

EuCAN Poland 2010

Trip Report

The first time I heard about volunteering with the Kingcombe Trust and EuCAN (European Conservation Action Network) was via an advert I saw on a website called www.wildlifeextra.com: in a nutshell the advert was asking people who were interested in environmental conservation to offer two and a half weeks of their time to volunteer on conservation projects in a number of exciting locations ranging from southern France to eastern Poland. Before I read this advert I had never heard of EuCAN, so after visiting the Kingcombe Trust website and reading about the goals of EuCAN and what the purpose of these conservation projects were I became very impressed by them and wanted to get involved. The EuCAN projects are funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union lifelong learning programme and EuCAN has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Poland and Romania. The aim of the projects are to establish links with conservation organizations, national parks and nature reserves in other countries of the EU and to enable citizens of the UK to travel and to work with these partners to carry out practical conservation management or species monitoring and to attract local people to join them as volunteers. Not only will this help all the partners by sharing the burden of environmental management, these visits will also provide increased motivation for the EuCAN participants to become more involved in conservation activities in their own localities in the UK.

I was very much hooked by the idea, especially when I found out it was all expenses paid!, although on a serious note the funding really helps on projects like these and makes it more accessible to a wider range of people. So after I filled in the application form that was sent to me, read through the details of the project and what environmental conservation work we would be doing in our chosen country. There were multiple choices regarding which country you wanted to volunteer in and the type of conservation work you would be doing whilst in that country, which also depended on the time of the year. My first choice on the list of countries to go to was Poland and I was delighted to find out I had been accepted on to this trip and would be spending two and a half weeks there.

My reasons for choosing the Poland trip were because we would be doing practical conservation work there, which I really enjoy, also the areas we would be visiting and working at would be very good places for wildlife watching and finally I enjoy travelling and I have always wanted to visit Poland and eastern Europe.

A few months before we were due to depart for Poland (or for any trip you go on), we met up for a preparation weekend at the Kingcombe Environmental Studies Centre in Dorset. This wonderful place is located in beautiful countryside near Dorchester, and there we met up with other volunteers going on these trips and we met Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson who lead them. I spent a thoroughly enjoyable weekend at the Kingcombe Centre, when we met volunteers who had been on these conservation trips in the previous year, we did some practical conservation work on the adjacent nature reserve, had a guided walk around the nature reserve, listened to a very interesting lecture from Dr Gabor Sramko and of course socialized and had a few drinks. We also had a detailed discussion about the work we would be doing, the areas we would be going to and general information regarding preparation for the trip.

When the two days were up and the preparation weekend had finished it was rather a shame, because I was quite enjoying it, but it also made me look forward to the day when we would be leaving for Poland.

The departure day was fast approaching and I was packing and unpacking my gear in my somewhat strange ritual for any long trip I go on, this normally ends up with me repacking my bag a few times to get the weight and balance perfect. The departure day finally came and I got to London St Pancras International station to meet up with the rest of the volunteers I would be working with on this project,

after having lunch at the Betjemans Arms pub, located inside the station, we boarded the Eurostar to Bruxelles. Another reason I chose this trip was because it involved embarking on a mammoth train journey from London via Bruxelles and Köln and finally reaching Warszawa Centralna by way of a sleeper train. After a cramped few hours on the Eurostar we arrived in Bruxelles and after a short wait we boarded one of the German ICE trains to Köln. Now these trains put the Eurostar to shame, they are so comfortable, brilliantly air conditioned and very spacious. A few hours later we arrived at Köln station, we still had about an hour until our next train left, so we headed outside the station and found a bar in the square outside, the area around the square is dominated by the beautifully imposing gothic Köln cathedral.

When the time came for us to depart Köln we boarded the sleeper train to Warszawa and headed out to Poland via what seemed to be every train station in Germany. I have to admit that I didn't get a whole lot of sleep that night, but I put that down to the excitement of the trip, although I did nod off eventually. When I woke up the following morning and stuck my head out the window, quite literally, I was immediately taken aback by the openness and flatness of the land passing us by, there was also the occasional sighting of White Storks. After about another forty five minutes we arrived at Warszawa Centralna station and began our adventure in Poland.

I could have written this report about many different aspects of this conservation trip to Poland, such as the rewarding work we were doing, the interesting sights and places we visited, fen hydrology or the epic and brilliant train journey we took to get to Poland. But instead I chose to write this report about the interesting species of animals we saw on this trip from birds to mammals to insects and plants, these sightings will form my lasting memories of Poland and of this trip and its a very good memory.

Overall I was very happy with the quality and quantity of wildlife I saw, many of the species I saw were new to me and it was a genuine thrill to see them. Although there was some species that I was desperate to see, but didn't, despite spending many hours looking for!

I shall now detail some of the more interesting sightings and observations which took place during our time in Poland.

Surely the most impressive animal we saw in terms of stature and looks was the Elk (*Alces alces*), at over 2.8 metre long, having a shoulder height of about 2.2 metre and in the males sporting a huge set of antlers, they are hard to miss, although in the vastness of the Biebrza Marshes they can disappear in the blink of an eye.

My first encounter with these incredible animals was during our visit to the wonderful Biebrza Marshes, within a couple of minutes of walking out onto this very long boardwalk which stretched out into the endless vista of marshland there was an adult female Elk and her calf making their way through the marsh and casually browsing on vegetation along the way. Although they were probably just over a hundred metres away to our right the elevation of the boardwalk over the relatively low vegetation of the marsh made them feel a lot closer so everyone was very quiet while we stood there watching them. Eventually the mother and calf rounded the edge of the line of trees they were walking parallel with and disappeared out of sight.

My second sighting of an elk that day was a very distant one, at first when I was scanning the marsh from the top of an observation tower using my binoculars I saw a speck in the distance in a shape of an Elk, at first I wasn't too sure if it was an elk because it didn't seem to move and it looked like it was in a ditch or long vegetation because the whole body wasn't in view. When it started to move I knew I was onto something, but still through my binoculars with a times 10 magnification it was still a dot, I estimated it was about 2 km away. So that was when I borrowed a telescope from the ever helpful Nigel, using the telescope revealed a rather bigger speck in the shape of an Elk, although you could now tell it was an Elk thanks to the increased magnification from the telescope. I was quite proud of this sighting because of the range and the difficulty of locating an Elk in the vastness of the marshes.



The third sighting of the day, like the second sighting was made from the observation tower, but unlike the second sighting this Elk was just a stones throw from the observation tower. It was an incredible sight, although it wasn't the big bull Elk I was hoping to see, this Elk (Adult female I guessed) was still really impressive to see. The Elk had a beautiful dark brown coat lightening to a whitish-grey colour on the animal's long legs. She was walking just pass the observation tower without a care in the world and loped off down one of the tracks that vanished in the sea of trees bordering the marsh.

The final sighting I had of an Elk was the big bull Elk I was hoping to see, unfortunately I only saw him for about 2 seconds walking on the edge of the treeline in a clearing.

This was because we travelling back home on the train, leaving Augustow and heading towards Bialystok, although it was only a brief sighting, it still caused a small ripple of excitement among the rest of the passengers on the train.

One of my favourite animals I saw while we were in Poland was the Pine Marten (*Martes martes*), this was another species that I hadn't seen before this trip. During the second week of our stay in Poland we stayed in a small hotel in a place called Kukle, the hotel was on the banks of a large lake which was also next to a large area of woodland with proved to be a very good place for wildlife watching, especially early in the morning or around dusk. My first sighting of a Pine Marten was early one morning in the forest, I had been wandering around the forest for about half an hour when I decided to hang around and wait on a small bridge that crossed over a stream that connected the larger lake near the hotel to a slightly smaller one that disappeared out of sight, from the limited view that the little bridge gave. So there I was standing on the little bridge leaning on the railings, admiring the river and the tranquillity of the place, when out of the corner of my eye a brown "streak" ran across the bridge and spiralled up a tree not more than a few metres from me. Even in the split second of it running across the bridge I knew it was a Pine Marten because of the chocolate brown coat, the creamy yellow throat patch and the overall elongated mustelid body shape. I immediately thought the Pine Marten would bolt and disappear into the undergrowth or further up into a larger tree, but to my amazement it stayed in the small tree it had ran up and just stared at me from not more than 3 metres away. This "standoff" lasted for about 10 seconds, I didn't dare move as this was a special moment (for me that is) and I didn't want to scare the little creature off, until the Pine Marten turned and scurried off into the tree canopy.

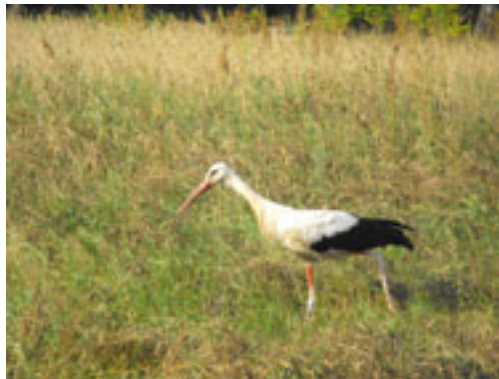
I saw this Pine Marten a second time a couple of days later, although this sighting was about 20 metres further down the track from the bridge, this was a more typical sighting watching the Pine Marten climbing with great agility through the maze of branches up in the canopy of the forest.

The little bridge where I had my first sighting of a Pine Marten proved to be a very good spot for observing wildlife, during the evenings it was a good place to see Daubenton's Bats (*Myotis daubentonii*) flying low over the water hunting for insects. This was of course a mosquito hotspot as well and the bats certainly had good hunting grounds, although the mosquitos did make watching the bats fairly uncomfortable!

The areas we worked and visited were also very good for birds and we saw a large number and variety of species. At the first hotel we stayed at in a place called Osieck, I saw my first Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*), calling from the top of the hotel entrance and this was within about 30 minutes of arriving at the hotel, so I thought this was a good omen for the rest of the trip.

At our first work site Bagno Calowanie, which means the "the kissing swamp", there was a really good observation tower which had a great view over the swamp, we often had lunch up there as well. The first interesting bird I saw from this tower was a Montagu's Harrier (*Circus pygargus*), this was the first time I had seen this bird and I was immediately struck by the shape of the bird, with its long and narrow wings combined with the buoyant flight pattern made it look almost tern like. The second exciting bird seen from the tower that day was a Great Grey Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*), this magnificent bird was perched on a tall haypole about 200 metres away, providing good observation. Shrikes are medium sized passerines (perching birds) with long tails, strong hooked bills, strong feet, sharp claws and generally a broad dark band over their or behind their eyes. Some shrikes store surplus food by spearing their surplus prey on bush thorns, hence their alternative name of "butcher birds". Shrikes spend long periods perched at the top of a bush, tree, post, etc looking for prey. The second species of shrike I saw in Poland was the Red-backed shrike (*Lanius collurio*). These were seen in the area around our hotel in Kukle and at our work site at Sarnetki, where they could be seen plucking insects out the sky.

We saw a great many Marsh Harriers (*Circus aeruginosus*) in the areas we visited, most were seen hunting low over fields and marshes, the vast majority of them we saw while we were driving along in the minibus.



Another bird often seen from the minibus while we were travelling parallel with fields and open ground was the White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*), these large graceful birds were normally seen probing through vegetation around marshes and river banks looking for prey. They were also seen following combine harvesters picking through the cut vegetation.

Another large graceful bird we saw was the Common Crane (*Grus grus*), these large wading birds breed on bogs, reedbeds and along rivers in forested areas, they eat plants, insects, amphibians and small mammals. My first glimpse of these birds was at our work site in Sarnetki, as we cleared some of the *Phragmites* reeds away and opened up a good sized area of ground for the Cranes to look for food on. In this area we had cleared I saw a small group of 2 adult and 2 juveniles Cranes feeding on the cleared fenland, presumably hunting the abundant number of amphibians on the fen.

Also at this work site we were treated to quite a spectacle, when a flock of maybe a thousand White Storks gradually circled around above us using the thermals until they flew off, it was an incredible sight.



My next and final sighting of the Cranes was a truly magical experience and probably my most enjoyable moment of the trip. Near our hotel in Kukle you could hear the Cranes calling early in the morning, they sounded a bit like Elephants, but the Cranes were always in a remote area of the lake/forest so you could never see them. I was up extra early wildlife watching in the morning as it was our final day in Poland and I was hoping to see something special on my last day. As I made my way down to the small bridge that spanned the small river between the 2 lakes I could hear the distinctive call of the Cranes, sounding somewhat like an unwell Elephant. So I decided to hang around the area with the bridge as this had proven fruitful in my previous experience, within about 10 minutes my patience was rewarded with a brief glimpse from the bridge, looking downstream the river meandered slightly as it joined up with the connecting lake, which was just out of sight, except for a small gap between the trees. From this small gap in the trees the Cranes performed a quick fly by and then a minute or so later they performed an equally tantalizing flyby in the opposite direction, at that stage they had flown past twice, both times I barely caught a glimpse, I guessed there to be about 5 Cranes in total and thought these two sightings would be all I saw of them. But to my surprise the Cranes started to fly in through the gap and fly upstream towards me on the bridge and indeed there were 5 Cranes, flying in a V formation at about 10 metres above the water, still heading straight towards me. I was sure they would see me and alter their course, but they kept flying towards me and passed only a few metres above my head, they were so close not only could I hear their wingbeats I could feel the downdraught of their wingbeats as well. It was a magical experience, that just left me in awe of these amazing creatures and it was a brilliant way to end my stay in Kukle and Poland.

The woods around Kukle proved to be a very good site for Woodpeckers as well, the two species I saw in this area that I had never seen before were the Black Woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*) and the White-backed Woodpecker (*Dendrocopus leucotos*). The Black Woodpecker is a very distinctive bird, it is about the size of a crow, it has jet black plumage and, in the males especially a bright red crown. They have a flappy type of flight pattern, which almost looks a bit clumsy and are quite vocal. These birds were quite common around the area we were staying and often you could get some good clear views of them, if only for a few seconds as they disappeared into the woods, shrieking loudly. The second interesting species of woodpecker seen around the forest we were staying near was the White-backed Woodpecker -I was quite surprised early one morning to see a pair around the local forest. They are apparently quite rare and prefer large areas of undisturbed forest with lots of dead trees, but the area I saw them in was right next to an area that had been felled, although the area in question had been fenced off and left to regenerate and it proved to be a very good place to see birds. White-backed Woodpeckers look superficially like Greater-spotted Woodpeckers, but have a distinctive white rump and a paler red vent.

Another bird that I was amazed to see was the Spotted Nutcracker (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*), this is a

beautiful bird somewhere between a woodpecker and a crow, it has dark brown plumage sprinkled with small white spots, although the greater part of the wings and the crown are by contrast unspotted brownish-black. They breed almost exclusively in areas with access to spruce forests for nesting and hazel and arolla pine for winter food stores, the nuts and seeds are cached in the ground during late summer-autumn and nut/seed deposits are memorized in great detail and can be found even in winter under a deep layer of snow. Whilst I was up early wildlife watching one morning in the forest near our hotel, I heard a strange call, a bit like a crow, but somehow different, this immediately got me curious. I turned round to where the sound was coming from and about 100 metres away at the top of a tall dead Pine tree, there was a Spotted Nutcracker, calling loudly. I couldn't believe my eyes at first as this was a bird I had only dreamed of seeing and I never expected I would see one during my time in Poland.

High up in the conifer trees a high pitched, bubbling, cheery trill could sometimes be heard; along with a brief glimpse of a small bird flittering around between the higher branches and the crown of the tree. These small birds were Crested tits (*Lophophanes cristatus*), they look very distinctive with their triangular crest, which can be raised to varying extents. They proved rather difficult birds to observe because of their near constant movement and because they were normally at the tops of most trees, so if you tried watching them for any length of time you normally ended up with a strained neck. Although with a bit of patience good views were possible and Crested Tits are quite confiding birds allowing close views.

In the forest at Kukle there was a relatively small area that had been felled and fenced off with quite tall fencing, to repel hungry Deer and other animals hoping to snack on the new shoots, thus hampering the regeneration of the trees. This fenced off area provided a really good area for birds, many of the rarer species I saw were in or around this area. One such species I saw was the Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*). From nowhere a female Goshawk flew over this fenced off area, the first thing that struck was the size of this bird, almost buzzard-sized, and the power that this bird radiated, as it flew it took a few relaxed wingbeats relieved by a short straight glide, but unlike a Sparrowhawk it didn't lose height whilst doing this and then dissappeared in to the forest.

I was very impressed by the amount and quantity of wildlife I saw on the trip, Poland is a country with a rich abundance of wildlife and has vast areas of very good habitat as well. I just hope these areas can be conserved for the future generations. I really enjoyed being a part of Eucan and would definitely recommend it as a worthwhile and fun project to be part of, more information can be found at the EuCAN website; www.eucan.org.uk .

As a final word I would like to say a big "thank you" to Nigel and Kathy, the entire EuCAN network, our hosts in Poland and to the staff at the Kingcombe Centre.