

## Volunteering as ringers on the Baltic coast, Poland

Zephné and Herman Bernitz

Herman and Zephné Bernitz spent three weeks during the northern Autumn in Poland as guests of the Bird Migration Ringing Scheme of the University of Gdansk. This project has been in existence for 53 years, and monitors the movements of Palaearctic migrant birds along the north coast of Poland. Migrants cross the Baltic Sea from Scandinavia and Russia and when they strike land around Gdansk, they then turn southwest and follow the coast on their southward migration. H & Z worked as volunteers at two of the Polish ringing stations. The stations are situated in coastal forest on a very narrow sand spit 50 to 200m wide which forms the coastline in the area. The spit acts almost like a dyke between extensive salt marshes that are just inland, and the sea, and consists of a natural dune parallel with the coast which is further stabilised by protected and managed natural forest. The salt marshes communicate with the sea through narrow mouths. Ringing thus takes place in a variety of habitats including wader ringing with walk-in traps along the wave line, and mist nets on the dunes, in the tall forest and within the extensive reed beds of the salt marshes.



Mist-nets in reedbeds



Camp site

The ringing stations are manned continuously by volunteers for three months during migration in Spring and three months in Autumn. Conditions can best be described as basic camping with two permanent army-style tents which act as the kitchen-dining-living area and the ringing tent. It was quite novel camping with a wood-fired stove in the living area tent to provide heating. Volunteers sleep in two man

tents scattered in the forest all around the main tent. There was no running water, but we had many 25l cans that we filled with fresh water daily, using the quad bike to haul them. Ablution facilities were primitive (read non-existent!) with a solar shower and a long drop.

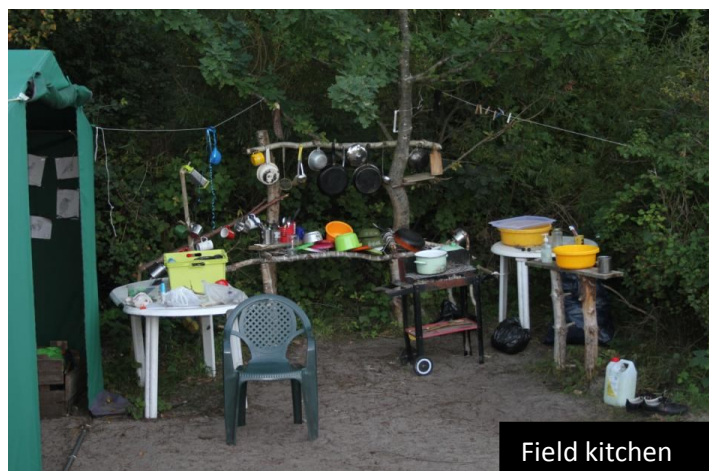
A unique modification of the long-drop technique is that the sand excavated during the digging of the pit is heaped up next to the hole, and small spade is kept handy, so after use of the facility, one scoops a couple of shovelfuls of soil over the deposits! A highly complicated structure of felled logs provided various hand and footholds to provide stability when squatting. A last refinement is that there was a cake tin buried in the sand



at the edge of the hole in which toilet rolls are stored to keep them dry but accessible. However remember that this is northern Poland at 54 degrees north, with temperatures averaging about 9 degrees while we were there, so a black bag shower didn't heat the water much! As an alternative we had an arrangement with the nearest farmhouse in one case, or forestry station in another, whereby for a small payment we could use their bathroom. One of the first Polish phrases Herman learnt was *goronzt presnitz* which means hot shower! Readers should also remember that Poland was the first East Block country to lead the uprising against communism, which collapsed in 1989, and as such has an economic backlog due to collective farming practices and other socialist policies. English is not spoken or understood by most of the common people over the age of 45, although most Poles under the age of twenty can now communicate in English. The lack of development was actually to the benefit of nature, and Poland still contains large tracts of unspoiled land that are the last strongholds of old forests that are home to breeding Greater and Lesser spotted eagles, marshes near Chernobyl where Aquatic warblers breed, and lekking grounds of Ruffs. Poland still has a population of European bison. The economic boom that is currently happening in Poland with the help of Eurozone funding is fortunately taking place in an era of intense ecological awareness so they are able to avoid many of the mistakes already made in the more "advanced" countries.

A typical day consisted of rising before the sun and beginning with hourly net checks, the last of which took place an hour after sunset. A net round took a minimum of twenty five minutes, depending on how many birds had been caught. So work that out for yourself - we basically walked 25 minutes x 14 rounds a day: six hours of walking a day on sand dunes, in mud/reeds and though thick forest. It was excellent exercise, and meant that we could eat to our hearts content and still return home having lost weight!

We ate like kings with simple home and campfire cooking which was ideal for us with our dietary issues. On most nights we were too tired even to have a beer after the last bird was released, but we did get to partake in some the local home-brewed spirits (*mampoer se boetie*) that is flavoured with various foul



tasting herbs and then consumed diluted with water after a few sugar cubes have been flamed and caramelised in some of the alcohol.



Drying *Boletus* mushrooms

We ate delicacies like freshly picked mushrooms that grew all over in the forests, wild berries of every size and colour and wild apples.

Birding was amazing with us being able to renew acquaintance with many old friends and handle a few new species. The most common species caught was definitely the European robin, but birds such as European reed warbler,

whitethroat and Pied flycatcher which seldom get as far as South Africa on migration were common.

We caught flocks of tits, which are small birds but biters of note! Parties of Longtailed tits were

amazing in that no two birds have exactly the same colouration : the amount of white on the faces varies tremendously as does the colour of the eye-wattle which ranges from flesh-coloured through yellow to blood red. We ringed such jewels as Nuthatches and Treecreepers, and finally ringed a Savi's warbler which is a bird that we had unsuccessfully chased in Kenya previously. We even caught a few raptors (sparrowhawk ) which were trying their luck with an easy meal of a bird already trapped in a mist net. We were amazed to find a beheaded, partially plucked Knot in a mist net and then saw the perpetrator: a goshawk which had caught the a Knot on the shoreline and was disturbed by us at his favourite plucking post in the forest, whereupon he dropped his hard -earned meal.



Long-tailed tit



Savi's warbler

Possibly the only part of the experience that was not fun was the mosquitoes. Because of the close proximity of the marshes we were nearly carried away by swarms of these pests. Toileting especially was a problem as any bare skin was immediately attacked by squadrons of these pests. And the particular species of mosquito responsible bites all day, not just at dusk or dawn like our African mosquitoes. For those of you who have never stopped to think why all the long distance migrants breed in the northern hemisphere, there is actually a very logical reason: the northern land mass extends far further north than our southern land mass is south, so daylight length is way longer in the northern hemisphere summer, with the possibility for MUCH higher productivity. All the goggas provide oodles of food for large broods of chicks and multiple clutches.

Apart from the mosquitoes there were also hover flies which fortunately do not bite, but of which there were eruptions every night. As the sun gets low in the sky, huge chimneys of these tiny midges rise from the forest, forming massive black swirling clouds that collectively make a deafening roar, or should I say hum. We were lucky to visit the biggest European cormorant colony in Europe near one of the ringing stations, which was no longer active as breeding season had already finished over, which may or may not have been a good thing. The 30000 odd birds breed in pine forests a kilometre in from the coast, and the extent of the guano is such that it has killed the forest in what looks like a huge bulls eye on Google earth. The area of dead trees is a few km across with new growth in the middle. The whole area below the nests is littered with eggshells and unfortunate chicks that did not make it.

Apart from the birdlife we saw an amazing variety of other wildlife, including snakes, wild boar, fox, badger and deer. We were able to enjoy the sea, and over the wet sand was about the only place one could stand without getting eaten by mosquitoes. The Baltic Sea is unique in that due to all the runoff and melt water, salinity is very reduced. Depending on the area, it is up to one tenth as salty as open ocean: in fact it doesn't make you sticky when you swim, and you can survive



drinking sea water for close on a week before developing dehydration. Because it is such a cold sea, the water is very stratified with salty levels and fresh levels. Because of this both freshwater fish such as trout and saltwater fish such as herring can survive in the same sea. On some days the ocean was flat and mirror-like, and on other days it had huge waves that were capable of wrecking sailing ships of days gone by. The Baltic is also a

huge store of amber. This fossilised tree resin is churned up when wind causes wave action, and amber in a range of sizes is washed up along the shore line. This is avidly collected by everyone. In the dune forest where we ringed there are large deposits of ancient buried amber which are illegally mined on a small scale. The resulting holes are quite a hazard as vegetation covers the narrow openings to deep "pipes" which have been excavated. Amber jewellery is a speciality of the Baltic area, and tiny amber chips are sold in bottles to be filled with vodka which slowly dissolves the resin and is purported to have medicinal value.

**In conclusion, Poland is a fantastic country to visit.** Birding is excellent compared with countries like Italy or Belgium, and travel and cost of living are extremely affordable. People are very friendly although language is sometimes an obstacle. The area is geared up for tourism, with cities like Krakow and Gdansk having more small restaurants than you could visit in a year of days. The country's history is fraught with wars which have resulted in the borders having been shifted multiple times, with obvious Russian and German influences. Due to the communist era there are still areas where WWII bombing damage is as yet unrepaired. No visit to Poland would be complete without a visit to Auschwitz or some of the other Nazi extermination camps, but that experience was too harrowing to include here.



Flat sea with wader traps



Stormy sea



European robin



Goldcrest



Blue tit



Nuthatch



Jay



Great spotted woodpecker