

**Ambios 6 Week Leonardo Mobility training placement- Research Assistant with the Mammal Research Institute Bialowieza – Eastern Poland**

**23.06.09 - 19.07.09 Fri**

Tuesday 23rd June

Tuesday morning we were introduced to everyone at the institute (literally).

They range from field workers to PhD students and academics.

Usually on Tuesdays there are lectures and we attending this Tuesdays. It was given by a South African biologist working at the institute. He presented past studies he had conducted in South Africa on rodents and antelope and their giving up densities under different conditions. He was trying to explain how this could be applied to mammals in the Bialoweza forest but was met with mixed reactions as some of the academics here are very traditional and do not favour experimental type studies.

In the afternoon I went radio tracking wild boar with a final year German diploma student and a visiting school student from Holland. We obtained coordinates for about 15 boar before a storm forced us to retreat (the radio equipment doesn't work in storms).

We saw two wild boar running from the car.

Wednesday 24th June

Spent today biomass sampling. This happens quarterly in a range of different habitat types on the outskirts of the forest. Today we sampled crop fields and forest.

Once the biomass is collected it is dried and sent to Berlin to determine it's calorific value. This will then be used in conjunction with data on roe deer droppings to determine which habitats are most valuable for them and which vegetation groups they prefer in each habitat.

Biomass is collected by throwing a 1mx1m quadrat into a random space and sampling at 10m intervals along a transect from this point. The entire living biomass from each quadrat is collected and seperated into categories such as "herbs", "crops" and "moss".

In one site we saw a montagus harrier flying away. We also saw a hoopoe, a red deer and a roe deer.

Thursday 25th June

More biomass sampling today though all in crop fields.

We saw a pair of marsh harriers very close by today.

Friday 26th June

We had two lectures today. The first was from a visiting lecturer from Sheffield University who presented about past work he had done determining if red deer had been illegally introduced into areas of Luxembourg for hunting by using forensics (the idea being that introducing domestic stocks dilutes the wild stock of deer so should be prevented).

The second lecture was by a visiting German biologist working in Kazakhstan. She was visiting to learn about the institutes large mammal trapping with the hope of being able to apply it to saiga antelope. Her talk was about the difficulties of capturing and tracking animals in the vast expanses of desert which prevail in Kazakhstan.

In the afternoon I joined the bison tracking project in the South East of the forest near the Belarussian border. Unfortunately we only located one bison in the seven hours we were tracking and the state of the tracks along with the capabilities of the small Fiat we were tracking in meant a difficult and long day.

We saw two snakes which I think were grass snakes as one was a juvenile and had bright markings on it's head. These were resting on a log over a stream but unfortunately my camera was playing truant! We also spent some time trying to catch frogs (unsuccessfully).

#### Saturday 27th June

We took our bikes today to see if we could find some bison and beaver. Unfortunately the area we had been told was good for bison was completely devoid of bison. We will try here again one evening as they are more active then. We did see another grass snake though.

We then went into the forest towards where we had been told there was a beaver lodge. Unfortunately we took a wrong turn and ended up on a tourist trail rather than by the river. We saw yet another grass snake, a toad and numerous exciting insects. The path which was supposed to be cycle friendly also opened our eyes to how difficult tracking in the forest on bikes is going to be...

#### Monday 29th June

Had an easy day entering data today. Each boar has it's own file with the last six months of it's co-ordinates. Currently they are a bit behind and I am entering data from April! The data will be put into a programme which will produce a graphic detailing the boars whereabouts.

Rita found the beaver lodge we tried to find on Saturday and it was much further away than we had anticipated! Not within an easy cycle.

#### Tuesday 30th June

Started tracking boar early this morning to avoid the heat and the mosquito's. Unfortunately we found that the equipment was not working as well as it should have been and were receiving very weak signals from animals which are usually easy to find. After having found onyl four out of about twelve boar we should have found we gave up.

We saw a small group of boar, one of which was a baby (I didn't see this one). We also watched a roe deer feeding near us. They are usually shy but this one didn't seem to mind us chatting loudly in a clearing!

#### Wednesday 1st July

Today I was sent into the forest to download the pictures and video from the hidden cameras. I was joined by a Dutch student and Rita who helped us and also tried to locate two of the bison they are tracking in the North.

This was my first time driving in Poland (or at all since passing my test) but it didn't seem too bad and the Toyota Corolla is quite capable of dealing with the muddy tracks. However, they are in much better condition than the tracks in the South and I would feel much less confident driving in conditions like we had been in last Friday, especially in the Fiat.

Navigation proved to be difficult with the three of us presenting conflicting

directions at every opportunity. Locating our first camera we took the wrong path and managed what would have been a 1km walk in about an hour and a half! On arrival at the site we located the coordinates the camera was supposed to be in but could find no camera. We spent an hour searching through deep bog with no luck. Unfortunately this was the case for the other two sites we managed to reach and we found no cameras. Perhaps there was a problem with the GPS or they have been stolen. Or perhaps we are just not very keen eyed!

At around five we drove to a tourist viewing tower in the North to try to obtain a signal from Rita's bison. Unfortunately we didn't get a signal from them either, perhaps due to an encroaching storm on the horizon. By this time we were running very low on petrol and returned home, arriving at eight and having achieved very little. We had learnt a bit about navigation, using the GPS and driving on Polish roads though.

We also saw more wildlife than usual. Two red deer crossed our path at one point. We also spent some time watching a red squirrel which I thoroughly enjoyed. We saw a hare which was a first for all of us and we also frightened a boar as we rounded a corner and it was feeding about a metre from us! I was suprised at the speed they can run at through the forest!

#### Thursday 2nd July

Today was supposed to be contiuous tracking of wild boar for which I was on the evening shift. Unfortunatley there was a problem with the radio meaning two hours of tracking was lost and it was called to a halt before my shift was due to start.

Instead I went to a nearby viewing tower to see if I could spot some bison as they are supposed to be more active at dusk. Unfortunately there were no bison but there was a wild boar feeding nearby, apparently nonplussed by my presence.

I also went to a lecture on "Web of Life" in the morning but as I have already used this programme a lot during my BSc, did not find it that useful.

#### Friday 3rd July

Today I entered more of April's data in the morning.

In the afternoon Tomek took us to the forest to find the camera's we were unable to find on Wednesday. We found that the GPS had led us to areas about 100m away from where the camera's had actually been placed and so felt a bit better about not having found them! Tomek also had problems finding some of the camera's which also helped us feel better! We only managed half the camera's before turning back for home.

In the evening we sampled some Polish hospitality at a bonfire and sampled some excellent guitar playing and singing!

#### Saturday 4th July

Today was Kappalle, a Belarussian festival celebrated in Bialowezia. Women throw flowers into the lake in the park after which men wade in to retrieve them and can marry whoever threw the flowers. The Belarussian music was somewhat to be desired (this was also the opinion of the local Polish attendees) and it was raining heavily so we didn't stay for the ceremony (which still hadn't appeared to have happened at midnight).

### Sunday 5th July

My first outing in the strict reserve today. We left at about 4.30PM in the hope of seeing some beavers and missing the afternoon heat. We cycled to a bridge on the Western path through the forest where there is a swamp. Here we left our bikes and walked (well waded and walked along fallen logs) around the swamp. We did see a beaver dam but no beavers. The dam looks quite old but apparently there have been footprints nearby and so we suspect it is still active.

We saw a three toed woodpecker in this area which was very close and again not bothered by our presence.

We then decided to do a circuit around the forest. This took about four hours and the state of the paths make it very hard going. So much so that we didn't see anything past this point as all our efforts were focused on staying on the path! This epic cycle also resulted in my bike dying.

### Monday 6th July

Replaced my bike with a nice new one today before the back wheel fell off my old one.

Tomek took us to see the remaining cameras today and showed us some good wildlife spots up North. We saw an old beaver haunt where some very large trees have been gnawed!

We got the 4x4 stuck today and had to use the car mats to place under the tyres. We also had to push. Luckily the shower of mud as we broke free missed me but unfortunately covered my Dutch colleague.

One of the camera's today was set by Gemma and Tomek had never been there so it was a good demonstration of how difficult out task was last Wednesday... Tomek couldn't find the camera using the GPS so we gave up. In the evening we drove along the Narewka road to a badger sett and sat for an hour and a half hoping to see one. Unfortunately we didn't but we will try this sett and another close to Budy again.

### Tuesday 7th July

Today we had a lecture on mating systems. It was very well executed with examples of monogamous and polygamous mating systems across mostly mammalian and bird groups.

In the afternoon we were dropped off in the North to replace some faulty camera's and track some boar on our own for the first time.

We found the boar easily though had trouble drawing them on the map due having so many azimuths so close to one another! We replaced a video camera with an image camera because it had not been working and also re-set a camera which had been leaking.

On this leg of the day we saw some tracks which on our return to Boalowezia have been identified as a baby raccoon dog! They were very fresh and were next to some bird prints.

We were then picked up and taken to the northernmost camera to replace it's memory card. This is apparently a good spot for ungulates and sure enough we saw three adult bison and a juvenile.

We then drove to the South to track the remaining boar and tried to do this from the car as much as possible as the evening mosquitos were now out in force.

### Friday 8th July

Today we were sent to track the boar all the way up the road to Narewka. Four of us went with me driving and managed to track (or not find!) all the boar up to the watchtower in the North. The whole thing took about 12 hours and we didn't quite finish.

### Saturday 9th July

Today we went to track the remaining boar from yesterday but out of the five we were looking for could not find any. We had a signal from one but this was in thick pine forest and it was difficult to tell where the signal was coming from. This seems to be a common problem with the boar tags. We lost the signal and had to admit defeat.

We did spot some deer from the watch tower (hinds).

### Sunday 10th July

Today we travelled to the large lake North of Bialoweza to go birdwatching. We walked the railway which dissects the lake and saw a plethora of birds. This included reed warblers, egrets, black headed gulls, sooty terns, black terns, a marsh harrier and to top it all off a white tailed eagle! We also found a black headed gull chick which one of our team (who had previously been a bird ringer) caught to see if it had a ring.

After this we walked to some reed beds close to Hajnowka and on to some lakes. The reed beds were especially lovely with an excellent view, especially at sunset, and we saw a pair of reed warblers. The lakes were quite busy with lots of people fishing but nonetheless were also very beautiful. This area seemed to have many more wolf tracks than other parts of the forest.

### Monday 11th July

Today we cycled through the strict reserve to try to locate two missing boar. We couldn't find them along the path and had been instructed to do a circuit through some forest with no paths. This proved to be a very difficult task as orientation was difficult. Luckily we had the route in the GPS and managed to mostly follow it. However leaving the path in the forest can be testing at times as often there are unpassable areas of swamp which can only be negotiated by balancing on fallen trees. We made it safely back to our bikes however and now know the area a little better. However, we didn't find the missing boar.

### Tuesday 12th July

Today we were given another lecture by a visiting Marie Curie scientist from South Africa about how decisions are made in reserves. He was explaining the difference between opinion and science based decisions and it was a very interesting talk (although the examples in favour of science were a little too neat!).

In the afternoon we went boar tracking and I was dropped off to find the large group we were dropped off to track last week. I was escorting a new PhD student who hunts deer as part of his job and again he was a very interesting character with some interesting ideas about wildlife management.

We also tracked the red deer in the area which were very close but unfortunately we didn't catch a glimpse of them.

We met our escort at the watchtower in the North and on the way saw some wild cat prints.

Being a hunter my fellow student also managed to spot a group of five stags from the tower as well as a few scattered hinds.

### Wednesday 13th July

Today we went to the zoo to collect poo samples from red and roe deer and boar. We then spread this on transects, one of which was in the field behind Bialoweza and one just in the strict reserve. The idea is to track it's rate of decay so that when transects are done in the forest looking at faeces and prints to determine area usage, they can add a temporal factor.

### Thursday 14th July

Today we were doing the 2pm until 8pm shift of continuous tracking. Unfortunately the boar we were tracking was not near enough the road to obtain a signal and so we were taken into the forest by the tracker on the previous shift. This caused major problems as we were led to believe we would be tracking near the car and unfortunately our guide didn't speak English to tell us this was not the case. So having led us into the forest for 15 minutes we were left not knowing where we were and without our bags. We spent the rest of our shift tracking and trying to find our way back to the car. We finally managed to find the track to the car at 8.30 pm just as it was getting dark. It was a steep learning curve and in future we will know to be more prepared in this situation and to programme the cars position in the GPS!

### Friday 15th July

Today we went tracking for the boar along the Narewka road again. We are finding fewer and fewer each time so Tomek will be flying over to find the missing ones in the next few weeks. There is such a large distance and so many boar to cover in one day that it is difficult to spend time trying to find those that have gone missing any other way.

We split into two groups today to try and make it quicker, with Rita and I going in the car. It did speed things up but still meant a few boar in the North were neglected.

Rita and I saw a honey buzzard walking along the road and then had a very good view of it swooping in front of the car.

### Saturday 16th, Sunday 17th and Monday 18th July

I went to Krakow for the weekend with another English student here at the institute. It was one of the most beautiful cities I have ever visited and had such a warm and friendly atmosphere. After travel we had a day and a half to see the city and this was actually enough time to see a lot and absorb the local culture. However if you wanted to sight see properly you would need at least two days I think.

Our hostel was a Travellers Inn hostel and was in an excellent location and was friendly and value for money. However I would not recommend eating out in Poland if you're a vegetarian, there are better things to spend your money on in Krakow and you wouldn't be missing out if you ate in the hostel!