

Scientific visit to Latvia and Estonia – November 2012

Participants:

Dominika Musiał – Project Coordinator (PTOP)

Daniel Piec – Project Manager (Natura International Poland)

Michał Korniluk – Project Scientific Assistant – organiser of the meeting (Natura International Poland)

Jarek Stepaniuk – Site Manager for the upper Narew River Valley (PTOP)

The first of the three planned scientific visits abroad within the framework of the Life+ project “Active protection of great snipe *Gallinago media* in Dolina Górnej Narwi Natura 2000 site” (LIFE11 NAT/PL/000436) took place in November 2012.

The objective of the visit

Up to now no studies have been carried out in Poland to specifically address the habitat preferences of the great snipe. It was therefore one of the important goals of our project (included in the tasks A3 and A4) to complete the knowledge on this topic. Similar studies have been carried out in Latvia and Estonia, where biotopes in which great snipes occur, share similar features with the ones in Poland. The aim of the visit was therefore to exchange experiences concerning habitat and telemetric investigations and the methods of restoration of the great snipe’s habitats.

The course of the visit

Latvia

On November 20th we participated in a meeting in Riga in the headquarters of the Latvian Fund for Nature, an organization ran by outstanding experts in active nature conservation. Among their achievements there are 5 projects co-financed from EU funds within the framework of the Life+ programme (carried out in a period of 11 years), aiming at restoration of favourable habitat conditions for wetland birds in river valleys and coastal mires. The area of their project activity encompassed the total of 3600 hectares.

The meeting was inaugurated by Ainars Auniņš – an ornithologist working on the protection of the great snipe in Latvia and the head of the LFN. He presented the objectives and the results of the project „Restoration of Floodplains” LIFE04 NAT/LV/000198, which concerned the restoration of flood-meadows in 15 key wetland areas in Latvia (http://www.lfn.lv/pub/?doc_id=28143). It was the first active nature conservation project ran on such a scale in Latvia, which encompassed the most important breeding sites of the great snipe. Its outcome was the restitution of favourable habitat conditions for, among others: the corn crane, the lesser spotted eagle, the greater spotted eagle and the great snipe, in an area of approximately 2400 ha. Monitoring of the ecological impact of the

project has shown that the number of great snipe individuals has substantially risen from ca. 90 in 2005 to over 120 males in 2007. The remaining part of the meeting was chaired by Edmunds Račinskis, a specialist in wetland habitat restoration. As the manager of the currently active project „Dviete” (<http://dvietespaliene.lv>), he introduced us to the objectives and the first results of the renaturalisation of the River Dviete bed.



Photo Jarek Stepaniuk

Meeting in the Latvian Fund for Nature headquarters. From the left: Edmunds Račinskis, Dominika Musiał, Daniel Piec.

The meeting has provided us with many useful suggestions concerning effective project coordination, choosing the right methods of monitoring the effects of the project, and handling unexpected problems of socioeconomic character. The most important outcome was, nevertheless, extending our knowledge concerning the choice of methods of habitat restoration, which would provide the most desired outcome, i.e. the habitat conditions most favourable for the great snipe. For instance, we were surprised by the scale on which primitive horse breeds (including Polish koniks) and meat cattle are employed in this country in order to restore wetland habitats. At the end of the meeting we were officially invited to a seminar summarizing the results of the “Dviete” project.

Estonia

In order to make the best use of our time in Estonia, already at dawn we went to the nearby fen of the Emajõe-Suursoo nature reserve (one of the great snipe’s breeding sites), which is located on the western bank of the Peipsi lake lying on the Estonian-Russian border.

Although unfavourable weather conditions didn’t allow too many interesting bird observations,

it was an interesting experience to observe the lake, which is 30 km wide and over 70 km long, on the bank where fens, on which the great snipe is so keen, were spread.

At noontime the same day, at the Estonian University of Life Science, we met Andres Kuresoo and Leho Luigujoe – ornithologists with over 15 years of experience in studying the great snipe in Estonia. Later we were joined by Jaak-Albert Metsoja – a botanist leading the restitution of fens and flood-meadows in the Alam-Pedja nature reserve.

Anders and Leho introduced us to the problems of the great snipe conservation in Estonia and presented their yet unpublished data concerning telemetric habitat studies, which they had carried out in the previous years. We were also shown the equipment which they employed for measuring habitat parameters, in telemetrics and in trapping of great snipes.



Photo Jarek Stepaniuk

Meeting at the Estonian University of Life Science. From the left: Jaak-Albert Metsoja, Daniel Piec, Dominika Musiał, Michał Korniluk, Andres Kuresoo and Leho Luigujoe.

On our part, a very important element of the meeting was presenting of the methodology of habitat and telemetric studies which we have prepared, as well as discussing it critically, which was to help us obtain optimal results of the study. We have also managed to clarify certain doubts concerning, for example, the choice of techniques in telemetric studies, methods of trapping of great snipes, the choice of the right season for habitat studies, as well as many other questions associated with our investigations.

After exhausting discussions which lasted over 6 hours, we moved the meeting to one of the renowned restaurants serving traditional Estonian cuisine.

On the next day (22.11) at dawn our Estonian colleagues had prepared for us a study visit to the great snipe's breeding sites, in part of which they also carried out their research. Of course we could not see the great snipes, since that time of the year they are wintering somewhere in equatorial Africa. We were, however, interested in the landscape and the type and structure of the habitat where they occur in Estonia. The first place which we have visited were meliorated sedge meadows in the Emajõgi River Valley. This place, in spite of a very strong intervention in the hydrological system and relatively intensive management of meadows, was an important site for great snipes, which attracted up to 20 lekking males. We immediately set to discuss the factors which drive the great snipe's occurrence in a habitat which seems unfavourable at the first sight. For 2 years the Estonians have carried out studies on the birds' habitat preferences in this locality. Visiting this site was particularly valuable for us, because it resembled one of the great snipe's sites in the upper Narew River Valley.



Photo Jarek Stepaniuk

Meliorated sedge meadows in the Emajõgi River Valley.

Another valuable experience was to get to know in the field the methods of microhabitat investigations, which serve to determine habitat selectivity of great snipes with respect to different types of plant communities. By discussing in detail and calibrating the methods of field measurements we will be able to compare the results we obtain with the results of research led in Estonia and Norway. We have also discussed the issue of bird trapping methods in lekking sites, which would be appropriate and, most important, safe for the birds.

To fully benefit from our visit in the country, the area of which is in 20% covered by mires, we

have visited bogs in the Alam-Pedia nature reserve. This site, with the area of over 340 km², is the fourth largest protected area in Estonia. The nature reserve was created in 1995, and – after ratification of the Ramsar Convention by Estonia – in 1997 it was listed in the List of Wetlands of International Importance. The complex of five vast bogs is surrounded by naturally meandering rivers, in the valleys of which vast fens and sedge meadows have formed, providing a breeding site for great snipes. Allegedly, there is also a site where once in two visits in the field one can spot western capercaillies looking for gastroliths on the road. Unfortunately our visit was one of the less fruitful...



Photo Leho Luigujoe

The Alam-Pedia nature reserve. From the left: Michał Korniluk, Dominika Musiał, Daniel Piec

At the end of the day we paid a visit to another great snipe site in the Emajõgi River Valley. The biotopes present there were of completely different character than the ones we had seen before. In majority they were – once extensively used – fens, represented by creeping sedge communities. In terms of landscape, these sites resembled the vast moss fens of the Bagna Ławki in the Biebrza River Valley. What is interesting, the site – although recognized for over 10 years, had an ephemeral character, and the fen located therein was changing its position not only depending on the hydrological conditions in a given year. This phenomenon, although seems unusual (it is acclaimed that great snipes are strongly attached to their lekking sites), was also observed in some areas of the Biebrza River Valley. We hope very much that the telemetric studies, which we will perform in our project, will contribute to a better understanding of the changes in lekking sites of great snipes and of local migrations of individuals during the breeding season.



Fens in the Emajõgi River Valleys. From the left: Andres Kuresoo, Daniel Piec, Michał Korniluk

The first of the three study visits performed within the project “Active protection of great snipe *Gallinago media* in Dolina Górnej Narwi Natura 2000 site” can be considered very successful. What is more, we had the weather on our side, as only 5 days after we left Estonia was covered by a 20-cm-layer of snow, We are looking forward to meeting the Estonians in 2014, when they are planning to visit us during our research works.

Michał Korniluk