

The Latvian Experience

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It is a dazzling September evening as we weave further into the bog to look at an area of pines scorched in a lightning-inspired fire last year. I brush past a clump of Labrador tea, its tangy scent evoking calm June evenings, and feel the bristly ground yield more with each step. Over the top of my sunglasses, I look to where the yellow sedges point to a pool the colour of stewed tea, and to the crisp pines beyond. I take one more step and suddenly am going down. As I sink into the unseen pool, I recall in an instant everything I have in my pack - all my camera gear, passport, currency, flight tickets. Down to my chest now, warm but unchecked then, in an instant up again, brown flecked elbows and forearms pressing into the comforting Sphagnum as Janis recovers me. The alarm is more on the part of my Latvian friends - once I realise that everything inside the pack has stayed dry; a spark of connection with this wild place has been ignited, rather than extinguished, by the baptism.

I have been in the bogs of eastern Latvia in March when snow conceals the generations-old paths of cranberry pickers and it's hard to know just where you are. In May, west of Riga, jumpy wood sandpipers have voiced their concerns to me from stunted pine snags, while below, the stone cold water reflects piling cumulus.

The "purvs" draw me back at all times of year by their wildness, their antiquity, their apparent intractability. For where in Latvia would the water drain to – the country is mostly very low lying? For all the Soviet's legacy of shattered family trees, grim utilitarianism and colonisation, they bequeathed to the restored Republic of Latvia a network of biologically-rich protected areas - and highly educated biologists - which we in the UK might envy. By 1985, 6 years before independence, 5 % of Latvia was under state protection - including, according to the Latvian SSR Red Data Book for that year, 61 cranberry sanctuaries; areas of bog. Now, as part of the political process to accede to the EU, strenuous efforts are being made to conform to EU habitat and species directives. Bureaucrats, on paper at least, are on the side of the bogs and in Kemer National Park and Teici Nature Reserve (at 19 337 ha, the largest protected bog in the Baltic), Latvia has two of the most important examples of lowland raised bogs left in Europe.

I am drawn back. It is easy in some of the bogs to imagine that you are the first to press their spongy surface, especially in summer when it is possible to penetrate deep within. The illusion is heightened by the loss of a horizon as water-dwarfed pines crowd around. Disorientation comes easily here. The lucky pines find small islands of mineral soil and grow without the stoop induced by physiological drought and anaerobia. Here too are refuges for wolves who also may sense isolation in the bogs, sometimes using the islands to den in. Even people have found sanctuary here. The island of Siksala in Teici, is home to a community of Old Believers. The absolutism which has characterised much of modern Russian history has long, deep roots and was manifest in Peter the Great's persecution of those who didn't subscribed to the new doctrine following a

17th century schism in the Russian Orthodox church. In Siksala, in the middle of a wild bog, the Old Believers found peace to worship.





For many modern Latvians - town and country people - bogs are not wasteland, or obstacle but enjoyable places to visit. You are almost certainly not the first to pass this way. People come to gather cloudberries and cranberries and to hunt elk, geese and black grouse. They may even come to swim in the warm, murky pools. There is a refreshing lack of preciousness in the Latvian attitude to wild nature, a sense that it is there to be enjoyed through restrained use rather than held in awe at arm's length. Wildflowers are gathered. Fur is worn. Wild game is eaten. The relatively recent (in British terms, at least) transition from agrarian to industrialised society deeply informs sensibilities towards nature and even cultural disposition towards expressions of that link with the land. For example, the surnames of many Latvians are the words for different species of birds or trees - my friend Janis Ozolins is John Littleoak. At the weekends, Riga grows quieter as residents head to their summer cottages in the country. During the Soviet occupation, the oak (the male tree) and lime (the female) were reaffirmed

as powerful symbols of Latvian national identity and several massive specimen oaks were dynamited - ostensibly for agricultural reasons but with a consequential demoralising effect too. I believe that this practical engagement with wild places (such as bogs) offers them the best protection from those who value them only for the money their peat could realise.

It is July now. My guide and I lounge on a board walk snaking through the Kemeris bog watching the clouds colour up at sunset. Suddenly I sit up. Where are the insects? I realise that we've been sitting here for the last twenty minutes and haven't been courted by a single mosquito. "It's too open for them here," she tells me, "And besides, there aren't many other meals here except us. Relax." Considering that earlier in the week, I'd had to wear a head net while swimming in a river to protect myself from cleggs (and still was bitten underwater!) and mosquitoes, this is reassuring. But I relax. Deeper into the bog than it is possible to reach without webbed feet we hear the slightly metallic symphonics of a crane family, a sound that, in the dead calm, reverberates off the tall pines at the edge of the bog way behind us. Bilberry fingered, I point to three whimbrel which trill overhead - perhaps early migrants moving south from their breeding grounds. On its last patrol before night fall a dragonfly clatters past, a dry, ancient sound from the Jurassic. To the high bugling of the cranes is now added a bass line as thunder rumbles like distant shed doors. Must get back to the woods now. Back to the scents of the night and a final feast of sweet bilberries.



Photographers for Latvia 2002 May 2002 saw the first gathering of professional nature photographers from Norway, Scotland, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Italy to shoot pictures of Latvia for its main conservation NGO, the Latvian Ornithological Society and to illustrate features about the country for their domestic publications about the biological riches of the country. There remains tremendous scope for photographers from different countries to cooperate with local biologists to raise the international profile of species and conservation issues in overlooked parts of the world.

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