

The Labanoras Project, origins and background

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Last Updated Sunday, 17 March 2013

Way back in the summer of 2004, up and down the country I travelled, a summer and a half looking for the perfect spot ...then finally my search was over, I stumbled across a small plot that seemed just the job. Up for sale, 35 hectares of forest and meadowland. I thought it over, it looked the perfect place to create my dream, a reserve to preserve a little corner of Lithuania and a selection of its birds. Then, as I pondered the debts I would incur, over flew a Roller, a bird in decline and nigh on extinct in Lithuania ...that just about clinched it, off to the bank manager I went and the rest is history. On the 1st of September that year, my reserve was born!

An Introduction to the Reserve So, for a quick tour of the reserve, let's break the land into three - each occupying about a third of the territory, each of the zones is characterized by differing habitats, i.e. flower-rich open meadowland, regenerating birch and alder scrub and mature woodland. The meadows Starting in the meadowland, an area totalling about 12 hectares or so, the broad picture is one of a traditional grassland, fairly rich in flowers and supporting a good variety of birds and butterflies.

On top of the numerous Skylarks and Whinchats, the rolling hillsides are also summer home to Corncrakes and occasional Quail, as well as serving as hunting grounds to various raptors, including regular Marsh and Montagu's Harrier, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Black Kite. Winter, harsh and relatively birdless, the meadows still see a few birds - a Great Grey Shrike is regular, whilst seedheads emerging from the snow appeal to Bullfinches and Mealy Redpolls (and occasionally Arctic Redpoll). Roe Deer are also frequent visitors and, as evidenced by their diggings, so too are Wild Boar at night. Habitat management here is simple - no cutting of the grass till all birds have finished breeding and a rotation of annual mowing to ensure some seedhead remain through the winter. The scrub zone Beyond the meadows, and beyond a ditch, is a zone of regeneration. This area has not been touched, cut or ploughed since the fall of Soviet times and is one of my favourite parts of the land. Straddling both sandy soils and peat, it is a wildlife-rich mosaic of open grasslands, regenerating bushland and stands of young trees. Some areas damp, some dry, Whinchats and Common Rosefinches are abundant, warblers sing across the area and occasional pairs of Woodlarks and Red-backed Shrikes dot the land. Cranes and White Storks favour the wetter parts, whilst a former speciality of the reserve, a pair of Rollers could often be found hunting in areas of sparse vegetation. But for all its birds, this is also the best area for butterflies - close on 40 species have already been recorded, numerous fritillaries, coppers and blues, occasional Swallowtails and many more. Not so knowledgeable on plants, but orchids of several species occur and, as the many plants come into flower, the slopes are a full flush of colour through the summer months. This is a special area, a habitat still fairly common in Lithuania, but likely to become less so. It is my intention to preserve this, habitat management being planned to enhance and maintain the mosaic. In damper areas, early work has also included the excavation of three pools, a process that almost bankrupted me, but left me with some super habitat for the local dragonflies and frogs. Now, as the seasons have passed, the pools are well-vegetated and birds frequently drop in - Yellow Wagtails sometimes breed, Snipe and Green Sandpipers occasionally feed and Swallows swoop. Raccoon Dogs and Foxes both maintain dens in this area. The woodland Now home to almost 200 nestboxes and sporting a few trails cut through the sometimes dense woodland, this is the creme de la creme of my land. About a third is on dry land, ancient oaks mixing with limes, birches and numerous other trees, the understorey often thick and rich. With a lot of free-standing dead wood, woodpeckers are common and eight species have now been recorded, Pied Flycatchers are also numerous, as are Golden Orioles, Wood Warblers, Nuthatches and both Marsh and Willow Tits. On the woodland edge, Icterine Warblers sing, along with a variety of other warblers and, in ranks of nestboxes, many pairs of Starlings. The interior of the woodland is something unique - standing under permanent water, mostly about a metre deep, there are many hectares of flood forest. A fantastic area, albeit difficult to explore, the forest mostly consists of alder and birch and, in addition to the birds already mentioned, supports breeding Goldeneyes, Tawny Owls (in a nestbox) and, on small islands, Redwings and, some years at least, Red-breasted Flycatcher. Out in the centre, where Beavers have created open marshland, Cranes breed and Marsh Harriers are suspected of doing so. On the mammal front, Roe Deer is common, Elk, Wild Boar and Red Deer occasional, but it is Beavers that are the most obvious of residents - not only by their large lodge, but by the frequent felling of trees! Management in this area is limited to keeping paths open through the woodland, maintaining the nestboxes and protecting the woodland, i.e. preventing cutting or removing of dead wood.