

Baltic salmon in Belarus? YES!

It has finally been confirmed that Baltic Salmon (*Salmo salar*) is indeed living in the Vilia basin in Belarus! Before we have got the field work evidence the only choice was to believe in it, and honestly, we have been doing it for a long time. For years we have been listening to the local fishermen's stories about Salmons caught in Vilia and some of its tributaries. But until now no one could confirm this with facts. In September 2009 researchers of the Belarus Academy of Sciences, while doing field work under the CCB Salmon Project, found young salmon (*Salmo salar*) in the Dudka river about 800 m upstream the confluence with Vilia.

This great find would not be possible without sustained CCB effort focused on protection of Atlantic salmon in the Baltic Sea basin and in Belarus in particular. Although Atlantic salmon is in the Belarus Red Data Book, this unique species has in fact been forgotten and has not been a subject to any research. Only occasionally the brown trout surveys were done by the Academy of Sciences in the Tartak river, a small tributary to Vilia. Last year the Belarus Ministry Natural Resources and Environmental Protection approved the Salmon Protection Plan initiated by CCB. The Plan included salmon monitoring with electro fishing equipment, which until now has been banned in Belarus even for research purposes. Based on the CCB request the Ministry issued a special permission to Dr Michael Plutae of Belarus Academy of Sciences to do salmon monitoring from 31 July to 31 August 2009. At last!

(photo 1) On the 12th August 09 Natalie, a young biology student of the Grodno University, Michael Plutae, his colleague Igor, and I arrived to the Vilia river to do the salmon monitoring. We started downstream the small river Kemelina near Lithuanian border. The site looked promising because of a long sand and gravel bar. Using a rubber boat and electro fishing kit SAMUS 725 MP **(photo 2)** rented from the Institute of Genetics we surveyed about 200 m long stretch of the river, but found no evidence of salmon. Then ichthyologists moved to the Kemelina river and surveyed about 300 m long stretch. There was not Baltic salmon (*Salmo salar*) too. But the good thing was they found plenty of Brown trout aged from 0+ to 1+ with the density about 36 fish per 100 m which is perhaps even higher than in the river Tartak. **(photo 3)**

I suggested to do another survey further upstream Vilia, but apparently it did not fit into Michael's and Igor's plans. They disappeared next day to do a field work in the river Dnieper until the end of August. I could not agree with this cowboy attitude; one day of monitoring was not enough and I felt that all my time and effort spent on getting special permission from the Ministry was wasted.

On my return back home I got in touch with the Ministry and with the Belarus Academy of Sciences telling them that we need to continue monitoring in September and that we need another special permission for electro fishing. Surprisingly they agreed and the special permission was issued for September 2009. On the 13th Sep 09 Michael, Igor and I arrived to the river Vilia upstream of the river Oshmianka. We surveyed a Vilia bar along more than 1000 m long stretch and found no salmon, probably because the river was too fast and the water was not clear enough.

Having lost no enthusiasm we surveyed about 1.5 km long stretch in the Oshmianka river with the same result. Oshmianka looks very much like the good salmon river Zheimena in Lithuania with a very similar water flow and morphology. But Oshmianka was not very lucky, this summer it badly suffered from untreated discharges of the Oshmiany Yeast Factory.

Next morning we moved to the Tartak river, surveyed about 100 m long stretch, found 12 young Sea trout and, then the electro rod battery gone flat. We had to find a replacement battery; luckily

found it fairly quickly and headed towards the river Dudka, the right tributary to Vilia. **(photo 4)** It was not possible to reach Dudka without a good off-roader. Thanks to the local WildLife Inspector and his robust Niva 4x4 we got there just on time. And this time it started to rain quite heavily. But Michael and Igor decided to press on. They returned in about half of hour dripping wet and cold, but very happy. In the 100 m of the river stretch they found 4 Sea trout and one young *Salmo salar* aged 0+. Unfortunately I couldn't follow them with my photocamera because of heavy rain.

This is just one young *Salmo salar*, but is now official fact. And this should give the kick start to the salmon conservation programme in the Vilia basin in Belarus

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