

The Scientists - Thomas & Wolfgang

Over 30 scientists came this week from all over Europe to bear witness to how much is still as yet unknown about the life thriving both within and around the Vjosa river. Every day during my stay, they were going down to the river with their tools to dig, explore, and attempt to discover new species unknown to science.

At the banks of the Vjosa, I cornered two of these scientists...Austrians, at that! Wolfgang Paill from the Natural History Museum in Graz, and Thomas Frank from Vienna's University of Natural Resources and Life Science.

Thomas: „My first impression was that this is a highly dynamic river that can extend in every possible direction. For example, take the gravel bank on which we are standing right now: if you come back next year, this particular bank might be gone entirely, flooded, while a new one would have probably formed some 100 meters above or below. This was a very first impression that, as a biologist, one will find very astonishing and pleasing. In this area, the river expands over 2.5 km in width. This doesn't mean the entire area is flooded, but one can see the impact of the river all the way to the hillsides, where the riverbed finally ends.“

Johnny Bliss



Thomas Frank

Wolfgang: „We have discovered many beautiful species, but yesterday evening we found a particularly special one, a shimmering green riparian ground beetle whose bizarre Latin name is *Poecilus striatupunctatus*. This species is nearly extinct in central Europe – currently there are only one or two known populations – and we found many of its specimens at the Vjosa today. The same is true for a variety of other species that we found yesterday such as species of tiger beetle that can't be found in Central Europe but here occur in unbelievable quantities. This shows how important it is to preserve extensive, dynamic alluvial

systems in order to protect habitats that are very specific and rare even in natural systems. So all in all, many spectacular species to be found here!“

Thomas: „Even though I predominantly work with small animals, I have noticed that this river system also hosts bigger ones, such as amphibians. You can hear the marsh frog croaking in the background, and on the island over there we found European green toads the day before yesterday. These are, of course, amphibians one can also find in Austria, but what is special here is that they are actually living in a natural, pristine river system, which is their original, ancestral habitat – while in Central Europe they are forced to adapt to substitute habitats since the original habitats have been destroyed.“

Johnny Bliss



Wolfgang Paill

Wolfgang: „Today, when I first got to the place we are standing right now, I was absolutely astonished, even though I have studied aerial images beforehand; this landscape is unbelievably beautiful and I cannot comprehend how anyone would want to alter this river system! I think that the people behind planning the dam have never actually been here, because there is no way that anyone would want change this landscape after seeing it in real life – that's impossible. People should be forced to come exactly to this spot to see what they want to destroy.“