

# Eldorado

## Poland's San River

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The San River in Poland's far south east corner, near the border with Ukraine and Slovakia, is known to Polish flyfishers as Eldorado, meaning "*a place of great abundance*". The San River is Poland's the 6th longest river (433km) and is a tributary of the Vistula River, which flows the full length of Poland and is truly awesome in size, as is the San. Rising in Ukraine, the San forms the border with Poland for its first 50km, in the Carpathian Mountains.

Until May 2005 I had never heard of the San River, but it was to be the venue of the 2005 European Flyfishing Championships, and my good friend Jeremy Lucas was there as part of the England team, competing with the best in Europe. Jeremy, one of the most capped flyfishers in the country, and a true all-rounder, was to have two trips over to the San and surrounding area; once to practice and to get to know the area with his family, and again to compete in the championships.

When I was asked by Jeremy to accompany him at the best time to fish for grayling on the San River, and to 'recce' the area, with a view to taking guided groups there in future, I couldn't say no. The flights, accommodation and English speaking guide were duly booked and we were all set for departure on 25th October 2005. We flew from Manchester to

Krakow, followed by a 4 hour drive to Lesko by hire car, where we were to stay for 4 nights and 3 days fishing.

We were to fish the San in the Bieszczady Mountains, near the town of Lesko, an area which is still largely unspoilt by man's activities. It is home to wild boar, wolves (which we heard most nights), lynxes, bears, martins, beavers, otters and is also a paradise for bird watchers with many rare species, including eagles and rare owls. Poland joined the EC in May 2005, so with changes in farming practice it probably will not stay this way for ever, but that's another story!

### Fishing Day One

Wojtek, our guide, took us to the actual Eldorado section, the "No-Kill" sector of the San River, immediately below a dam and hydro electric turbines. I should mention at this point that the Poles regard fish as food and as a rule do not practice catch and release with takeable fish (the freezer in our apartment had a fair number of grayling from a couple of Poles also staying there). The no-kill sector was set up as a result of angling pressure and I had been told that the numbers of fish, particularly grayling, had to be seen to be believed and that I could expect to catch up to 100 fish per day if you hit it right!

My first view of the San was much as I had expected it to be; about 60 metres wide, shallow, between steep wooded hills, but much smoother than I had imagined. It was also very low, and fish could be seen rising both upstream and downstream. We asked Wojtek where we should start and



he just shrugged his shoulders and said "anywhere"! I entered the river where we were stood, Jeremy just upstream and Wojtek below. There were fish rising literally everywhere, some could be seen moving from under your feet as you waded. I began casting my size 20 Pale Watery Paradun to the rises; in the first 20 minutes I rose a few, but many more fish ignored my imitation. Wojtek had caught 1 and Jeremy 6 before I got my first fish, a trout of about 0.5lb. After a short while I got another fish, a bigger trout this time I thought. As soon as I set the hook it pulled away upstream, fighting hard and I could see its golden flanks flashing underwater. As I slid it on its side towards my outstretched net, I saw to my surprise the unmistakable dorsal fin of my first San grayling. Over the next few days I made this mistake many times; San River grayling fight like trout, upstream, hard and fast. They are remarkably golden coloured and spotted like brown trout. They could almost be brown trout/grayling hybrids and you simply do not know whether you have hooked a trout or a grayling until you see it clearly, usually as it nears the net.

I was now realising that I had underestimated the guile and wiliness of the San fish and they weren't going to be easy in the low, clear water. Prompted by a shout from Jeremy, I decided to change to a smaller fly, a size 26 Aphid 'F' Fly. This did the trick and I started to catch more grayling.

Trout and grayling were rising 360 degrees around me, but I decided to move upstream to a riffle that I could see, to fish nymphs. The San grayling approved and I immediately caught on 2 small tungsten bead nymphs fished upstream. Jeremy and Wojtek came up to join me and they watched as fish after fish took one of the nymphs.

After a quick lunch we moved downstream a short distance to fish near an island. Jeremy and I crossed the smaller section of river that flowed down the back of the island to get to the main river on the far side. As we did we both tossed our flies into the water. Such is the density of fish in the San that we both had a fish each, first cast, in water barely ankle deep. On reaching the island Jeremy was into fish straight away, fishing a dry fly/nymph duo. It took me a while to find some water that I

really liked, but when I did the size 20 PW Paradun did the trick. For the rest of the day I used this same fly to entice a steady number of fish. I finished with just below 30 fish for the day and Jeremy with just over 30.

The name Eldorado has been applied because of the abundance of fish that the San holds in the no-kill sector, and I certainly couldn't argue with that after just one day. But my dictionary has an alternative meaning of Eldorado; "*any imaginary country or city abounding in gold*". This is very apt too, with grayling which are stunning, golden specimens, especially the bigger ones and on our October trip, the golden autumn vista provided by the dense tree covered slopes. A scene that must rival New England in the fall and one that really needs to be seen to be believed and appreciated! Yes, South-East Poland is a truly beautiful and unspoilt land; long may it remain that way!

### **Fishing Day Two**

The fishing on day one had been much more exacting than I expected. If I had given the fish a little more respect I am sure I could have caught a few more. I wouldn't repeat the mistake again! On our second day we were to take some time out from fishing to visit Top Fly, a small tackle shop in Sanok, about 30 minutes drive from Lesko. Top Fly is by anyone's standards small, more the size of a cigarette kiosk than any tackle shop I have been in previously. What it lacks in size it certainly makes up for with the 'goodies' on sale. My attention was focused on row upon row of expertly tied flies, mainly small gold head nymphs, scuds and CDC dries. More the type of flies that you would expect to see in one of the country's top river fishers fly boxes, rather than in a shop, and in my opinion indicative of the large gulf in the average fishing abilities between our respective countries. The shop also had a large range of specialist hand made nymph and dry fly hooks from Czech Republic. Whilst in the shop, Adam, the very knowledgeable and friendly owner, offered to take us fishing to his favourite bit of the San River. Now, we had been told by Wojtek, that Adam was 'up there' with the best fly fishers in Poland and like all tackle dealers I'm sure he hears where's fishing and where's not. Also, he told us that the stretch we were



planning on fishing was too low for good fishing, so it goes without saying that we accepted his offer in a flash. He jumped in his car and we followed in our hire car, through the back streets of Sanok, driving fast in what to us resembled a car chase from an old cold war spy film. He took us a long way downstream and although the scenery was still very nice, it lacked the almost breathtaking splendour of the upper San and its dense tree covered hills.

Adam showed us the river; 2 smooth glides where he expected the grayling to start rising around 2pm, and a large riffle below where we should fish until then with nymphs. He went on to say that there were "No special grayling in this part of the river, they only go to about 55cm!" Jeremy and I looked at each other and just smiled. Much to Adam's disappointment the fishing never really took off here. We all had a few trout, grayling and what Adam collectively called "whitefish". I think some were true whitefish, but many were coarse fish, including small chub and bleak. Adam then took us back upstream about 6km to another stretch that he thought offered better prospects. I was lucky enough to find myself in a bit of river that grayling fishers would die for. About knee to waist deep, perfect speed of flow and with a 'crinkly' surface. To add to this there were grayling rising too, which again approved of my Pale Watery imitation. Jeremy and Adam struggled a bit here, but to be fair I had the only good looking piece of water on that stretch. The river finally came alive right at the end of the day, when there was just enough light to see the rises but not your fly. It was just case of casting near a rise and striking if something rose where you thought your fly was. These rising fish sounded big and after many fruitless strikes I hooked a good fish that I assumed was a grayling. It didn't fight at

all well to start with, but after a while it woke up and I struggled to net it in the fast flow. In the net I thought that it was easily my best grayling of the trip, but on closer inspection I realised that it wasn't a grayling at all, although it did look very similar, and my thoughts turned to it being a chub. On the bank I had a much closer look and I decided that it was a species that I had never seen before. Similar to a grayling, and a chub, but its mouth position was more under-slung even than a grayling. I took many photos as evidence and for identification.

It was now completely dark and when I returned to the cars I could see the silhouette of Jeremy crossing the river and Adam sat in his car. Adam thought we were mad fishing so late and went on to explain that the Poles don't fish past 5pm at that time of year; it was now after 6pm, and he had been waiting for us for over an hour! I showed him the pictures of my last fish, which he called a "yeltsin" (this is what it sounded like to me, but I am sure it is not spelt this way). "Did you get it on a nymph?" he asked. He was literally astounded when I said no and showed him the size 24 'F' Fly that it had taken. He had never heard of one of these fish being taken on anything but a nymph, and he explained that they clamp your fly to the bottom, before sucking it into their mouth. The fish was later identified by Jeremy and others as a nace. Jeremy had caught well in this last bit of the day, finishing with a 2lb brownie. The day had turned out disappointing in terms of numbers of fish, but it had been very interesting looking at this stretch of water, catching different species of fish and watching Adam fish his way. We both learnt one or two tricks that might come in handy in future, but more importantly, we had made a new friend.

### **Fishing Day Three**

Jeremy was keen for us to fish the water right in front of our accommodation on our last day. The San flowed about 100 metres away from our house and I had fished it a couple of times before breakfast, whilst Jeremy was out on his daily run. Waders were donned and we tackled up by the house, but on arrival at the river we had been beaten to it by 4 others, already working downstream in typical Polish nymphing style. Jeremy was disappointed, but we made a quick decision to drive upstream for about a mile

to an area that Jeremy had fished back in May. This stretch of river was the best I had seen so far. Lovely surroundings, but the river had everything; more depth in places than I had seen elsewhere, smooth glides, riffles, boulders, even a tributary (the Hoczewka) entering just upstream. The water did have a moderate cloudiness to it that we hadn't seen before, but I figured that would help rather than hinder us. Jeremy went downstream and I upstream, towards a nice mix of riffle and pocket water. A Polish angler was working down the far bank, but we kept to our respective sides and acknowledged each other with a wave. When I reached the head of this wide pool I had only taken a couple of small trout and grayling and I was starting to curse the Poles for eating all the takeable fish outside the no-kill sector. I continued upstream with a couple of nymphs and I caught my best fish of the day so far; a brown trout of about 1.25lb. I had been fishing for about 2 hours now, for a handful of fish, in what looked like perfect water, my head was starting to drop and I was thinking about the no-kill sector, Eldorado. The next hour was to totally change my day, my thoughts of the San and make my trip complete.

I started to cross to the other side of the river, where the Polish angler had fished through earlier. About half way across, the river became distinctly clearer, and it was now obvious that the cloudiness was emanating from the tributary just above. I persevered with my 2 nymphs upstream into tasty looking water. Immediately I was into a good fish, a grayling. Many more fish followed to this same tactic without moving my feet, mostly trout, including a marvellous specimen of about 1.5lb. More and more fish were starting to rise and I made the switch to a dry fly, yes you guessed it, my size 20 Pale Watery. The fish instantly approved and I was beginning to realise that the river was 'lifting' with rising fish and that a massive hatch of olives was underway. But all this action had appeared to have started in the clear water when I crossed the river, and I was thinking that Jeremy might be missing out, fishing in the cloudy water downstream. He was too far away now to shout or wave, though I could just see him in the distance. I would just have to tell him about what he had missed at the end of the day!



I fished on, catching with amazing regularity, trout in the edges and grayling mid-stream, all falling for the Pale Watery. I was in fishing heaven! When Jeremy finally came upstream to meet me he simply said "Well Stu, you have now seen the San at its best". He had stopped counting at 50, but had caught in the region of sixty fish. I had caught about 40, but numbers weren't important, other than to give an idea of the quality of fishing on the San River. It had been a fantastic days fishing and one that I will never forget, and probably never better.

### **Conclusions**

3 days fishing the San River was long enough for me to realise that it is the perfect destination for UK trout and grayling fly fishers in search of something special. A place that few outside Poland have fished. We fished in 3 completely different areas; the no-kill was certainly the 'cream', but the other areas, Dobra and Laczki, were outstanding in their own right, certainly better than anything we have in the UK and most of Europe, with phenomenal numbers of grayling and trout.

Since writing the above Jeremy and I have returned many times and now escort and arrange guided trips to the San. There are many opportunities for non-fishing partners and trips work out cheap in comparison to other destinations, though we feel the fishing is far superior. In addition, the food, people and the ease of getting there combine to ensure that guests go home happy and anticipating their return.

For further information please contact me on: 01535 635464, or Jeremy: 01768 352995. We hope to have our dedicated website up and running before you read this at: [www.pioneerflyfishing.co.uk](http://www.pioneerflyfishing.co.uk)