

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



POLAND

Bison, Elk & Birds in Winter

1 – 7 March 2018

TOUR REPORT

Leader: Andrzej Petryna

Our tour started two days after a sudden attack of winter, which brought severe frost to north-east Poland after a short period of warmer days. While daily temperature oscillated around -8oC, temperatures at night were dropping down to -15 / -18oC. Additionally, for the first few days of our stay at the Biebrza Marshes, strong winds made the walks even more challenging. Snow cover was thin and fresh. The weather changed to become milder towards the end of our tour, with temperatures ranging from -3oC in the morning to +3oC during the day, with some light snowfall.

Thursday 1 March 2018

Transfer to the Biebrza Marshes

After meeting the group at the Warsaw airport, we headed to Dobarz, a small settlement right in the heart of the Biebrza Marshes. We reached our destination early enough to stop for a short walk and to enjoy our first glimpse of the area, where we spotted - in the distance - our first elk, a single male walking across the marsh. After a traditional and warming dinner at our cosy wooden guesthouse, we set off for a night drive in our minibus, hoping to spotlight some interesting nocturnal wildlife. Driving slowly along Tsarska Road, we observed another five elks browsing in a sandy pine forest adjoining the marsh.

Friday 2 – Saturday 3 March 2018

Biebrza Marshes

We spent the next two days at the Biebrza Marshes, focusing on the southern and the middle basins, the most interesting areas of the national park at this time of the year. Vast landscapes of once flooded river valley and adjoining meadows were now all covered with solid ice, therefore the water birds concentrated mainly in a small ice-free patch near the main current of the river. We spotted mainly mute and whooper swan, mallard, goldeneye, pintail and wigeon. In one spot we saw five white-tailed eagles and witnessed a very interesting scene when two of them attempted a hunt for a single mute swan trapped in a very small pond of water, surrounded by ice floes. A very interesting sight was also a pair of cranes wintering in the area. Apparently most of geese - numerous at the Marshes before severe frosts started – had left the area, and only greylag geese could be seen at the fields close to the river. In many places waxwing and redpoll were spotted.

One of the highlights of our stay at the Marshes was a visit to the XIX c. fortress, partially turned into a museum and open for tourists, but which also acts as a very important shelter for wintering bats. Accompanied by our local guide, we were allowed into the site, where we observed in total around 600

bats still hibernating (some of them had already left the site in a warmer period, before the extremely cold weather arrived), including six out of 15 bat species known from north east Poland (Dauberton's, serotine, barbastelle, Natterer's, Brandt's and pond bat).

In total during our stay at the Biebrza Marshes we saw 13 elks (most of them in a pine forest, but also two single bulls were spotted in the open space of the Marshes), three otters (each of them seen in a different area of the river), around ten roe deer and three foxes (at the meadows near the forest).

Sunday 4 March 2018

Transfer to Białowieża Forest

Before leaving the Marshes, we made a short stop at the historical town of Tykocin, where a walk along frozen Narew River showed us goldeneye and goosander. Further on, we stopped again at Dojlidy fishponds near Białystok to spot goldeneye, redpoll and white-tailed eagle. After lunch in Białystok, we continued to the Białowieża Forest. Having reached our second destination, we carefully checked few sites - open meadows and forest clearings - in search of wild bison. Before we reached the guesthouse late in the afternoon, we had already seen two small groups of bison (six animals in total). After yet another cold day, the homemade dinner and a fireplace at our guesthouse were most inviting.

Monday 5 – Tuesday 6 March 2018

Białowieża Forest

During the next two days in the northern part of the forest, we spotted a total of 44 bison, including a herd of 30 females with calves, and two small groups of bulls (seven in each group). As some of the bulls weren't shy, we managed to take photos from quite close distance. There were also red and roe deer feeding in the meadows, and in the same area a wintering female hen harrier was also spotted.

Mammal tracking in the powder-like snow was very challenging, nevertheless we came across wolf tracks and scratchings on the ground in the strictly protected area of the national park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A few hours' walk in the unmanaged part of the forest with a local national park guide was very educational. Not only did we see the signs of wolf activity, but we also spotted a very interesting range of woodpeckers, such as three-toed, white-backed, middle spotted, lesser spotted and a black woodpecker. Last but not least, one of the highlights of our stay in the Białowieża Forest was a close view of a pygmy owl.

Tuesday 7 March 2018

Transfer to Warsaw, depart

We finished our trip with a pre-breakfast walk in the Palace Park in Białowieża village, with good views of a red squirrel. After a hearty breakfast we left Białowieża Forest and headed directly to Warsaw airport.