

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



Tour Report

Poland– Poland's Winter Wildlife

28 February - 6 March 2019

Biebrza Marshes



Moose



European Bison



Common Crane



Compiled by: Andrzej Petryna



Tour Leader: Andrzej Petryna with 5 participants

Introduction

The 2019 Poland's Winter Wildlife departure experienced pretty mild weather and saw thousands of birds on a spring migration. Indeed, it already felt like an early spring. The last small patches of snow and ice survived only in shaded places, but in general rivers and most of lakes were already free of ice.

Day 1: Arrive Dobarz, Biebrza Marshes

Thursday 28 February 2019

Weather: Sunny, 9 degrees

After collecting all of the participants at Warsaw airport, we boarded our minibus and headed north east of Warsaw, towards the Podlasie region. During our six-day stay we planned to visit two gems of Polish nature: the Biebrza Marshes and the Białowieża Forest.

Our first overnight was Dobarz, a small settlement located conveniently in the wooded area in the southern part of the Biebrza Marshes National Park. Although the major part of our drive from Warsaw was along the express road, en route we saw a lot of common buzzards, ravens and small groups of roe deer. We reached the Marshes early enough to visit few interesting sites before checking in to our guesthouse. After a traditional dinner at our wooden guesthouse we discussed plans for the next three days of the tour. We finished the day with an evening safari-style drive, spotlighting two elks, a few more roe deer and a hare, all in close vicinity to Dobarz.

Day 2: Biebrza Marshes

Friday 1 March 2019

Weather: Sunny, -1 degree in the morning, 4 degrees during the day, cold, strong wind

An early morning drive through the pine forest was very successful, and we saw five elk in total, and also came across wolf droppings. We returned to our guesthouse for breakfast and then took an excursion to the historic XIX century fortification at Osowiec, a perfect wintering site for bats. Despite mild weather and winter coming to an end, we still observed around 500 individuals of different species, including greater mouse-eared, Brandt's, pond, Daubenton's, serotine and barbastelle bats (the latter being the most numerous, counting approximately 400, hibernating in small colonies). The cellars of the fortress are also used by hibernating insects, and we spotted comma and peacock butterflies, along with herald and pale brindled beauty moths. We finished our two hour excursion at the Visitor's Centre of Biebrza National Park and, as it was lunchtime, we decided to take a short break at our guesthouse.

In the afternoon we explored the southernmost edge of the Marshes, the area of Ruś and Strękowa Góra. After days of mild weather and temperatures over zero, the major part of the area was already free of ice and heavily flooded. Large flocks of tundra and taiga bean geese, wigeon, pintail, mute and whooper swans and greylags gathered at a fair distance from our observation point (therefore making photography quite challenging). We also spotted a few white-tailed eagles and several pairs of cranes feeding on grain fields near the villages.

After dinner we took a short drive to a small pond in search of beaver, but no luck this time..

Day 3: Biebrza Marshes

Saturday 2 March 2019

Weather: Sunny, -6 degrees at sunrise, 1 degree during the day

During a pre-breakfast search we saw seven elks in different spots in the forest. We also explored a vast open area near Laskowiec and Zajki, where at the flooded meadows we notice flocks of greylag geese, bean geese, goosander and white-tailed eagle.

After breakfast we explored the middle part of the Marshes, where again we saw plenty of birds from a distance (large flocks of geese, pintail, wigeon, mallard, mute swan, great white egret and grey heron, as well as small flocks of cranes and lapwing in flight). While driving back to the hotel, we took the road along the western bank of the Biebrza River and paid a visit to Brzostowo to admire the wetlands, where we experienced thousands of white-fronted, taiga and tundra bean geese, greylag, mute and whooper swans, common merganser, goldeneye and tufted ducks. The impressive gatherings of waterfowl stretched over a large area, accompanied in many places by white-tailed eagles.

After lunch at a local bar we checked the areas along the adjoining Narew River, where the results were very similar, with gatherings of countless waterbirds. In the afternoon we returned once more to Brzostowo. There were some keen photographers within the group and this site offers the best view of the area and the shortest distance to the birds. We stayed to enjoy a picturesque sunset. After dinner we checked the beaver pond again, unfortunately with no results.

Day 4: Transfer to Białowieża Forest

Sunday 3 March 2019

Weather: fully clouded, 4 degrees, scattered showers, rain in the afternoon

Early in the morning we took a walk through the forest near our guesthouse. It was a very interesting stroll, as we observed white-backed, grey-headed and great spotted woodpeckers, and heard a distinct call of a black woodpecker. Long-tailed and crested tits closed our morning list. After breakfast we left Biebrza Marshes (seeing two elks on the way) and we headed to our second destination, the Białowieża Forest. A 150 kilometre-long transfer through the Podlasie region revealed very pleasant landscapes, small villages with traditional wooden architecture, roadside shrines and historical towns. One of these towns is Tykocin, where we stopped for a short walk along the Narew River, a coffee break and then the historical XVIII century building of the first hospice in Europe for war veterans. Next stop was Dojlidy fishponds near Białystok. Most of the water surface here was still frozen, but we managed to spot smew and red-breasted merganser. We made last one stop close to Hajnówka city, where we observed a large aggregation of geese (around 5,000 birds), mostly tundra and taiga bean geese.

In the afternoon we reached Białowieża village and checked in to yet another atmospheric wooden guesthouse, where after dinner we sat by the fireplace and discussed our plans for the coming days.

Day 5: Białowieża Forest

Monday 4 March 2019

Weather: cloudy, 4 degrees, windy, scattered showers

Before breakfast we searched for bison, checking several places, where adult bulls tend to visit at this time of the year, but we only found fresh tracks and droppings. After breakfast we drove to the northern part of the Białowieża Forest and continued our patrol. This time we were lucky, and at one of the meadows we spotted a herd of 19 bison (cows with one year old calves and immature bulls). We spent a while watching the bison, while migrating flocks of lapwings, starlings, skylarks, woodlarks and siskins passed high above our heads. Satisfied with our sightings, we moved to the nearby man-made water reservoir of Siemianówka for a picnic lunch and further observations of waterbirds. We enjoyed hundreds of ducks (wigeon, pintail,



mallard mainly), greylags and numerous great white egrets, with several white-tailed eagles on the lookout for prey.

Our first day in Białowieża passed quickly and we decided to spend the rest of the afternoon and evening on one of the watching towers overlooking meadows frequently visited by bison and other large mammals. As time went by, we saw roe deer and a large herd of red deer (17 individuals) that suddenly ran out of the forest and quickly crossed the meadow, thus alerting us to the possibility of wolves following them. But there were no wolves. Red deer swiftly disappeared and we returned to our guesthouse for a late dinner and a cosy time by the fireplace.

Day 6: Białowieża Forest

Tuesday 5 March 2019

Weather: Cloudy, 4 degrees, strong wind

Another early morning search for adult bulls of bison showed only their fresh footprints and droppings. After breakfast we had intended to visit the Strict Reserve of the Białowieża National Park, the core area of the Forest listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The wind was very strong and park authorities decided to close the site to the public for safety reasons. We therefore changed our plans and visited another nearby site, however the danger of falling branches kept us away from further exploration of forest tracks. We returned to the meadows and open spaces in the northern part of the Forest, where we watched immature white-tailed eagles chasing other birds. On the way back we saw a herd of nine bison, this time mostly males with two massive adult bulls. After dinner, despite the windy weather, we took a short drive trying to spotlight the nocturnal wildlife.

Day 7: Białowieża Forest and drive to Warsaw

Wednesday 6 March 2019

Weather: Sunny, 5 degrees

As the weather improved overnight, early in the morning we met our local national park guide, Joanna, and visited the Strict Reserve of the Białowieża National Park. A three hour walk took us to the most natural part of the Forest, formally protected since 1921. Today was sunny and the bird activity high. We noticed hawfinch, nuthatch, middle spotted and lesser spotted woodpecker, and we heard plenty of other passerines, along with the drumming of three-toed and black woodpecker, and even the call of a tawny owl.

After a walk we stopped for a tasty lunch in the Palace Park Restaurant, before heading back to Warsaw, where everyone was dropped off at their hotels or Warsaw airport.



Checklist

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| | Common Name | Scientific Name | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 | Day 6 | Day 7 |
|----|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | BIRDS | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Greylag goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 2 | Tiaga bean goose | <i>Anser fabalis</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 3 | Tundra bean goose | <i>Anser serrirostris</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 4 | Greater white-fronted goose | <i>Anser albifrons</i> | | | H | | | | |
| 5 | Mute swan | <i>Cygnus olor</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 6 | Whooper swan | <i>Cygnus cygnus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 7 | Eurasian widgeon | <i>Mareca penelope</i> | | H | H | | | | |
| 8 | Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 9 | Northern pintail | <i>Anas acuta</i> | | H | H | | | | |
| 10 | Common pochard | <i>Aythya ferina</i> | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| 11 | Common goldeneye | <i>Bucephala clangula</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 12 | Smew | <i>Mergellus albellus</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 13 | Common merganser | <i>Mergus merganser</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| 14 | Red-breasted merganser | <i>Mergus serrator</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |

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|----|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 15 | Grey partridge | <i>Perdix perdix</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 16 | Grey heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 17 | Great egret | <i>Ardea alba</i> | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 18 | Great cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| 19 | Eurasian sparrowhawk | <i>Accipiter nisus</i> | | ✓ | | | | | |
| 20 | Northern goshawk | <i>Accipiter gentilis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| 21 | White-tailed eagle | <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 22 | Common buzzard | <i>Buteo buteo</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 23 | Eurasian coot | <i>Fulica atra</i> | | | | | ✓ | | |
| 24 | Black-headed gull | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | |
| 25 | Mew gull | <i>Larus canus</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| 26 | Yellow-legged gull | <i>Larus michahellis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| 27 | Tawny owl | <i>Strix aluco</i> | H | | | | | | H |
| 28 | Eurasian three-toed woodpecker | <i>Picoides tridactylus</i> | | | | | | | H |
| 29 | Middle spotted woodpecker | <i>Dendrocoptes medius</i> | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 30 | Lesser spotted woodpecker | <i>Dryobates minor</i> | | | | | | | ✓ |
| 31 | Great spotted woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos major</i> | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 32 | White-backed woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i> | | | | ✓ | | | |
| 33 | Black woodpecker | <i>Dryocopus martius</i> | | H | | H | | | H |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------|------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 34 | Grey-headed woodpecker | <i>Picus canus</i> | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| 35 | Common kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | | | | | | | |
| 36 | Great grey shrike | <i>Lanius excubitor</i> | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 37 | Eurasian jay | <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 38 | Eurasian magpie | <i>Pica pica</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 39 | Western jackdaw | <i>Coloeus monedula</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 40 | Rook | <i>Corvus frugilegus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 41 | Hooded crow | <i>Corvus cornix</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 42 | Northern raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 43 | Coal tit | <i>Periparus ater</i> | | | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| 44 | European crested tit | <i>Lophophanes cristatus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 45 | Marsh tit | <i>Poecile palustris</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 46 | Willow tit | <i>Poecile montanus</i> | | | | | | | ✓ |
| 47 | Eurasian blue tit | <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 48 | Great tit | <i>Parus major</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 49 | Woodlark | <i>Lullula arborea</i> | | | | | ✓ | | |
| 50 | Eurasian Skylark | <i>Alauda arvensis</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 51 | Long-tailed tit | <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 52 | Goldcrest | <i>Regulus regulus</i> | | | | | | | H |

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|----|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 53 | Eurasian nuthatch | <i>Sitta europaea</i> | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| 54 | Eurasian treecreeper | <i>Certhia familiaris</i> | | | | | | | ✓ |
| 55 | Fieldfare | <i>Turdus pilaris</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 56 | Mistle thrush | <i>Turdus viscivorus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| 57 | House sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 58 | Eurasian tree sparrow | <i>Passer montanus</i> | | | ✓ | | | | |
| 59 | Common chaffinch | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 60 | Hawfinch | <i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i> | | | | | | | ✓ |
| 61 | Eurasian bullfinch | <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i> | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| 62 | European greenfinch | <i>Chloris chloris</i> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| 63 | Common redpoll | <i>Acanthis flammea</i> | | | | | ✓ | | |
| 64 | Red crossbill | <i>Loxia curvirostra</i> | | | | | | H | |
| 65 | European goldfinch | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| 66 | Eurasian siskin | <i>Spinus spinus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 67 | Yellowhammer | <i>Emberiza citrinella</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |