

TRIP REPORT

WINTER BISON SAFARI & WOLF TRACKING 4-7 MAR 2016

4 DAY MAMMAL WATCHING TOUR
IN THE BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST AND BIEBRZA MARSHES
- MODIFIED ITINERARY



TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDRZEJ PETRYNA

TOUR LEADER: ANDRZEJ (JAY) PETRYNA

PARTICIPANTS: BIANCA & GABRIELE (IT)

WILDLIFE: 11 MAMMAL AND 34 BIRD SPECIES RECORDED, FULL CHECKLIST ON PAGE 5

DAY 1, FRIDAY 4 MAR - ARRIVAL

TEMP. +5° C, CLOUDY AND MISTY

Bianca & Gabriele had started their trip to Poland with a morning exploring Warsaw Old Town. After that we met at the monument of King Zigmund Wasa the Third near the Royal Castle and soon we were on our way to the Białowieża Forest. We were driving through completely flat landscape of Masovian Plain, with some **Common Buzzards** hovering over snowless fields, but soon we turned off the main road and entered Podlasie Region, with slightly undulating landscape of the fields around, small forests and villages with a lot of wooden houses. We found some **Roe Deer** in the fields and next **Buzzards** sitting along the road. We arrived in Białowieża just on time to have a tasty home-made dinner in our family run guesthouse. After dinner we took a short walk in the park just in front of our house to look for beavers, but they were busy elsewhere, so we came back and made our plans for the next days sitting at a fireplace.

DAY 2, SATURDAY 5 MAR - BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST

TEMP. -2 TO + 3°C, CLOUDY



Our Bison day we had started before breakfast. We checked the meadows to the north of the village, but we found **four Red Deer** (three stags) and plenty of fresh footprints of Bison only. Next place was much better: we found **two Bison bulls** feeding at the meadow. It was near the village and the animals obviously were used to see humans, because it was possible to get close to them to take pictures.

After the usual plentiful breakfast we packed our picnic lunches and went off to explore another parts of the forest. We had started with the northern part of the Białowieża Forest. It was a successfull day – after the **two bulls** before breakfast we found the next two – **male and female** – at the edge of the forest. These were very shy – immediately ran away across the meadow and disappeared in the reeds. On the way back to the centre of the forest we met a **small herd of Bison bulls** in a small wood, these ones allowed us to take pictures in a short distance.



We stopped for a picnic lunch at a big forest clearing and then walked into the forest, to visit a distant Bison winter feeding place, often with a large herd of Bisons. We found a lot of different footprints on the forest path (Wolf, Wild Boar, Red Deer, Badger, Hare) and **traces of Wolf hunting** – probably the place where they attacked Red Deer with a lot of fur left on the ground.

When we got closer to the feeder we noticed single Bisons crossing the path to get to the feeder. It was a **herd of ca 30 animals**, mostly females with calves, some of them quite young, born late last year. We had some great views.

After a lot of walking on this day a hearty dinner was a fantastic reward, and after that it was a time to look at the photos once more drinking the local *Żubr* (*Bison*) beer.



DAY 3, SUNDAY 6 MAR - BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST + BIEBRZA MARSHES TEMP. +1° TO +5°C

The weather improved (with a chance to get some sunshine) so before breakfast we decided to visit the same place we did yesterday to try and get better photos of **Bison**. Good luck – there were Bison in the same place, but **two young bulls** this time. After a longish photo-session we still had some time before breakfast to visit a small dam and a lodge built by **Beavers** near the village.

After breakfast it was a time to visit the Strict Reserve, the most famous and valuable remnant of primaeval forest in the Białowieża National Park, UNESCO World Heritage Site and a Man & Biosphere Reserve. In the forest, we were welcomed by Red Squirrels and the local guide Irek gave us a lot of valuable information about forest



ecology. It is a special place to watch Woodpeckers because of a lot of dead wood in the Strict Reserve, and we saw a **pair of White-backed Woodpeckers**, the rarest European one, and heard **Middle-spotted** and **Black Woodpeckers**. It was a stunning walk in leafless but bright green forest (because of moss cover), showing us a probable view of European habitat some thousands of years ago.



Bianca & Gabriele wanted to see **Elk** very much, so after lunch we left Białowieża and headed to Biebrza Marshes where seeing **Elk** is much more reliable than in the Białowieża Forest. The drive through rural area with a lot of wooden architecture in local villages took about 3 hrs but passed quickly. We left our luggage at our guesthouse in the Biebrza, located at a very small settlement in the middle of the southern basin of the Biebrza Marshes, and went for a late afternoon **Elk** patrol. Quite soon we found **three Elks** (female with two young from year) feeding on Willow twigs near the road.

We finished our day with a tasty home-made dinner at our guesthouse, in a cosy dining room with a hot fireplace.

DAY 4, MONDAY 15 FEB - BIEBRZA MARSHES & TRANSFER TO WARSAW MODLIN AIRPORT

TEMP. +6°C

We got out at sunrise to look for more **Elks**. Meadows around were covered with a delicate mist, everywhere one could hear migrating **White-fronted, Bean and Greylag Geese** and **Cranes**. After a short drive through the forest we found our **first Elks**, and then the next ones in small groups of 2-3 animals. Altogether, quite a successful morning with **9 Elks** near!





After breakfast we visited the open fens of the Biebrza Marshes. We were invited by a **Grey-headed Woodpecker** call, but we didn't see the bird. At the end of our muddy path we climbed a watching tower with fantastic view of a huge part of the marshes with not a single trace of civilisation up to the horizon, and we found next **four Elks and a Fox**.

Unfortunately, it was the last bit of the Marshes. After lunch we headed back towards Warsaw. We were driving back to Warsaw along the road through the Marshes so Bianca & Gabriele didn't pack their cameras hoping to meet **more Elks** for the last time. And it happened! We took our last shots and after three hour drive we appeared at the Warsaw Modlin airport on time.

CHECKLIST

F - footprints
D - droppings
H - heard
X - seen

MAMMALS

Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	SUM
European Bison <i>Bison bonasus</i>		34	2		36
Red Deer <i>Cervus elaphus</i>		11			11
Roe Deer <i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	5	4	4		13
Wild Boar <i>Sus scrofa</i>		F		F	2
European Elk <i>Alces alces</i>			3	14	17
Wolf <i>Canis lupus</i>		F, D	F		2
Red Fox <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>				1	1
Badger <i>Meles meles</i>		F			1
European Beaver <i>Castor fiber</i>		F	F		2
Red Squirrel <i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			4		4
European Hare <i>Lepus europaeus</i>		F			1
Number of species:	1	8	6	3	11

BIRDS

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	SUM
039	Mute Swan <i>Cygnus olor</i>		x			1
041	Greater White-fronted Goose <i>Anser albifrons</i>				x	1
043	Bean Goose <i>Anser fabalis</i>				x	1
043	Greylag Goose <i>Anser anser</i>				x	1
089	Rough-legged Buzzard <i>Buteo lagopus</i>			x		1
091	Common Buzzard <i>Buteo buteo</i>	x	x	x	x	4
119	Common Crane <i>Grus grus</i>		x			1
171	Black-headed Gull <i>Larus ridibundus</i>	x				1
201	Feral Pigeon <i>Columba livia feral</i>	x				1
225	Black Woodpecker <i>Dryocopus martius</i>		H	H	x	3
225	Grey-headed Woodpecker <i>Picus canus</i>		H		H	2
227	Great Spotted Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos major</i>		x	x		2
227	Middle Spotted Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos medius</i>			H		1
229	White-backed Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>			3		1
231	Skylark <i>Alauda arvensis</i>			x	x	2
275	Mistle Thrush <i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		x	x		2
275	Fieldfare <i>Turdus pilaris</i>			x		1
277	Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>		x	x		2
317	Great Tit <i>Parus major</i>		x	x		2
317	Coal Tit <i>Periparus ater</i>		x			1
317	Blue Tit <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		x	x		2
319	Crested Tit <i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			x		1
331	Magpie <i>Pica pica</i>	x	x	x		3
333	Jay <i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		x	x		2
335	Jackdaw <i>Corvus monedula</i>	x				1
337	Rook <i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			x		1
337	Hooded Crow <i>Corvus cornix</i>				x	1
337	Raven <i>Corvus corax</i>		x	x	x	3
341	Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>				x	1
343	House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>		x	x		2
351	Greenfinch <i>Carduelis chloris</i>			x		1
351	Siskin <i>Carduelis spinus</i>		x			1
355	Bullfinch <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		x	x		2
373	Yellowhammer <i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			x		1
Number of species:		5	17	21	10	34

FOR FULL SIZE PHOTOGRAPHS, PLEASE VISIT OUR NEWS AT WWW.WILDPOLAND.COM
OR OUR FACEBOOK PAGE: WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/WILDPOLAND