WILDPOLAND Trip report

Autumn Birds & Mammals
8–18 September 2014

10 day bird and mammal watching tour
in the Białowieża Forest and Biebrza Marshes

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Participants:
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Day 1, Mon 8th Sep - Arrival

After meeting at Warsaw Airport we were soon heading towards our first destination – Bialowieza Forest. After getting through an usual traffic jam in Warsaw we took the road towards Bialystok, then turned right to a local road along the Bug river. We drove through picturesque countryside with a mosaic of wet meadows, small patches of forest and strips of farm fields, passing the numerous White Stork nests along village road (a week or so too late to see the birds around). Roe Deer, Fox and Hare were seen in some places on the way, as well as Common Buzzards and Kestrels. After ca. 4 hrs we finished our drive at a family run Wejmutka guesthouse in the Bialowieza village in the centre of Bialowieza Forest.

Day 2, Tue 9th Sep - Białowieża

We left the hotel at 5.00 a.m. to check some forest meadows searching for European Bison. We started with the area around the Strict Reserve out of Bialowieza village. In poor dawn light we saw some dark silhouettes, which were 6 Red Deer, single Wild Boar and two bulls of Bison. When the daylight developed, we found another 4 Bison. We arrived at a right time because after 20 minutes all the animals disappeared in the forest. The rest of pre-breakfast walk we spent in the park, observing flocks of migrating Tits, numerous Chiffchaffs, Jays and other birds. Finally, we met Middle Spotted and Grey-headed Woodpecker.

After rich breakfast we drove to the northern part of Bialowieza Forest. We took Carska Tropina walk (ca. 9 km). The trail goes through various forest habitats, a little bit muddy in the southern part. We saw our first Lesser Spotted Eagle soaring over one of the glades, and Three-toed Woodpecker in the last part of the walk. Everybody was excited by Wolf footprints found on the trail, as well as Wild Boar feeding on acorns near our picnic lunch site. We also found some fresh footprints of Bison in the same part of the forest. Our walk had ended with one of the last summer thunder storms, so we had to move out of the area. We drove to the southern part of Siemianowka Lake, to the village with a nice Polish name Siemieniakowszczyzna, to take shelter at a watching tower. On our way to Siemianowka village we were excited by European Bison crossing the road in front of our car, it was a single one.

At part of the lake seen from the tower, we saw many ducks (mostly Mallards, Wigeons, Gadwalls and some Garganeys), plenty of Black-headed Gulls and a few
Caspian Gulls flying over open water. Numerous Great White Egrets were flying all the time from one part of reed-beds to another. No birds of prey in such rainy weather. On the way back we saw a single White Stork near Białowieża village, quite a late bird (they leave at the end of August).

After fantastic home made dinner we went out in search of Pygmy Owl. We failed in the first place, so we drove to the next one. This time Pygmy Owl was quite vocative, flying over our heads. The show was quite short, because in the same place the Tawny Owl appeared, making Pygmy Owl silent.

Day 3, Wed 10th Sep - Białowieża

After breakfast we took a short drive to the western part of Białowieza Forest – one of the nature reserves. In the first sector of walk we met a lot of migrating forest birds - mainly Tits, Chiffchaffs, Jays, Chaffinches. Most interesting were Willow and Crested Tits, feeding around in small groups. Finally we got into the older part of the forest, forming Nature Reserve. After a short time we saw Middle-spotted, Great Spotted, White-backed and Black Woodpeckers. This part of the forest looked really primeval, with plenty of fallen trees across our path and bog around with many frogs. After some struggling to get out of bog alder forest we reached the border of the reserve. We examined the stream running across the track with great success – we saw an Otter jumping out of water and running along a fallen tree submerged in water.

After picnic lunch we transferred into the central part of the forest. We took the walk along one of most interesting and picturesque trails – Wilczy and Pojedynacki Tryb. After a short walk E we turned N along the National Park border. Accompanied by calls of Black Woodpecker we entered longish glade full of fresh Bison footprints and droppings. For a short moment we saw Lesser-spotted Eagle disappearing behind tops of the trees. On our way back we saw a short glimpse of Hazel Hen flying in the forest.

After exciting forest walks we went back to our guesthouse for a fantastic dinner with double portions of tasty meat and huge dessert. After that we went out in the evening for spotlighting drive in the middle part of Białowieza Forest. There was quite a lot of wildlife in the darkness: we spotted several Red Deer, Wild Boar and one Fox.

Day 4, Thu 11th Sep - Białowieża

After breakfast we spent some hours walking in the famous Strict Protection Area of the National Park. The weather made a big surprise, and after a beautiful “Polish Golden Autumn” hot and sunny days, we walked all the time in the rain. So, it was difficult to
find the birds, but finally we saw a Middle Spotted Woodpecker and heard a Black Woodpecker in the background. We were more lucky with mammals – we met a herd of Red Deer and female Wild Boar crossing the forest track with young very close to us. Despite the animals seen, it was fantastic time spent among ancient trees in the primeval forest scenery. It was very good time of the year to see different species of fungi, especially numerous in Strict Reserve, rich in deadwood material. Among others, we saw Stinkhorn, Honey Mushroom, Coral Tooth and Dead Man’s Fingers fungi.

After warm lunch highly appreciated at the end of the walk in rainy forest, the sky cleared up and the weather went back to sunny and warm “Indian Summer”. We decided to have some relaxing time after the days with intensive walks, spending the rest of the day on walks in the village or in the park, jogging, or reading a book at a pleasant area of “Wejmutka” guesthouse.

**Day 5, Fre 12th Sep - Białowieża**

Full day cycling trip. We started with Wysokie Bagno Reserve to see a taiga type bog spruce forest. Usually very good habitat for woodpeckers, this time showed us plenty of Spotted Flycatchers and one of the last Honey Buzzards soaring over spruces. We made a short stop at a XIX c. train station with the collection of steam engines and then headed towards the southern part of Bialowieza Forest. We visited a wide range of forest habitats, and beautiful valley of the Lesna River. We stopped for picnic lunch at Topilo Lake. We found some Gadwalls, Mallards and Goldeneye at the lake, and one of the last Reed Warblers in the reeds around, and plenty of dragonflies along the banks of lake (one Yellow-spotted Whiteface was found near the picnic site).

After dinner we drove once more to the middle part of the forest for spotlighting, but before the darkness came, we walked E following Wilczy Tryb trail to the border of National Park. As the rutting season of Red Deer just started, we were listening to
stunning concert of stags coming out from National Park. On the way back we spotlighted some Red Deer and Wild Boar near the roadside.

**Day 6, Sat 13th Sep - transfer to Biebrza Marshes**

On transfer to Biebrza Marshes we stopped at Kosy Most area – elongated clearing along the river Narewka with two (road and narrow gauge railway) bridges. On the walk along the river bank we found plenty of fresh footprints of Beavers in the mud. It was intensive bird migration across the clearing, mostly tits, finches, Jays and Swallows. Still good weather for butterflies - numerous Brimstones, Small Tortoiseshells, Red Admirals, Peacocks and one Camberwell Beauty were flying around.

Next stop – northern side of Siemianowka Lake. This part of the lake shows more open water areas than the southern one. A lot of Black-headed Gulls, Great Cormorants, Grey Herons and Great White Egrets were feeding in different parts of the lake. In the distance there were some marsh terns, but it was too far away to determine the species. Small flocks of Greylag Goose were observed in the reeds. Hundreds of swallows were chased by Hobby, also some Marsh Harriers patrolling reed-beds were seen. It was our last stop in Bialowieza Forest region. We drove through rural parts of Podlasie, full of small villages with beautiful wooden houses with shutters and orthodox churches.

Due to new roads around Bialystok, we passed through this biggest town in Podlasie region smoothly and headed towards Biebrza Marshes. Our last stop on the way was a lake near Knyszyn, the best place to see White-tailed Eagle. In a short time we saw four of them soaring over the lake.

After short drive we appeared in our guesthouse in the marshes, placed in small Dobarz village (a few houses around only) at the big clearing in the middle of southern basin of Biebrza Marshes. After placing our luggage in our rooms we had a relaxing time around our house, with open view to the meadows around with Cranes and Nutcracker call in background.

After home-made dinner we went for an evening drive along Csar’s Road to check what happens in the bushes. It was not very successful, but at least we got two Foxes.

**Day 7, Sun 14th Sep - Biebrza Marshes**

We had started the day with pre-breakfast drive in search of Elks. We stopped near Bagno Lawki watchtower, and after some minutes a fantastic male Elk emerged out of morning mist and stayed in focus for a short time. After big breakfast we planned to a drive along the western bank of southern basin of Biebrza Marshes. Our first stop it was a watch platform in Goniadz placed at elevated bank of Biebrza River, with a great view
into the marshes. We found a bulky bird sitting at the low bush and then taking off – it was a Greater Spotted Eagle. We noticed also some Marsh Harriers, Great White Herons, Common Snipes and migrating Magpies. Next stop – board walk near ruins of Osowiec Fortress. It was our lucky day for Elk, because we saw another male walking around the ruins. In small marshy area at the beginning of board walk we watched some Penduline Tits and Lesser Spotted Eagle high up in the sky. Driving south along the western bank of Biebrza River we passed the villages with original farm buildings, made of colorful granite boulder stones, left in enormous numbers at the fields around by the last glacier. We took a dike road at Mscichy towards Bialy Grad. We met the flocks of migrating Cranes, some Marsh Harriers and one of the last Red-backed Shrikes. We stopped for our picnic lunch in Brzostowo, the village just at the river. The meadow behind the river was busy even in this time of the year. There were, as usual, plenty of Black-headed Gulls, Greylag Geese, Lapwings, Starlings and Cranes. Not many waders, but we saw a flock of Ruff, Redshank and Common Sandpiper. We visited some other places with similar results.

After dinner (very tasty Tench from a local river) we drove to Wizna at Narew River to take a boat trip to spot Beavers. This shy, nocturnal animal is not easy to see in daylight. We started at dusk to patrol the banks of the river, formed into short, steep slopes covered with willow bushes overhanging to the water edge. The boat with small engine seemed to be familiar to Beavers, because soon we got the first animal sitting at the bank under the branches, and then many others scratching themselves, eating bark from twigs, staring at us, swimming around. Stunning views! At the end of boat trip we saw also American Mink running along waterline.

Day 8, Mon 15th Sep - Biebrza Marshes

This was the day to see the National Park from the river. Perfect weather for kayaking: warm, sunny day with weak backside wind. We started from Osowiec down the river Biebrza, equipped with picnic lunches and spare mineral water. The river is meandering intensively, so we passed plenty of old riverbed sectors, cut off from the main course by water vegetation or sand. We flushed out Grey Herons, Great White Egrets and Cormorants from some shallow dead-end canals. In many places we met obvious signs of Beaver presence, the same we’ve met a day before at Narew River. After 14 km of kayaking we stopped for picnic lunch at watchtower at Bialy Grad. The day on the river was so beautiful, that we decided to go down to Brzostowo (next 23 km to go). Soon after we left picnic site we had fantastic view of White-tailed Eagle crossing the river close to us. The river was still meandering, forming deep holes at turns. In crystal clear water we
could see some large fish – Tench, Roach and Pike chasing fry in shallow water. So, after some hours of kayaking in virgin landscape we saw the first signs of civilisation – farm animals and buildings. We reached Brzostowo village just before we got stiff in our kayaks. After coffees ordered in local farmer’s B&B, we drove back to our guesthouse.

The time before dinner we spent around our hotel, counting hundreds of Cranes flying over the clearing on their way to roosting sites.

**Day 9, Tue 16th Sep - Biebrza Marshes**

Today we decided to explore the marshes around Barwik. We took the trail towards the watchtower on elevated sand dunes in the middle of the marsh. We got a vast view around the marshes. Plenty of Cranes were wandering from one place to another in the meadows, there were some Marsh Harriers over the reed-beds near the river. We continued our walk into the marshes until the path became too wet to go further.

Next part of the day we decided to spend in Tykocin, a small town at Narew River, with Baroque architecture (church, monastery, war veteran hospice, synagogue).

On the way back to the hotel we visited a watchtower at Gugny, placed out in the open space of marshes. We saw two Kestrels feeding on insects in the meadow, and Great Grey Shrike perched at a trail sign pole. This was a very atmospheric, tranquil end of our last day in the marshes.

**Day 10, Wed 17th Sep - Biebrza Marshes to Warsaw**

After listening to a dawn chorus of Cranes in the meadow around the hotel and our last huge breakfast we left Dobarz village and headed to Warsaw, leaving Biebrza Marshes still in fantastic weather.
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