WILDPOLAND

Trip Report

Winter Bison Safari & Wolf Tracking 12-15 Feb 2016

4 day mammal watching tour in the Białowieża Forest

Text and photographs by Andrzej Petryna

Tour Leader: Andrzej (Jay) Petryna

Participants: Colin (UK), Maire & James (IE), Oliver (DE)

Wildlife: 12 mammal and 28 bird species recorded, full checklist on page 5

Day 1, Friday 12 Feb - Arrival

TEMP. +6° C, SUNNY

Warsaw welcomed us with warm (as for mid February) and sunny weather, but I was sure it will be colder at Białowieża, the eastern limit of Poland. We left the busy part of the city as quick as it was possible at the beginning of the weekend. We met some typical urban birds on our way along the streets (some Corvids) and finally we drove out of the town heading north-east. After about one hour of driving and a lunch stop we left the busy main road, overcrowded with big lorries, and drove into a peaceful countryside with small villages with a lot of wooden houses and numerous **White Stork nests** (still empty) along the roads. We passed a small herd of **Roe Deer, Sparrowhawk** and some **Common Buzzards** hovering over the fields.

After a couple of hours we stopped at the yard of our hotel – a stylish wooden building near the Palace Park in Białowieża. A hearty home made dinner was a great pleasure after a longish drive.
We discussed our plans for the next days sitting by the fireplace, and then went for a short walk along the river in the park to look for **Beavers**. We didn't meet them this time, but we heard a **Towny Owl calling** at the outskirts of the village.

Day 2, Saturday 13 Feb - Białowieża Forest

TEMP. -1 TO + 2°C, SUNNY

We went out for Bison searching early morning. At the outskirts of one of the villages we found **one Bison** behind the trees, but James noticed two other ones in the opposite direction, so we drove around the village to get there and be positioned well. It was a perfect spot: **two bulls feeding** on a small haystack at a small meadow cowered with frost, with some sunshine from time to time and **Mistle Thrushes** singing around. **Bison** were very busy with hay, so it was possible to take photos in a short distance.

Plentiful and tasty breakfast was the right thing after this cold but successful morning. Unfortunately, the weather changed: it became warmer but with rain. We decided to check the northern outskirts of the Białowieża Forest. All the meadows possible to see the Bisons were abandoned, but in one place Oliver saw a big animal at the forest edge: it was an Elk, not so often to be seen in Białowieża Forest.

We went back to the forest. After picnic lunch we took a walk in the forest to the feeding station. It was raining, so we didn't see many birds, but we met **Black Woodpecker** and **Northern Long-Tailed** and **Crested Tits**. The feeding station was empty, but there were plenty of fresh Bison footprints and droppings of quite a big herd. When we decided to go back, suddenly (if such huge animals can appear suddenly) one old Bison female appeared near the feeder. After a time spent at the feeder we went back to our car, meeting a plenty of different animal footprints in remnants of snow on our path (Wolf, Badger, Racoon Dog, Fox, Wild Boar, Red Deer).

After a hearty dinner at our wooden guesthouse, we decided to go back to the park to look for **Beavers** once again. Soon we saw one **Beaver swimming** across the river, and then the second one appeared in the spotlight. It was a cold, drizzling weather, so we quickly went back to our hotel, nicely illuminated in the dark.

Day 3, Sunday 14 Feb - Białowieża Forest

TEMP. +1° C, WET SNOW

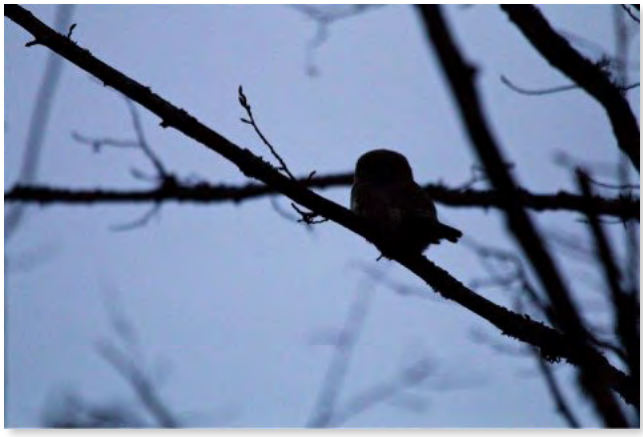
We made a short pre-breakfast walk around the village, finding a copulating pair of **Foxes** in the fields. We also visited a **Beaver's lodge** with a small dam out of the village.

After breakfast – a visit to the Strict Reserve of the Białowieża National Park was planned. We had the opportunity to see the last remnants of European Natural Forest, the UNESCO Heritage Site. The forest without snow looked unexpectedly green due to abundant mosses. We also found some more colourful elements – **Scarlet Elf Cup** fungus.

It was a good place not only to see the primaeval forest itself – we saw also a herd of **Red Deer** and **White-backed** and **Middle Spotted Woodpeckers.**

On the way back from the Strict Reserve through the Palace Park, we found a **Tawny Owl,** sleeping in a tree hole.

After a fantastic home made lunch we went out again to track Wolves. We walked along the forest roads in southern part of the forest. In patches of snow at the sides of the road we found a quite **fresh Wolf footprints** and the place with scratching. Later on we moved to the middle part of the forest. We found more **Wolf footprints**, and in misty and dark late afternoon we entered a forest clearing where we saw **two Bison bulls** feeding at dusk. We left this atmospheric place after a while, but just behind a road turn we heard a **Pygmy Owl**. It was sitting at the top of a small twig in the canopy of old oak. We stopped to listen to this concert in the middle of a darkening forest.



The day finished with a superb dinner (good food is really important when you spend the hours walking in cold and wet weather!), then we moved towards the fireplace drinking „Żubr" (Bison) beer and chatting about our trip.

Day 4, Monday 15 Feb - Back to Warsaw

TEMP. +3°C

After an early breakfast we headed back to Warsaw. With a short coffee stop on the way, we parked our car near the Old Town in Warsaw at lunch time. We stopped for a meal in one of the small, traditional restaurants and then we took a walk to see the New and Old Towns of Warsaw, carefully rebuilt after the Second World War damages, reaching almost 90% of buildings. Careful reconstruction was awarded by UNESCO World Heritage Site title.

So, unfortunately it was the last part of our trip. We made the last Warsaw sight-seeing on the way to our hotels.

Checklist

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

MAMMALS

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	SUM
	European Bison *Bison bonasus*		4	2		6
	Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*		2	10		12
	Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*	4		F		4
	Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*		F	F		1
	European Elk *Alces alces*		1	F		1
	Wolf *Canis lupus*		F	F		1
	Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*		F	2		2
	Racoon Dog *Nyctereutes procyonides*		F	F		1
	Badger *Meles meles*		F	F		1
	Pine Marten *Martes martes*			F		1
	European Beaver *Castor fiber*			2, F		2
	Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgarus*			F		1
	Number of species:	**1**	**8**	**12**	**0**	**12**

BIRDS

	Species name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	SUM
049	**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*			x		**1**
091	**Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo*	x				**1**
093	**Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus*	x				**1**
171	**Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*				x	**1**
201	**Feral Pigeon** *Columba livia feral*				x	**1**
207	**Tawny Owl** *Strix aluco*	H			1	**2**
211	**Eurasian Pygmy-Owl** *Glaucidium passerinum*				1	**1**
225	**Black Woodpecker** *Dryocopus martius*		1			**1**
227	**Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major*		x	x		**2**
227	**Middle Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos medius*			x		**1**
229	**White-backed Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos leucotos*			x		**1**
275	**Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus*		x	x		**2**
275	**Fieldfare** *Turdus pilaris*			x		**1**
277	**Blackbird** *Turdus merula*		x	x		**2**
317	**Great Tit** *Parus major*		x	x		**2**
317	**Blue Tit** *Cyanistes caeruleus*		x	x		**2**
319	**Crested Tit** *Lophophanes cristatus*		x			**1**
321	**Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus*			x		**1**
323	**Nuthatch** *Sitta europaea*		x	x		**2**
331	**Magpie** *Pica pica*	x	x	x		**3**
333	**Jay** *Garrulus glandarius*		x	x		**2**
335	**Jackdaw** *Corvus monedula*	x				**1**
337	**Rook** *Corvus frugilegus*	x				**1**
337	**Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix*	x				**1**
337	**Raven** *Corvus corax*		x	x		**2**
343	**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*		x	x		**2**
355	**Bullfinch** *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*			x		**1**
373	**Yellowhammer** *Emberiza citrinella*		x			**1**
	Number of species:	**7**	**13**	**16**	**4**	**28**

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