

Poland in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

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Overview

I have accompanied wildlife tours to Poland most winters since 1985 and this was one of the top half-dozen, due to a combination of favourable weather conditions; minor itinerary re-design; and of course some good luck!

Weather: The temperature stayed below freezing for the entire trip, indeed, it scarcely rose above -10°C . Intensely cold weather in Moscow and most of western Russia made the news in the latter half of the trip, and we caught the edge of this. On the morning of Friday 20 January the vehicle thermometer showed -27°C ¹, equalling the previous lowest on one of these trips in the early 1990s. We had a few light snow showers.

Mammals: In 2004 and 2005 we had to work hard for Bison in the eastern part of Puszcza Borecka. The itinerary re-design involved visiting the western part of the large Borecka forest and this was rewarded with over 50 Bison.

2006 was the "Year of the Fox"! We saw Red Fox nearly every day. Although this carnivore is widespread in the British Isles nevertheless some of these views in Poland of the smart rufous animal against brilliant white snow were extremely attractive. Other mammals seen by the entire group included Elk; Red & Roe Deer; Wild Boar.

This trip saw a return of good Wolf sightings after a gap of a couple of years - see the day-by-day account, below. Brown Hare and Red Squirrel were other mammals observed by at least some of the group.

Birds: Two groups of birds stand out from the trip - woodpeckers and tits. Many woodpeckers came to the fat-balls on the tree in front of the lodge at Żytkiejmy, the species of most interest to us being Middle-spotted and Grey-headed - views of the latter were the best we have had in over twenty years of these trips. Lots of tits came to the same fat-balls.

¹Purists may object that vehicle thermometers are mass-produced and not individually calibrated. However I regularly check the one in this Sprinter against other criteria and am satisfied that it is reasonably accurate.

Erne [White-tailed Eagle] were seen with almost monotonous regularity, also lots of Buzzard and some Rough-legged Buzzard. Partridge were seen in considerable numbers on the journeys to and from Warsaw, near the A-frame feeding stations on farm fields.

Day 1

Below freezing & cloudy all day, foggy at times.

The flight from London was a little late at Okęcie and we got away from that airport about 1225hrs. The first hours of the drive were in daylight and we reached Zabie Oko lodge at 1900 hrs, having stopped for lunch en route.

Wildlife we saw during the trip included Rook, Jackdaw and Red Fox; also several coveys of Partridge which must have numbered about 100 in total.

Day 2

Brilliant sunshine, clear; temperature down to about -13°C.

We left the lodge at 0900 and arrived at our rendezvous in the eastern part of Puszcza Borecka at 0940. Our forest guide turned up after some delay but we used the time to spy Redpoll by the parking spot. After the stalker arrived he took the group into the forest four at a time in his 4x4. The first excursion drew a blank and we rotated the next four into the jeep. They came back beaming, having seen 52 Bison, and the others all got good views of this, Europe's most massive ungulate, on the next two outings.

We returned to the lodge for lunch. On the drives to and from the lodge we had seen Red Fox, Erne, and Raven. We had time on our own at the lodge before lunch. Most, like myself, used it to photograph the lodge and its surroundings; our master photographer, Peter Price, ventured a little further away and was rewarded with two Roe Deer which appear on his website.

This was the first time we had used the lodge at Zabie Oko and it was very popular with the clients. After lunch we took the relatively slow route through the huge Borecka forest and got glimpses of some cervids.

At Gołdap we stopped so some members of the group could rent cross-country skis. We then had an uneventful drive to Żytkiejmy, our base for the next five nights, arriving about 1630hrs.

Day 3

Brilliant sunshine, clear. Temperature down to about -17°C.

Our friend and guide for many years in Puszcza Romincka - Romek - joined us and after the introductions we left the lodge about 0900 and headed north towards the Russian border. En route we had a Great Grey Shrike, Roe Deer & lots of Raven.

We spent time at the area which has come to be known as the “wolf meadow”. There was plenty of Wolf sign, though the spoor was confusing since there had been no fresh snow for some time. Clients visited the large high seat to assess if they were ready for an all-night vigil!

We then went by the stone commemorating Kaiser Wilhelm’s 2,000th stag and visited some Beaver ponds with an ex-beaver lodge, now Otter-occupied.

Back to the lodge at 1220. Birds here included Great-spotted Woodpecker; Nuthatch; Yellowhammer ; Great Tit; and Tree Sparrow. Yellowhammer were present in scores throughout the trip and it was pleasant to see this bird thriving in Poland.

After lunch we left for the forest again and high seats. As usual, we picked the clients up after dark and it had been a most successful afternoon. The first high seat had yielded 14 Wild Boar and a distant Elk; the second, nine Boar and a hooting Tawny Owl - the latter heard, not seen.

Few people take telescopes to high seats but Mike Wearing heroically carted his to the wolf meadow seat and, shortly after arrival, trained it on a Buzzard feeding on a piece of a carrion, remains of an earlier wolf kill. The Buzzard left at 1500hrs, displaced by a Wolf. So there the group was, looking through a telescope when a Wolf walked into the field of view! They also saw Erne and Red Fox, maybe as many as five of the latter.

Day 4

Overcast most of day, a few snow flurries. Lowest temperature -13°C

Today we made our usual dawn drive through the forest, departing at 0700 and using mostly roads south of the lodge. Red Deer were the highlight, with views of about nine, both stags and hinds.

After breakfast we returned to the main part of the forest north of the Gołdap highway and visited a Beaver dam and lodge. Four clients and Piotr strapped on their gear and skied back from here to the lodge and lots of woodpeckers.

After lunch two clients went high-seating and were rewarded with many Boar, at least in teens.

Four decided to try for an all-night at the wolf meadow, entering the large hide about 1500hrs with blankets, food, hot drinks, night-glasses and image intensifiers.

The rest of us went on a shopping trip to Suwałki.

About 2000hrs I got an SMS from the four vigilantes asking to be taken out. Red Fox had been the main wildlife sighting.

This left me with an opportunity to complete the vigil and a little after 2200hrs I was back at the wolf meadow with flask of coffee, large bar of chocolate and optical aids.

Day 5

Overcast most of day, snow showers. Lowest temperature -10°C.

At 0230hrs I watched two Wolf for about five minutes, SWW from the hide, probably about 250-300 yards away. These Wolf might have been around for some time but I had been lying down - being on my own I could not keep up a continuous watch.

At 0500 I again watched two Wolf - I presume the same two, and in the same area - for twenty minutes. In previous years during vigils at the wolf meadow I have seen large parties of Wild Boar which were their usual noisy selves, both vocally and in movement. By contrast the two Wolf were totally silent, moving like wraiths. It was dramatic to watch these two animals while they were quite unaware of any human presence.

A Raccoon Dog may also have been visited the site during the night. I had a clear view of a Red Fox at 0635 as the first light came. The first Raven croaked at 0650, I left the high seat and joined the others for breakfast.

At 0900 the clients left on horse-drawn sledges while Piotr & I drove to an RV point in the forest and prepared a bonfire, the sledgers joining us after about an hour. After time at the bonfire six clients continued on the sledges back to the lodge, two walked, and four skied.

After lunch about half the clients elected to do their own walks in the vicinity of the lodge, one went to a high seat on his own, and six to the wolf meadow. Little wildlife was seen.

Day 6

A little snow fell overnight. Brilliant sunshine; - 20°C in morning.

The low temperatures forecast² for the second half of the week had arrived. We left the lodge at 0930 and took a winding route through the forest. The overnight snow, though light, revealed fresh tracks but we found none of Wolf and Romek suspected they might have moved to the west end of the forest; he did however find Lynx tracks. We visited more Beaver areas and saw how many trees had died since the Beaver had been given protection. We walked across a pond to view a Beaver lodge at close quarters; near here some of us also got views of a Red Squirrel.

We emerged from the forest to return to Żytkiejmy by public road and had gone only a short distance when we saw a Raccoon Dog on the road. This is a mammal native to the Far East which escaped from fur farms in Russia and is now living ferally in Poland. It is mainly nocturnal and this was the best view we have ever had of one. It stayed on the road for some time, glancing back at us; when the bus moved forward it finally clambered up on the snow bank to get to the field, becoming briefly mired in deep drifted snow before heading across the field. We also had a fine view of a Red Fox, both these carnivores looking handsome against the snow in the brilliant sunshine.

² See box on page 7 of report

After lunch half the group went walking and birdwatching on their own; five clients and myself went for a last visit to the wolf meadow from 1430-1700hrs, but saw little. We then drove straight to the “forest feast” by the bonfire by the frozen lake.

Day 7

Brilliant sunshine; -27°C in morning

The temperature of -27°C (-17°F) shortly after 0700 in the morning equaled the lowest temperature I had experienced on any of these winter trips and we needed some help with getting the vehicle started. We had excellent woodpeckers before finally leaving Żytkiejmy, the intense cold presumably driving them to the fat-balls on the tree.

We drove west to the Wolf's Lair, with our usual coffee stop at Węgorzewo. The Wolf's Lair was the Nazi HQ in East Prussia where the assassination attempt on Hitler took place in July 1944. We usually head straight out into the bunker complex but with the severe cold today - it rarely rose above -20°C - Piotr with his usual flair for organization suggested we start the visit in the restaurant. So we had our soup while bunker guide Chester gave us an introductory talk. The group then did the tour, and returned to the restaurant for the main course and coffee.

A visit to an underground area gave a glimpse of bats, but the light was too subdued and the visit too brief - so as not to disturb the flying mammals - to get a positive identification.

After lunch we continued to Kuwasy on the edge of the Red Marsh, our accommodation for the last two nights of the trip. I followed Piotr's advice and took one of the vehicle batteries inside and left it by a radiator all night. Lead-acid accumulators have more oomph when warm!

This was the only day when we didn't have a clear or definite sighting of a Fox.
(Note: itinerary redesign means we will not have this long drive next year)

Day 8

Overcast most of day, very light snow shower. Temperature -18°C most of day.

Our local guide, Kasia Ramatowska, met us at 0930 and we drove off to the sand ridge. Kasia showed the group the old Wolf kill (an Elk) and interpreted tracks and scats as we walked along. From the tower we spied two Elk, a cow and calf, giving us partial views through the birch trees.

We returned to the vehicle and after a few kilometres Jacquie Moran spotted a cow Elk lying down, barely twenty yards from the track. We watched it a long time from the vehicle; it paid little attention to us. Even when everyone got out of the vehicle it was some time before it got up and moved away, giving us fine views of its long, pale legs. We also had Roe during the drive.

We arrived at the lunch bonfire spot where the chef from the Kuwasy lodge was waiting us with local sour soup, sausage and lots of other goodies.

After lunch we had a short stop at the lodge and then headed towards Grajewo and east to the Czar's Road. Here in the Pine-Juniper woods we had good views of a cow Elk and calf, both on the outward and return journeys. Here too we had good views of a flock of Waxwing.

Day 9

On all cold mornings I start the minicoach about twenty minutes before departure and give it a short run to warm up all the oils. During this run I had a sensational view of a cow Elk and her calf, yards from the road; alas, with no clients and no camera!

We loaded up the luggage about 0900 and started our drive to Warsaw. After a lunch stop 1220-1320 hrs we continued to Warsaw.

During the drive we saw lots of Buzzard, also coveys of Partridge as on the first day's journey. We also had another flock of Waxwing in a town we passed through.

We reached Okęcie Airport at 1500hrs in good time for the flight to London, checked the status of the flight and then said goodbye to the clients before heading for the Bydgoszcz road and our own journey home.

That evening the temperature again fell to -27°C. In the town of Płock - where I spent the Sunday night - the temperature must certainly have fallen to -30°C (-22 °F) overnight. We passed lots of trucks stuck by the roadside with gelled diesel; at a filling station on the Monday we saw one such truck with an actual fire under its fuel system - not glowing embers, not a hair-drier, but actual orange flames!

A few Thoughts on Weather Forecasting . . .

Before trips, and especially this Poland trip, I assiduously follow the 10-day forecasts given on the web at www.weather.co.uk. The forecast from this site for north-east Poland gave the period 13-22 January as being pleasantly frosty: apparently the temperature would not fall below -7 or -8°C.

On the third day of this trip (Monday 16 January) I received an SMS on my cellphone. My wife (in Scotland) had been studying the 5-day forecasts for European cities on the BBC Ceefax service (page 410). This predicted that on the Thursday Warsaw would have maximum/minimum temperatures of -17°C & -23°C. Winter temperatures in NE Poland are usually 5-10 CD below those of Warsaw, so the suggestion was that it would be very cold indeed where we were.

I told this to our guide, Piotr, who mentioned it to our hosts at Żytkiejmy. I got the impression they did not take “my” prediction very seriously, though such temperatures are cold even by Polish standards; when the temperature fell below -20°C towards the end of the trip many Polish motorists were in trouble, lots of trucks were stranded by the roadside, and a lodge (not one we use!) had to turn away bookings because its plumbing was frozen.

On the evening of 18 January BBC World Service (short wave) had a piece about the intense cold in western Russia, mentioning that factories might have to close to help conserve energy. Next day the Polish media mentioned that this was the coldest weather known in European Russia for four decades. However I didn't get the impression that the country was being issued with a severe weather warning.

I'm not taking a swipe at www.weather.co.uk, but the weather of the last fortnight of January does seem to show the limits of even 10-day forecasts. We may remember too that in November pundits in our country were forecasting the coldest winter for a decade. So far, even in the north of Scotland, we've had just 1½ days of snow only a few seriously frosty nights. Whaur's yir wild winter noo? Ah, well I may eat my words yet

Bird list

	Common name	Scientific Name	January 2006								
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>							20		
2	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1				2			
3	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>						1	2		
4	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		4	2					x	x
5	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>								1	
6	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		3	2		2	2	1	1	
7	Hazel Grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>				42					
8	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>	100								100
9	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	2								
10	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	2								
11	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	x	x					x	x	
12	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			H						
13	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>						1		1	
14	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>				1	1		1		
15	Middle-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>				1	1	5	1		
16	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			3	1	4	X	X	1	
17	Lesser-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>					1				
18	Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>								31	5
19	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	5								
20	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	X	10					2	10	
21	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				X	1	X		4	
22	Marsh Tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>			2	1	2	X	X		
23	Willow Tit	<i>Parus montanus</i>						2			
24	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>				1					
25	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>			20+	X	X	X	X	2	
26	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		X	30+	X	X	X	X	1	
27	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>				3					
28	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				9	4	12+			
29	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1	2	4	2	X	X	1	
30	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>				2	1	1		1	
31	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>			1						
32	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		10	7	4	3	1		2	
33	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	X	X	X						1
34	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	X	X					X	X	X
35	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	X	30	30	X	X	X	X	X	X
36	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>	X	2					5	X	
37	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	200+	50+					4	X	X
38	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			3	3	3	3	4		
39	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		20						X	

		January 2006									
	Common name	Scientific Name	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
40	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		40	9		3	x	x		
41	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>						20	10	1	
42	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		2				2			
43	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			30+	30+	30+	100+	30+	30+	

Mammal list

		January 2006									
	Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
1	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		1		1					
2	Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>			1		2				
3	Raccoon Dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>						1			
4	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	2	1	5	3	1	2		4	1
5	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>						1			
6	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>			28	35	17				
7	European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>		52							
8	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			2	19		7	6		
9	Elk (Moose)	<i>Alces alces</i>			1					5	2
10	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	1	2	3	1	1		?	20+	