

# Poland in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 31 January 2010

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Report and images compiled by Sinclair Dunnett



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## Overview:

This is a trip whose main purpose is to get views of mammals. Warm-blooded creatures metabolise fat reserves in the winter, but they are also more active, seeking more food; snow shows their tracks more clearly; and the whole trip is predicated on having frost and snow. We certainly had frost and snow during this visit - maybe a little too much of both! This is the first of twenty-five winter visits since 1985 when there was snow cover in every part of Poland we travelled, from its western border through Warsaw to the far northeast of the country. Much of the snow was knee-deep in places and where the ploughs had heaped the snow high, private cars could see nothing but a wall of snow on either side! The temperature was below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  (i.e. below zero Fahrenheit) for the first half of the trip, which is cold even by Eastern European norms. When it soared to a balmy  $-3^{\circ}\text{C}$  later in the week fresh snow fell, accompanied by wind, presenting its own challenges.

Wisent and Elk were observed on Days 2 and 8 of the trip. Roe Deer were seen on nearly every day, both in forests and out in the open. Wild Boar were seen by all clients; Red Deer & Red Squirrel by most; Red Fox by a few. This is the first time I can recollect that the group didn't see Brown Hare, though Ian Royle did see one on the overland journey with me. The intense cold meant that spending the whole night at the "Wolf Meadow" - giving the best chance of seeing Wolf - was unfortunately out of the question. This is the first trip in some years when new bird species - Short-toed Treecreeper and Water Rail - were added to the cumulative checklist, thanks mainly to our sharp-eyed diligent birder, Phil Quinn. It may seem strange to make a fuss over Yellowhammer but several clients expressed their pleasure at seeing large flocks - sometimes  $> 100$  - of this attractive bunting, which is in decline in parts of our own country.

## Day 1

Saturday 23rd January

$-17^{\circ}\text{C}$  in morning in Warsaw; below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  on arrival at Żabie Oko

The flight was on time (11:40) and all formalities were completed quickly within the airport. We left Okęcie at noon and stopped at Łomża for a light lunch, map-buying etc. We reached the lodge of Żabie Oko (near Jeziorowskie) about 1830 hrs, as noted above, where there was a very sharp frost. As usual, we saw many corvids, plus a Buzzard and Roe Deer.

## Day 2

Sunday 24th January

A fine clear dawn, bus thermometer showed -22°C and reports from the surrounding area included one overnight low of -26°C. Sunny much of day

The group left the lodge c. 09:00 and arrived in the western part of Puszcza Borecka a half-hour later. The usual tractor/trailer kitted out with basic seats was waiting, so the whole group could enter the forest together. About 60 Bison were seen! After a short stop at the lodge we drove west to the Wolf's Lair, the Nazi HQ in East Prussia where the assassination attempt on Hitler took place in July 1944. We had lunch in the former Nazi garage (now a restaurant) before a conducted tour of an hour-and-a-half by Jadwiga Korowaj. Wildlife seen in the immediate vicinity of Żabie Oko included Red Squirrel...

## Day 3

Monday 25th January

Thermometer outside lodge showed -23°C before dawn; similar temperature on arrival at Żytkiejmy in the late afternoon

We left Żabie Oko at 0945, and stopped in Goldap for just under an hour for shopping, and coffees. We then continued east and entered the western part of Puszcza Romincka. The group made a circular walk by fields and forest with local ornithologist Szymon; the highlight was Black Woodpecker. Lunch was at Puszcza Romincka Lodge. Then we went on to our base for the next four days - Żytkiejmy.

## Day 4

Tuesday 26th January

-23°C at 0700; -11°C at lunchtime; -13°C c. 2200hrs. Light snow fell pm

We set off at 0920 with Romek, our friend and guide for many years in Puszcza Romincka. After the introductions we headed for the "Wolf Meadow" in the north of the forest, where the clients inspected large hide on stilts. We also visited the 1908 Kaiser Wilhelm II memorial stone by a Beaver area and discussed that energetic, interesting mammal. We had a mix of driving and walking back to lodge, and a remarkable observation by Phil at the "Barbecue Lake" was of a Water Rail. Just below the lodge was a "woodpecker workshop" - a tree where a woodpecker had wedged cones to pick out the seeds before dislodging the stripped cones to the ground below.

At 1500hrs we left for the forest again and high seats! Two clients went to "Wolf Meadow", six other clients were distributed over three high seats and we extracted them at 1800-1830 hrs. Those at the Wolf Meadow had seen Roe Deer, Raven, and two White-tailed Eagles. Those at the seat nearest to the lodge saw three Roe, two adult Boar and five young. Another seat saw a small Boar and the last saw a young Roe doe; Blue and Great Tits; Yellowhammer; plus a Sparrowhawk killing a Parus Tit.

## Day 5

Wednesday 27th January

The temperature fell to -24°C overnight, rising to -14°C in evening; a little snow fell after lunchtime

We set off at 09:20hrs for the Russian Border via Kaiser's Avenue, then to the stone commemorating Kaiser Wilhelm's 2000th stag.

We viewed some more beaver dams with associated “habitat diversification enhancement” or “hideous damage” depending on whether you’re looking at it from a wildlife enthusiast’s or forester’s viewpoint. We saw Roe Deer, and then walked back to the lodge. Later we had a good view of four Roe Deer east of the lodge at lunchtime.

We left for the high seats at 1500. The group at Wolf Meadow had seen one big Boar and lots of Ravens. The other high seat saw - as they put it - “1¾ Boar”; that is, a young one with its three-legged mother! The boar left, to be succeeded by a Red Fox and two stags with three hinds. Later the same two Boars returned. Yellowhammers were the most notable bird sighting.

## Day 6

Thursday 28th January

-7 to -5°C most of day, some snow fell. Windy, but less so than the pressure of 975 mb might have suggested

Took a few clients shopping to Żytkiejmy village at 0900, then back to lodge for a sledge ride. Three horse-drawn sledges were waiting to take three clients per sledge (along with Zosia). Piotr, Romek and I went to the RV point to make a bonfire. The sledges duly arrived and a bottle of vodka was passed round. The mini-coach was spurned after the break, with all clients remounting the sledges. Some rode all the way back to the lodge, some got off at “Barbecue Lake” and walked back.

We left the lodge at 14:10hrs with four clients for two high seats and extracted them 1645-1700 hrs. Two clients at the Wolf Meadow saw little of interest, save Ravens flying off noisily. Clients at the other high-seat saw seven Wild Boar - including the three-legged one from yesterday - and two Red Deer.

At 1700hrs we assembled for the “forest feast” by the bonfire by the frozen lake, which was fun, though overcast, with a little moon later.

## Day 7

Friday 29th January

More snow overnight, temperature a few degrees below freezing most of day. Brilliant sunshine in morning, overcast later.

While packing, Ian Royle saw a Waxwing from our room, subsequently seen by nearly all clients - the only Waxwing of the trip. We loaded up the luggage and left Żytkiejmy at 10:30, driving east and then south. After fifty minutes in Suwalki for shopping we continued south, lunching at a roadside restaurant. We had already heard that there might be difficulties getting to the sand ridge in Czerwone Bagno, which is normally the morning programme on Day 8. However, Piotr could not raise the forester or the park gate and he therefore suggested we drive there before checking in at Knieja and get the intelligence directly. This turned out to be a good move for two reasons. Firstly, the staff at the gate advised us that it would be impossible to get to the sand ridge - they could not get through even in their 4x4s. At the gate area there were a number of small passerines including numerous Yellowhammer. Before leaving I asked the group if they would like a stroll along a boardwalk but all seemed keen to get their accommodation. Secondly, on the return trip we had excellent, prolonged views of an Elk – curiously, in the birches by the boardwalk. We arrived at our accommodation at Knieja at 1700hrs, and our first wi-fi in seven days!

## Day 8

Saturday 30th January

A few degrees below freezing most of day. Brisk east wind at times with drifting. Full moon

We had a walk 0700-0800 in the pinewoods on the landward side of the hotel. This yielded the usual Great Spotted Woodpecker, Treecreeper and some tits; then to breakfast. At 0900 our local guide, Łukas Artur Wiatr, briefed us at the map in the lodge. We already knew the normal morning programme was impossible because of the blocked road. Łukas proposed that we drive west and then south, roughly parallel to the Czar's Road, the main feature of the afternoon. This route would give us fine views of the Biebrza Marches from a number of elevated points, and after lunch we would then drive the Czar's Road in a northerly direction rather than doing it out and back.

Half-an-hour into this drive we stopped to tow-start a stranded local motorist. The wind (from the east) was freshening and drifting increased across the road. It was plain by this time that we were not going to get any panoramic views, and the road conditions were getting challenging. Our route was blocked at one point by two milk tankers off the road, forcing us on to a secondary road. Artur wanted me to mount the tyre chains. I was preparing to do this when a tractor came from the east; its driver told us it would be impossible for us to get through so we turned back and had a coffee break at Goniadz before heading for the Czar's Road and a late lunch at Dobiarz, where teams of huskies were an attraction. The drives to Goniadz and the Czar's Road gave us several views of Elk, some of them prolonged if slightly frustrating because of trees . . . well, what should we expect in a forest?! Back to the Knieja, which was noisy with the wedding reception of a most gorgeous, raven-haired bride (though it should be said the noise didn't extend to our sleeping areas).

## Day 9

Sunday 31st January

A few degrees below freezing when we left Knieja. Later in day - after clients left - temperature fell again as I drove west, to -14°C overnight

We loaded up the luggage and started our drive to Warsaw. We had a coffee break in Łomża at 11:20hrs and an hour's stop for lunch. We reached Warsaw in good time, dropping Ian at the rail station for his onward journey to Krakow before continuing with the others to Okęcie Airport in good time for the flight to London. The usual Buzzard and corvids were seen during this journey, plus one bird new for the trip, Partridge.

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## Species List

Birds (C = common H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	January									
			21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2		4					60+		
2	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				1					1	
3	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>			1							
4	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	2		✓	✓	✓	1	1	✓	✓
5	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			1	3	✓	4			✓	
6	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>				C						
7	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>									4	
8	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>									✓	
9	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>								C		
10	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓		✓						✓	
11	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>								10+		
12	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>		1	1					1		
13	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>					1					
14	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		3	1	✓	7	✓		2		
15	Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>							1			
16	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				C						
17	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		3	1					✓		
18	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1		1	1	1				
19	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			1							
20	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		3			4					
21	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			8	4	4	4		✓		
22	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montana</i>		2		1	1	1				
23	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>				2	2					
24	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				2	2					
25	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	12		✓		
26	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			1	✓	✓	✓	4			
27	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		2	1	✓	✓	✓		H		
28	Common Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			1	✓	✓	✓		1		
29	Short-toed Tree-creeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			C							
30	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓	✓			1	✓	✓	□	
31	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	
32	Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>		C								
33	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓		✓
34	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	□	✓
35	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	1	1						✓		
36	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		1	1	23	✓	12		✓		
37	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓						✓			
38	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		4				2				
39	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		5								
40	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>			6				40			
41	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			6		4			1		
42	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			3			5				
43	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓	4		2	1		2		
44	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		20	7	✓	✓	>100	>100	90+		

	Common name	Scientific name	January										
			21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
45	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>											

## Mammals

1	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		3	2		1						
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>					1						
3	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>				6	2	10					
4	Red Deer	<i>Cervis elaphus</i>					5	12					
5	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	3	15	11	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Lots
6	Elk (Moose)	<i>Alces alces</i>							1	7			
7	European Bison (Wisent)	<i>Bison bosasus</i>		c.60									