

Poland in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

31 January – 6 February 2015



Elk



European Bison



Examining wolf tracks at the "wolf meadow"



Roe Deer

Report & images compiled by Sinclair Dunnett



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leader: Sinclair Dunnett Naturetrek
 Piotr Moszkowski Local guide

Participants: Keith Mellen
 Douglas Gooday
 Miles Bromilow
 Kim Compton
 Julian Ofverberg

Overview

Wildlife

The whole group saw about 50 Wisent (European Bison) and nearly 20 Red Deer on Day 2 at Puszcza Borecka, and on Day 6 we had excellent views of Elk from the Czar's Road, and also Red Fox. At Puszcza Romincka everyone saw Roe Deer and Wild Boar, and heard Wolf howling. Two members of our group also had good views of this challenging species.

Weather

We had snow cover with fine snowscapes in all three wildlife areas visited, and moderate frosts. The vehicle did not have a thermometer, nor did most of the accommodations, but it was estimated that temperature rarely fell below - 10°C (14°F). Little fresh snow fell during the trip and there would appear to have been a minor thaw followed by the snow re-freezing which caused tracks and other signs to be rather poor.

Day 1

Saturday 31st January

The BA flight arrived on time at Warsaw and we were on the road by 12.30pm. We had a coffee and comfort break at the BP station on the outskirts of Łomża, then continued north-east, reaching the lodge of Żabie Oko (near Jesiorowski) about 5.30pm where we found about six inches of lying snow.

Day 2

Sunday 1st February

We had breakfast at 7.45am and then left the lodge for our 9.30am rendezvous in the western part of Puszcza Borecka with Krzysztof Zoch, our local forest guide who was waiting for us with his 4x4 and a tractor with trailer fitted out with basic seats. Less than two kilometres into the forest in a clearing we found about 50 Wisent of both sexes and a wide variety of ages. We also saw a good number of Red Deer, all hinds and followers.

We returned to the lodge for lunch before departing. This time we headed east, making a stop at Tesco in Goldap, one of the few shops open in this small town on a Sunday. We continued east along the south edge of the great Puszcza Romincka forest and arrived at Gosciniec Użmauda, our accommodation for the next four nights, located at the eastern end of the forest. Here Paulina Pruszkowka and her sister, the owner's daughters, fed us well for the next four days.

Day 3

Monday 2nd February

At 9.30am we drove to Żytkiejmy and met Romuald Naruszewicz, known to all as Romek, a retired stalker in the eastern half of the forest, and our friend and guide for many years in Puszcza Romincka. We set off for the 'Wolf Meadow', an area near the Russian border where Ravens were evident and we saw White-tailed Sea Eagle in the distance. We also examined wolf tracks.

We then drove along the avenue of red Oaks (*Quercus rubra*) leading to the Russian border. These oaks were planted during East Prussian times and led to Kaiser Wilhelm II's hunting palace. Then we visited the stone commemorating the Kaiser's 2,000th stag, and saw a Beaver area with lodge and cut trees. We returned to Uźmauda for lunch and several of the group walked the last half-mile to the lodge.

At 3.30pm we set off with Romek a short distance into the forest and were installed, in pairs, in three ambony (high seats). We were there till about 6.30pm during which time Douglas and Miles enjoyed the most success seeing four species of large mammal: Red Fox, Roe Deer, Wild Boar and Elk - the last in the distance but quite recognisable with its distinctive silhouette. There had been intense barking from Roe Deer which suggested the presence of Wolf or Lynx.

Day 4

Tuesday 3rd February

Today there was a stunning hoar frost on the trees. As income levels rise in Poland, the rural horse is being replaced by tractors and cars and is becoming almost a rarity. Fortunately there is still one cheery farmer in the village of Żytkiejmy with a horse and passenger sleigh. He set off with three members of the group while the rest were driven into the forest and dropped about a mile from our rendezvous point with the sledgers. Romek and Piotr got a bonfire going and when the sledge arrived we had a sip or two of Zubrow Vodka by the welcome bonfire. We then did an exchange for the others to get a sleigh ride.

After lunch Romek took Julian, Keith and Miles to the ambony we had used the previous day where they stayed till about 6.30pm spotting Roe Deer and Wild Boar. Meanwhile Sinclair took Douglas and Kim, provisioned with hot soup in vacuum flasks, sandwiches and other sustenance, back to the 'wolf meadow'. They stayed there till 10pm and in a very rewarding six hours saw Red Fox, Roe Deer, Wild Boar, and just 20 minutes before leaving, two Wolves! Also they had heard Wolves howling shortly after arriving, then again three hours later and lastly from the pair they had seen.

Day 5

Wednesday 4th February

We met Romek at 9.30am at Skajzgiry, a hamlet about halfway between Uźmauda and Żytkiejmy. After a drive of a few miles west, passing Beaver 'habitat modifications', we set off on a fine, easy walk of several miles through the forest. In addition to the ubiquitous corvids, we saw Nuthatch, the first of the trip, and woodpeckers. We were met with the minibus at the public road and drove a few miles to Stańczyki and its spectacular, abandoned railway viaducts from the East Prussian period.

After lunch Julian, Keith and Miles went to the 'wolf meadow' and Douglas and Kim went to another ambona we had used for many years. En route to the 'wolf meadow' we had views of an immature White-tailed Eagle flying along the forest road between the trees, its considerable mass evident from its heavy flight.

During the session Douglas and Kim had seen Roe Deer and a family of five Boar, including young. On the 'wolf meadow' wolf howling had been heard and Raven and White-tailed Eagle seen.

Back together, we followed the main forest road and then a minor one to a bonfire between the forest and a frozen lake where Romek had prepared some splendid bigos and other goodies for us. And then to bed.

Day 6

Thursday 5th February

We left about 8.30am, winding south-east till we joined the main road to Suwałki. We had a break at a filling station, then continued south to Grajewo and east before turning south again on the Czar's Road. An Elk was spotted in the Pine-Juniper woods east of the road, and eventually this became one of a group of four. We had lunch at Dwór Dobarz, one of many new accommodations which have sprung up in Poland since the collapse of communism.

After lunch we returned along the Czar's Road, almost losing count of the Elk (and Roe) we saw which included a fine dark bull. We also saw the last Red Fox for the trip.

Day 7

Friday 6th February

While loading the luggage after breakfast, with the help of a Dutch birder we solved a problem that had bugged us. On a couple of occasions we had heard a call which we referred to as the 'bicycle bird' due to the noise it made. It turned out to have been a Pygmy Owl.

We finished stowing our bags and started our drive to Warsaw and Frederic Chopin Airport for our flight back to the UK to end another superb tour.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	January/February						
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>						5	
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓				H	
3	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓	1	1	2		
4	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓	✓			
5	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	5	✓	✓			✓	
6	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓				✓	
7	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓				✓	
8	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>					H		
9	Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>				H	H		
10	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	1		2		
11	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>			1				
12	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓						
13	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>							
15	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	100	100				H	
16	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	100	100				H	
17	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓					
18	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	10		
19	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			✓				
20	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓			1			
21	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓				
22	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					2		
23	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		20					
24	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓					
25	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓	2		✓		
26	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		H	H	H			

Mammals

1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			1	1	1	1	
2	Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>				2	H		
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		19					
4	Elk	<i>Alces alces</i>			1	1	2	15	
5	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	12		4	5	15	H	
6	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>			1	1	3		
7	European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>		50					
8	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		1					

