

# Poland in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

16 - 22 January 2016

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Report by Sinclair Dunnett



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

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour participants: Sinclair Dunnett (leader) and Piotr Moszkowski (local guide) with nine Naturetrek clients

## Weather

For most of December 2015 and early January 2016 much of Poland, like the UK, had been unseasonably mild. Happily, at least from our point of view, 'normal' winter started about ten days before our arrival so we had snow and frost throughout our visit. There was no outside thermometer at our main accommodation, nor in the vehicle, so day-to-day figures are not available, but at some points the temperature got down to 5°F (-15°C).

## Day 1

**Saturday 16th January**

Our British Airways flight landed on time at Warsaw airport and we were on the road by 12.30pm. We had a coffee/comfort break at the BP station on the outskirts of Łomża before continuing north-east, reaching our lodge at Żabie Oko near Jesiorowski about 5.30pm.

## Day 2

**Sunday 17th January**

We left the lodge at 8.25am and about halfway to the western part of Puszcza Borecka we saw three Elk crossing farm fields. Forest staff met us at the rendezvous point with a 4×4 vehicle and a tractor/trailer, the latter kitted out with basic seats. We headed into the forest and observed 50 European Bison (Wisent) of both sexes and a wide variety of ages. Eight Red Deer were also seen; all hinds and followers.

We had lunch back at the lodge before heading east. We had a stop at the Tesco store at Goldap, one of the few shops open in this small town on a Sunday. We then continued east along the southern edge of the great Puszcza Romincka. At Żytkiejmy we rendezvoused with Romuald Naruszewicz, known to all as Romek, a retired stalker for 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. Northern Raven and White-tailed Eagle were observed. Peter and Terry elected to stay at the ambona (a shooting hide on stilts) till after dark but saw little.

We returned to the public road and went to Gosciniec Użmauda, our accommodation for the next four nights at the east end of the forest. Here Paulina Pruszkowka, the owner's daughter and her husband Daniel welcomed us and fed us well for the duration of our stay.

## Days 3 - 5

**Monday 18th – Wednesday 20th January**

### Puszcza Romincka

Our days in Puszcza Romincka followed the pattern of exploring the forest on foot and by vehicle till lunchtime, then going to ambona mid-afternoon.

One morning outing included a return to the Wolf Meadow with Romek, and a drive 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. Other features visited included the stone commemorating the Kaiser's 2,000th stag, and a beaver area with lodge and beaver-cut trees.

Another day included a walk of five or six miles with a local naturalist, Szymon Czernek, who communicated with us directly in English. The first part of this walk was through rolling open fields, beautiful in the perfect snow. We saw a Red Fox shortly before entering the forest and getting shelter from the snell wind. After an hour or so we passed through Degucie, a State farm village from the communist days. It was less bleak than others and nice to see bird feeders with tits and other small passerines. The small dogs were amiable and non-yappy. Our bus was waiting near this village. One of the group elected to leave here and return to Gosciniec Użmauda. The rest of us continued through high forest and spotted a variety of smaller birds in the next part of the forest. Among his talents, Szymon was an accomplished bird mimic.

On the third morning, rides were organized in a horse-drawn sleigh. At one time these sleighs were common, but as income levels rise in Poland, the rural horse is being replaced by tractors and cars, and is becoming almost a rarity. A farther problem is that more roads are now cleared of snow and horses cannot realistically pull a sleigh across bare tarmac, so routes must be carefully planned. However, for Romek there are 'no problems, only challenges' and we drove to the edge of Żytkiejmy village where a two-horse open sleigh awaited us. Some of the group rode from here in the sleigh whilst the rest of us drove some miles into the forest where Romek soon had a fine bonfire going. With some management, everyone had a sleigh ride and the opportunity for walks, if they wished. Later, including sleigh driver Pan Wierzchowski, we got warmed by the bonfire and those who wished had a sip or more of Zubrow *Wódka*.

Each day we had lunch at Gosciniec Użmauda, then between 3pm and 3.30pm we set off with Romek. Group members were installed, usually in pairs, in several ambona and extracted about 6.30pm. En route to at least one ambona, Elk and Brown Hare were observed. Wild Boar, Red Fox, and Roe Deer were seen at several locations, and birds included Northern Raven and Erne (White-tailed Eagle), the latter mainly at the Wolf Meadow site.

On day four, Terry and Peter saw a mammal from the Wolf Meadow ambona which they didn't recognise. Both were familiar with Red Fox from England and Terry had seen Wolf more than once in the wild. It was intermediate in size between wolf and fox, but of a different build. Later, after discussions and recourse to illustrations in the field guides, it was clear they had seen Raccoon Dog. The following afternoon/evening Erica and Susan also saw a Raccoon Dog at the same locale. It is unclear as to the status of this species – perhaps feral or escapee – but those who saw it were pleased with their observation.

One evening we went directly from the ambona to a bonfire site between the forest and a frozen lake, where Romek had prepared some splendid bigos (Hunter's stew) and other 'goodies' for us. The pièce de résistance was a whole boar roasted over the bonfire.

## Day 6

Thursday 21st January

Today we left Użmauda and before long we had spotted several Elk in fields. Our winding route took us south-east till we joined the 'main' road to Suwalki. We had a break at a filling station, then continued south to Grajewo and then east before turning south again on the Czar's Road leading us to Dwór Dobarz, our lunch stop.

We made several slow passes on the Czar's Road between the turn-off and Dwór Dobarz, both before and after lunch, observing Elk and Roe Deer in the Pine and Juniper woods.

## Day 7

Friday 22nd January

We left Łomża and headed south-west to Warsaw. We made good time which allowed us two hours on foot in the old city, and a drive past some of Warsaw's notable features. Then it was to Frederic Chopin Airport for our flight back to the UK where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

## L'Envoi

Sightings of wild animals cannot be guaranteed, however we visit areas with the best chance of such sightings. It is disappointing that not only did we fail to see Wolf, but also none were heard howling. Sinclair has led this trip most winters since 1985 and this year there were fewer wolf signs than on any previous visit: no urine marking, fewer tracks than normal, and none of the spoor going for a considerable distance along the forest roads and tracks.

There are two main reasons for doing this trip in the winter: spoor is far more readily visible in snow than on other substrates; secondly, warm-blooded creatures (at least, those which don't hibernate) must be more active than at other times of year if they are to obtain enough food for energy balance, even more so females which are carrying unborn young through the cold season.

It is possible that the very mild late 2015 meant that the majority of large mammals, and other creatures, entered the cold spell in January with good reserves of fat and just didn't need to be as active as normal in pursuing food sources, hence the paucity of spoor.

Normally the last full day in the field, especially the time by the Czar's Road, is dedicated to Elk. This year, most group members had enjoyed views of Elk long before we got to the Czar's Road. It would be good to think that this is because Elk are doing well and spreading further.

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## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January					
			16	17	18	19	20	21
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓					
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>					✓	
3	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓				✓	
4	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓		✓		
5	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
6	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓					✓
7	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓					
8	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H		✓		
9	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓				
10	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓			✓	
11	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula soemmeringii</i>	✓	✓			✓	
12	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓				
13	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓				✓	
14	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
15	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>				✓		
16	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			✓			
18	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓				
19	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓				
20	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓				
21	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓			
22	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				✓		
23	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓		✓		
24	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓	✓	✓		

## Mammals

1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓			✓	✓
2	Raccoon Dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>				✓		
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓				
4	Elk	<i>Alces alces</i>		✓				✓
5	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
6	European Bison (Wisent)	<i>Bison bonasus</i>		✓				
7	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>				✓		
8	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	