



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Poland
14 – 22 May 2016

Holiday participants

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Alice Lester

Leader: Artur Wiatr www.biebrza-explorer.pl

Report: words by Jim Simons, photos by Sue and David Rowell except lady's slipper orchid by Artur Wiatr.

Cover: bison, at a secret location near Białowieża.

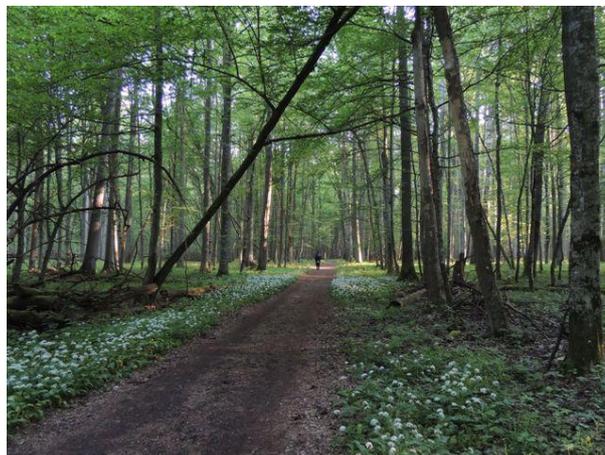
Below: the group early one morning, shortly after seeing a bison.



In Biebrza National Park we stayed at Dwór Dobarz www.dwordobarz.pl
In Białowieża we stayed at Gawra Pensjon at www.gawra.bialowieza.com



Biebrza River.



Białowieża forest.

This holiday, as for every Honeyguide holiday, also puts something into conservation in our host country by way of a contribution to the wildlife that we enjoyed. The conservation contribution this year of £40 per person was supplemented by gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, leading to a donation of £500. The total for all conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 was £108,126 to early June 2016.

The donation went to The Workshop of Living Architecture, a small NGO that runs environmental projects in and near Biebrza Marshes. The group is managing land to benefit migrating geese, particularly white-fronted and bean geese. This means co-operating with farmers to get marshes grazed so they are in prime condition when the geese arrive in early spring, and to limit disturbance by people in general and wildfowling in particular with no shooting zones. Part of the money will also be spent on the conservation project previously supported by Honeyguide on lady's slipper orchid conservation, namely educational talks and scrub removal from the sites where orchids grow.

DAILY DIARY

Day 1 – Saturday 14 May

At Chopin airport in Warsaw we all met up easily enough with our guide Artur, who gave all the ladies a red rose. Easily enough that is apart from Chris who met up with considerable difficulty, and not after Alice had set out as a one-woman search party, and Jim had shouted across the concourse for him, none of which helped. On the bus drive to the hotel we stopped for lunch at a road-side café and sampled various soups and salads. Back on the road, Chris announced from the back of the bus that he wouldn't get out of his seat for anything less than an elk. As we drove into the Biebrza National Park, Artur told us to keep our eyes open, because if we were lucky we might see elk close by the road. We were lucky. We saw an elk browsing not thirty yards from the road, her huge ears turning this way and that, but often at us. She must have decided we were not a threat because she stayed there for about ten minutes, affording us all a good view. After a while we all piled out of the bus to get a better look, even Chris, and still she stayed. Eventually something spooked her, but not, I think, us. On the way to the hotel we also saw a raven, a marsh harrier, a stork, great white egrets and a beaver dam. An excellent start.



Elk and white stork.

BIEBRZA NATIONAL PARK

Day 2 – Sunday 15 May

Most of us were up bright and early the next morning for a 7am pre-breakfast amble around the hotel grounds. We saw a hoopoe, an icterine warbler, many swallows, a yellowhammer, a spotted flycatcher, a white wagtail, a pair of redstarts that seemed to be using an old swallow's nest, a crane, a roe deer, starlings, blackbirds, a goldfinch, a linnet and a grey heron. There was also apparently a nesting pair of plastic storks, and what we took to be a real stork in a nest much higher up. Of mammals, we saw a brown hare, and a park naturalist, but he was rather more timid than the previous evening's elk had been, and retreated on seeing us. We heard, but did not see, a fire-bellied toad, a blackcap and a thrush nightingale. In fact we heard thrush nightingales throughout the day, but never managed to see one.

After breakfast we set off for the southern basin of the Biebrza river valley, stopping first at a wooded raised bog, having seen a pied flycatcher on the way. The trees were mostly scots pine, black alder and silver birch, but also downy birch and aspen. Among the pine were bonsai specimens made that way by browsing elk, who developed the technique before the Japanese, but unfortunately failed to patent it. We saw old peat workings, which are being re-colonised by sphagnum moss, making them into dangerous elk traps. It was cool, so there were not many mosquitoes, and the dragonfly that Artur picked up stayed on his finger for long enough to be photographed, and identified as *Gomphus vulgatissimus* (common clubtail). Of shrubs and smaller plants we saw sundew, bog rosemary, bird cherry, dogwood, interrupted club moss, lily of the valley, hops, and northern bilberry, known as the tipsy plant for its hallucinogenic properties. We found some tiny mushrooms, and bracket fungi on silver birch.

The next stop was an observation tower by the roadside just outside Goniadz, where we had a magnificent view of a marsh harrier, and of a buzzard hovering. We also saw more storks and swallows, a whitethroat, lapwing and a yellowhammer, and yellow iris. Slightly alarmingly the bus reversed back down the road towards Goniadz before heading for the park headquarters, where we admired the collection of stuffed mammals and birds, all of which had been killed in road accidents – elk, wolves, beavers, pine martens, a kestrel and many more. Still in Goniadz, we stopped outside Artur's house, where he explained that he had forgotten to kiss his wife goodbye that morning and left us in the bus. Well, either this was the longest kiss in Polish history or they were up to something else. It turned out to have been cake decoration, for he returned to the bus bearing a huge cake with which to celebrate Alice's birthday.

And so to lunch, to eat the sandwiches we had prepared from the breakfast vittles and at least to make a start on the enormous cake. We sang "Happy Birthday", and Artur and our driver Christoph sang what they assured us was the Polish equivalent, but might, for all we knew, have been something quite different – they seemed to enjoy singing it anyway, and Alice was happy. Artur also produced a hip flask of Polish firewater with which to warm the cockles of any hearts that felt in need. Artur's little comforter made repeated appearances through the week.

Alice's was in fact the first of three birthdays in the week, and she asked what the chances of that were. It turns out there were several mathematicians on board, well able to answer the question, but none of us proved equal to the mental arithmetic required. The answer turns out to be about one in a thousand, assuming, as Michelle pointed out, that there is no particular propensity for people in general to book birdwatching holidays on their birthday or to avoid doing so. It can safely be assumed that it will be some years before the Honeyguide cake budget takes such a battering.

We took a walk along a boardwalk, although the highlight was before we even reached it: a bluethroat badgering a female cuckoo in a willow tree! We climbed several towers on the walk, but the memory of exactly which birds we saw from which tower has somewhat faded. In some order or another, we saw grey heron, greylag geese, yellow wagtail, a hobby and a song thrush, a Montagu's harrier and a swift and reed buntings, ruff, lapwings, great white egrets and mute swans. Another highlight was a rosefinch perched in a dead tree affording us a magnificent view. We admired a penduline tit's nest, and later saw the bird itself. In the water we admired some splendid caddisfly larvae, and along the path we saw water avens and speedwell. We saw orange tip butterflies, a green-veined white, and a magnificent but unidentified small moth with huge antennae. It was by now becoming rather cold, but we nevertheless saw a small lizard. It was interesting to see the damage inflicted on the boardwalk itself by beavers near to their lodge.

At about this time Chris said that seeing three new birds was too much excitement for one day, and so he needed to go and lie down, but instead of that we drove on to one more observation tower on private land overlooking the river. The list here included redshank, black-tailed godwit, wood sandpiper, black-headed gull, gadwall, white tailed eagle, lesser spotted eagle, little tern, black tern, whiskered tern, mute swan, house martin, grey wagtail, blue headed wagtail, and a fox.

On the way home in the bus, we saw another elk, a common snipe and a skylark. We were well ready for dinner after a long day, and Chris could finally get to lie down.



Penduline tit nest with a bird flying away from it; Labrador tea and bogbean flowers.

Day 3 – Monday 16 May

The early risers walked down the road in search of the woodpecker whose hole we had seen the day before. No luck there, but they saw red-backed and great grey shrike, pied flycatcher, golden orioles, yellowhammer, redstart and a red deer. They heard but did not see a black woodpecker and a wood warbler.

From the beginning, John had said that it would take a lady's slipper orchid to make him happy. So after breakfast we set off for a secret location. A young man met us there and led us through fields and meadows and into ancient woodland. We saw early marsh orchid, herb paris, may lily, marsh lousewort, common bugle, *Alchemilla vulgaris*, chickweed wintergreen, some sort of stitchwort, ground ivy, yellow rattle, great celandine, water avens, a horsetail of some sort, wood anemone, solomon's seal, meadowsweet and, yes, a lady's slipper orchid. Artur explained that some of the Honeyguide money is used to help look after the lady's slipper orchid's environment.



Lady's slipper orchid (AW); konik, a traditional Polish pony adapted to life in the marshes.

The spring was so late that only one plant was in flower, but one was enough. We also saw a skylark, a jay and a tree creeper, and on the way to our next stop, a marsh harrier, a raven and a crane.

We stopped at Bialygrad. It was cold and windy, and we set off on a long trail that wound into the distance across the windswept plains of northern Europe. At the far end we took lunch on an observation tower over the river, but observation was somewhat curtailed by the risk of hypothermia attendant upon sticking one's head above the parapet. For all that we managed a reasonable bird list: hobby, white tailed eagle, marsh harrier, common snipe, rosefinch, chaffinch, song thrush, fieldfare, swallow, great white egret, hooded crow, magpie, sedge warbler, reed bunting, grey heron, crane, stork, lapwing, tree sparrow, black headed gull, redshank, mallard, meadow pipit and goosander. We heard but did not see golden oriole and cuckoo. Head down against the wind, we probably noticed more flowers than we might otherwise: yellow iris, water violet, water dock, common water crowsfoot, water mustard and marsh yellowcress (*Rorippa palustris*, which is not on the Honeyguide list.)

On the way back to the hotel we turned off into the forest, and as we went ever deeper in we felt ourselves slipping backwards in time and thinking of ghosts, vampires and werewolves. It turns out though that times are hard for the un-dead in modern Poland, so they have opened a museum. They employ as curator an antiquarian bookseller who retired a hundred and twenty years ago, though he believes it was only twenty years ago. By day he lives on the farm with his twenty-three stray dogs, some of which are wolves even by day, his small herd of beautiful red cattle of an ancient Polish breed almost extinct elsewhere, his equally beautiful and rare konik horses and his Vietnamese pot-bellied pig. By night he is sent on errands to collect a miscellany so miscellaneous that is it hoped visitors will become bewitched and stay until midnight, and an almost convincing simulation of electric light has been magicked up in the middle of the forest to help with this ruse.

Among the exhibits are a barrel full of used boots, several hundred empty beer bottles and an equally large number of crown caps that have sadly been separated from their bottles, crates of plastic bottles, local craftsmen's work, ancient gas masks, a bomb, obscure farm implements piled high on top of one another, and a sixteenth century Latin book of psalms which the curator must have smuggled past his employers as a reminder of his previous life. There is also a piano, with a copy of Cramer's exercises open on the stand. As we left the museum and drove back through the woods we thought we caught a glimpse of a dodo, and far away above the trees, a vast flock of passenger pigeons.

Back on the main road in twenty-first century Poland we saw a jay and a hoopoe, and still got back in time for dinner. After dinner some of us went in search of the rare and endangered aquatic warbler but didn't see one, although we heard several. Nicholas's visit to the museum has had a lasting effect on his eyes though, as he spotted a reed warbler a couple of hundred yards away in the near dark.

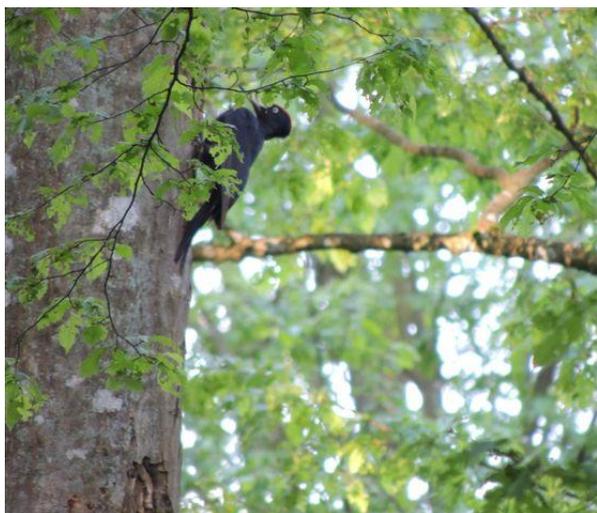
There was a young Anglo-Polish lad staying at the hotel, and he had found tree frogs in one of the ponds, which he was keen to show us.



Common tree frog.

Day 4 – Tuesday 17 May

The pre-breakfast party set off down the road again, but this time turned into the woods. They saw red-backed shrike, wood warbler, great grey shrike and rosefinch.



Black woodpecker.

After breakfast we set off for the Red Marsh, on the way spotting fieldfare and a kestrel hovering. The landscape is very flat everywhere, the soil extremely sandy. In the state park there are a few low hills, though in fact they are no more than large sand dunes. Walking towards the dunes we spotted a hawfinch feeding her chick on the path in front of us, and two red squirrels chasing one another in the trees, so that made Nicholas happy, as he had announced at the start that red squirrels were what would make the holiday worthwhile for him. On Wolf Hill we spotted wolf dung, and Artur regaled us with tales of having seen real wolves from that very spot. Not this time, though we did see more elk. The avian highlights of our walk through the dunes were black stork, black woodpecker, wood warbler, red breasted flycatcher, marsh harrier, jays, red-backed and great grey shrikes, hoopoe, whinchat, and we heard but did not see chiffchaff. While in the hide on Wolf Hill we hid from a brief shower, our only day-time rain of the holiday.

On the way back in the bus we stopped at a bridge over the river Jigrznia and found great reed warbler, pied wagtail, reed bunting, red-backed shrike, lesser spotted eagle, buzzard, rosefinch, yellowhammer and a white stork flying low overhead carrying nesting material. A dead beaver floating in the river found by David did not earn Artur his beaver points.



Thrush nightingale and red-backed shrike.

A second unsuccessful evening trip in search of aquatic warblers was at least rewarded with a pair of Montagu's harriers, marsh harriers, a cuckoo being mobbed by snipe, curlew, grasshopper warbler, black tailed godwit, curlew, and the sound of snipe drumming over the marshes. Plants of note were bogbean and crested cow wheat.

Day 5 – Wednesday 18 May

The early risers saw roe deer and a fox, a starling nest in a hole in a tree, a pair of red-backed shrikes, cuckoo, great spotted woodpecker, linnets and black redstart.

After breakfast we set out on foot, along the road, stopping to admire honey buzzard in the sky, and into the woods. The weather was calmer and a little warmer, and so the spotting was easier as the little birds were not hiding in the bushes so much and the big ones were soaring on thermals, and so it was that:

On the fifth day in Poland
Our spotters found for us
Five black storks,
Four spotted eagles,
Three white-tailed eagles,
Two golden orioles
And a whitethroat in a birch tree.

There were lesser spotted eagles, but that doesn't scan even by my lax standards. We also saw meadow pipit, pied flycatcher, red-backed shrike, willow warbler, wood warbler, marsh tits, great white egrets, distant unidentifiable gulls, marsh harriers all over the place, hobbies mobbing a white-tailed eagle, and another elk.

We had our main meal at lunchtime, then an afternoon off before an evening activity. It was a calm and sunny evening, albeit still quite cool, and it was third time lucky on the aquatic warbler front with two very clear sightings. Also, with the sun low in the sky over the marshes, we saw a Montagu's harrier with its colours glowing in the sunlight, black-tailed godwit mobbing a marsh harrier, as well as cuckoos (both red and grey phases), reed buntings and lapwing. We saw and heard snipe drumming. Then it was off to see beavers, and we saw lots. We stopped at a bridge and watched as a beaver came to look at us, and then went on to where we could board a boat and be taken to look back at the beavers. We saw ten of them, mostly sitting at the edge of the water or on the bank eating, some swimming in the river, one of them carrying a large branch quite some way downstream. In fact the first one we saw had been hiding behind a mallard, preening itself, waiting to make its appearance the moment we looked its way. We were able to get quite close to the beavers, and they didn't seem to mind our spotlights or the pattering of the engine. Artur has definitely scored his beaver points now.



Beaver at dusk

BIAŁOWIEŻA NATIONAL PARK

Day 6 – Thursday 19 May

There was no early expedition this morning as it would be a long day and a very early start tomorrow. That didn't stop some of us from wandering around the hotel grounds, seeing a fire-bellied toad as it pumped itself up and then suddenly collapsed, and yellow-eyed green-backed frogs wrestling. Before leaving we spotted a sparrowhawk being mobbed by swallows.

After breakfast we set off southwards for our second centre in Białowieża, quite a long coach drive. We stopped at a quarry to look for bee-eaters and tawny pipits, and saw a bee-eater on a wire almost as soon as we stepped off the bus, and sand martins at their nests. We also saw skylark, whinchat, wheatear, Montagu's harrier, yellowhammer and finally a tawny pipit. We also saw a few maybugs and a giant edible snail.

We lunched at the side of a track between large ponds and reed beds at Dojlidy, loud with the sound of a thousand frogs, the squabbling of a thousand black-headed gulls that were nesting in the reeds and the occasional booming bittern. It was now getting quite warm and sunny as we walked down the track. We saw great crested grebe, red-necked grebe, a charming family of coots, tufted duck, yellow wagtail, whitethroat, penduline tit, reed warbler, great reed warblers, swallows, rosefinch and swifts high above us. We also saw a pair of marsh harriers passing food from one to the other. We saw some dragonflies some of which were not in our insect book, but one of which was probably a hairy hawk.

And so to our new hotel. After supper most went off in search of pygmy owls near a railway line built for the Tsar. As it happens there is another railway line nearby, a narrow gauge one built by a British company that was granted the logging rights after the First World War. The group saw woodcock roding, a song thrush, a green sandpiper whizzing past, a female blackbird and also a stoat while waiting for their local guide Matthew. After rather a long wait, a pygmy owl appeared, and it was briefly spotted.

Day 7 – Friday 20 May

A very early start today, we left the hotel at 4:15, arriving at the Białowieża National Park a few minutes later as the sun rose above the trees towards Belarus. The fields were shrouded in mist. We met Matthew again and were escorted down the track towards the magnificent park gate by starlings and a whinchat, and saw a red-backed shrike and heard a golden oriole. After we had walked the 500m to the gate the mist had largely burnt off. We walked along a track in this, the strictly protected part of the park, where one is only allowed with a licensed guide. There are apparently two forms of the pendunculate oak, early and late, and just outside the park there is one of each, growing so close together that they almost look like a single tree that has split. The early one was in full leaf, while the late one was just breaking out of bud. The pendunculate oak is of course the English oak, so how come none of us knew about this early and late business?

Inside the park, the highlight was the woodpeckers. We saw middle spotted woodpeckers changing guard at the nest hole, and a male black woodpecker feeding his young from outside the hole: we could clearly see two little redheads inside the hole and one big one outside. We also saw a three-toed woodpecker, as well as wood warbler, blue tit, robin, red-breasted flycatcher, hawfinch, wren, nuthatch and rather incongruously a mallard. We had only a poor view of a collared flycatcher high up in the trees, and for most of us we really had to take the guide's word for it that that was what it was. We had a magnificent view of red deer, and some saw another red squirrel. We were pleased to see wych elm growing in the forest, as it is now so rare at home.

There is an amazing number of dead trees at every stage of decomposition, and in particular we noticed wood sorrel growing on a well-rotted trunk. Wild garlic, baneberry, *Daphne mezereum* and *Dentaria bulbifera* were among the plants we noticed. We spotted a tree pipit on the way back to the bus.

Next stop was by a river bridge in the Białowieża Glade near the Tsar's cargo railway station. The exciting spot was a wryneck, and we heard but didn't see a river warbler and an icterine warbler. We also saw blackbird, red-backed shrikes, great tit, marsh warbler, buzzard, reed bunting. Butterflies were emerging in the warmer weather, and we saw brimstone and orange tip.

We stopped for lunch by a track that leads to the border with Belarus, and some border guards soon came by on a quad bike painted in military drab. They held a brief conversation with Artur, and they didn't arrest us.

A little way down the road we went for a walk along another boardwalk. The highlights were mammals. We saw a family of wild boar with half a dozen piglets trotting across the path, and a bank vole. Chris, who went on ahead at one point, assured us proudly that he had seen two mammals, one of which might have been a deer, and other he positively identified as a rodent. We certainly saw deer and bison prints.

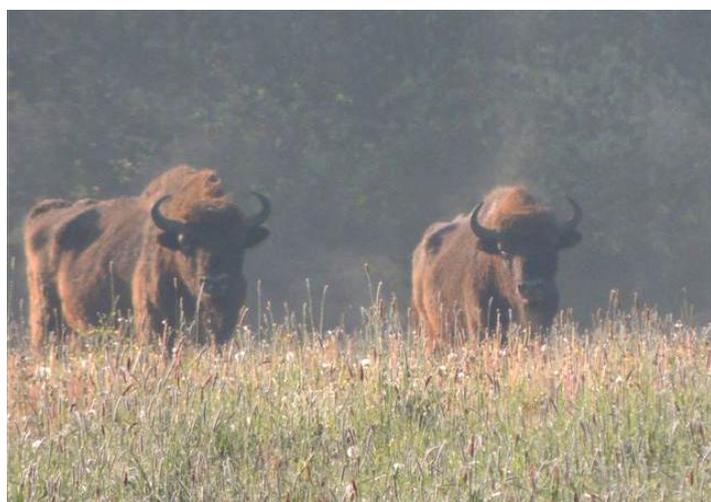
We then found a pygmy owl nest and hoped the owl might peer out at us, but she put her fingers to her ears and pretended not to hear us. We did though see another red squirrel, great spotted woodpecker, jay, song thrush, and a wood white butterfly. Chris also wished it to be known that he had seen two raptors that he couldn't identify.

The hotel had by now been invaded by the Warsaw chapter of the Honda Valkyrie Club in their black leather gilets. Their motto is "2003 ad mortem", 2003 being the year the motorbike went out of production. There were some 20 bikes outside, though some of them lesser machines than the mighty Valkyrie, which boasts a 1520cc flat 6 engine with six carburettors. We imagined ourselves as the Raptor Chapter of the RSPB with "A Million Voices for Nature" emblazoned in white across the back of our black fleeces with the arms cut off, and tattoos of fierce-looking eagles. But then we returned to reality and filled in a rather mundane and over-long questionnaire designed to assess the economic impact of tourists to the national park. Some of the questions had lost something in the translation from Polish, and no doubt some of our answers will have lost something on the way back.

After dinner most of us were ready for an early night, but Chris and Nick set off a-beavering. They walked around the village and down to the river, and indeed they found a beaver dragging two sticks home. They also saw at least two kinds of bat.

Day 8 – Saturday 21 May

Up at 4am again to go in search of bison. We met up with a backwoodsman who took us down the road a little way and then dived into the forest. He enjoined us to complete silence as he sought our quarry. At the far side there was a meadow, and there, just beyond the trees, stood a great bull bison, head down, grazing. We watched enthralled for perhaps ten minutes from about fifty yards away. He did not seem to notice us. Our guide asked us to change vantage point as the bull would shortly be coming into the woods. And so he did, but now he definitely did notice us. He stood there, breath steaming in the cool morning air, watching us watching him watching us, with cuckoos and golden orioles singing their hearts out behind us, and a blackcap flitting from branch to branch overhead. This was a magic moment, but much more than a moment, for it went on for about another ten minutes. Eventually he broke the spell by deciding to lie down and wait for us to go away, and so a little while later we did.

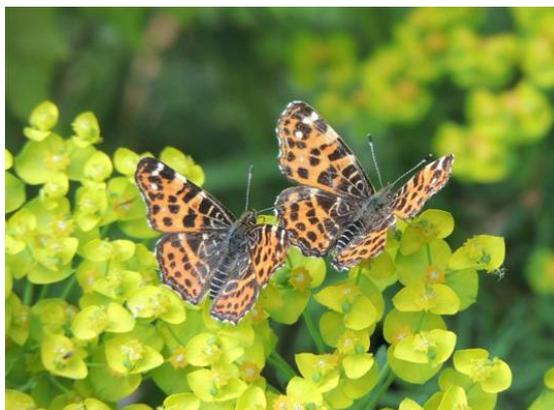


Another encounter with bison.

We drove down the road a little way and walked down a track between fields, and there we saw three more bison. Although they were further away, this was arguably a better view, with no trees between us and the bison, but it lacked the magic of the earlier forest encounter. At another stop we again heard and did see the river warbler with its extraordinary sewing machine song.

After breakfast we headed north, and almost immediately saw a redstart and some roe deer. We stopped first at an observation tower overlooking some wetlands. We saw lots of birds: black-headed gulls, whiskered terns and black terns, and Artur saw a white-winged tern, but I don't think anyone else managed to catch it.

In the wildfowl department we saw mute swan, garganey, gadwall, ferruginous duck and shoveler; great crested grebe, lapwing and great white egrets. We saw mash harriers and a family of white-tailed eagles: dad swooped down and caught a fish, and then mum and the little'un turned up to help eat it. Of passerines we saw swallow, whinchat, red-backed shrike, starling, goldcrest, yellowhammer and chaffinch. We also saw map butterflies, holly blue, speckled wood and brimstone.



Map butterflies.

A white-backed woodpecker was the star of our next stop in the woods, where we also saw a grass snake. At the final stop for a walk along a woodland track we saw a barred warbler, a pied wagtail and heard a corncrake. In the sunshine we spotted a holly blue and a Camberwell beauty.

Over dinner that evening we discussed our personal highlights of the holiday. Pretty much everyone chose the bison in the forest first, but forced to think of something else we came up with:

- Chris The elk in the woods on day one.
- Sue Red-backed shrike and many other first time spots.
- Jim The many different woodpeckers.
- Michelle Hare and golden orioles.
- Dave First beaver coming people-watching.
- Helen Black woodpecker feeding its young.
- John Lady's slipper orchid.
- Alice Thrush nightingales singing all over the place.
- Nick Learning how to spot birds with some expert help.
- Artur Us, for not getting grumpy despite the miserable weather – how diplomatic!
In fact I suppose Nick was saying that Artur himself was a highlight of the trip, a sentiment with which I think we'd all agree.

As the wine sank in, some more favourites emerged: bluethroat, particularly the incident with the cuckoo, the forest in general, the three white-tailed eagles eating a fish, the frogs and fire-bellied toads, the lilacs all over the place, and the beaver toothmarks on the boardwalk – happy memories.

After dinner some of us went on a bat hunt with a bat detector. We found two species, clearly distinguishable by frequency and the nature of the sound, but none of us is anywhere near expert enough to know what species they were. We also met some jovially drunk youths who taught us a very rude Polish word.

Day 9 – Sunday 22 May

Most of the party went out for one last early morning walk around the palace park, where there are few remnants of the Tsar's palace, and at last they all actually saw a thrush nightingale. They also found a red squirrel, a redstart, a serin, a nuthatch, blackbirds, starlings, a good view of a collared flycatcher, a middle spotted woodpecker, and another woodpecker about which the debate never came to a conclusion. In breaking news, it turns out that that might have been because they were looking at different birds.



Białowieża: the Governor's House, one of the few remaining buildings from the time of the Tsar, now an educational centre (L); and Forest Park HQ (R), which has a museum telling the story of the Tsar's palace on this site, destroyed in the war. The tower gives an excellent view across the treetops.