

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

36 Thunder Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich NR7 0PX

Telephone: 01603 300552

www.honeyguide.co.uk E-mail: honeyguide@tesco.net



Poland recce 24 – 29 September 2009

This is an account of my recce trip to Poland to help plan for next May's Honeyguide holiday. The holiday is timed for the peak time for birds in Poland, but I hope this will still give a feel what group members can expect next year – and maybe tempt some others to join the group.

Chris Durdin, October 2009

Pictures: bisons at dawn by Artur Wiatr, Biebrza Explorer (www.biebrza-explorer.pl), page 7. Other pictures by Chris Durdin. Above: view from the back of the Dwór Dobarz hotel at Biebrza. Below: village houses near Białowieża, and fen on a vast scale in the Biebrza marshes.



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Thursday 24 September – Warsaw to Biebrza

First lesson of the morning is that the parking that comes with Hotel Ibis booking via Holiday Extras is five miles away on the other side of the M1. Decide to opt for the mid-stay car park instead. My first time with Wizz Air and the flight is 30 minutes late leaving, but makes good time; the flight is two hours, with some applause as it touches down safely at 11.40 – clocks go on one hour in Poland. The hire car desks are in the other terminal, around the corner to the right, but not far. Paperwork done, I change some money: the rate at Warsaw is a bit better than Luton, somewhere between four and five zloty to the pound. Back to the other terminal to buy some lunch.

All vehicles have to be driven with dipped headlights on, which is straightforward enough, if easy to forget. But the second serious lesson of the morning is that signposting in busy Warsaw leaves much to be desired, so instead of heading north east I find I'm going east. Happily it's a good second option and I find the turn to head north across country to pick up main road no. 8 heading eventually for Białystok.

I was a bit preoccupied with the route to have much of an impression of Warsaw. The countryside though strikes me as East Anglian: fairly flat, often with Scots pines and birches, recalling Breckland, if a little less orderly in its soft autumn colours, and on a far bigger scale. All the birds seem to be corvids: rooks, jackdaws, jays and hooded crows.

The turn to Goniądz is well signed, taking me along the edge of the Biebrza river valley. This is different: large fens, more like Broadland, again on a much bigger scale. I pass a fen harvester and tractors: conservation management underway. This is by contractors for the National Park; other areas are privately owned, some traditionally cut for marsh hay, others increasingly under-managed.

I rendezvous with our host, Artur Wiatr, in Goniądz, then retrace my steps along the straight 'Tsar's road' to my hotel, the Dwór Dobarz [www.dwordobarz.pl]. Dobarz is the hamlet and Dwór means manor house; it's built in the style of a Prussian manor house or hunting lodge, wooden with a big garden and outstanding views over open marshes both to the rear and front across the road. Time for a welcome cup of tea: they can even provide cold milk, though typically it comes with lemon. Dinner starts with a goulash-style soup, then a meal of a kind of wild boar sausage with buckwheat and salads. The salads, I discover, always come as a side dish and seem to be an endless variety of ways to present raw cabbage and carrot. This is much tastier than it sounds, but it helps to like coleslaw.



Artur tells me that this morning at 7 a.m. a car hit an elk on a road not far from here. Elk are not very traffic savvy, it seems, and are quite regularly hit by cars or even trains. The elk was killed, the car a write-off but the man OK. He decided he wanted the elk as a trophy so had to buy the carcass from the state forestry service as mammals are state-owned.

Friday 25 September - Biebrza river valley's lower basin

It's a warm, sunny start to the day and behind the hotel a chiffchaff is singing, there are white wagtails on the lawn and a black redstart finds a song perch on the hotel roof. Breakfast at 8 a.m. is bread with cherry jam, a board of meats and cheese and iced buns. Lipton's yellow label tea comes in a small jug and this is followed a very large plate of scrambled egg.

Just before 9.30, met Artur outside the elegant Catholic church in Goniądz (*right*), then popped round the corner to his house passing, just along the road, the house he's moving to with his family when it's been reconstructed. There are endless tales of troubles with builders, I gather, though I'm spared most of the detail – it's just like home. On the other edge of Goniądz we stop to overlook the marshes and two large raptors – far bigger than the accompanying ravens – come into view, lesser spotted eagles, probably due to leave the area in the next 10 days or so.



Artur takes me to see two other accommodation options. The first is owned by the hugely hospitable George who invites us to help ourselves to the oversupply of tomatoes, red and yellow, in his garden. This is where Honeyguide leader Andrew stayed on his last visit. Great location by the marshes but with eight rooms, three of these sharing one bathroom, it's too small for us. Then there's the big Hotel Bartlowizna, one for business conferences but not at all Honeyguide. This reinforces Artur's choice of Dwór Dobarz. We also call at Leśniczowska Biebrzanska, another wooden building next-door-but-one to Dwór Dobarz. The owner Eugeniusz has almost completed renovating this and over a cup of coffee is delightfully candid about how doing this is more a hobby than a business. Eight rooms, of which six are twins and two singles and only partly set up for catering, so not quite there for a full group of 14 plus leaders but could be fine as an overspill from the Dwór Dobarz.



We visit two more places on the east side of the Biebrza. We start with, at first sight, an even-aged birch woodland. Actually it's a raised mire but a falling water table means it has dried out enough for trees to move in. The taiga vegetation is still there though: Labrador tea, interrupted clubmoss and bog blueberry (as Artur called it, an alternative and arguably better name for what Fitter, Blamey & Fitter call northern bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*). There are regular small but deep pits where peat has been dug, now filled



with superficially solid-looking sphagnum moss but in reality a terrible trap for the unwary elk or human visitor.

The second stop is the house and fields owned by the only resident within this section of the national park. Christophe, nicknamed 'king of the marshes', at first sight appears to be a marsh man, perhaps a recluse, but actually he's a former bookseller in Warsaw who has dropped out of the rat race to live here. He has a tremendous collection of artefacts: traditional tools, models of birds, squeezeboxes, art and books. He's very happy to show you these, but

his pride and joy are his livestock. He manages his bit of marsh with Polish red cattle and koniks, the latter the Polish ponies descended from the wild tarpans that are now helping to manage wetland nature reserves like Minsmere and Redgrave & Lopham Fen in East Anglia. Here Christophe hosts a steady trickle of visitors, individuals and groups, in the spring and summer. However I have already discovered he has his evening meals at Dwór Dobarz. (From left to right: Artur, Christophe and konik)



Artur and I head off on an anti-clockwise tour of the lower marsh. The centre of the marsh is essentially inaccessible but on the way round there is a succession of viewpoints, mainly from superb towers built by the national park, and occasional boardwalks taking you into the marsh (*view and hide below*). You can well imagine the riches here in spring – wader flocks, terns, lekking ruffs, over-flying birds of prey. A few marsh harriers remain and we find group of 46 cranes in a field. Farther along and there are more cranes: this time a count of 160 plus 70-odd flying away over a wood, then further scattered groups.



It's getting later and colder but we have a final stop. Artur has called ahead to a friend who has a little viewing hide over a couple of ponds with beavers. We are in luck: after just a short wait, we have a fine view of a beaver surfacing below us, to the background noise of cranes over the marshes behind at dusk. (For more on beavers, see www.honeyguide.co.uk/beavers.htm)

The geography meant driving past the hotel at Dobarz so I could collect my car at Artur's. Just outside Goniądz there's the unhelpful hazard of a tractor and large trailer with no lights, but we avoid it safely. Happily it's gone as I drive back to Dobarz, seeing at first a hare in the headlights then, with terrific luck, an elk crosses the road. It's both far enough away to provide no hazard, unlike the tale told to me before, but close enough to see really well, especially its white stockings that show well in the headlights. She – she had no horns so was a cow elk – slips away quietly into the birch wood.

Duck for dinner with mashed potato and three kinds of raw cabbage side salads, followed by apple cake and ice cream. As to drinks, without Artur I needed a sketch to explain my request for tap water. There's almost no wine in Poland so which beer to choose: I go for the one with the bison logo. The following night I had the other beer on offer and they taste the same, like any continental draft lager.

Saturday 26 September – Biebrza red marsh

Tomatoes and pancakes with this morning's breakfast. Today we're starting with what will be a walk on the first day of the group's visit, though we drive just up the road to save a little time. There's a track that goes out onto the marshes. Not far into the fen there's a viewing platform once famous in sections of the birdwatching community: here many groups stood viewing a great snipe lek while being attacked by mosquitos at dusk. Sadly the great snipe went from here some five years ago and though some remain in the valley they aren't in accessible areas.

Beyond the fen there is one the many pockets of higher land on the marshes; firstly acidic grassland with perforate St John's wort and lady's bedstraw, then inland sand dunes. This dune area, as many, was planted with pines in the Communist era in an attempt to make something productive of the area. Small pines are attractive to browsing elks and many of these have been nibbled so regularly over the years that they are in effect elk-created bonsai pines (*right*). There are also many craters from munitions testing, now making various micro-habitats. From the tower hide here a large brown blob turns out to be a grazing elk. On a distant tree there are two white-tailed eagles that stretch from time to time, showing their white tail feathers. Here as in many places there are siskin flocks buzzing around and our first and only redwing (though plenty of fieldfares and mistle thrushes in several places).



Heading north we stop at a garage for LPG and make a quick stop to have a look at the exhibits at the Biebrza National Park HQ. It's mainly the administrative heart of the park and the information element is modest: some stuffed animals and some pictures and maps. Artur collects some wire to tie up his car's fallen exhaust.

The central section of Biebrza National Park is called the red marsh, perhaps from bog iron, or maybe the autumn colours in the fen. We pass park buildings and Artur stops to chat with Anna who looks after the koniks here and runs the rehabilitation centre for injured/orphaned mammals; we pass two elks in a large enclosure. Then through woodland and out onto quite extensive sand dunes. Artur tells me something of the mixed history here at Grzędy: the first strictly protected area in the valley, dating back to 1921, a refuge and later a battleground for partisans during WW2. The paths leads to another tower hide on Wolf Hill overlooking a vast fen, with distant elks. It was here that the TV programme Animal Planet spent a week with Artur trying to film wolves one winter. In the end they (narrowly) failed.

There are brief stops as we head back, the first of which is where a Scots pine had a nest cavity created, with immediate effect, for wild bees. Today you can hear buzzing but it's too cool to see bees, but an essential stop in spring for a Honeyguide group? Then a boardwalk into a raised mire. Here there are pine trees on the mire that look some 40 years old but in fact are 100 years plus, a reflection of the poor conditions. They are growing with downy birch and Artur finds some bog rosemary.

Sunday 27 September – travel to Białowieża

Fried eggs for breakfast, then pack and drive north to Artur's house, pausing to photograph the church in Goniądz. Having left my Hillside Rovers football coaching duties in the capable hands of others this weekend at least I get a kick around with Artur's son Gniewko.

Today we are travelling south-east to Białowieża, much as the group will next May, taking in the same two stops on the way. The first of these is the large Lake Augusta at Czechowizna. Two bearded tits 'ping', fly and settle on some reeds at the lake's edge, over which we find three white-tailed eagles, quite a modest count for here, I gather. Pale clouded yellows feed on some late flowering lucerne. The second stop is some fishponds at Dojlidy, really the eastern part of the large town on Białystok. A dozen tree sparrows are feeding on the ground where we park. A

penduline tit calls and several reed buntings fly around the beds of reed and narrow-leaved reedmace. Spring will bring much more: red-necked grebes, great reed warblers, marsh terns and so on.

You can tell you are getting closer to Białowieża by the number of pictures and models of bison. There is particularly fine bison statue in the square at Hajnowka. I am relieved to find it's not only me photographing it.

Białowieża is certainly capitalising on the forest and its famous inhabitants with a plethora of signs and several large hotels. We check in at the modest-sized and friendly Pensjonat Gawra [www.gawra.bialowieza.com], stepping over the wild boar skin that acts as a doormat.

We meet Mateusz Szymura who, like his father, acts as an official guide to the strict reserve part of the forest. Access is through a huge wooden gate and getting round is easier than I had imagined: there is a wide path where horse-drawn carts take visitors, well-established paths and a boardwalk across some wet bits. No doubt there is much more to see in spring but the forest is seriously impressive in autumn.



The most striking aspects to me are two-fold. Firstly, the volume of dead wood, both standing and fallen. There are clean-cut, sawn ends – manual, not chain saw – where trees would have blocked main paths but otherwise they are left where they are, and no health and safety nonsense about standing dead timber threatening the many visitors. Secondly, the sheer size of so many individual trees. Mateusz reels off many impressive numbers about height, girth and age, but I choose simply to admire the trees rather than note the statistics. The tree species though, are familiar, albeit in a superb mix. We noted large-leaved lime, spruce, ‘English’ oak, hornbeam, alder, hazel, silver birch, wych elm, Scots pine and Norway maple. Everyone will have their own favourites and points of interest. For me it was the mix of conifer and broad-leaved, that I don’t recall seeing in a natural setting, and the amazing wych elms, unfamiliar now in the years after Dutch elm disease. We also have good views of red squirrel and middle spotted woodpecker



and puzzle over a large-flowered hemp-nettle *Galeopsis speciosa*. More pictures on our website: see www.honeyguide.co.uk/Bialowieza.htm

Monday 28 September – Białowieża

It's 6 a.m., completely dark, and Artur and I meet Norbert, another local guide, on the edge of a village. The aim is to experience the sights and sounds of the primeval forest at first light. It's the rutting season: red deer are roaring in the darkness.

06:45. We've driven into the forest and Norbert's Jeep is parked under the trees. We walk along a track towards a meadow. There is a dark shape in the half-light. It could be cow, but it isn't: it's a bison. We edge forward: there are three. Then a large male, powerful, shaggy shoulders and beard moves into view. We move to the edge of the clearing and there are 13 bison grazing in the mist, of various sizes from huge males to this year's calves. Suddenly they spot us, canter away and are lost in the mist on the other side of the meadow. Slowly, outlines begin to form,

and a re-count reveals there are 14. That's about the same number¹ as the group brought together in the 1950s to repopulate the forest after their extinction here. They move slowly away this time, disappearing from view behind some bales of silage wrapped in white plastic. It's now seven o'clock and we've been watching one of Europe's rarest mammals for just 15 minutes.



Bisons at dawn. The white glow is a line of silage bales.

It's still early so time for a walk around the Palace Park at Białowieża, close to the hotel, before going back to base. After breakfast, Artur and I drive north through the managed portion of the forest. There is a lively debate about extending the National Park and it could take in areas like this where timber is still being extracted. Another stroke of luck: a hazel hen (some books call it hazel grouse) walks across the road in front of the car. Brief but good views. We reach a sunny clearing. Having worn every layer I had first thing, changing into shorts for the main part of the day was not a mistake. We walk through more first-rate woodland to a tower hide overlooking a marsh. As we return, there are nutcrackers calling and we get brief views of red deer. Another hazel hen scuttles across the path. Any Honeyguiders still reading should know to see this species once, let alone twice, is so lucky and you certainly wouldn't count on coming here to see it. Back at the clearing the sun has brought out brimstone and comma butterflies as Artur pours tea from his flask and we eat sandwiches.

Our last stop in the Białowieża forest is an area of dead trees, killed by flooding. The culprits are beavers, and it makes a superb and visually stunning habitat. (For pictures of this, see www.honeyguide.co.uk/beavers.htm) Standing dead wood is always valuable for a range of wildlife, not just woodpeckers, as every naturalist knows. In spring there is a pale sheet of water violet; now the place is buzzing with ruddy darter dragonflies. We go off the main track to see if the beaver lodge is occupied. But beavers are forgotten as Artur grabs me to say there is a wild boar piglet drinking close to our right. There is no sign of a protective mother boar, so we take the chance to watch and take a photo (*see checklists, last page*). It sees us and dashes past.

Walking back, there are newly gnawed trees and beaver footprints. Looking closely at the dam, you can see the water level is higher one side. The evidence, even without seeing the animals, is that it's still occupied. Artur and I have traded enough family news for him to suggest I take a handful of the beavers' wood chippings for William's Beaver pack at home.

We pause by a village sign. It's taken me several days to learn *dzień dobry* (good morning) and to pronounce Białowieża ... enough said!



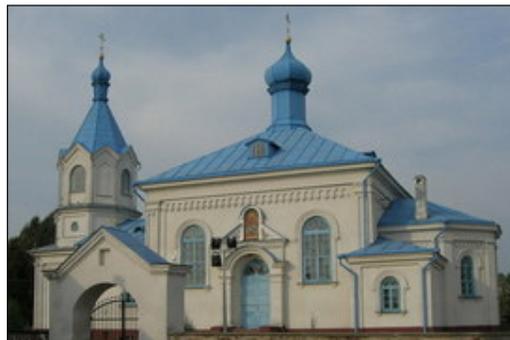
There is one more stop, to briefly overview Lake Siemianówka. There are at least four great white egrets today; in spring this is a western outpost for citrine wagtail. We head back towards Białowieża and I drop Artur at a bus stop by an orthodox church with a blue roof (*next page*)

¹ According to the Crossbill guide to Białowieża primeval forest, there were 12 lowland bison and one 'upland bison' from the Caucasian population, also hunted to extinction. This is therefore a rather narrow genetic base for the population, hampered further by the physical barrier that separates those in Poland and Belarus.

from where he catches a bus back home. I continue to the Nature Park where everyone is guaranteed a good view of bisons, wolves and boars.

Tuesday 29 September – Białowieża to Warsaw

Leave at 8.45. It takes three hours at a steady pace to get back onto the main Białystok-Warsaw road, albeit with stops to check the route, which was straightforward enough, and to buy fuel. Then it's less than an hour to get to the edge of Warsaw, but then more than an hour extra to reach the airport. When I see a brown bear – though after **b**eaver, **b**oar and **b**ison perhaps no surprise – on some rocks having just crossed the river, the penny drops that in passing the zoo I've gone via the centre rather than the planned route.



Again, signs are poor within Warsaw, but with the help of a kind lady in a petrol station I confirm I'm on the right route and take a right turn into the wide avenue to the airport. Happily, I'd left plenty of time.

Fortunately, the two airport terminals are side by side. I return the hire car keys in the old Terminal 1. Having arrived in the new Terminal 2 last week it seemed likely that I'd check-in there – the e-ticket didn't say – but no, check-in was back in Terminal 1. Then there's a longish walk after security into the usual parade of shops and back to the far end of Terminal 2! The flight leaves 30 minutes late this time, and flying into a headwind it's nearly half an hour late landing too, but otherwise smooth.

Birds seen on the recce

Cormorant	Blackbird
Great white egret – 4 at Lake Siemianówka	Fieldfare
Grey heron	Redwing
Mute swan	Mistle thrush
Greylag goose	Chiffchaff
Mallard	Goldcrest
Pochard	Bearded tit – two at Lake Augusta
Goosander	Long-tailed tit
White-tailed eagle – Biebrza; 3 at Lake Augusta	Willow tit
Marsh harrier	Coal tit
Sparrowhawk	Blue tit
Buzzard	Great tit
Lesser spotted eagle – several in the Biebrza river valley; migrants due to leave very shortly	Penduline tit – heard at fishponds at Dojlidy
Hazel hen – twice seen crossing roads/paths at Białowieża	Nuthatch
Moorhen	Great grey shrike – in the red marsh area at Biebrza
Coot	Jay
Crane – several flocks in the Biebrza river valley	Magpie
Lapwing	Nutcracker – 1 at the park offices at the red marsh; heard in Białowieża
Snipe	Jackdaw
Black-headed gull – Warsaw only	Rook
Woodpigeon	Hooded crow
Collared dove	Raven
Great spotted woodpecker	Starling
Middle spotted woodpecker – Białowieża	House sparrow
Skylark	Tree sparrow – little flock at Dojlidy fishponds
Swallow	Chaffinch
Meadow pipit	Goldfinch
White wagtail	Siskin – many winter flocks in the Biebrza valley
Robin	Yellowhammer
Black redstart	Reed bunting

Mammals

Elk
Roe deer
Red deer
Bison
Wild boar
Hedgehog
Fox
Hare
Beaver
Red squirrel



Butterflies

Red admiral
Peacock
Small tortoiseshell
Comma
Small white
Large white
Brimstone
Pale clouded yellow
Small copper

Flowers

These flowers are mostly of the 'last-lingering' type in late September. They don't give much of a guide for what will be seen in May, except that it's a range of species from northern European field guides.

Water chickweed
White campion
Ragged robin
Soapwort
Carthusian pink
Field buttercup
Hoary alison
Forking larkspur
Meadowsweet
Tufted vetch
White melilot
White & red clovers
Wood cranesbill
Herb Robert
Small-flowered cranesbill
Evening primrose
Heather
Vipers bugloss
Large-flowered hemp-nettle
Black nightshade
Common toadflax
Red bartsia
Field scabious
Spreading bellflower
Jerusalem artichoke (planted, widespread in patches, even on the edge of Warsaw – *pictured*)
Yarrow
(Bur marigold *Bidens sp* in seed was common in places – its seeds sticking in masses)
Chicory
Mouse-ear hawkweed



Shrubs in fruit: spindle, barberry, wayfaring tree, northern bilberry. An American bird cherry *Prunus serotina* is established in some areas, as is an exotic dogwood *Cornus sp.*