

Poland In Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Warsaw and transfer to Białowieża .
Day 2/3	Białowieża Forest.
Day 4/5	Biebrza Marshes.
Day 6/8	Baltic Coast.
Day 9	Transfer to Warsaw and fly London.

Departs

September

Focus

Birds and larger mammals

Grading

Grade B. Day walks only

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code POL02)

Highlights:

- Explore Białowieża National Park's primeval forests.
- Look for European Bison & other mammals.
- Pygmy Owl, Spotted Eagle, Common Crane & many more.
- 8 species of woodpecker possible, plus Wryneck.
- Elk (Moose) in the Biebrza Marshes.
- Enjoy bird migration along the Vistula Spit & Baltic Coast.
- Visit the beautiful city of Gdańsk.
- Expertly led by a British Naturetrek ornithologist & local guides.



*From top: Three-toed Woodpecker, Wild Boar & Montagu's harrier.
Images by Paul Marshall & David Mercer*



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Introduction

Poland was one of the first countries in eastern Europe to open its doors to birdwatchers and we have been running tours here in search of Aquatic Warblers, Great Snipe and woodpeckers for over 25 years! Although much has changed over the past quarter of a century, the pace of change has been slowest in Poland's peaceful north-eastern corner. Pristine primeval forests – some of the last in Europe – continue to provide important habitat for a wide range of wildlife. At this time of year, the region takes on an autumnal character, with changing colours across forests and meadows and a noticeable shift in bird activity. Migration is underway, with a variety of passage species moving through, while resident birds remain well represented. The mosaic of traditional farmland, wetlands and woodland continues to support a high diversity of wildlife, including raptors, woodpeckers and late-season insects such as butterflies and dragonflies during favourable conditions.

With farming still relatively low intensity compared to much of western Europe, this habitat-rich landscape remains an important refuge for wildlife and offers a quieter, more reflective birdwatching experience in the early autumn season.



We will start in the primeval forests of Białowieża, home to the mighty European Bison, Pygmy Owl and White-backed Woodpecker. On rare occasions our tours here have even seen Wolf and Lynx. Stopping briefly at the Siemianówka Reservoir, we move north to the Biebrza Marshes where we look for Cranes, waders and Spotted Eagle, before ending on the Vistula Spit on the Baltic Coast. Here, amongst a wide variety of regular migrants, rarer species such as Bluethroat and Red-footed Falcon may be seen. There is also the opportunity to visit the picturesque city of Gdańsk.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Białowieża Forest

Our flight departs from London on a scheduled flight. On arrival in Warsaw we will be met by our local guide and drive eastwards to the Białowieża National Park. The 4-hour journey will take us across eastern Poland, through a peaceful rural landscape typified by a patchwork of fields, forests dotted with lakes and small rural villages. Most villages here contain one or more small wooden churches, the denomination of which (catholic or orthodox) can be gauged by the design of their crosses. We aim to arrive in the small village of Białowieża by late afternoon.

Day 2

Białowieża Forest

We will spend today exploring in and around Białowieża, walking the trails that criss-cross the magnificent ancient Forest. This is the largest remaining remnant of the original European forest left in Europe. In Poland alone it covers an area of 580 square kilometres and continues into a vast tract of woodland across the Belorussian border. Much of the Polish side is managed for forestry, but 47.5 square kilometres is protected within a national park, known locally as the 'Strict Reserve'. Today we will concentrate our efforts on the managed portion of the forest. Although it generally contains a less diverse assemblage of birds, the managed woodland holds a larger number of many of the sought-after species and almost all of the European Bison. Here we will try to locate birds such as Lesser Spotted Eagle, Hazel Grouse, Nutcracker and White-backed, Middle-spotted, Black, Grey-headed and Three-toed Woodpeckers. The latter is very elusive and can be very difficult to find at this time of year, but with the help of our local guides we just might strike lucky! We will also venture into the woodland in the evening to look for the diminutive, but secretive, Pygmy Owl.



Pygmy Owl

The managed forest also holds nearly all of the Białowieża's European Bison. The Wisent, as it is also known, is the largest land mammal in Europe and became extinct in the wild in the 1920's. Shortly after its demise, a programme of captive breeding was initiated and in 1952 this magnificent animal was successfully re-introduced back into the forest. The Białowieża forest now contains one of Europe's, and indeed the world's, last remaining herds with around 1176 Bison ranging freely within the Polish section of the forest and another 726 across the Belorussian border, as of 2025. For such a big animal Bison can

be very elusive, but if we are fortunate enough to locate one, or maybe a group, slowly plodding their way through the forest it will undoubtedly be one of the highlights of the tour.

Other mammals to look out for include Red and Roe Deer, Elk, Red Squirrel, Pine Marten, and perhaps Wild Boar. Both Lynx and Wolf occur here in reasonable numbers, but it would be a very fortunate group indeed to spot either of these!



European Bison

Day 3

Białowieża Forest

This morning we will continue our exploration of the managed portion of the forest. Here we will have another chance of finding all the species outlined above along with Hawfinches, Crested Tits, Crossbill and the occasional Great Grey Shrike. The Palace Park can also be very productive, especially around the two small lakes where such birds as Grey-headed Woodpecker, Black Redstart and Red-backed Shrike can often be found.

The swampy Alder woods and ancient Limes, Hornbeams, Oaks and Norway Spruces are truly impressive, and together with the park's rich diversity of fauna, assured its selection as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1977 and a World Heritage Site two years later. Indeed, the Białowieża Forest still retains a near



Eurasian Elk

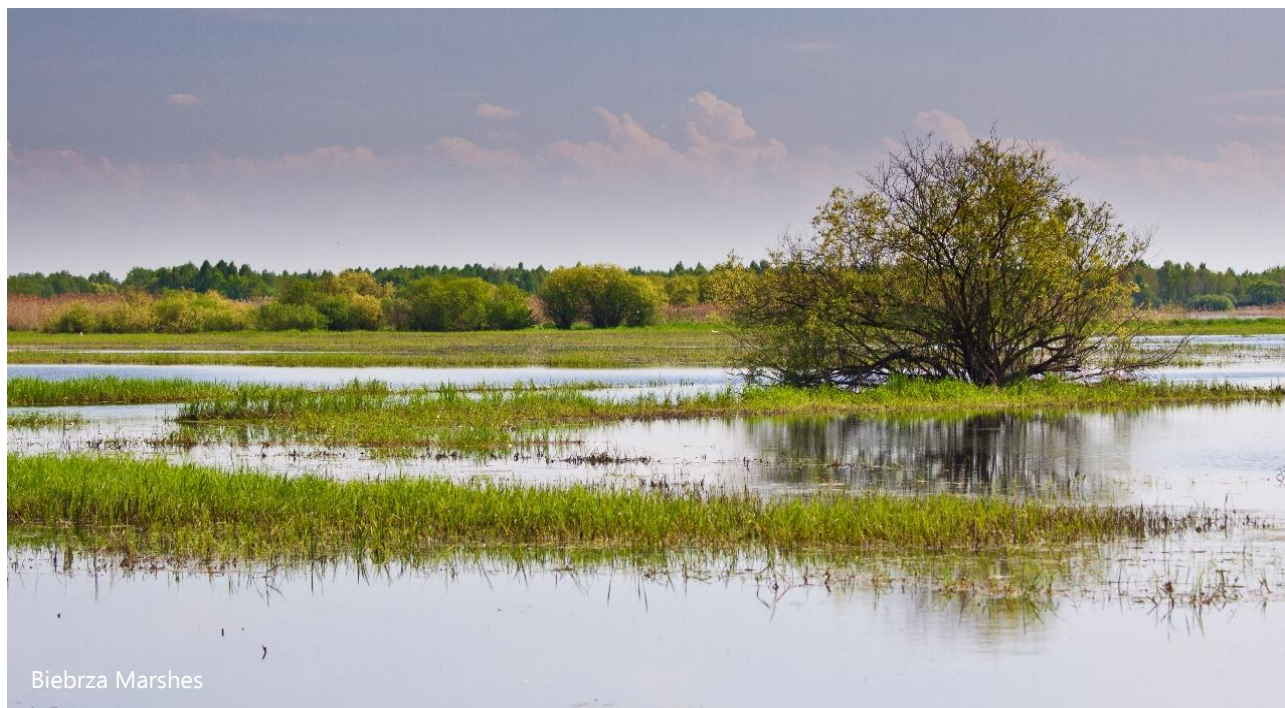
complete natural assemblage of animals and plants, from top carnivores such as Wolf and Lynx, through large herbivores, in particular European Bison and Elk, down to an unparalleled diversity of higher plants, mosses, lichens and fungi. It has been estimated that the forest contains approximately 8,500 species of insect, 12 species of amphibian, 44 species of mammal and 232 species of bird, 120 of which remain to breed. There are 40 distinct plant communities, including 20 forest communities, indeed within the strict reserve alone there are 560 species of vascular plants representing almost 30% of the total flora in the whole of Poland!

In autumn the woodlands tend to be fairly quiet and, without the bird-song, birdwatching can be difficult. However, the ecology of the forest is fascinating no matter what the season and the experience of being within Europe's last primeval forest is sure to remain in the memory for many years to come.

Day 4

Biebrza Marshes

We may have time for a quick pre-breakfast walk before packing up and heading north towards the Biebrza River Basin. En-route we will spend a few hours at Lake Siemianówka, a superb area of open water and marsh formed by the damming of the Narew River and one that holds a rich assemblage of resident and migrant bird species. In the past this site has yielded Black Stork, Little Egret (a rarity for Poland), Great Egret, Caspian Tern, Common Crane and various waders.



The surrounding woodlands and marsh are also excellent for birds of prey. White-tailed Eagles are frequently seen perched on dead trees around the lake shore or drifting overhead on huge outstretched wings. Marsh and Hen Harriers are a regular sight quartering the reedbeds as are Lesser-spotted Eagles which hunt over the adjacent fields. Hobby, Goshawk, Red Kite, Osprey, Honey Buzzard, and Spotted Eagle have all been seen here on previous visits, indeed on warm sunny days it is not unusual to see as many as 10 species of raptor in a single morning.

From Lake Siemianówka we head north-east to Goniądz our base for the next two nights located in the heart of the Biebrza River Basin and overlooking the Biebrza River.

Day 5

Biebrza Marshes

Today we will begin our exploration of the internationally important Biebrzański National Park. Here the meandering Biebrza River has created a maze of channels, wet meadows, lakes and huge areas of alder and birch dotted marsh that together make up the largest continuous expanse of natural riverine marshland left in Europe. In autumn many of the flood meadows are dry and the water has receded to the main channels, but the area is still superb for wildlife. Flocks of migrating Cranes are a common sight overhead whilst both Black and White Storks can be seen feeding in the wet fields. Great Grey Shrike, Nutcracker, Penduline Tit and Black Grouse are also possible as is the rare Spotted Eagle which breeds in

the marshes. Elk, too, are frequently seen here as they make their way slowly through the birch-dotted peatbogs that typify the region's landscape.

Day 6

Baltic Coast

It is a long drive north-west from the Biebrza Marshes to the Baltic Coast, a journey that will probably take most of the day to complete, but we will stop occasionally to birdwatch en route. We aim to arrive at our simple, but comfortable, hotel on the coast between Gdańsk and the Vistula Spit by late afternoon, from which there may be time left for a quick spot of coastal birding before dark. The Baltic Coast lies on a major autumn migration route, with thousands of birds passing through on their southbound journeys. Passerine movement can be particularly impressive, with eastern rarities such as Citrine Wagtail often recorded. Amongst the commoner migrants such as Wheatear, Whinchat, Red-backed Shrike, Tree Pipit, Redstart and Pied Flycatcher we have the chance of finding some of the more unusual species which may include Red-throated Pipit, Ortolan Bunting or Scarlet Rosefinch. The Baltic Sea itself is a major wintering ground for divers, Slavonian and Black-necked Grebes, sea-ducks, skuas and gulls, many of which begin to arrive in September.



Citrine Wagtail

Days 7 – 8

Baltic Coast

We will make an early start this morning and make our way along the Vistula Spit to a passerine ringing station (if operating). Here under a couple of temporary shelters a small, dedicated band of ringers spend each autumn catching a cross-section of the thousands of birds that move south-west along the spit. You never quite know what they will pull from the bag next, indeed a couple of years ago the first to appear was no less than a Bluethroat! Other species that may be seen during our visit include Pied Flycatcher, Whinchat, Common and Black Redstarts, Lesser Whitethroat, Reed Warbler, Garden Warbler and maybe



Red -footed Falcon

even Wryneck, Icterine Warbler or Firecrest. There are plenty of other areas to explore along the Vistula Spit and around the mouth of the Vistula River so we will spend much of our time here in search of migrants. In the past we have seen Red-footed Falcon, Terek Sandpiper, Ortolan Bunting and Woodlark amongst the commoner species and on one particularly memorable occasion even managed to find Poland's second Pied Wheatear!

Waders also move along the coastline here in large numbers. Amongst the commoner species such as Dunlin, Sanderling, Ruff, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Greenshank and Bar-tailed Godwit we have a good

chance of finding a few more unusual species such as Temminck's Stint or Red-necked Phalarope. On fine sunny days it is worth glancing skyward as these conditions often prompt the movement of raptors including White-tailed Eagle, Rough-legged Buzzard, Osprey and Merlin. If, on the other hand, the wind picks up we will turn our attention to the sea in search of Arctic and Pomarine Skuas, Kittiwake, Little Gull, auks, divers and grebes.

For those interested in Poland's rich history, a short visit to the old town of Gdańsk, the birthplace of the Solidarity movement, could also be arranged.

Day 9

London

We may have time for some final birdwatching close to our hotel before beginning the long 5-6 hour drive from the Baltic Coast back to Warsaw. Our return flight to London is scheduled to arrive back in the early evening.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock

Tour grading & Focus

This tour is graded A/B, consisting of easy to moderate walks. We will travel to each site by minibus, then take leisurely walks to explore the area, generally over easy terrain, although some paths can be rough in places and we will often cover a number of miles over each day; please be prepared to walk up to ten miles on some days. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys walking in the countryside and has a reasonable level of fitness.

The main focus of this tour will be the wonderful bird life, as well as the larger mammals. Whilst your tour leader's expertise may be primarily in birds, they will be more than happy to share their knowledge on the region's mammal and butterfly life, geology, history and to a lesser extent, plants.

Weather

The weather in Poland at this time of the year is very similar to that experienced in the UK. It can be changeable but can also be pleasantly sunny and warm. It will be chilly in the evenings with daytime temperatures between 10 and 20°C.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. Poland has a distinctive cuisine, with typical ingredients being dill, marjoram, caraway seeds, wild mushrooms and sour cream, which is frequently added to soups, sauces and braised meats. Much of the Polish fare is typically European with a distinct Germanic influence.

For our time in Białowieża we use a comfortable guesthouse on the edge of the village. Whilst exploring the marshes we stay outside of the town of Goniądz, a short stroll from the Biebrza River and for our time

on the coast we use a comfortable (but simple) hotel, ideally situated close to the Vistula Spit. Hotels in eastern Poland are fairly simple in nature so you should not expect 5-star accommodation on this tour! We use fairly basic, but comfortable, accommodation for all our Poland holidays, each room having private facilities. Single rooms are available but limited so please notify us as soon as possible if you wish to be assigned a single.

Regional Flights

The standard flights for this holiday are from a London airport. Most typically these are on direct flights from Heathrow to Warsaw Chopin Airport, however this will depend on the flight schedules. It is sometimes possible to fly from regional airports, although using these routes does often involve travelling out early or returning a day later, in order to fit in with the group flights. Please note that flight schedules can change so please contact the Naturetrek office for further information and prices.

Train Travel

If you would like to consider travelling to Poland by train, we are working in partnership with Byway Travel to facilitate this. Please visit the Travel by Train page of our website for details: <https://www.naturetrek.co.uk/tour-focus/travel-by-train>

Your Safety & Security

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/poland> regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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