

# Poland in Autumn

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

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



### Departs

September

### Focus

Birds and larger mammals

### Grading

Grade A. Day walks only

### Dates and Prices

Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code POL02) or see the current Naturetrek brochure.



### Highlights:

- Explore Bialowieza 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 Gdansk.
- 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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**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

## Bialowieza Forest

Our flight departs from London's Heathrow Airport around 0730 hours. On arrival in Warsaw we will be met by our local guide and drive eastwards to the Bialowieza 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. Horse-drawn transport is still occasionally used in this area as is the strip farming method of agriculture. We aim to arrive in the small village of Bialowieza by late afternoon.

## Day 2

## Bialowieza Forest

We will spend today exploring in and around Bialowieza, 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.

The managed forest also holds nearly all of the Bialowieza'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 Bialowieza now contains one of Europe's, and indeed the world's, last remaining herds with around 250 Bison ranging freely within the Polish section of the forest and another 300 across the Belorussian border. 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!

## Day 3

## Bialowieza 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.

Around mid-afternoon we will walk to the entrance of the 'Strict Reserve' for a tour of the national park. Access to this area is strictly controlled and only granted if you are accompanied by one of twenty or so licensed guides. Our guide will meet us at the entrance and take us through this magnificent remnant of primeval woodland describing the areas rich ecology en route. 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 Bialowieza Forest still retains a near 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, Spotted Eagle and Short-toed 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 Goniadz 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 Biebrzanski 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 Gdansk 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.

## Day 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 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 Gdansk, 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.

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## Tour grading

This tour is graded A, consisting of easy walks only. We will travel to each site by minibus, then take leisurely walks to explore the area, generally over flat terrain, although some paths can be rough in places. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys walking in the countryside and is of an 'average' level of fitness.

## 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 included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. For our time in Bialowieza we use a comfortable guesthouse on the edge of the village. Whilst exploring the marshes we stay in the town of Goniadz, 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. All rooms have private facilities.

## Mammal & bird lists

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

## 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.

Security is rarely a problem on any of our trips; the vast majority of the people we come into contact with are scrupulously honest. However, it is only sensible not to put temptation in the way of the local people. Do not take expensive jewellery or watches with you; do not flash your money around, keep your large notes separate from small ones so that when you make a small purchase you only have to bring out a small amount of money.

Do not leave anything of value lying around where it can easily be picked up. In short, look after your belongings!

## 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](http://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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