

Poland in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	<u>Fly Warsaw and overnight Bialoweiza.</u>
Day 2/4	<u>Bialoweiza Forest.</u>
Day 5/7	<u>Biebrza Marshes.</u>
Day 8	<u>Transfer to Warsaw and fly London.</u>

Departs

May

Focus

Birds and larger mammals

Grading

A. Day walks only

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code POL03) or see the current Naturetrek brochure

Highlights:

- Search for 8 species of woodpeckers including Three-toed, White-backed & Black Woodpecker
- Explore the primeval forests of Bialoweiza
- Chance of encountering European Bison & Elk
- Breeding Aquatic Warbler in the Biebrza Marshes
- Citrine Wagtail, White-tailed Eagle & migrating waders at Siemianówka Reservoir
- Watch lekking Great Snipe at dusk
- Black, Whiskered & White-winged Terns
- Look for Pygmy Owl at dusk
- Around 150 species of bird typically recorded
- Led by an expert UK ornithologist & local naturalist guide



From top: White-backed Woodpecker, White-winged Tern, Biebrza marshes. Images by Shutterstock Images



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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 is scheduled to depart from London's Heathrow Airport early morning (around 0735 hours). On arrival in Warsaw we will be met by our local guide and drive eastwards to the Bialowieza National Park. The long journey will take us across eastern Poland, through a peaceful rural landscape typified by fields of crops and patches of forest dotted with lakes and small 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 will stop for lunch, coffee and birdwatching en route and aim to arrive in the small village of Bialowieza by the late afternoon.

Days 2 – 4

Bialowieza Forest

We will spend the next two full days exploring in and around the Bialowieza Forest, walking the trails that criss-cross this magnificent mixed woodland. This is the largest remaining remnant of the original European forest and is both the oldest national park in Poland and one of the oldest in the whole of 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 are protected within the Bialowieza National Park, known locally as the 'Strict Reserve'. Access to this area is strictly controlled and only granted if accompanied by one of twenty or so licensed guides. On one morning a guide will meet us at the entrance and take us through this magnificent remnant of primeval woodland describing the area's 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 the early morning the woodland will be alive with the songs of numerous birds and the drumming of up to seven species of woodpeckers including Black, White-backed, Middle Spotted and Three-toed Woodpeckers. By mid-May all the summer migrants will have arrived and be on territory and whilst walking through the forest we should catch sight of Collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers and Nutcracker, along with more familiar woodland species such as Wood Warbler, Redstart, Nuthatch and Hawfinch.

During our stay we will also thoroughly explore the managed portion of the forest. Although this habitat generally contains a less diverse assemblage of birds, the managed woodland holds a larger number of many of the sought after species. Pygmy Owl, Grey-headed, Middle Spotted and White-backed Woodpeckers are all fairly

common as is the elusive Hazel Grouse. The distinctive 'crex crex' call of the Corncrake is often heard emanating from the rough meadows, whilst in the scrub and thickets that edge the woodlands and rivers Barred, River and Marsh Warblers all breed. Above the forests and meadows Lesser-spotted Eagles frequently soar and these are often joined by Honey Buzzard and Goshawk. 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 or so across the Belorussian border. For such a big animal, Bison can be very elusive, but if we are fortunate enough to locate a small herd 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. Although both Lynx or Wolf have been seen by past groups, they are extremely elusive and only observed by the fortunate few!

Another speciality of eastern Poland is the Great Snipe. During the day they skulk in the damp meadows, but at dusk the birds move onto their lek sites to display and during at least one evening we too will move in to watch the performance unfold. This must be one of Europe's most remarkable ornithological sights. To have the opportunity to watch these normally elusive birds squabbling, bill clicking and leaping in the air as the sun sets over the marshes will undoubtedly be another highlight of the tour. We will travel to the Narew valley after dinner and after a short walk onto the flood plain we should witness their display. (Please note that Great Snipe can be very elusive at times and sightings of this species are far from guaranteed).

The Palace Park is another very productive area to explore. Here a patchwork of open woodlands, grass lawns and small lakes provides habitat for Collared Flycatcher, Siskin, breeding Fieldfare, Icterine Warbler and Wryneck, whilst the reed-fringed edges of the ponds hold a bumper population of Great Reed Warblers. The park is also a good spot for Thrush Nightingale, but not as reliable nowadays for Syrian Woodpecker, a bird that was expanding its range up from the south but now more likely in the Biebrza Marshes.

On one day we will also visit the woodlands and marshes in the vicinity of Siemianówka Reservoir, approximately 1 hour or so to the north. Lake Siemianówka is a superb area of open water and marsh formed by the damming of the Narew River and holds a rich assemblage of resident and migrant bird species. Black, Whiskered and the beautiful White-winged Terns all breed here as do Garganey, Great White Egret and even Citrine Wagtail. White-tailed Eagles are a regular sight perched on dead trees around the lake shore or drifting overhead on huge outstretched wings whilst Marsh Harriers quarter the reedbeds below. Lesser-spotted Eagles are another common sight and Hobby, Goshawk, Red Kite, Osprey, Honey Buzzard and Spotted Eagle have all been seen here in the past; indeed on warm sunny days it is not unusual to see as many as 10 species of raptor in a single morning. Nearby woodlands hold both Collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers and this is another good area for the elusive Three-toed Woodpecker and Hazen Hen.

Day 5

Biebrza Marshes

This morning we must leave Bialowieza and make our way north-west to the Biebrza Marshes. En route we will stop at the Bialystok's Dojlidy Fishponds an excellent area of reed-fringed ponds which hold numerous birds including Red-necked and Black-necked Grebes, Whiskered Tern, Penduline Tit, Marsh Warbler and Great Reed

Warbler. From here it is only an hour or so to our hotel for the next 3 nights located on the edge of the small town of Goniadz in the heart of the Biebrza River Basin.

Days 6 – 7

Biebrza Marshes

We will spend the next two full days exploring the internationally important Biebrzanski National Park. Here the meandering Biebrza River has created a maze of channels, flooded meadows, lakes and huge areas of marsh that together make up the largest continuous expanse of natural riverine marshland left in Europe. This is also a region of Poland rich in folklore, where the local farming communities still use horse-drawn ploughs and carts, cultivate their crops in strips and go about their business as they have done for generations. In the spring, the flood meadows, river channels and birch-dotted peatbogs will be full of birdlife. To date 235 species of birds have been recorded in the marshes and of these 185 species remain here to breed. Flocks of White-winged and Black Terns hawk for insects over the ponds and flooded fields whilst groups of Ruff are often seen in the first couple of weeks of May, the males resplendent in their breeding dress. Parties of Cranes are a regular sight in the fields and most of the small rural villages that dot the landscape have at least a few pairs of nesting White Storks. The reedbeds hold Savi's, Grasshopper, River and Great Reed Warblers, Penduline Tit, Little and Spotted Crakes, Bittern and Little Bittern, whilst in the sedge beds we will make a special effort to find the beautiful 'tiger-striped' Aquatic Warbler, one of the specialities of the Biebrza area, and usually on territory by mid May!

With such a vast area of pristine habitat open for hunting it is not surprising to learn that the Biebrza Marshes also hold one of Poland's largest concentrations of birds of prey. Along with the numerous pairs of Marsh Harriers breed both Hen and Montagu's Harriers, Lesser-spotted and Spotted Eagles, White-tailed Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Osprey, Red Kite and Hobby. We also have a good chance of locating a few mammals and will be particularly on the look out for Elk (same species as the North American Moose). Biebrza has a good population of Elk and they are relatively easy to see here as they make their way slowly through the birch-dotted peatbogs that typify the region's landscape.

Day 8

London

We should have time for another early morning visit to the marshes or perhaps some birdwatching close to our hotel before we have to transfer from the Biebrza Marshes to Warsaw for our return flight to London. Our flight arrives back in London Heathrow in the early evening (around 1955 hours).

Tour grading

This tour is graded A, consisting of day walks only. 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. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys walking in the countryside and is of an 'average' level of fitness.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday.

Weather

Polish weather in May is very similar to that experienced in the UK. By late-spring the weather is generally becoming settled and we can expect fairly warm and sunny days. The evenings can be fairly chilly, however, and there is always the chance of some rain.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read our main Naturetrek brochure and complete and return the enclosed booking form together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us now on 01962 733051. Alternatively please give us a call with a credit card number or you are welcome to book on the internet by visiting www.naturetrek.co.uk.



Birding Biebrza at dawn