

# Poland's Primeval Forests

Naturetrek Tour Report

29 April - 2 May 2016



European Bison collage by Hannah & Neil Gange



Eurasian Pygmy Owl by Peter Dunn



Hawfinch and Jay interaction by Peter Dunn



Palace Park at Sunrise by Paul Selby

Report compiled by Peter Dunn  
Images courtesy of Hannah & Neil Gange, Paul Selby and Peter Dunn



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Tour Participants: Peter Dunn & Andrzej Petryna (leaders) with eight Naturetrek clients.  
Driver – Witek.

## Introduction

A weekend sampling the best forest habitats in eastern Poland with excellent accommodation and good food. We managed to see (or hear) all nine of the woodpeckers together with Eurasian Wryneck, a close relative, and we saw two magnificent European Bison grazing in a meadow in the early morning mist – a lasting experience for all.

## Day 1

Friday 29th April

### UK – Warsaw - Białoweiza

An early start at London Heathrow Terminal 3 saw a group of wildlife watchers gathered at the departure gate for the early morning 7:20am flight to Warsaw. With a tail wind we landed 20 minutes early and were quickly through immigration and bag collection, to be met by our local guide Andrew.

After loading our gear into the minibus, we set off through Warsaw city. Our local driver, Witek found us some quick routes through the backstreets to avoid the road works and soon we were heading east on the Via Baltica. Shouts of “Hooded Crow” and “Fieldfare” rang out from the bus before the group realised they were common, as was the first sighting of White Stork. We stopped at a roadside restaurant where we experienced our first dumplings filled with pork, cheese or cabbage accompanied by a local brew.

In the afternoon we made two stops alongside the Bug River where we added more storks, Grey Heron, European Serin, Black Redstart, heard a Green Woodpecker, and saw a nice adult summer Little Gull.

The last leg into Białoweiza was quick, arriving at our hotel by 5pm. After a quick tidy we headed out for a pre-dinner walk into the Palace Park. Now we started to see some real Poland. Male Collared Flycatchers were newly arrived and Great Spotted Woodpeckers were drumming. Some bull-necked Hawfinches fed in the sparsely leaved trees where the sound of Eurasian Blackcap, Willow and Wood Warblers and Common Chiffchaff were the predominant chorus. A strident call alerted us to the presence of a Black Woodpecker and John then found not one but two over the lake, followed by a fly-by Grey-headed Woodpecker (three times). This was a great start to the tour and we returned to the hotel for a hearty meal before retiring after a long day and the thought of a 4:30am rise in the morning.

## Day 2

Saturday 30th April

### Białoweiza & Siemianówka Reservoir

We gathered early for coffee just after 4:30am before heading out on the hunt for European Bison. Unfortunately the Polish weather forecast was wrong and we walked out of the hotel to drizzle which got steadily heavier during the morning, but on the bright side the first singing Thrush Nightingale for the tour was across the road. Not deterred by the weather, we checked a few of the favoured bison places. One area just behind the police station and next to the Strict Reserve had four bison, which only the leaders saw through the open front window. By the time everyone had debussed they had melted back into the forest. So close.....

We continued searching various places and had great views of a Lesser Spotted Eagle sat low in a tree and looking thoroughly miserable in the rain, but having failed to find any bison away from Białoweiza we went back to the police station meadows and had a walk. The rain was pretty constant by now but we staked to pick up birds. Woodlark and Eurasian Skylark were singing and over the forest we watched two Black Storks flying west. Whinchats were singing on territory and a Great Grey Shrike was briefly seen in the distance. Walking back Andrew spotted a bird sat near a newly ploughed field and it turned out to be a nice male Montagu's Harrier which later began quartering the field. The ploughed field also held a nice flock of Yellow Wagtails, made up of Blue-headed and Grey-headed birds. We returned to the hotel to dry out and have a nice Polish breakfast of meats, cheeses and scrambled eggs.

Because of the rain we spent the morning at Siemianówka where there was a sheltered tower hide. We drove through the forest still checking for bison and Peter thought he'd found one when he saw a large animal moving behind a bush – it turned out to be a horse!

We approached the reservoir on the south-west side via the village of Siemieniakowszczyzna, which warranted a photograph of the sign, and pulled up to the tower hide. As soon as we got out the rain eased and eventually stopped (for at least four hours) so we walked the bank, scanning the area. White-winged and Whiskered Terns noisily patrolled the water whilst numerous species of duck fed on it, including some very nice Garganey. As we walked along the bank Andrew found a pair of Citrine Wagtails which showed well before flying off into the rough field, and another Lesser Spotted Eagle was watched in a low tree. Two or three White-tailed Eagles were jostling over the far wood and we managed to see two male Penduline Tits attending some old nests in the willows. We had lunch here, using the covered picnic table, and then headed for the forest whilst it was not raining.

We drove to the car park at Kosy Most and then walked a track to visit the tower hide overlooking the marsh where we found a Common Buzzard in a tree. We walked a little further into the forest towards Belarus and managed to get great views of a pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and a pair of White-backed Woodpeckers. We even had a Middle-spotted Woodpecker calling and there were Great Spotted Woodpeckers drumming everywhere. What a great place! We started to make our way back and were first waylaid by a Crested Tit, then Peter and Keith investigated a group of birds alarm calling and Keith found a superb Pygmy Owl which remained in view for everyone to see – in daylight!

What had started as a damp day had ended on a high. We tried again to find bison in their favoured places but failed, however we were rewarded with a pale looking mustelid running across the road, which may have been an escaped Sable? With the rain starting again everyone opted for an early (6pm) finish. We met before dinner to do the log and then had some well deserved rest.

## Day 3

Sunday 1st May

### Białoweiza

It was another early morning with a keen group, gathering to leave at 4:30am in search of European Bison. We were delayed by some more singing Thrush Nightingales next to the hotel which was a good sign; another was that it was not raining, although a bit foggy.

Checking the meadows behind the police station near the Strict Reserve was impossible because of the fog so we headed out of the village towards Budy. We did not have to go far because as we approach the village of Pogorzelce there were two fine bull European Bison grazing not far from the road. With Andrews's guidance we approached downwind with some bushes as cover from the skyline and spent over 30 minutes watching, photographing and videoing before the animals finished feeding and slowly ambled back into the mist and the trees. The iconic view of a huge beast with curved horns in the mist will stay with all present.

We were now on a high and spent the next three hours with Arek, our very knowledgeable guide, ambling around the Strict Reserve. He explained the history, biology and ecology of the area, of which we were honoured to see a very small portion. The size of the trees, density of the woodland flowers and variety of birds could not be matched by most areas in the UK. We even added new woodpeckers here with a very obliging Three-toed Woodpecker feeding on rotting trees and good views of a male Middle-spotted Woodpecker. Add to this many Collared Flycatchers, and singing Common Firecrest amongst other species, it set us up nicely for breakfast. After bidding goodbye to Arek who was thanked by the group, we headed back to the hotel to feed.

After breakfast and armed with our packed lunches, we visited a number of areas alongside the Narewka River including a beaver lodge and dam, and then walked the trail around the Wysokie Bagno reserve. Birding was quiet as the sun heated the woods, apart from the constant song of Wood Warblers. Butterflies started to appear including Brimstone and Orange-tip. By the time we got back to the minibus it was time for lunch which we had at a woodland bar near Budy, using the tables for our pack up and getting drinks from the bar.

We then went to a 'dead wood' just outside Budy where we had excellent views of Grey-headed Woodpecker and many male and female Collared Flycatchers, with more butterflies. Our final stop was a walk from the village of Czerlonka where we heard Black Woodpecker drumming and had excellent views of a Pine Marten running along a track towards us.

Back at the hotel, the early morning and the walks told on most. We opted for an early evening to prepare for tomorrow's departure, the log and dinner.

## Day 4

Monday 2nd May

### Journey back to UK

We agreed on a later start of 6am for a walk around the Palace Park. It was a beautiful crisp bright morning and woodpeckers were drumming and Thrush Nightingales singing. We watched Hawfinches building a nest and 'white-headed' Long-tailed Tit taking food to a nest. John found a roosting Tawny Owl in a tree just before we left the park to visit the tower hide behind the school.

Walking to the hide we found the first Red-backed Shrike (a male) of the spring, followed later by a female. From the tower we managed to locate a singing Savi's Warbler in the reeds and saw both Green and Wood Sandpiper, together with displaying Common Snipe. We heard the flight calls of a Black Woodpecker and saw two birds visit the same tree that we had seen them in a couple of days earlier. One disappeared and suspecting a nest, we went to the road and sure enough, we were able to watch a male Black Woodpecker ejecting wood chips from a newly excavated hole. What a way to end the morning! As we headed back to the hotel for breakfast, we were delayed slightly by the sound of two calling Eurasian Wrynecks.

We packed after breakfast and bid farewell to our hosts, ready for our journey back to the UK. Totalling up, we had seen/heard eight species of woodpecker and Eurasian Wryneck, with just one left – Syrian Woodpecker. Armed with some new information we set off to Hajnówka where we alighted on the side of a busy road. Suddenly a woodpecker appeared and we were watching number nine, a fine male Syrian Woodpecker. Brilliant! But now it was time to head off to Białystok where we intended to visit the fish ponds of Dojlidy before driving to Warsaw airport.

We had an hour at the ponds which provided more species; it completed our marsh tern trilogy, there were breeding Red-necked Grebes and best of all, a nice male Little Crake to finish with.

The journey back to Warsaw was smooth with a couple of stops for our picnic and comfort. A final log call gave us a total of 126 species of birds seen or heard (plus Common Swift on the way into Warsaw) and of course the European Bison which were the icing on the cake. We said thanks and goodbye to Andrew our guide and Witek the driver for all their hard work. We then checked in for our flight and were soon heading back to London.

It was a pleasure to be with a keen, enthusiastic group whose eyes and ears helped get the species we all enjoyed.

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Black Woodpecker collage by Hannah & Neil Gange



Arek in the Strict Reserve by Peter Dunn

## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	April/May			
			29	30	1	2
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓		
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓		
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		4		
4	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		✓		
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		4		
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		✓		
8	Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>		20		
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		6		
10	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				1
11	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		10		2
12	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	1			
13	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>				2
14	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		1		1
15	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		2		
16	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		H		H
18	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	✓		1
19	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		40		
20	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		4		
21	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>				1
22	Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga pomarina</i>		3	1	
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1		
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	✓	1	✓
25	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	2	1		
26	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		3		1
27	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	2	1
28	Little Crake	<i>Porzana parva</i>				1
29	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓		✓
30	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	2	4		H
31	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓		
32	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		H		3
33	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			H	2
34	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>				2
35	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	2			1
36	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>				7
37	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓
38	Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>	1			
39	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				2
40	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				1
41	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>		✓		✓
42	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>		✓		✓
43	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>				✓
44	Rock Dove (Feral)	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓			✓
45	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓			✓
47	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	H	6	H	H

	Common name	Scientific name	April/May			
			29	30	1	2
48	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			H	1
49	Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>		1		
50	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>				5
51	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1		
52	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>		2		H
53	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>		2	2	
54	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>		H	1	
55	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>		2		
56	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>				1
57	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	H	1	5	3
58	Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>			1	
59	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	2	1	H	2
60	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H			
61	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>	1		1	
62	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1			1
63	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>				2
64	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>		1	1	
65	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>			H	
66	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1	1	5	2
67	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	2	1
68	Russian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula soemmerringii</i>	✓			✓
69	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓			✓
70	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓		1	✓
71	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	H	2	1	6
72	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		H	H	
73	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		1	1	
74	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	2	1	3	2
75	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>		2	1	
76	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	2	✓	✓	✓
77	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>		2		1
79	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		2	1	
80	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	H	✓	✓	
81	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	H	✓
83	Long-tailed Tit (Northern)	<i>Aegithalos caudatus caudatus</i>	1		H	1
84	Northern Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus acredula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>	✓	✓	✓	
87	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	H	✓		✓
88	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	1			✓
89	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>				2
90	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	H	2	6	✓
92	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	1	1	1	H
93	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			H	
94	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		1	3	
95	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1	H	H
96	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	2	2	5	2
97	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		1	2	1
98	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	April/May			
			29	30	1	2
99	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	2	✓	✓
101	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>				1
102	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1		
104	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2	2	✓
105	Thrush Nightingale	<i>Luscinia luscinia</i>		H	5	✓
106	Collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>	3		✓	3
107	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	1	1	3
108	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1	2	
109	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		✓	✓	
110	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
111	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	H	✓	2	✓
112	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			H	
113	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		25		
	Blue-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava</i>		2		
	Grey-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava thunbergi</i>		3		
114	Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>		2		
115	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	2	✓	2	3
116	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		H	1	
117	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
118	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	3	✓	✓	✓
119	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			H	
120	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
121	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓			
122	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
123	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	1			2
124	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			1	
125	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		1	H	
126	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	✓	✓	✓	1
127	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	H	2	2	✓

## Mammals

1	Eurasian Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>				signs
2	European Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>			1	
3	Sable	<i>Martes zibellina</i>		1		
4	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		signs	signs	signs
5	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	1	10	1	1
6	European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>			2	

## Amphibians

1	Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>			1	
2	Marsh Frog	<i>Pelophylax ridibundus</i>				5
3	Common Tree Frog	<i>Hyla arborea</i>			H	
4	European Fire-bellied Toad	<i>Bombina bombina</i>				H

## Other Taxa

Green-veined White, Orange Tip, Brimstone, Peacock Butterfly, Comma Butterfly, Roman Snail, Dung Beetle, Black-spotted Pliers Support Beetle (*Rhagium mordax*), Medical Leech, Wood Ants, Common Heath moth