

Poland in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

31 January - 8 February 2009

Report compiled by Sinclair Dunnett



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Weather summary

There was enough snow to show tracks well - and to make it pretty - but not enough for skiing or the horse-drawn sledge ride. Temperatures were mostly in the range -13 to -5°C (8-27 °F), crisp enough to be pleasant but not numbingly cold; almost ideal for our purposes. A thaw did however set in during the last couple of days. Ironically, this was the week that saw major snow dumps in England. On 2 February London woke up to about 6" of snow, the biggest fall in 18 years.

Wildlife summary

The whole group saw > 60 Wisent [European Bison] on Day 2 at Puszcza Borecka and eight Elk on Day 8 from the Czar's Road. Going south on that road the first Elk gave us long views, good through the telescope, and then we had poor views of three. On the return journey we had fine views of a mother and calf, and then another mother and large male calf.

Puszcza Romincka gave all those who wished excellent views of Wild Boar, a score or more at least once including a party/"family" of boar: a large one we presumed was the male, slightly smaller one we took to be mummy, and five piglets. This array of seven snuffling, snorting, grunting, grubbing porkers was almost like something from a children's story book. And they clearly looked on this station as their own, the male aggressively repelling others who would dare have filled their bellies with a few husks. We also had good views here of both Roe and Red Deer. On the last afternoon a stag tried to feed at the station but was not welcomed by a large Boar. The stag attempted a number of approaches but was eventually seen off by the Boar.

Roe Deer were seen on numerous occasions, in daylight and by twilight, in the forests and in open fields, in parties of up to ten or even more. Most of us also saw Red Deer a number of times; on several nights there were one or two feeding on a silage bale a little east of Oytkiejmy lodge.

This feeding area also attracted Boar and birds, especially Jay. A Mouse spp and Vole spp the clients had observed should be given honourable mention. Red Squirrel was observed by most clients at least once, Red Fox several times. Unidentified bat spp were seen in the underground area of Hitler's bunker. This was also a good trip for tracks and signs. Birdlife was as usual dominated by Sea-eagle at the bigger end of the scale, woodpeckers and corvids in the middle range, and tits at the smaller end. Please consult the checklist for detailed day-by-day sightings.

Day 1

Saturday 31st January

Light frost, steady light snow for much of the afternoon

The flights from Dublin and London were on time and all formalities within the airport completed quickly. We left Okecie (Warsaw airport is officially Frederic Chopin Airport, but most still refer to it as Okecie) just after noon. We reached the lodge of Kabie Oko (near Jesiorowski) before 1830hrs, having stopped for a light lunch at Komza. As usual, we saw many corvids, plus Roe Deer.

Day 2

Sunday 1st February

-10 to -7°C most of day.

We left the lodge at 0845 and arrived at our rendezvous in the western part of Puszcza Borecka before 0930. Our forest guide was waiting for us with his 4x4 and we followed him a few miles into the forest where a tractor/trailer, kitted out with basic seats, waited us. The group went in two parties and, as already noted, we all saw > 60 Bison, both sexes and a wide variety of ages.

We returned to the lodge briefly and then drove west to the Wolf's Lair, the Nazi HQ in East Prussia where the assassination attempt on Hitler took place in July 1944. Our usual enthusiastic bunker guide Chester was there to conduct us round the site; this was also our lunch stop.

Day 3

Monday 2nd February

-12 to -7°C.

We left Kabie Oko lodge at 0930 and travelled east through the large forest of Puszcza Borecka. We had a short stop in Gokdap for shopping, then on to our base for the next four days - Kytkiejmy. The central square in Gokdap gave its usual good views of Jackdaw, plus some of the few House Sparrows seen during the trip. We had lunch at Kytkiejmy at 1400hrs and left the lodge at 1500 for the "Wolf Meadow" in the north of the forest. Five clients stayed out there till 2015 hrs.

Day 4

Tuesday 3rd February

-11 to -7°C; brilliant sunshine.

We set off at 0930 with Romek, our friend and guide for many years in Puszcza Romincka. After the introductions we headed north towards the Russian border. At the "Wolf Meadow" we saw Raven and a number of White-tailed Eagles, both from the meadow and also from the Russian border. We visited one of the Kaiser Wilhelm II memorial stones and a number of Beaver areas to view cut trees, dams and lodges.

At 1515hrs we entered the forest again seeing a dozen Wild Boar through the trees on our way along the river as well as two stags. One client elected to go to the “wolf meadow” and was picked up about 2020 hrs. He saw Erne [Sea-eagle]; and a female Red Deer.

Day 5

Wednesday 4th February

- 7 to -2°C; light snow fell steadily in late afternoon

Romincka is a large forest - c. 30 miles from west to east - and today we set off at 0900hrs towards its western half. En route we saw Boar, Red Fox, and Border Guards. Poland is now part of the EU's eastern frontier for those countries in Schengen (Schengen is a town in Luxembourg by the Mosel. The Schengen Agreements allow for passport-free travel between the participating countries which currently consists of twenty-five European countries. You can travel from [just north of] Gibraltar all the way to Poland without showing your passport once). We met our local guide here. Szymon is a general naturalist. The only new species we saw was Crested Tit, though we heard Nutcracker. The 2½ mile walk was considered most rewarding thanks to the interpretation of signs and spoor by Szymon and Romek. We had many tracks of Wolf, plus urine marking on the snow; Lynx tracks; a Black Woodpecker nest in an area of drowned trees - Szymon said this hole might be used by nesting Goldeneye, which cannot excavate their own nesting cavities - and much else.

At a parking area, we came on curious structures over 6' high and about 2' square. The top part was a bat-roost, and the lower part, packed with primitive mortar, replicated a material that was formerly used in buildings, and used by certain insects as nesting habitat. Clients asked about the nest-boxes we had seen in different parts of Romincka, and apparently schoolchildren used to make them as projects; Szymon was sceptical however, suggesting that in a forest such as Romincka, with a wide range of tree ages and conditions, hole-nesting birds should have little trouble excavating their own nest-holes.

A few clients went on a drive from 1530-1900. Others did a circular walk west of the lodge, past the trees which used to be tapped for turpentine. Very light snow fell during this walk, and continued falling for several hours.

Day 6

Thursday 5th February

-3°C to freezing

I left the Wolf Meadow about 0400 hrs having walked to it yesterday evening at 2130. By this time the moon had set, and I used a powerful torch to check my path. There was fresh wolf spoor - fresh at least from the previous morning - and this spoor had a little snow lying in it. So - wearing my Sherlock Holmes & Davy Crockett hats simultaneously - this Wolf had evidently passed the previous afternoon, during the period the snow was falling. We had missed it!

We had a walk in the lodge area between 0715-0815hrs and saw various tits; Nuthatch, and Great Spotted Woodpecker. A feature of this morning - and other mornings - was the Jay, numbering in the teens, picking over the food put out for deer and boar!

After breakfast we went west of the lodge for photos of Beaver lodge and dams, and walked part of the sand-dune/moraine system. In the afternoon four of us went on a drive before assembling shortly after 1800 hrs for the “forest feast” by the bonfire by the frozen lake.

This last evening meal in Romincka was a highlight of the trip, with a whole wild boar roasted over a bonfire between the forest and a frozen lake. We usually have a sing-song afterwards and this year’s group was the most enthusiastic I can remember, and, though we enjoyed ourselves, it was remarked that the position of Côr Meibion Cymry Llundain [London Welsh Male Voice Choir] was probably still secure!

Day 7

Friday 6th February

Thawing

We loaded up the luggage and left Kytkejmy at 1015, driving east and then south. After fifty minutes in Suwakki for shopping we continued south, stopping for lunch at a roadside restaurant, and arrived at Kuwasy, on the edge of Czerwone Bagno (the Red Marsh), mid-afternoon. We then drove a loop of a few miles, seeing Buzzard, Black Woodpecker, and Polish Pony. Our local guide, Kukasz Artur Wiatr, arrived in the evening and gave a presentation on the area.

Day 8

Saturday 7th February

Thawing

We left at 0845 with Kukasz. As usual we waited at the entrance to the “Strict Reserve” portion of Czerwone Bagno while permits were organized. Here we had good views of Waxwing and one of the few sightings of Willow Tit of the trip. (Marsh Tits by contrast were seen almost daily.)

We continued to the parking area and then on foot along the sand ridge which is high enough to give views over the marsh. Specifically, there are a platform and tower which give the best views, and these views are currently being enhanced by removing more trees. Kukasz had warned us that the activities of the tree extractors would probably limit what wildlife we might see this year. His prediction turned out to be correct, we did however have a pleasant walk and saw a variety of spoor in the sand and other signs.

We had our alfresco lunch at the usual spot, with a bonfire to heat our sausages. After lunch we made a short stop at the lodge and then headed towards Grajewo and east to the Czar’s Road. In the Pine-Juniper woods there we had several views of Elk. We said our goodbyes to Kukasz at the north end of the Czar’s Road and returned to the lodge.

Day 9

Sunday 8th February

We loaded up the luggage after breakfast and started our drive to Warsaw. We had a coffee break in Komza and an hour’s stop for lunch. We reached Warsaw in good time, took the bulk of the clients and Piotr to Okecie Airport, after which I continued to Krakow with the last client.

Species Lists

Birds

Key: C = seen by client G = seen by guide only H = heard only

	Common name	Scientific name	January/February									
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>							C			
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	2						10+			
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓						✓		✓	
4	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1							
5	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>			G							
6	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		4		✓			3		✓	✓
7	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				6	1					
8	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>							1			
9	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>										✓
10	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓		30+				✓			✓
11	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>						G	1			
12	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>						1				
13	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>						1				
14	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	✓	✓	✓	✓	1			
15	Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>									20+	
16	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			✓							
17	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		2		1	1	2				
18	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>						31	3			
19	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		2		✓	6+	3	1			
20	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
21	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montana</i>									✓	
22	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>							2			
23	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>						1				
24	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		3				✓	✓	✓		
25	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>						✓	✓	✓		
26	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
27	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>										✓
28	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1	✓	14	✓	✓	10+			✓
29	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		2					2			✓
30	Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>						H				
31	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	5					✓		✓
32	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓							✓		✓
33	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		1						1		✓
34	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		10+	13	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓							
36	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			✓							

	Common name	Scientific name	January/February								
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
37	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>				3					
38	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>							C		
39	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>								✓	
40	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			1						
41	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		G				10			
42	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

Mammals

	Common Name	Scientific name	January/February								
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			1						
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		2	3	✓	✓				
3	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>				36+	20+	20+			
4	Red Deer	<i>Cervis elaphus</i>			2		7+	4			
5	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	6	25+	✓		4	2	4		
6	Elk (Moose)	<i>Alces alces</i>								8	
7	European Bison (Wisent)	<i>Bison bosasus</i>		63							
8	Bat sp			40+							
9	Mouse sp							✓			
10	Vole sp							✓			
11	Badger - roadkill									✓	

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