

## Poland in Spring

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Days 1-5 Bialowieza Forest

Bialowieza Forest is the largest remaining tract of original European Forest. Almost six hundred square kilometres occupies a corner of Eastern Poland and an even larger area stretches into neighbouring Belarus. We will be taken into the heart of the forest, inside the Bialowieza National Park. Covering just under fifty square kilometres this is the part of the forest now listed as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and a World Heritage Site. It retains a virtually complete assemblage of species, from the ten thousand invertebrates, right up to the top mammalian predators such as Wolves and Lynx. There are well over a thousand higher plant species recorded and though it would be hard to describe the forest as flowery there are nonetheless many fine species. Birds-nest Orchids emerge from the leaf litter in ghostly groups, and lovely *Thalictrum lucidum* blooms in damp alder forest with *Thalictrum aquilegifolium*, *Ranunculus cassubicus* and lots of Common Spotted Orchids. Roadsides are colourful with Wood Vetch, Dusky Cranesbill, Wood Cranesbill, *Geranium pyrenaicum* and Peach-leaved Bellflower. Under shaded spruce we'll find various wintergreens including the pretty little *Chimaphila umbellata* and both *Pyrola minor* and *Orthilia secunda*. Moschatel and Alternate-leaved Golden Saxifrage inhabit the swamiest of woodland with elegant Crested Buckler Fern. Spring Pea is a lovely sight in profusion and we'll find the milkvetch *Astragalus danicus* and *Chamaecytisus ratisbonensis* along the forest edge.

Wood Whites and Holly Blues flutter continuously along the woodland rides. In damp valleys we'll encounter the pretty Northern Chequered Skipper and hopefully Scarce Fritillary. Up in the canopy there are Camberwell Beauties and other Nymphalids. Odonata are plentiful with both Banded and Beautiful Demoiselles very common along the forest streams and rivers.

Bialowieza is rightly renowned for its mammal fauna. If there is one mammal that embodies Bialowieza's ancient heritage it must be the majestic European Bison. Once widespread in Eastern Europe, they were hunted to the edge of extinction by the beginning of this century. The last Tsar maintained a small population to hunt in Bialowieza, and the continued protection of these animals has allowed them to increase slowly over the years so that they are now being re-introduced to other areas. Their immense size belies a placid nature and an ability to stay invisible – our chances of a sighting are limited, though those willing to take part in a very early morning excursion might well strike lucky. Other mammals play a big part in the forest's ecology, none more so than Wild Boar. It is their rooting activities which help keep large areas of the forest floor clear of tangled vegetation. Roe Deer and Red Deer are quite often seen but we'll have to work harder to get a glimpse of the European Beaver. However, with some perseverance, we can do it, as there are several active sites near to our base, though you'll have to be

prepared get up early or stay out late to have the best chance of seeing these charismatic animals.

All these trees offer great habitat for no less than eight species of woodpeckers. Black Woodpeckers are quite common and we shall hear their loud ringing cries echoing through the forest. Middle Spotted are common too and we should see both White-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers. The sibilant song of the Wood Warbler will be our constant companion and we'll hear and see both Collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers. Hawfinches are really rather common as are Redstarts and Nuthatches and other avian highlights will include Hazelhen and Nutcracker. We'll also try for the Great Snipe lek. These rare birds can put on an unforgettable display, though one will have to wait for dusk to see it, and even then they are somewhat capricious in appearance.

Just north of the forest is Siemianowka's reservoir. The marshy edges hold flowering Marsh Pea, Larkspurs and the purple and yellow cow-wheat, *Melampyrum polonicum*. The surrounding marshes will be yellow with Great Yellowcress. Marsh Harriers are common and we'll see Lesser Spotted Eagles and Great White Egret. As Sand Lizards scurry in shore-side rushes and loosestrifes we'll look for breeding Citrine Wagtails. Large Red Damselflies and Broad-bodied Chasers skim through the banks of Yellow Flags and Green Figworts. A delightful prospect is of all three 'marsh terns' in their dapper breeding plumage. Particularly common are both Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns.

Day 6

Bialystok Fishponds

Heading northwards Penduline Tits and Common Rosefinch might draw our attention from the lovely Red-necked Grebes in full breeding plumage on Bialystok's fishponds and here we'll see a wonderful variety of Odonata, amongst them Norfolk Hawkers, Four-spotted Chasers, Black Darters, Variable and Azure Damselflies, and the lovely Red-eyed Damselfly.

Days 7 - 9

The Biebrza Marshes

The reason that the Biebrza gains so much attention, aside from its magical faunal and floral riches, is that it is the only European River of any size that has an intact 'hydrology'. This is true from source to mouth (where it meets the Narew River) and from riverbed to hillside. It has not been tampered with along its entire length, no dams (other than Beavers!) and no canals. A rarity indeed.

Blue Iris *sibirica* mixes with yellow Iris *pseudacorus* amongst drifts of creamy Meadowsweet. Expansive sedge meadows are dotted with Ragged Robin and cotton grasses. Tower hides provide fantastic views over the seemingly endless marshes. They provide excellent vantage points for watching birds of prey which are plentiful with Lesser-Spotted and occasionally Spotted Eagles as well as the

magnificent White-tailed Eagle. The clarion-like calls of Common Cranes reveal pairs of these beautiful birds on their breeding grounds. Other birds featured here are Hawfinch, Penduline Tit, Great Grey, Red-backed Shrike and the rare Aquatic Warbler. Well search for the beautiful Large Copper are two of the rarer butterflies and we'll look for are Scarce Heath and Large Heath. Pretty *Crepis tectorum* grows alongside the paths and we'll find beautiful flowers such as Tufted Milkwort, Bloody Cranesbill, Marsh Pea, and the lovely Jacob's Ladder. Dragonflies and Damselflies are not surprisingly common and varied. Both Downy and Brilliant Emeralds occur and White-legged Damselfly and Northern Damselflies are frequent.

Of particular interest will be a visit to Kozlowka, an area of Silver Birch Forest. This open mossy forest is more normally found in boreal Russia and is not common this far south. Sedges and Marsh Fern abound and we'll find various clubmosses and Chickweed Wintergreen. Raised bogs host Labrador Tea, Cowberry and Bog Bilberry. Not surprising then that this will be one of the best places to see Elk (Moose). At close range their size really becomes apparent - a bull stands seven feet tall at the shoulder!

Days 10-11  
Wigry National Park

In the remote northeastern corner of Poland, where the Mazurian Lakes abut the Lithuanian border lies Wigry National Park. The landscapes are barely scarred by the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first. There are extensive forests and lakes and some very fine peat bogs. Cotton Grass and Rannoch Rush flower amidst a variety of *Carex* species and the abundant pinky-white flowers of lovely Bogbean. Sundews are common too though less obvious and we'll encounter plenty of Cranberry. Butterflies include Large Heath and Pale Clouded Yellow and Poland's only colony of the Baltic Grayling which will be flying at this season. Specialist Odonata like these bogs too - damselflies such as *Coenagrion hastulatum* and larger species like the Bog Hawker, a dragonfly confined to bogs with floating areas of moss! Elk can often be seen grazing in the Beaver ponds that dot the landscape. This is a stronghold of the Beaver within Europe, and these ponds provide great habitat for dragonflies with the Yellow-ringed Clubtail and Two-spotted Dragonfly being common. Pools host many amphibians including both Moor and Agile Frogs and we'll hope to see Common Spadefoot.

Day 12  
Return to UK

We'll make a relaxed return journey to Warsaw in preparation for our afternoon flight back to the UK.

Trip reports are available from previous trips. If you would like to see a copy, or to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please contact us on 01298 83563 or email on [enquiries@greentours.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@greentours.co.uk).