

Belarus

Untamed Europe

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive in Minsk and transfer to Belovezhskaya

After landing at Minsk Airport we travel to Belovezhskaya Pushcha ancient forest, a World Heritage Site.

Days 2-4

Belovezhskaya Pushcha World Heritage Forest

We've two full days and a morning in which to explore the wonderful Belovezhskaya Pushcha ancient forest. The Polish part (Bialowieza) is better-known by Western travellers, but the Belarussian part is much larger, more intact and is very sparsely visited, ensuring a real primaeval wildwood experience. Walking through the forests, Yellow Anemones and May Lilies at our feet, the forest is a delight for those who have yearned to see ancient wildwood. In the shady depths of the forest we can find many of the species which were part of our own forest flora and fauna hundreds of years ago, and which are now rare over the whole of Europe. We will be taken into the heart of the forest where awesome Oaks, Limes and Ash trees grow upwards for a hundred feet before they begin to branch. The wildlife remains undisturbed, as few people visit the remoter areas of Belovezhskaya.

Belovezhskaya is rapidly gaining recognition as **the** place in the European continent to seek the original forest mammal fauna. If there is one mammal that embodies Belovezhskaya'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, with just small populations surviving in the remotest forests such as Belovezhskaya. Their immense size belies a placid nature and we hope to see them on more than one occasion. 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 vegetation. Red Deer and Roe Deer are both common animals in the forest and we'll come across them from time to time. Wolves and Lynx keep the numbers of hoofed animals under control and both have strong populations in the forest though these are very shy animals. Nevertheless we've a good chance of seeing Wolves, several places have now become known where visiting naturalists might see them, however Lynx is still very much an animal that we'd be very lucky indeed to encounter.

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 and we should see both

White-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers. Other avian highlights include Hazelhen, Hawfinch and Nutcracker. Belowezhskaya is home to several species of owl and we will spend an evening looking and listening for Tengmalm's, or more likely at this time of year, Pygmy Owl. There's a very good possibility to see the magnificent Great Grey Owl too.

Crested Tit and Common Crossbill are found even just around our hotel. Around Lake Liadskoye Whooper Swan and Wood Sandpiper occur. Raptors include White-tailed, Short-toed and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Hen and Montagu's Harrier, and we should find Spotted Eagle as well. Though not the best time of year to see the exceptional diversity of fungi Belowezhskaya Pushcha still has much to offer in spring, from huge bracket fungi nearly a metre across to Morels and Oyster Mushrooms and some fabulous Chicken-of-the-Woods. It is a good time for the flora though with abundant Marsh Violet, Asarabacca and May Lily. There are some great stands of the elegantly shaped Herb Paris and the saprophytic Toothwort is easily found too.

Day 5

Sporovo Reserve

So that we don't lose any morning time in good habitats we'll break the journey to the Pripjatsky National Park with a night staying in the Sporovo Reserve. Great Grey Shrike, Goshawk, Hen and Montagu's Harriers, Penduline and Bearded Tits are all common here. Little and Spotted Crakes and Corncrakes can all be heard and we'll try hard to see one or more of these too. After lunch on Day 5 we'll continue to the Pripjatsky National Park.

Days 6-8

Pripjatsky National Park

Our base for the second half of the tour will be near the famous Pripjatsky National Park. We'll spend four nights in Turov in a comfortable hotel located on the bank of the river. Several sought-after waders such as Great Snipe, Terek Sandpiper and Marsh Sandpiper breed on the banks of the untamed River Pripjaty that floods vast areas of meadows and forests during Spring. Easy walks will produce White-backed Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreeper, Black, Middle Spotted and Three-toed Woodpeckers; some of them are relatively easy to see in this magical place at this time of the year.

Evenings often produce spectacular gatherings of hundreds of migrating Black-tailed Godwits and Ruffs including many extremely colourful males, and elegant Spotted Redshanks are also found in good numbers at Turov Meadows. On one of the days we will visit a fishpond system where we should find several pairs of Smew, Black-necked Grebes and perhaps Red-necked Grebes too. Spring brood Map Butterflies and Swallowtails will distract us from Muskrat-watching or photographing Fire-bellied Toads.

Birds of prey are plentiful with Lesser Spotted and occasionally Spotted Eagles as well as the magnificent White-tailed Eagle. Other birds featured here are

Hawfinch, Penduline Tit, Great Grey and Red-backed Shrikes. Of particular interest are areas of Silver Birch Forest and raised bogs. These habitats are more normally found in boreal Russia and are not common this far south. Not surprising then that this will be one of the best places to see Moose. At close range their size really becomes apparent - a bull stands seven feet tall at the shoulder! In April the females will be calving, if we are very lucky we might find a spindly-legged youngster, these staying close to their lugubrious looking mothers. The bogs are wonderful habitats to familiarise ourselves with a range of plants specially adapted for these conditions, especially *Ericaceae* such as Bog Rosemary, Cranberry, and aromatic Labrador Tea. One bog has a fine show of Pasque Flowers. Sandy banks are great spots to look for pugmarks and give some indication of the abundance of mammals in the area, and often show Wolf prints, though the Wolves themselves may remain hidden.

Surely one of the strongest candidates for bird of the trip will be Azure Tit. Belarus is the only place in Europe where we have good chance to find this stunning bird in its breeding habitat along the riparian willow forests of the River Pripyaty. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Wryneck and Hawfinches all populate the same willow groves and Goshawks often display overhead. Thrush Nightingales sing from cover but Fieldfares are altogether more obvious. As soon as the sun comes out various overwintering nymphalids become active up and down the tracks, especially Comma, Peacock and Large Tortoiseshells.

A bridge over the River Pripyaty provides a good viewpoint for a range of bird species especially raptors and a walk along the banks will allow us to find European Beavers busy with their cleaning. With luck we'll get extended views of these endearing creatures as Savi's Warblers and Great Reed Warblers sing in the background.

Wild Boar and Roe Deer are common in Scot's Pine woodlands decorated with abundant Lily of the Valley. We'll look for Black Woodpecker which nest in these open woodlands. Forest types are exceptionally varied in the Pripjatsky with each area seemingly different from the next. We'll wander Norway Maple forest, favoured by Hazel Hen and European Bison. Red Squirrels are frequent and the flora varied with a colourful understory at this season of Lungwort, Spring Pea, Yellow Archangel and Yellow Anemones. Green Hairstreak, Map Butterfly and Camberwell Beauties are all on the wing.

Day 9

Depart Minsk

Perhaps a last morning visit to the local pairs of Bluethroats and Collared Flycatchers, or maybe a last attempt to photograph the Red Squirrels, and then it'll be on the road back to Minsk and the airport.

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