



# Bieszczady Mountains Poland 1-9 March 2014 European bison quest





### **A portfolio of impressions:**

Where in Europe have you counted more red and roe deer than people and cars together after driving eight days and one thousand two hundred kilometers?

Where in Europe can you find active bears in early March, whose droppings are filled with the remains of pine cones?

Where in Europe have you seen more wolves than foxes in one trip?

Where in Europe do you constantly place your feet in the tracks of wolves, bears, lynx, bison, wild cat, badger, wild boar, roe deer and fox, while walking a forested ridge?

Where in Europe can you move unhindered and free in an endless mosaic of forests and extensively managed meadows?

Where in Europe can you find pictures of bear and bison on the labels of spirits?

Where in Europe do bears tear bark from pines in order to eat the resin underneath?

Where in Europe can you find red deer whose antlers are far beyond the average size?



A wide-angle photograph of a misty forest. The trees are mostly evergreens, and the ground is covered in a layer of mist or fog. A white text box with a black border is centered in the upper part of the image.

### Close encounters with European bison herds

**The first encounter** we had after walking for six hours through prime bison habitat. Signs of their presence everywhere: trees stripped of their bark, a labyrinth of footprints in the mud and droppings all over the place. Obvious to were clearly thinned fragments of brambles (an important food source of Europe's heaviest land mammal) scattered over the beech forests that surrounded us. Finally, late in the afternoon, a foraging herd was located by our front running local guide. These local people really don't mind about/suffer from walking the cross country way through the vast hilly forested terrain we patrolled with our bins, scopes and lenses. Unfortunately, the animals left the scene once we were reunited. At least eight animals. Part of the group made another effort and continued the hide and seek game. They were rewarded with close views despite the fact that the animals ran away just when close enough to be photographed.



**The second sighting** concerned a large herd of adult cows with many younger animals. Despite the misty weather and it being late afternoon everybody had good views of the animals. The manner in which they disappear as soon as the leading cow discovers a passage into the forest, truly is impressive.





**Our third sighting** the least satisfying, but yet so typical. Their habit of blending quietly in their surroundings is really remarkable. From the moment our binoculars caught sight of the robust heads and impressive bodies, these forest ghosts immediately disappeared. Vanished all of a sudden. No matter how hard you try to get onto their trail again afterwards, catching a second glimpse is everything but guaranteed. Before you know, you have lost their fresh trail with all quiet and concentrated walking seeming to have been in vain and a useless effort. Amazing creatures! When, during such a chase, you also hear a calling lynx, you once again realize the uniqueness of the area.



### About bonus species apart from bison

Just as the bison the main target of the trip behaved rather elusive and shy, also other species on the wish list were not cooperative either. All observations very short and always momentary. Or maybe rather short and powerful?



A large wolf appearing in front of our early morning vantage point gets our pulses racing, especially when we find two others hiding in the riverine vegetation of the San, the local river. Once everybody is onto the location of the pack, they decide to remain hidden. The very nervous herd of red deer in the same area clearly shows you have to be on your guard for top predators. Concentration is really necessary, and this accounts for both spectators as for resident potential prey. If not, you certainly can forget it...



From the endless beaver dams we especially remember that idyllic place where an immature beaver swims too close to the shore to be seen by everyone. Fortunately this is not the case with the Tengmalm's owl calling in one of the firs bordering the habitat created by the large rodent. These trees also appear to be the breeding habitat of a pair of grey-headed woodpeckers. Another beaver dam, a road side location, even deserves twice a visit. For those who missed it during the first attempt, the beaver reveals itself again after dinner was served.





The stake-out for pygmy-owl is disrupted by some too diligent lumberjacks. Unlike one of the previous trips, the imitation of the pjuu-call doesn't result in a reaction. Ural owl is heard and seen briefly in the headlights of our minivan, as is a Eurasian eagle-owl. Endless flocks of hawfinch, and calling nutcrackers and goldfinches are everywhere. Red Squirrels are also seen on our forest walks along with a few Yellow-necked Mice. Migrating flocks of cranes indicate spring is coming.

Maybe the highlights of the trip, calling lynx and brown bear. The first one is clearly heard just before our second bison sighting. Less than 300 meter away, we twice hear some powerful 'wuaaw'-calls. KEJ can link this with Spain: it sounds like Iberian lynx, albeit shorter and more powerful. Unfortunately our views are limited due to the fog, and the animal quickly stops calling.





John Wright's trip feedback, initiator of the UK group participants:

*Morning Jan,*

*Just a quick email to say a big thank you once again to you and Karl for a successful trip to Bieszczady. I really enjoyed it and what a great area to explore for all those elusive mammals. I know some of the others found it hard going at times but they all enjoyed it and had some great encounters with the wildlife.*



EB5 guides Karl Van Ginderdeuren (right on top) & Jan Kelchtermans (left on top) above; John Wright in the middle.

UK participants (posing with Karl) names: from left to right: Paul Baker, John Wright, Dave Knight, Andrew Woodhouse, Angela Baldock, Brian Baldock.

**Doing better** It's always EB5's intention to do better the next time. The same case when being in Bieszczady for European bison. It's of course nature that decides: we can't influence the animals in their behavior and movements as the same for the weather forecast. But nest boxes for owls (Ural and Tengmalm's) will be ready and placed in some good trees next autumn. Even more exciting is the fact a personal, stationary EB5 large carnivore observation hide is getting real shape!

