

Trip report Poland : 9 – 17 September 2011



Places visited :

Popowka
Bialowieza area
Kampionos NP

Mammal sightings :

English name	Latin name	info
Red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	Around one a day in Bialowieza area
Spotted souslik	<i>Spermophilus suslicus</i>	A dead one and one very poor sighting in Popowka
Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>	One from a bridge in Bialowieza village
Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	One in Narewka area and one in Bialowieza area
Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Several in Bialowieza area
Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Many in Bialowieza area
Elk	<i>Alces alces</i>	One in Bialowieza area and one in Narewka area
Wisent	<i>Bison bonasus</i>	Several in Bialowieza area
Wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Two between Bialowieza and Narewka
Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Several in Bialowieza area, one in Popowka
Stone marten	<i>Martes foina</i>	Three in Bialowieza area
Pine marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	One in Bialowieza area
Raccoon dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>	Two in Bialowieza area
Mouse sp.		Several in Bialowieza area

Other sightings :

Three-toed woodpecker, white-backed woodpecker, middle spotted woodpecker, hazel grouse, lesser spotted eagle, grass snake.

General info for Bialowieza

Staying and eating etc.

We stayed at a place called “Domek pod Klomen” which was on the left side of the road, just after entering town, before the Palace park. The place was very basic, with a shared bathroom and single sofa-like beds but at around 20-25€ per night one shouldn't be too picky and it was clean and quiet – hence exactly what we needed. There was no problem at all finding accommodation, there were VERY little if any foreign tourists while we were there. We usually ate at the same place, but I don't remember the name. It was on the right side of the road, a whitish housed, before passing the Place park. The food was nice, the cocktails as well, and they served all day long so we could have early diners. Late diners are not really an option because everything closes down early. There is a gas station in town and there are several small shops.

Site guide

Be sure to get the Bialowieza site guide of the Wild Poland website <http://www.wildpoland.com/>.

With this amazing book (also available as pdf-file) you'll find all the greatest spots. It is a priceless source of information. The information was correct and we had many great sightings thanks to this book. It includes a map of the area. Further subsections treat different parts of the area more in detail. For each subsection a range of foot and bike trails are suggested. The gps coordinates to the start of the trails are also included. There is information on time needed for all the trails, which shoes to wear, when to go (in the year and in the day)... More importantly there is also a list included on common, less common and rare species which you may encounter (mainly birds, but also lots of info on mammals). For each trail there is a detailed colour map with numbers which indicate where to keep an extra eye open for which species. A description of the trail (in English – just in case you were wondering) gives extra directions and information on species sightings. The whole is illustrated with nice pictures. The book also included extra general information on the history of the area and the animals, where to stay and eat, how to behave when meeting officials, ... I feel like I'm selling the thing by now but it is just a great book which is very easy to use, attractive to look at and which gives fantastic information! No more extra preparation needed with this one!

For this trip report, I mainly use the numbers of the trails used in the Site guide. As this book was such a great help to us, it seems rather unfair to spread all the info we got from it just like that. Who wants to have the exact spots for sightings should better spend a few euros and purchase it from the authors, that clearly put a lot of effort in writing it.



Spotlighting in Bialowieza

The possibilities are limited because the forest tracks, although in perfect condition, are not open to traffic. Here is a list of stretches we used for spotlighting. I use the numbers of the stretches for the rest of the trip report.

1. Stretch Bialowieza-Pogorzelce
(tarred road – watch out for pedestrians in the villages)
This is a nice stretch through a forest-y area with some grass field which are unfortunately not so visible due to high vegetation.
2. Stretch Pogorzelce-Teremiski
(tarred road – watch out for pedestrians in the villages)
This is a nice stretch through a forest-y area. The grass field just before entering the village are very interesting for wisent in the very early morning or at night. Keep an eye open for animals crossing the road. Keep an eye open for animals crossing the road.
3. Stretch Teremiski – Budy
(tarred road)
Pay special attention to the grassy fields just after leaving Teremiski. Keep an eye open for animals crossing the road.
4. Stretch Budy – Czerlonka
(tarred road)
This is a longer stretch through a forest-y area. It crosses the main road into Bialowieza and then goes on for a short stretch until the next village. We always saw red deer on this last stretch.
5. Bialowieza loop
(tarred road)
This partly passes houses but there are also some fields and more forest-y areas. I think this also passes Grudki. Interesting for less shy mammals such as red foxes. We also saw red deer and quietly get out of the car at the bridges to look in the river for beavers.
6. Narewka road
(dirt road with lots and lots of bumps – very slow drive with car with low clearance)
This road seemed the most promising one. However, we often didn't see a lot on this road. It is around 20km long one-way and because of all of the bumps we had to drive really slowly so it took us quite a while to do this road. One time, all we saw on the whole of the road was one wild boar.
7. Stretch Narewka – Masiewo
(tarred road)
We drove this road once when coming back from a stake-out for wildlife. It is rather busy. It passes through an agricultural landscape. We saw our only hare here.
8. Stretch to Kosy Most from Narewka road
(short dirt road)
This stretch passes nice forest area and ends in a small glade. We saw nothing here, but it seemed promising. Take a turn to the left after a few kilometers when coming from Narewka.
9. Main road into Bialowieza
(tarred road)
While we met very little cars on the other roads, this road was rather busy so we did not use it for spotlighting.

Day by day report

9.09

We spent a week in Poland. We drove from Belgium over Eindhoven, Hannover and Berlin, crossing the German-Polish border at Frankfurt a/d Oder. There were some exchange offices at the border which surprisingly offered a rather good rate. The highway driving into Poland is horrible – so bumpy. After a while it got better and we managed to get to the area of Oswieçim where we found a very nice hotel called Adria hotel (ul. Wawelka 4, 4-155 Bierun). The nicest sightings from the car were a **stork**, a **black kite** and 3 times 2 **roe deer**.

10.09

Today we had to go to the wedding of a friend in Jaslo, but we still had some quick time for a cultural visit to Auschwitz. We arrived at the site early, I think around 8am. Later in the day, from around 10am, you are only allowed to enter in groups and we didn't have time for a whole group-thing. It was not the perfect pre-wedding activity but as we were in the area we really wanted to see it. Today was not a day for wildlife watching and we saw nothing.

11.09



After a late breakfast we were on the road to Popowka. Popowka lays between Zamosc and Hrubieszow. You had to take a turn at a town called Miaczyn and go in the direction of Grabowiec. It was surprisingly easy to find. The Polish roads were quite ok, we mainly took secondary roads. The pavement was a bit patchy but we had no problems driving at a decent speed.

We arrived at Popowka at around 4pm. There is a hilly field on the left after passing the village of.

There is even a sign in Polish, talking about the main attraction to visit the place: The **spotted souslik**. We parked the car on the other side of the road. Soon after entering the grassy fields we saw a feral cat carrying something. We scared it off and it dropped its prey. It turned out to be the underparts of a **souslik**. We now knew for sure that they were still here. We saw quite a few burrow entrances, but unfortunately the **sousliks** did not show. We did see a **red fox** and another feral cat, so it wasn't too hard to imagine why the **sousliks** were so shy. After two hours of so we started to give up. We returned to the car and as Tim was packing his photography gear, I suddenly saw a **souslik** turning up, quickly crossing the area with shorter grass at the entrance to the field and disappearing into the ditch. It all went superfast. Although the light was bad, the size, shape and short tail clearly revealed that it was a souslik. All in all a disappointing sighting though. Maybe the mornings are better for souslik-spotting. We decided to drive on to try our luck the next morning on the grass area next to the Lublin



airstrip. Apparently the biggest colony of **souslik** is housed here. They were introduced to the grass field a few decades ago and they quickly established themselves growing to a population of 10000 individuals. Unfortunately I had already received bad news from a Polish fellow PhD I met on a



conference earlier that summer. He had told me that the population had suffered from an illness and had undergone a strong decline. Furthermore, the expansion of the Lublin airport wasn't doing the population any good. We stayed the night in a city called Piaski in a horrible hotel that I think was called Europa hotel. It was a tall building which looked nice from the outside but inside it was as if we were in the USSR.

12.09

Finding the Swidnik airport and especially the grassy parts next to the airstrip turned out to be trickier than we thought. At last we found the place but our hopes immediately vanished. The terrain was much less accessible. Not only was it actually not allowed due to the road works of the airport expansion, the grass was also very high and visibility was virtually non-existing, especially compared to Popowka. Not surprisingly we saw nothing. We hang around the area for an hour or two and then we had to give up. We still had a long drive ahead of us.

The way to Bialowieza was rather uneventful. We saw three **roe deer**, a road kill **fox** and two road kill **hedgehogs**, which judging by the distribution were probably Eastern hedgehogs. The road was from time to time pretty nice. The Polish have nice houses and sometimes it all felt very authentic. After our arrival in Bialowieza we had to look for a place to stay which we quickly found. We took a short walk through the Palace Park which was rather uneventful. After a quick diner we took off for spotlighting. It was the only warmer night of our stay. The roads were swarming with frogs, which were very difficult to avoid. We first drove stretch 1 and 2. Just after leaving Bialowieza, we saw our only male **red deer** with antlers during spotlighting. Then we drove the Narewowska road (stretch 6). We quickly saw a first **fox** of the night. There were also some **red deer** every now and then, but all in the first few kilometers of the road. At stretch 3 a **stone marten** crossed the road and gave some

nice views. At stretch 4 we were rewarded with several small groups of **red deer** with large calves. We also saw a **mouse** with a relatively long tail cross the road just before Czerlonka. On stretch 4 Tim saw what might have been an **elk** just before reaching the main road into Bialowieza, but unfortunately we were too slowly with driving backwards and the animal had vanished. After this we decided to call it a day.



13.09

We got up relatively late at around 8am. We saw two **lesser spotted eagles** circling over the fields near Pogorzelce. One of them had caught a **mouse**. We walked trail 30 which starts at the crossing of the Narewka and the Teremiski roads. Exactly where promised (around point 6) we



saw first a **three-toed woodpecker** and then also a **white-backed woodpecker** in the same forest patch. We also saw a **roe deer**. Unfortunately we saw no wisent. Maybe that had something to do with the forest works that were going on a bit further away. We did find an animal print on a dirt track back to the tarred road which might have been a **wolf-track** but we are no true trackers. Next we

drove up the Narewkowska road and we stopped at parking site in around the middle of the road (trail 36). We took a short walk and kept an eye open for **pygmy owl** but we only saw a **red squirrel**. We also walked trail



35 to a glade where wisents are regularly spotted. This trail starts on the left side of the Narewkowska road, just before reaching the parking spot. We saw the big haystacks, but no wisents. We did startle a **red deer** that quickly took off. The trail is an example of trails which are so wide and in such good condition that they are easily accessible by car. Unfortunately this is not allowed (although the Polish do use the trails for driving, but then again, they are locals and probably know the officials you may meet). Cycling would allow saving some time on these trails. In the case of cycling, I would advise bringing something to carry rental bicycles because if you already have to cycle all the way from town to here you again lose time. In the afternoon we tried for wisent, again at trail 30. As we saw none there, we went on to a clearing just outside of Bialowieza (trail 9). We waited at the clearing for dusk. The mosquitos were relatively bad. We only saw a **fox** coming out just before dark. We returned to the car and started spotlighting. We first drove stretch 1-2-3-4. We saw a **roe deer** on stretch 1. At stretch 4 we again saw several small groups of **red deer** with large calves. Then we



drove the Narewkowska road (stretch 6). Somewhere around the middle of the road we saw a large **wild boar** crossing the road. There were no **red deer** today. We went back via stretch 2-3-4. Passing through stretch 5 we had a nice encounter with a **fox**. We stopped relatively early at around 1am because we decided to try for the wisents in the morning, as it seemed rather difficult to see them at night.



We got up before dawn and we quickly drove to the fields just before entering Teremiski to look for **wisent**. It was just getting light and we didn't see anything at first glance. A better look revealed a big bull, much closer to the road than we expected. Unfortunately he had already almost reached the forest edge and after just a few minutes he disappeared. Happy with our sighting we decided to try our luck elsewhere. We drove to the Kosy Most (stretch 7), spotting a dark **red squirrel** on the road just before reaching the clearing. We walked trail 50. This trail was very nice. We saw many tracks of wild boar, three-toed woodpecker and white-backed woodpecker. We also saw wisent prints which followed the track for at least 100 meters. We met two soldier-type guys on a motorcycle in the forest. We stopped; they stopped and said something in Polish. We tried with English but they just looked very unhappy. We were all looking at each other, not really

knowing what to do and then one of the guys waved his hand, as if to make us go away. That's what we did of course. It was a funny encounter but they were very polite. Between points 6 and 7 we saw two **hazel grouses** flying off. We followed them but unfortunately they outsmarted us because we only saw them very briefly as they flew from tree to tree, always further into the forest. The beautiful mushrooms kept us quite busy after that. At the small pond at the end of the walk, we saw a large **grass snake** in the grass (how fitting). It was patient with us taking pictures but in the end took off



with gracious snake-movements. It was a very nice walk. After that walk we went back to Bialowieza and we took an afternoon walk which started off stretch 5. Just behind Bialowieza there are again nice forest patches with trails. We partly walked trail 7. It was a nice walk but there were some mosquitos. We did not have a lot of interesting encounters here. There is a small bridge to cross (point 5) but the bridge was not accessible – it was in repair though – so we could not move further.

After returning we had a quick diner. We wanted to be back out before dusk to wait at a stake out for mammals (trail 34) along the Narewowska road. We quickly walked to the stake out, which is a river valley bordering the strict reserve. We read a bit late that you had to carry some sort of entrance ticket to walk the last few meters of the trail but we didn't bother too much with that. It was already getting dark as we finally arrived on the spot, just to notice that the vegetation in the river valley was so high that there was no way we were going to see anything. We quickly changed plans and changed to trail 41, which crossed trail 34. A bit further down trail 41 there was a clearing in the forest which also seemed promising. We followed an old railway track through the forest and as it was getting pretty dark now and we were trying to beat time, the walk was rather hard. Just before entering the clearing we heard some snoring noises in the forest to our left. We moved on really

quietly and just upon arriving at the clearing, we saw a big black mass coming out of the woods and running/humping over the clearing. With our binoculars we could clearly make out the shape of a **wisent** in the dark. The clearing was small so it all just took a few seconds. This was really cool but unfortunately we had of course ruined our chances for seeing anything else in the next time. We decided to walk back another track (seen on the map in the site guided but not part of a trail). The walk was rather difficult in the dark and the track was not well maintained. Everywhere around us in the forest we could hear the sounds of what were probably the **wisents** (it was rutting season). As we got back to the dirt road it was already completely dark. We were passed by a car with police men on the way back to the car. They had certainly seen us coming out of the forest but we were not



stopped. Back at the car Tim decided that he wanted to go back to the bison clearing of the day before (trail 35). This seemed promising because of all the rutting-sounds coming out of the forest, seemingly from that direction. We quickly drove the stretch. Unfortunately there were no mammals at all at the clearing. Maybe wisents call from in the middle of the forest or maybe they have different clearings where they gather. We were not so familiar with the rutting behavior

of wisents. We drove back without the lights on, which was only possible because of the bright moonlight. We spotlighted again the same stretches. The spotlighting was not so successful. We saw again quite some **red deer** and a **hare** on stretch 6 (direction main road into Bialowieza).



This morning was dedicated to birdwatching. We went around in the village and the park but we saw not too many birds. A **middle spotted woodpecker** just outside of the park was the nicest. Then we drove up to Teremiski to do a short hike in the forest there. We again saw one **lesser spotted eagle** soaring over the field. We started off walking trail 25. We saw some signs of beaver activity from the small bridge crossing the small river. After the short hike, we felt like hiking a bit more and we took trail 41 north. The trail paralleled the river valley and some of

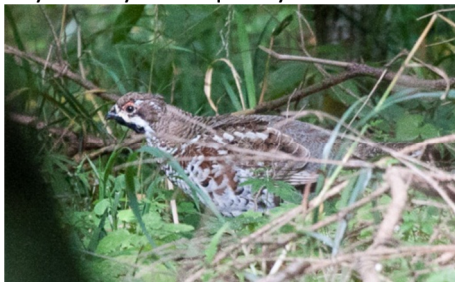


the hunter's towers here seemed to be good stake outs for dusk. However, a short inspection revealed that they were certainly not stable enough. We were busy with taking photographs of the mushrooms. After the turning point of the trail (point 11) we met the only other hikers during the trip. A bit further there is a very small clearing on the left (between point 11 and 10). Tim had to get something out of the backpack which I was wearing. As he was searching his stuff, I was looking into the forest. Suddenly I could make out a vague silhouette. It was dark and very tall; we quickly grabbed our binoculars and we saw that we had encountered an **elk**! He had small antlers and amazingly long legs. Unfortunately the

branches prevented a better sight and the animal quickly walked away. This was really cool, especially as elks are apparently rather rare in this region. We went on and just a few meters further, I again saw a brown, large shape in the forest. We took our binoculars and we saw that it was the back of an animal grazing. The greyish moving, branch-like structures in front of the animal revealed that it had to be a male **red deer**. As the animal lifted its head, we got a clear sight. He kept staring at us for maybe half a minute and then decided that it might be better after all to take off.



We were still all happy about this second encounter as Tim heard some noise on the forest floor. A good look revealed a male **hazel grouse** which was making its way through the leaves. We very slowly and quietly followed it along the track to make pictures. Suddenly Tim whispered:



"There's a **marten** as well". I had trouble seeing the animal but then I saw a longish brown animal running around: a **pine marten**! He went off and came back and went off again. The **hazel grouse** was very nervous but the marten didn't get it. All of these encounters took place in a few hundred meters between

point 10 and 11! We still walked on to the clearing of trail 35 but we saw no more animals, also not at the clearing itself. Then we had to walk the whole way back to the car. We saw the **hazel grouse** again, safe and sound, but we had no more other encounter. We had a quick early diner in town and then we drove all the way north to trail 55 which is a stake out for wisents near Babia Gora, seeing a red squirrel on the





way. We got there a bit late and it was already almost dark. I scanned the forest edge with my binoculars and I saw a large animal walking. The light was already pretty bad, but with some good configuration of his camera, Tim managed to make a relatively ok picture. The picture revealed that we had just spotted our second **elk** of the trip! Although there is a population of around 400 wisents and just 30 elks, we had by now managed to see an equal amount of individuals of both species. After dark we wanted to drive back but after just a few meters we were stopped by the border control. They only spoke Polish and Russian. They took our passports and went back to their car to make long

phone calls. After about 15 minutes and assuring them that we were going to Bialowieza and not to Belarus, we were free to go again. Spotlighting along stretch 7 we saw a **hare** and a **roe deer**. The Narewowska road only produced a single **wild boar**, but it did show very well. The rest of the road was a boring and slow drive. We did stretches 2-3-4 but we only saw some **red deer**, which we were getting quite used to now. We drove back in the other direction and now our luck turned. We stopped at the fields just before Teremiski (after from the direction we were coming from now). This is where we had seen the **wisent** the morning of the day before. Carefully scanning the surroundings suddenly revealed a weak eye shine, relatively close to the road. A large bull was standing there, but due to their small eyes we had first not seen it. It stayed for a little bit and then slowly started walking away. He walked a bit further to the back and as we closely followed the eye shine and the shape of the animal, we suddenly saw that there were two more individuals. They surely are not so easy to spot, big black animals with small eyes against the black background.





We were very happy. We moved on and on stretch 2, Tim suddenly saw two weird mammals in front on the road. We quickly saw that they were two **raccoon dogs**. They trotted along the road in front of the car and crossed the road several times before they disappeared into the



grass. We went on and a bit further I suddenly heard loud screams coming out of the forest. Tim stopped the car but left the engine running and the headlights on. The screams got louder and suddenly two **stone martens** came rolling onto the street. I don't know whether they were mating or fighting, but they were doing it with full passion. They quickly disappeared into the forest, just to come out of it again, crossing the road a second time. As they crossed the road a third time, one by one, Tim managed to get a picture. This was already the 10th mammal species of the day! We finished the spotlighting session with stretch 5. We saw a mother **red deer** and calve in a field between the houses. I decided to have a quick peek into the river at the palace park in town (point 6 of trail 2). I



saw a **beaver**, but it took off before Tim managed to get out of the car. After that we deserved a good night's rest.

16.09

In the morning we paid a short visit to the zoo in town. We were still looking for wryneck, but, just as many of the other birds we had hoped to see, it seems that they had already left to go to warmer places. The zoo was quite nice. Sad to see a lynx in an enclosure though. After that we left to go home. We decided to pass through the Kampionos national park. The road map showed some promising roads. This was a bad idea; we landed driving/sliding for kilometers through sand roads in a very dry area, in the middle of the forest. We passed a very authentic village with old inhabitants who looked very weird as they saw us passing by. We saw no more interesting animals there. We stayed the night near Lodz in a nice hotel right next to the highway. The rest of the trip home was rather uneventful, apart from a group of **common cranes** seen from the highway just after entering Germany.

