

BIALOWIEZA NATIONAL PARK

# IN THE HALLS OF THE BISON KING

Hiking deep in the heart  
of Poland's primeval forest in search  
of the fabled European Bison



Rotting undisturbed for decades on the forest floor, ancient and gigantic tree trunks are slowly colonized by fungi and mosses, slowly blending with the landscape and returning to the great matrix of the forest. This is Nature at work - almost impossible to see elsewhere in today's highly industrialized Europe.



■ A massive Zubr or European Bison *Bison bonasus* - also known by its German name of Wisent, this is the last of the great European ungulates of antiquity. Large bulls such as this one may be two meters tall and weigh one ton - an imposing and humbling sight.



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PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

There are ghosts in the forest. There are ghosts, and banshees, and spirits, and goblins. They hide and rest and sleep during the day, when the great halls and cloisters of the forest are silent and empty, and one walks in the sun. But with dusk and twilight, they come. They come with the thick white fog, which rolls like a wave from the darkness of the treeline, creeping on the meadows and flooding the forest clearings like a milky tide. They come with the full moon, shining bright up in the sapphire ice-cold blue sky, hiding behind the waving, pointed tips of the spruces and birches. They scurry in the undergrowth, running on all fours, dark and irsute, grunting harshly. They bellow with prehistoric echoes from behind the curtain of trees, a sound Jurassic which smells of ages gone past, of melancholy and fury. They hobble across the trail, low and fast, with a creepy undulating motion – pausing only for the briefest of pauses to turn, flashing their yellow chest, to look at you and then disappear among the ferns and nettles once more. They swim in the forest ponds, water rippling in silver waves under the moon, playfully diving and quickly disappearing under the surface. Some say they know better, and call them wild boars foraging for mushrooms and acorns, and Red deer in rut challenging their rivals, pine martens


on the prowl and beavers building their dams – but the doubt stays with us, as Bialowieza's celebrated forest is a place of mystery, of brief glimpses, of eerie sounds, of half-forgotten memories and primordial suggestions. Located at Poland's northeastern frontier, bordering with Belarus, this is Europe's last standing primeval forest – a vast sanctuary of gigantic oaks, linden and ash, an impenetrable fortress of thick alder, maple and hornbeam, a rampart of spruce, birch and Scottish pine which despite having been ravaged by man on several occasions still retains its unique, ageless appeal. Walking among its immense trees, dwarfed by the green giants soaring up in the sky, dodging gigantic tree trunks which have been rotting for decades in the ankle-deep moss, one feels what the Roman legionnaires must have felt when they first crossed the Alps and entered what was then wild, forbidding, untouched continental Europe. The air is fresh and clean, and yet heavy with cool moisture: the forest acts like an immense sponge – its floor is more often than not a mushy, soaked, saturated bog. The smell of cool temperate forests, that unmistakably woody, aromatic smell of pine needles, peaty soil and wet mushrooms pervades every corner of the sanctuary. The sun's rays slant here

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■ Białowieża's forest landscapes can often be extraordinarily beautiful, especially in autumn. Natural woodland regeneration is allowed and strictly monitored in several sites inside the National Park.



*Ancient trees proudly rising like temple pillars towards the sun*

A close-up photograph of a common or grass frog (Rana temporaria) sitting on a dark, weathered log in a forest. The frog has a mottled pattern of brown, tan, and black spots on its back and sides. Its large, dark eyes are prominent, and its mouth is slightly open. The background is a soft-focus green forest floor with various plants and leaves.


*A common or grass frog **Rana temporaria** sits unperturbed by its pond in the middle of the forest. Bialowieza's moist forest undergrowth habitat is home to a great number of amphibians.*

and there, like through a cathedral's stained glass window, painting golden patches on the open, leaf-littered ground among the trees. And there is silence everywhere – a silence borne of aeons long past, that deep, dizzying silence which only wild untouched natural places can generate, and which the soft buzz of bees and the occasional chirping of a hidden bird can only make even more intimidating. And then of course, above all and all-important, there is the great dark god of the forest, the ancient lord of Bialowieza. Enormous and nimble, powerful and silent, dangerous and shy like all sylvan deities of antiquity, its horned enormous head one readily imagines standing on the sweaty, grimy shoulders of a prehistoric shaman, the European bison inhabits the deepest recesses of the primeval forest like a great spirit, silently appearing now and then - a monstrous dark shadow – revealing itself in brief stunning glimpses among the pale, naked tree trunks. We stalk it for hours and days, moving like ghosts among the thick branches, obsessively checking footprints and droppings, ambushing it at dawn and dusk, now and then crawling on our bellies, communicating in gestures, and when we finally approach it closely, hearts thumping in our chests from excitement and trepidation, the huge bull watches us gravely and intently – its enormous

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■ One of the most typical sights of Białowieża's extraordinary environment - a seasonal bog pond in marshy, spongy ground. Alder, spruce, ash and hornbeam thrive in this habitat.



A photograph of a European Bison (Zubr) in a forest. The bison is partially visible, standing among tall, thin trees. The forest floor is covered with fallen branches and some green moss. The lighting is soft, suggesting a shaded forest environment.

head and chest framed among the trees, its wild eyes flickering in the darkness of its brow, an image of heart-shaking power and raw wilderness emerging from the ancient legends of Central Europe. A shiver runs down our backs – as we, in mute amazement, kneel in admiration and respect in front of the Zubr, the wild European Bison, the last great survivor of a glorious past, the true King of Bialowieza. Then a brief snort, a muted thumping of hooves, and in a dark flash the savage spirit of the forest vanishes once more.

### **A COMPLEX TEXTURE OF INTERLACED ENVIRONMENTS**

As National Parks go, Bialowieza is somewhat an enigma, as the protected area encompasses an enormous variety of different environments and habitats, ranging from populated and cultivated areas to relatively new forests, and from marshes and riverbanks to the core area or Strict Reserve. This might prove a little confusing at first, since most animal sightings actually take place outside the core area and occasionally on clearings and meadows close to human settlements, while the Strict Reserve – which is cut by the two branches of the Narewka river - offers the most spectacular views of a pristine European forest one can imagine, with trees which can be 700 years old and

■ A typical European Bison encounter in the forest - despite their enormous size and weight, these ungulates can move nimbly and silently among the thick trees of Bialowieza. Approaching them closely requires caution, stealth, patience and good camouflage.

■ A splendid *Bison bonasus* bull in its prime - which, thanks to our guide Lukasz's tireless tracking, we were lucky enough to sight at twilight in a forest clearing. It took us a long, slow crawl on our bellies in the wet grass to approach him this close - a uniquely rewarding opportunity even if by then the very low light levels forced us to raise our camera settings to 1600 ISO, something we would never do in normal circumstances.



50 meters tall. To further confuse first-time visitors, the so-called Bialowieza forest complex covers a cross-border area of almost 1600 square kilometers, of which about 45% is in Poland and 55% lies instead in Belarus, with the result that this latter part is virtually off-limits for visitors. In fact, while walking there it is not uncommon to be stopped by border patrols and have one's documents carefully checked. Accommodation and great, comforting food are readily available in a variety of options and in a number of small hamlets and villages, from lovely intimate hotels to quaint and very comfortable private homes traditionally built in wood, but another perplexing aspect of the current state of things is that wildlife photographers and nature lovers visiting the area during September and October - as we have done - have to share sighting sites and forest trails with large numbers of mushroom pickers (collecting wild mushrooms, freely permitted inside National Parks, is a much-loved pastime in Poland) and, more worryingly, with big-game hunters coming from all over Europe. It can be extremely disconcerting and occasionally bothersome having to share the breakfast table with a group of bragging shooters carrying high-powered, scope-equipped rifles and not-so-casually laying down a freshly stripped set of Red deer antlers from last night's kill...quite possibly the same

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■ A freezing, wind-swept new day dawns on the meadows bordering the forest - such sites usually offer the best chances to sight Red deer in rut and small Bison herds.

■ *Birches in autumn foliage and cobweb-draped long grasses stand transfixed in the icy grip of a freezing new dawn - in a few minutes fog will give way to the sun's rays.*

animal which was the majestic subject of your latest photo (thankfully, they're not allowed to shoot Bison – only Red deer, wild boar and Roe deer). In fact, the clash between time-honored local traditions such as hunting (including poaching) and more enlightened ones such as wildlife viewing and photographing is quite apparent everywhere – what we naively took at first sight as wildlife viewing towers, standing on every forest clearing, are in fact shooting hides for hunters, and surprisingly, it is the hunting community plus the Polish casual weekend tourists which seem to represent the bulk of the

visitors to the Park, rather than wildlife photographers and nature lovers from the rest of Europe – although birdwatchers in springtime are a notable exception. Most of the wild or semi-wild area outside of the Strict Reserve (in which hunting is obviously not allowed) is also subject to a strict forest management, as trees are regularly felled for commercial timber – another surprising aspect one would not expect in a National Park. Despite these minor and rather curious – at least to us – details, Bialowieza National Park appears in any case to be a splendidly managed, very well

organized and carefully protected nature reserve – a shining example of wilderness preservation to the rest of the world. Easily reached from all of corners of Europe – it is located only a few hours' drive from Warsaw's Chopin International Airport – it certainly represents one of the Old Continent's most interesting destinations for wildlife photographers and nature lovers – it's safe, accessible, easily explored and stunningly beautiful. Its environment features a very complex and rather interesting geological and botanical history – it's basically a marshy mosaic of several

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■ A fully mature Red deer *Cervus elaphus* stag - a seven or eight pointer judging by its splendid set of antlers - rests by a forest clearing in the late afternoon's warm light. Autumn is rut time for this species - antlers will be shed soon to be grown back next year.



different kinds of forests, including spruce and Scottish pine woods, temperate, deciduous oak, linden and hornbeam mixed forest, alder bog forest and spruce bog forest, with birch woods, open meadows and riverbank reed beds thrown in for good measure - but the details can be too complex (or boring) for the non-botanist layman: for an in-depth, exhaustive description of the different environments found in the area and their history we suggest reading *The Nature Guide to the Bialowieza primeval forest – Poland*, published by **Crossbill Guides**.

### **SECRETIVE DWELLERS OF THE ANCIENT FOREST**

Given its consolidated (and most of the times rather troubled) interaction with man and his intruding activities, the fauna of Bialowieza is predictably wary and very difficult to see - European wildlife, alas, has little to share with its tropical counterparts regarding numbers, population density or confidence, and those hoping for easy, close views of the large mammals - European bison, Red deer, Roe deer, wild boar...not to mention wolf and lynx - are in for a huge disappointment (even if, as ever, there are the lucky exceptions!). Sightings, when they occur, can also be frustratingly brief – often lasting only a few seconds – or from a great distance, so taking good shots of the large mammals can be

exceedingly difficult (don't let yourself be fooled - most images of the Bialowieza mammals available today have been in fact taken in the so-called Bison Reserve, an admittedly very nice zoo where several animals are kept in large, somewhat natural-looking fenced enclosures. Some photos taken there look wonderful, but it's not the same thing as getting them in the wild, obviously). At least 44 mammal species are represented in the National Park grounds – a number without equals in Europe. Most are moderately- to small-sized (foxes, beavers, hares, minks, badgers, raccoon dogs, pine martens, mice, voles), extremely rare and wary (wolf, lynx) or present in very small numbers (less than 30 Elk live in the Park), but European bison – now strictly protected and an icon of modern Poland - have made a successful comeback after being completely wiped out in the wild at the end of World War One: the current population of 300 now residing in Bialowieza descends from the 12 specimens which had survived in captivity, with the first captive-bred individuals having been released in the wild in 1956. Red deer and wild boar have also been successful and are present in large numbers. Seeing these - not to mention being able to photograph them with some measure of success - requires an enormous amount of patience and dedication, a good degree of luck and above all the skills of

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■ A stunning European Bison *Bison bonasus* bull - it always comes as a surprise discovering that an animal of such enormous size and weight can easily jump across a 3 meter wide stream or over a 2 meter obstacle from a standing position. Normally shy and peaceful, bulls can become dangerous during rut, while females will promptly charge humans if separated from their calves. Bison can live up to 27 years in the wild.



■ A scenic bog landscape in the heart of the forest. Such quiet, peaceful corners offer wonderful photo opportunities to visitors, particularly in spring and autumn when colors are at their most vibrant.

a seriously motivated, experienced wildlife guide. We have been exceptionally lucky in this respect having secured the services of Lukasz Mazurek, the founder and owner of [WildPoland.com](http://WildPoland.com) and author of the highly recommended and exhaustive *WildPoland Bialowieza* and *Biebrza Site Guides* - an enthusiastic, highly motivated, exceptionally informative young man who, besides being a very pleasant companion, was able to successfully track down our wary subjects - thanks in no small measure to his relentless obstination in making us happy. Make no mistake, the animals are there - but it takes a lot of experience in the field to find them in the right place and at the right time, so the contribution of a local experienced guide is absolutely essential if one does not want to rely on luck alone or be sorely disappointed, and we can safely recommend Lukasz and his small but highly professional company for a custom-designed trip.

**THERE IS A RIGHT TIME AND A RIGHT PLACE FOR EVERYTHING**

Different periods of the year predictably present different opportunities - many interesting bird species and mixed bison herds are easier to see in spring and summer (but then the forest foliage is thick and uniformly green), autumn is remarkably good for colors, mushrooms, lone

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*Flamed by the nearing of autumn, maple and hornbeam leaves drift on the surface of a forest puddle. Soon they'll be part again of the never-ending cycle of death and regeneration so evident everywhere in Bialowieza.*

Approaching bison in the thickly forested habitat they live in usually means slowly and silently negotiating soft, uneven, mossy ground and a tangle of twigs and branches to be able to get a good field of view. It's not easy - but highly rewarding, even if the shot is flawed or not as good as hoped.





■ A rare sight - a bachelor bull grazing at sunset in a forest clearing. The small photo at right gives a good idea of how close one can get - with a good dose of caution - to such a magnificent animal.



bison bulls and rutting Red deer, winter offers spectacular snowy landscapes and allows good views of bison feeding at specially appointed haystacks (at minus 30°C) - but do not be mistaken, time (at least a full week) and stamina are always required to have some reasonable chances of success. There's a lot of walking to be expected (from 8 to 15 kilometers a day, and that can be quite long for photographers carrying 12 kilograms of equipment on their back, as we do), but luckily the forest floor is very open and flat - not like in the tropics! - and the trails are immaculately maintained, so this can actually be very pleasant; light levels inside the forest itself, however, are very low and often problematic even during the day, and that may complicate matters as most sightings of large mammals can be hoped for just before sunrise (from 5am to 6 am) or in the late afternoon (from 5pm to 6pm), at least in autumn. Using a normal tripod for wildlife photography here is out of the question, as most encounters are too short to allow setting up one, so the only other option is raising the ISO values and keeping one's hands steady - you'll need those, as a

400mm lens is the absolute minimum required. The other solution - adopted by several dedicated and hard-working professionals - requires setting up a one-person hide by one of the trail crossroads and sit there all day long with a hot coffee thermos, a long lens and a tripod-mounted camera, from dawn to dusk, hoping for some fine specimen to show up. They usually do, sooner or later - but that is not our idea of enjoying ourselves or enjoying the forest. Bird life is exceptionally abundant in spring (Bialowieza is a woodpecker's paradise with all but one of European species represented, including the rare Three-toed woodpecker, and it hosts eight out of ten Central European owl species, including the diminutive Pygmy Owl) but once again seeing is one thing - European birdwatchers flock in large groups to Bialowieza every year! - and taking good pictures is another, as the dark, sun-dappled forest environment usually frustrates the fast focusing which bird photography requires. There are no dangerous animals in Bialowieza, and those potentially so (bison, wild boar, wolves) keep well clear of humans, so walking is safe at all times - but mosquitoes can be very



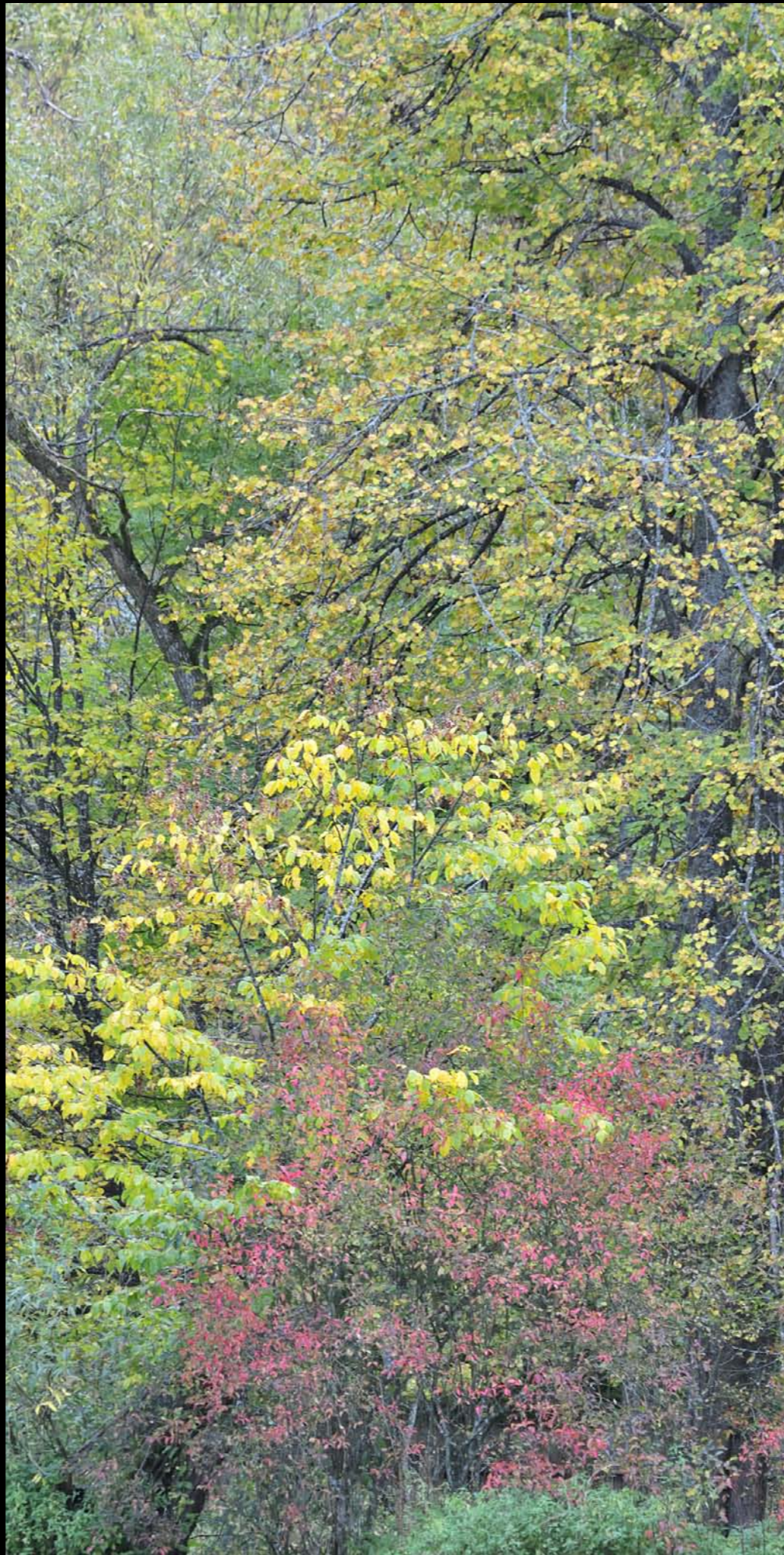
■ Bright green duckweed, colorful dead leaves and a clear blue autumn sky reflected in a quiet forest bog - a few simple elements which conspire in creating images of great appeal and natural beauty.



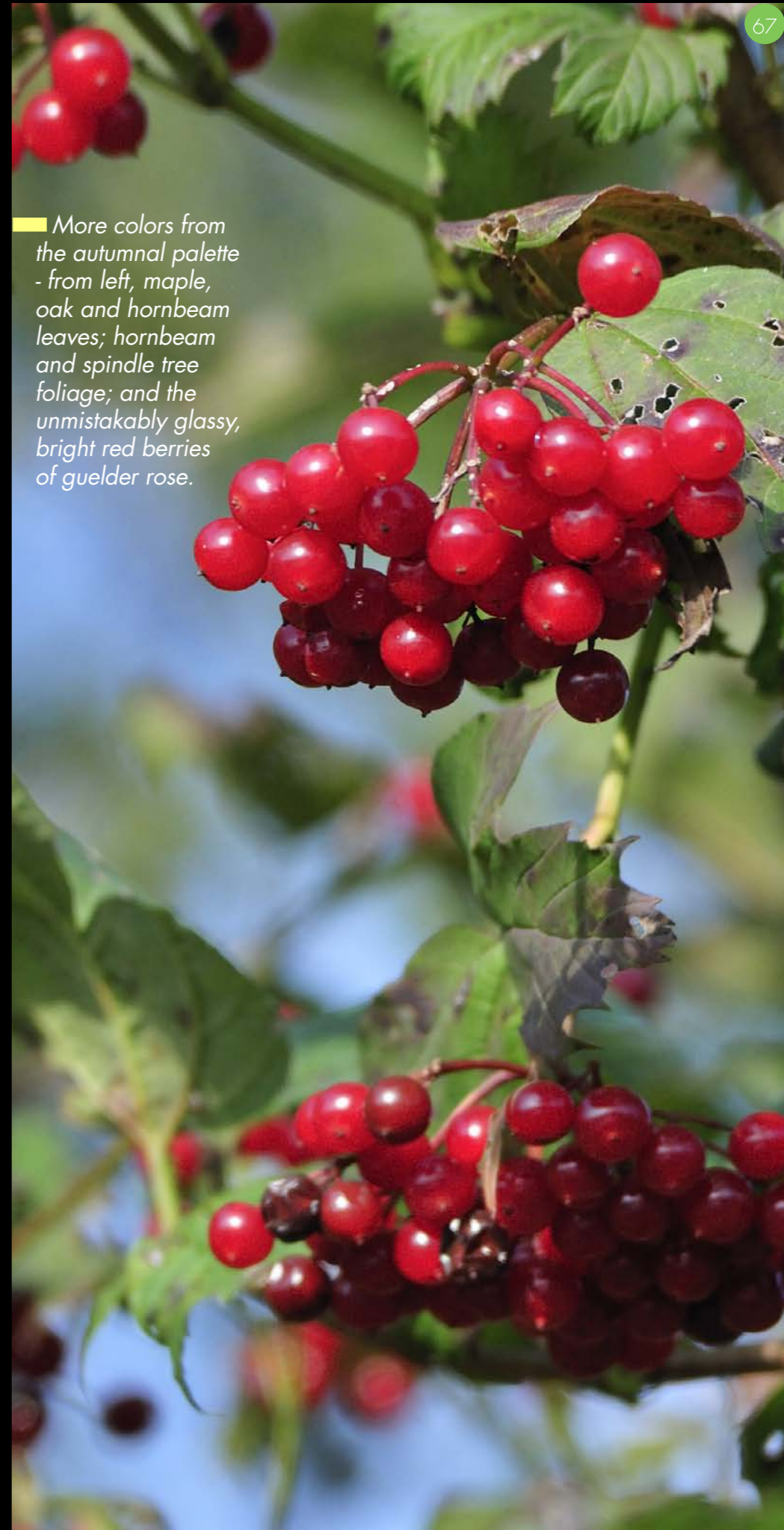
■ A flaming sunrise heralds the coming of a new day on Bialowieza's ancient forests - many-hued, colorful dawns and sunsets at these latitudes often rival those usually admired at the tropics.

numerous and bothersome in warm weather, and ticks are very common in the tall grasses. These latter blood-sucking parasites are not dangerous *per se*, but they can occasionally transmit Lyme's disease - which can be very serious if not treated in time - and so it is very advisable to wear long sleeves and trousers, tucking them into socks, and check well every part of the body in the evening. If the relative (or rather, the apparent) scarcity of large animals can be very frustrating to the uninitiated, the methodical, careful observation of the forest floor is instead exceptionally rewarding (in September and October the woods are literally alive with thousands of exquisitely camouflaged Grass frogs *Rana temporaria* and millions of colorful, strangely-shaped fungi of all sorts and sizes), so carrying a macro

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More colors from the autumnal palette - from left, maple, oak and hornbeam leaves; hornbeam and spindle tree foliage; and the unmistakably glassy, bright red berries of guelder rose.



■ Backlit by the early morning sun, dry tall grasses sway in the breeze on a forest clearing. Such habitats offer excellent opportunities to sight raptors and other birds and small mammals.



or wide-macro set up is obviously recommended to all. And then of course there are the spectacular landscapes of Bialowieza - open meadows and luminous forest clearings, tree trunk shapes and bark textures, solemn forest panoramas, peaceful beaver ponds, the black still pools of peat bogs - which truly have few or no rivals at all in the rest of Europe. Colors in autumn can be absolutely stunning and a photographer's dream - the cool blue-green of spruces, the golden leaves and silver-white trunks of birches, the flaming red and oranges of Norway maples, the bright yellow of hornbeam, the fluorescent vermilion and fuchsia of fruiting Spindle trees all blend harmoniously in a glorious and uniquely European tapestry. There are moments - especially at dawn - when the delicate, exquisite beauty of the surrounding landscape, still cloaked in mist, is truly overwhelming. It is then that the secret, mysterious essence of Bialowieza is finally revealed to those humble enough to watch and learn. Silently standing in the early morning's frost, the pilgrim hushes in awe, transfixed by nature's epiphany, as from the fog shrouding the meadows an electric vibration of cold hues rises, evoked by the first, streaming rays of the rising sun: that shimmering, shivering, magical curtain which shelters now and forever, like in an ancient Slavic fable, the mystery of the Halls of the Bison King.

■ The Common toad *Bufo bufo* is often encountered during the day if the weather has been wet - given the opportunity, this robust and well-camouflaged amphibian will not hesitate to prey on large insects, reptiles, frogs and even small mammals.



■ Guided excursions inside the Strict Reserve offer stunning photographic opportunities to visitors, even if actual animal sightings can be rare. The trails run between scenic alder bog forests and imposing oak, linden and hornbeam mixed woods, where some trees can be 50 meters tall - that is rainforest size, unheard of elsewhere in Europe today.





More details from the universe of Białowieża's forest - a mushroom colony, the heavily fissured bark of an ancient tree, a clump of ferns in the undergrowth.





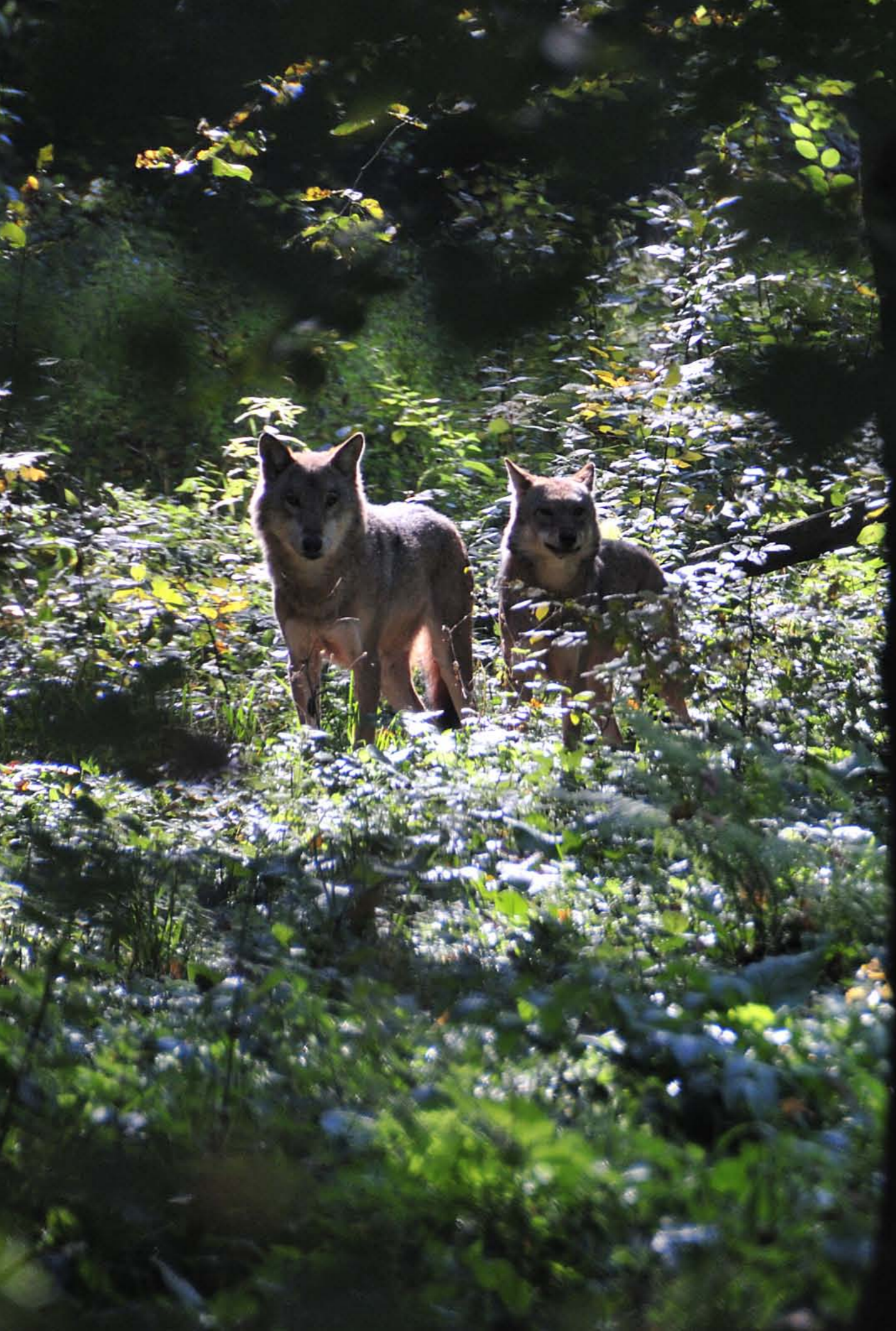
More impressions from Bialowieza: grasses waving in the golden afternoon sun (far left), a Spotted Flycatcher *Muscipapa striata* perching on the wooden fence of a country cottage, an unidentified species of field mouse surprised in the forest (below).







■ During September and October - if the weather has been favorable - Bialowieza is trasformed in a magical kingdom of mushrooms, with an overwhelming number and variety of fungi growing literally everywhere.



■ *Feared by all and persecuted by many, wary and endangered, the European wolf *Canis lupus lupus* lives in small packs and is very rarely sighted in the forests of Bialowieza. Antonella's hand besides the footprint freshly left by a large wolf gives a good idea of the size of the specimen - this Alpha male might very well weigh more than 70 kgs. Tracks left by this highly sociable and mysterious predator are very often observed along the trails which criss-cross the forest.*



Autumn lighting and foliage in Bialowieza offer truly superb opportunities for landscape photographers - here the long meadow grasses, immersed in a cool golden glow, acquire an almost theatrical quality.



*Looking like a dead leaf but ready to jump away at a moment's notice*

■ A common or grass frog *Rana temporaria* on the forest floor. At these latitudes this species can still be quite active at very low temperatures - nearing 0°C - and at a remarkable distance from streams and ponds.





More examples of the stunning variety and quantity of mushroom species found in Bialowieza during September and October. The bright livery of the Toadstool or Fly Agaric *Amanita muscaria* (right) advertises its hallucinogenic and potentially deadly properties.





■ Wild boars *Sus scrofa* are possibly some of the most easily observed large animals in the Bialowieza forest. Wary, intelligent and alert, often foraging in groups, these relatives of the domestic pig will occasionally charge intruders - with very scary and potentially dangerous consequences, as their tubular snout conceals a pair of curved, razor-sharp tusks, particularly developed in males.

■ The fiery autumn foliage of Norway maple is instantly recognized - single *Acer platanoides* trees stand out at a great distance.



■ The sun sets in a fiery display - eastern European skies have a special quality to them which is rather unique in our experience, often offering spectacular cloud formations which are seldom observed further west.



CLICK ON THE IMAGES AND WATCH THREE SHORT VIDEOS ON SOME OF BIALOWIEZA'S MOST SPECTACULAR NATURAL HIGHLIGHTS







Colors - from the technicolored foliage of the autumn forest to the leaves of a fern burnished by the frost, to the soft hues of a rainbow gloriously rising above the forest after a rain squall.






■ The sun's rays, filtering and scything from the tree canopy above, often increase one's sensation of entering a cathedral or a temple - ancient forests such as this one have a distinctly mystical quality.



A variety of species, colors and habitats. Top left, a juvenile Common toad *Bufo bufo*; bottom left, a few brightly colored Norway maple leaves stand out on the forest floor; right, the stunning change brought to a football-field sized stretch of forest by a family of beavers - which first dammed a small brook and then flooded it, transforming it into a veritable lake.





■ The forest canopy stretches above. Trees in Bialowieza can reach a very old age and a very remarkable height: oak trees *Quercus robur* (40 meters), linden *Tilia cordata* (40 meters) and Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* (40 meters) are some of the tallest species. The record however belongs to the Norway spruce *Picea abies* which can reach a height of 57 meters.



■ The European or Eurasian lynx *Lynx lynx* is - together with the wolf - the top predator of the Bialowieza forest. Nickamed "the Silver Ghost of the Forest" for its wariness, this stealthy, cunning feline is very rarely observed and even less often photographed in the wild. No more than 200 individuals of this very secretive species are present in Poland at the moment, even if its areal stretches from western Europe to Siberia.



*The cold stare of the silver ghost of the forest*

■ The warm, golden light of a late autumn afternoon lends a distinctly magical quality to this simple forest landscape - those rounded willow bushes, tall spruces and sharply defined birch trees might very well serve as a Pre-raphaelite set to Mozart's Magic Flute.



■ An old, massive bison bull strides fearlessly and purposefully towards us - a good reminder of man's puniness when facing Nature. Saved by man at literally the last minute by a man-induced extinction, this spectacular species now stands as a symbol - still endangered, yes, but hopefully recovering - of what can and must be done to preserve our natural heritage.



*A living symbol of Europe's endangered natural heritage*

# USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

SOME SIMPLE, COMMON SENSE, FIELD-TESTED ADVICE AND INFORMATION TO MAKE THE BEST OUT OF YOUR TRIP AND TO AVOID HASSLES, WORRIES AND PROBLEMS

## At-a-glance travel guide



### COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: **POLAND**

**ROUTE:** Your plane will land at Chopin Warsaw International Airport, a thoroughly modern and well organized facility. From there it's a comfortable five-hour car drive due north-east on good, well-maintained roads to your destination, Bialowieza National Park, close to the border with Belarus.

**MEANS OF TRANSPORT:** You might rent a car in **Warsaw** and drive yourself but we do not advise you to - save yourself the trouble and have the trip organized by a guide who is familiar with the routes and the best wildlife viewing spots. Once in the Park you will have to drive for short distances and then walk - a lot - on very easy, perfectly maintained forest trails. Many visitors also rent bicycles, which are available at every lodge - an excellent and

enjoyable choice but not an easy or comfortable one for equipment-laden wildlife photographers.

**CURRENCY:** It's advisable to change one's own currency in the local one (Polish Zloty) upon arrival in Warsaw to save loss of valuable time looking for small local bank branches later on.

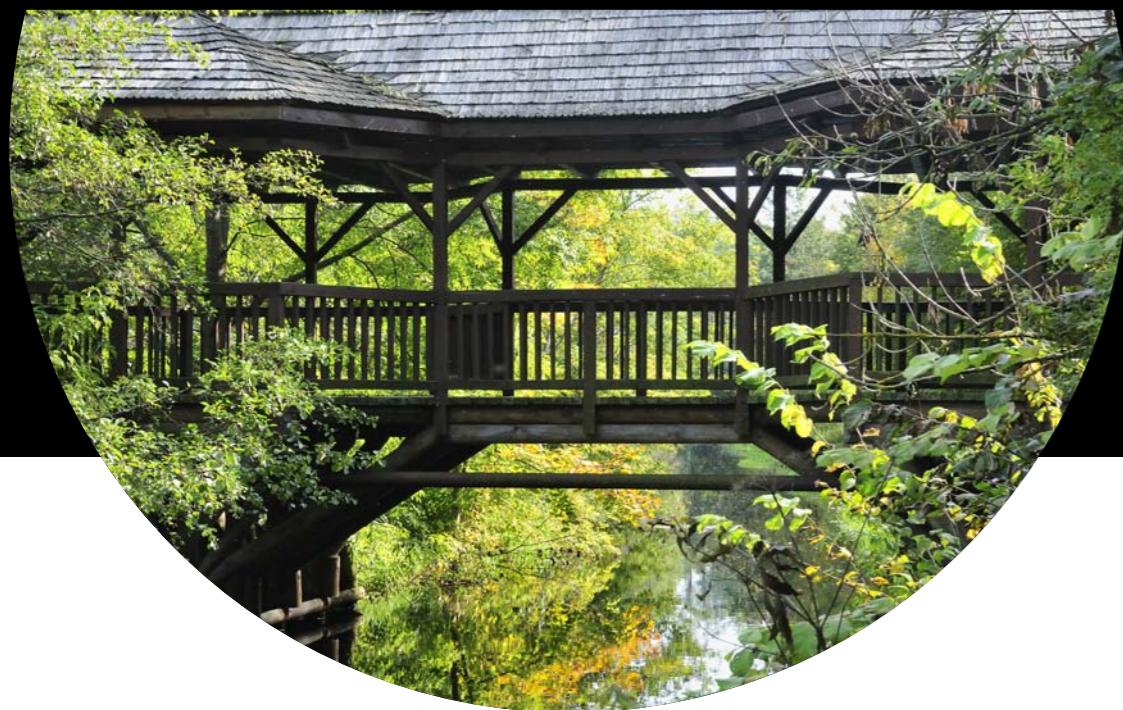
**ACCOMODATION:** Pick your choice from beautiful, top-class hotels to simple, family-style cottages. There's a bit for everybody, so it really depends on your preferences. We elected to stay in small, cozy family-run wooden cottages to have a real taste of local life and traditional cuisine and did not regret it. Even basic, unexpensive accomodation is usually very clean and well heated.

**FOOD:** Fantastic! Heavy and abundant stuff due to the climate - plenty of smoked and cured pork, venison, herring, cabbage, pickles and preserved fruit. Surprisingly, little or no beef is consumed locally. Beware - this isn't an ideal destination for strict vegetarians! Don't miss *pirogi* (stuffed dumplings), the local *bortsch* (the celebrated eastern european red beet and sour cream soup) and Polish *kompot*, a brew of dried fruit and hot water which is both warming and refreshing - and which goes surprisingly well with the hearty food of the area.

**LANGUAGE:** Polish - obviously - and some German and Russian. Very little or no English at all is spoken in eastern Poland - one more reason to have a guide you can communicate with along.



## A treasure trove of European history, art and culture



**WORRIES:** None. Locals are very decent, private, reasonably friendly country folk. Crime is almost non-existent. Food and drink are absolutely safe. Trails are easy to follow and well marked, there are no seriously dangerous animals (well, don't disturb Bison or Wild boar!) and it is rare not to meet other hikers in the forest anyway. Mosquitoes can be real pests in season however, and ticks are a serious liability, so bring some good repellent as there's none available locally.

**HEALTH:** No worries worth mentioning except the risk of catching Lyme's diseases if bitten by a carrier tick. If the bite mark shows a white circle have it inspected by your doctor as soon as possible - Lyme's disease is easily cured but can have very serious consequences if left untreated.

**CLIMATE:** Continental European - reasonably warm summers, cool mid-seasons, freezing winters with lots of snow. Can be very cold at dawn and dusk - dress in layers. Good, well worn-in hiking boots and rubber wellingtons are a must as there's a lot of marshy, boggy terrain in the woods. Forest photography is not easy due to prevalent low light conditions and lots of obstacles (branches, twigs, leaves) between you and your subject.

**BESIDES:** Besides the wildlife, Poland offers all the extraordinary attractions of one of the great cradles of European culture. Local hamlets in the north-eastern area provide interesting photo opportunities with their colorful wooden houses, and in Tykocin, nearby Bialowieza, one should not miss visiting the baroque Synagogue Beit ha-

Kneset ha-Godol, built in 1642. It will offer the opportunity for some sombre reflections about some of the Country's darkest moments in history as the Jewish population of Tykocin - numbering 2.000 - was slaughtered *en masse* by the Nazis on 25-26 August 1941. Then of course there's the rebuilt center of old **Warsaw** - razed to the ground during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1944 and subsequently rebuilt brick upon brick with spectacular results - which one should not miss visiting before flying back home at the end of the trip. Poland offers many other exceptionally beautiful, not-to-be missed destinations - such as the historically and artistically significant **Krakow**, a jewel of a city - which however lie beyond the scope of this guide. For art, architecture and music lovers it is a destination of a lifetime. ●