

THE BIEBRZA MARSHES
OF NORTH-EASTERN POLAND

A SOUND OF TUNDRA

European Elk, beavers, adders, wolves
and a multitude of birds
find their home among peat bogs,
birch woods and a sea of grass



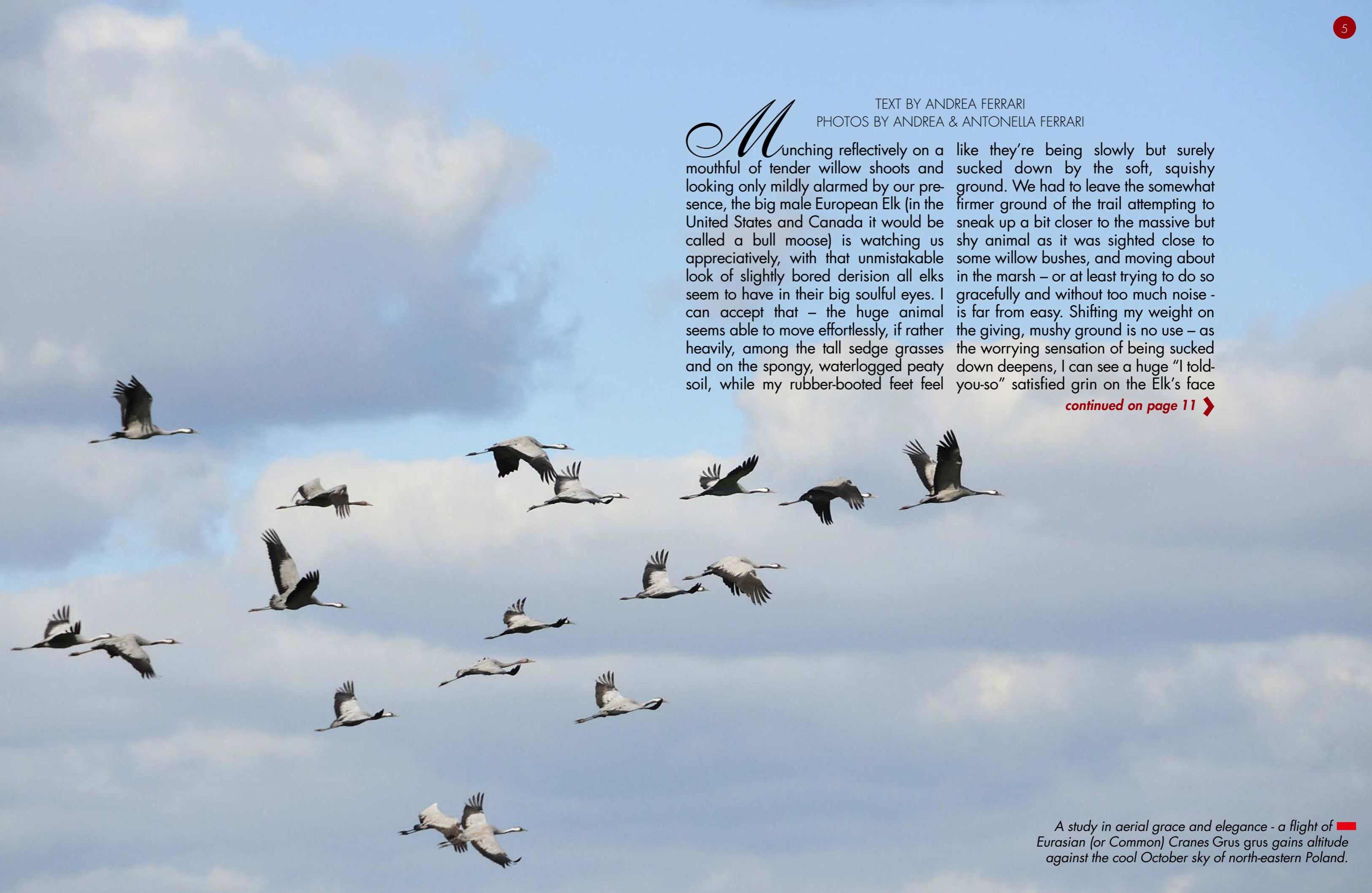
■ A male European Elk Alces alces in its prime and with a full set of antlers - one of the Biebrza marshes most sought-after and thrilling encounters for wildlife photographers.

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

Munching reflectively on a mouthful of tender willow shoots and looking only mildly alarmed by our presence, the big male European Elk (in the United States and Canada it would be called a bull moose) is watching us appreciatively, with that unmistakable look of slightly bored derision all elks seem to have in their big soulful eyes. I can accept that – the huge animal seems able to move effortlessly, if rather heavily, among the tall sedge grasses and on the spongy, waterlogged peaty soil, while my rubber-booted feet feel

like they're being slowly but surely sucked down by the soft, squishy ground. We had to leave the somewhat firmer ground of the trail attempting to sneak up a bit closer to the massive but shy animal as it was sighted close to some willow bushes, and moving about in the marsh – or at least trying to do so gracefully and without too much noise - is far from easy. Shifting my weight on the giving, mushy ground is no use – as the worrying sensation of being sucked down deepens, I can see a huge "I told-you-so" satisfied grin on the Elk's face

continued on page 11 >



A study in aerial grace and elegance - a flight of Eurasian (or Common) Cranes Grus grus gains altitude against the cool October sky of north-eastern Poland.



Dominated by dogwood, spindle-tree and willow, the Biebrza landscapes in October offer enchanting vistas and stunning panoramas - a boon for the landscape photographer.



■ A few plants are still in flower as a male Roe deer *Capreolus capreolus* emerges - like a legendary faun of antiquity - from the tall grasses and bullrushes of the marsh.



Looking like a perfectly innocent puddle, a peat bog pit dug by peat collectors is in fact an almost bottomless, deadly trap for the unwary animal passing by.

Common adders *Vipera berus* are the only venomous snakes found in northern Europe. This beautiful but very shy species is quite commonly encountered in Cerzwone Bagno.





The Eurasian █
Lynx lynx lynx is
one of the largest
predators of
European and
Siberian forests.
This stunningly
beautiful species is
however extremely
wary and almost
never sighted in
the wild.
Biebrza's acidic
soils are locally
dominated by
heathlands, where
Ericaceae such as
Calluna vulgaris
are often
abundant.



through my telephoto lens, and the uncomfortable feeling of being swallowed up alive and forever by a bottomless peat bog like some relic of the Pleistocene presents itself with utmost clarity. Of course having a big cumbersome backpack full of photo equipment on my back doesn't help, and when a stream of icy, crystal-clear bog water suddenly rushes down my calf soaking my foot I finally explode in a muttered curse. The big elk, predictably, looks at me once more, snorts the expected derisory comment, and canters away, disappearing among the tall grasses with an elastic, rubbery, slow-motion gait. But it's a draw – he got the last laugh, but I got my photo!

Walking for miles in sticky, deep mud or in ankle-deep, clear and ice-cold water on soft, spongy, treacherous vegetable mats which are in the process of being transformed into peat is indeed part and parcel of the Biebrza Marshes experience – the well-kept wooden walkways, the occasional drier higher ground and the birch-topped, post-glacial sand dunes incongruously emerging now and then like small islands from the mesmerizing, endless sea of grass at Czerwone Bagno ("The Red Swamp") are somewhat unexpected and welcome luxuries after a long, wet slog.

continued on page 18 ➤

*The endangered green
elves of Europe's
imperilled wetlands*



Severely endangered elsewhere, the European Tree Frog *Hyla arborea* is still commonly encountered in Biebrza during spring and summer (photo Lukasz Mazurek).



An adult female European Elk *Alces alces* grazes peacefully in the late afternoon light. Despite their size, Elks are very shy and not easily approached.



The marshes' permanent waters are mostly exceptionally clear and very cool, hosting a huge variety of animal and plant species.



■ A Roe deer *Capreolus capreolus* freezes among the thick shrubbery of a fern mire. The alder woods encircling the marshes offer excellent chances to view Roe deer and European Elk.

*A safe haven for
beautiful waterbirds
persecuted elsewhere*



The Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* is one of Europe's showiest birds. Sadly, this beautiful species can still be hunted in some countries (photo Lukasz Mazurek).



■ A flaming sunset over the marshes offers a background to a baby Slow worm *Anguis fragilis*, a legless lizard species often found on the sand dunes of Czerwone Bagno.

■ Baby adders *Vipera berus* use their yellow-colored tail tip as a lure to attract lizards and frogs. These elegantly marked snakes will only bite in self-defense (photo Lukasz Mazurek).



And yet the marshes are only one of the innumerable facets of the Biebrza National Park, a complex, multi-layered environment stretching for 1.160 square kilometers in the remotest corner of North-Eastern Poland, along the border with Belarus. This is a little European Amazon, a flat, wide river valley counting scores of labyrinthine smaller rivers, tributaries and canals which snake through open meadows and cultivated fields, impenetrable reed and sedge beds, fairy-tale fen mires, waterlogged peat bogs, swampy alder forests, birch and spruce woods and even enormous sand dunes left over by the last glaciation – a relic

swamp like no other, the open door to the tundra further north, and the last and only European lowland river valley with an intact longitudinal and cross-sectional hydrology. No wonder then if this richly varied environment and its many different habitats host an exceptional number of plant and animal species.

Rather than visiting the Biebrza valley in late spring or early summer – when thousands of breeding and migratory birds congregate in the marshes and the nearby meadows, attracting scores of birdwatchers and wildlife photographers from all over Europe – we chose to visit in October, when the

continued on page 24 ➤

■ *The Biebrza marshes often offer stunning vistas - cloud-dotted bright blue skies, open wetlands and birch woods "islands" conjure iconic images of the European North.*





Flooded alder woods and bogs are an extensive, permanent feature of the Biebrza marshes. These are an ideal environment for amphibian species.

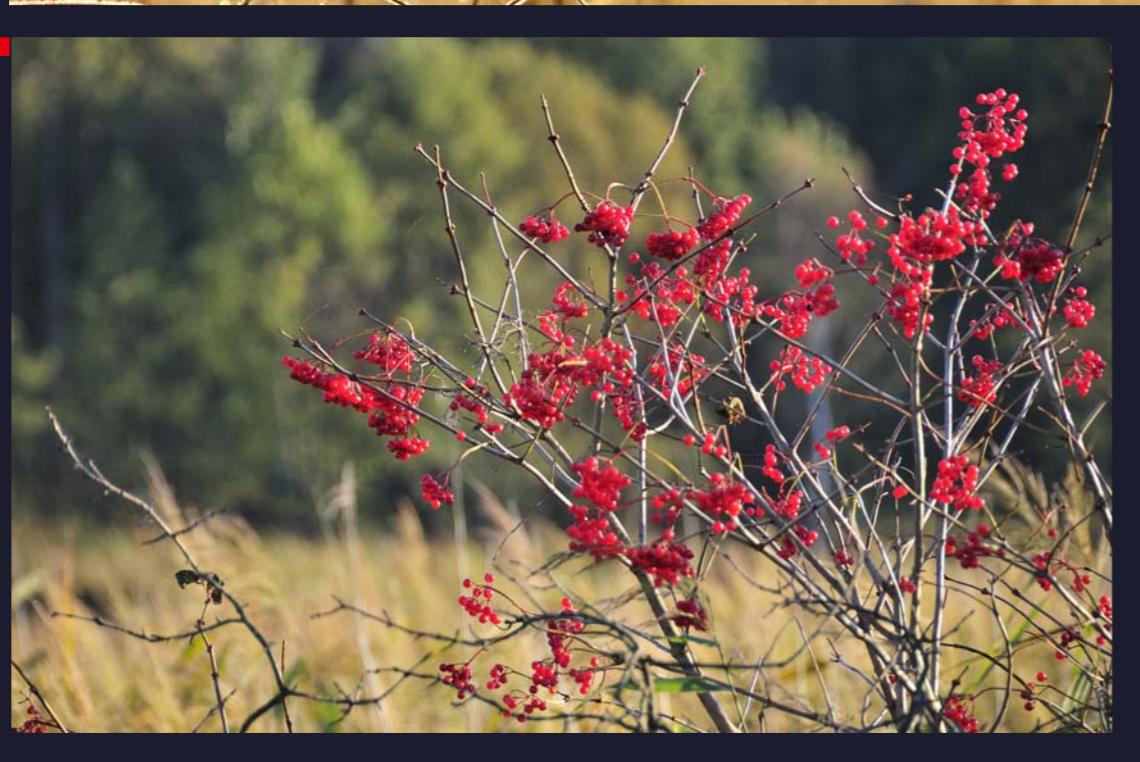
A world of water and leaves where ancient mammals roam



■ A Red deer *Cervus elaphus* stag shows a magnificent set of antlers as it cautiously negotiates the mushy, peaty floor of the Biebrza marshes. This is a rather uncommon encounter.



Frozen in crystal-like frost, the golden grasses of the marsh briefly - and gloriously - shine for a few seconds in the glow of the dawning sun. The bright red berries of a Guelder rose *Viburnum opulus* offer an equally vibrant, albeit longer lasting, show of beauty in the warm afternoon sun.





An adult European Elk Alces alces female emerges cautiously from a willow bush. She was part of a family group - both parents and a calf: her partner can be seen in the opening spread of our article on page 4.



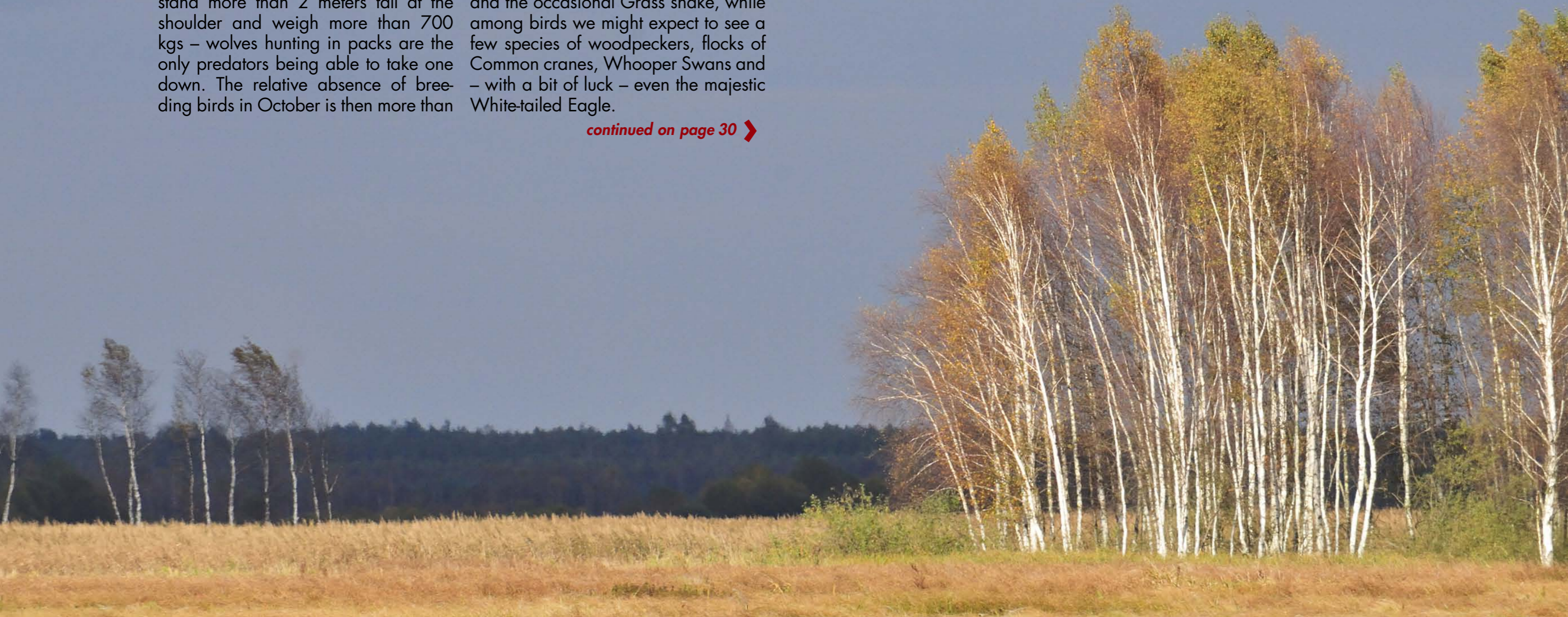
■ The difficulties encountered in approaching the largest mammals found in the Biebrza marshes are more than compensated by the dazzling color palette and variety shown by the vegetation's autumn foliage.

colorful autumn foliage is at its stunning best and the resident male Elks – being in rut - sport their distinctive antlers. Eurasian Elks are somewhat smaller than their New Continent relatives, and they sport smaller and less palmated sets of antlers, but are fascinating and rather impressive animals in their own right, of course – the only other place in Western and Central Europe where they can be seen with such frequency is Scandinavia, ie Sweden, Finland and Norway. “Smaller” here is of course a relative term, as a mature bull can stand more than 2 meters tall at the shoulder and weigh more than 700 kgs – wolves hunting in packs are the only predators being able to take one down. The relative absence of breeding birds in October is then more than

compensated by the other species now roaming undisturbed the endless marshes and the mysterious, silent spruce and birch woods - Red and Roe deer in rut (a strange and unusual sight among the sedge grasses of the marshes!), beavers, which are slightly less nocturnal and more active at twilight at this time of the year (in fact the river Biebrza takes its name from the word “bòbr”, Polish for “beaver”), Red fox, Eurasian lynx, Eurasian wolf, Common adders preparing for their long winter sleep, Fire-bellied toads, Slow worms and the occasional Grass snake, while among birds we might expect to see a few species of woodpeckers, flocks of Common cranes, Whooper Swans and – with a bit of luck – even the majestic White-tailed Eagle.

continued on page 30 ➤

Birch trees can be especially colorful in autumn - their silver-white, straight trunks crowned by the pale green, gold and brass leaves of the crown.



■ *Several apparently endless expanses of the Biebrza marshes are all but impassable, requiring the use of canoes or inflatable rubber boats. Such clear-water flooded areas teem with amphibian and insect life.*



■ A Red fox *Vulpes vulpes* flashes suddenly across a wet meadow, oblivious of our presence. This was a totally unexpected and truly exhilarating encounter even if it only lasted a few seconds.

Expecting the unexpected is the rule of wildlife photography



■ A large flock of Common cranes *Grus grus* forages undisturbed in a hamlet meadow. In a few days these stately birds will start their migration to Africa. The whole world's population of this species counts about 220.00 individuals - a frighteningly low number.



■ A stunningly beautiful male Roe deer *Capreolus capreolus* is frozen in mid-air by the camera's click as it runs (and urinates!) from an unseen pursuer. The brightly-lit, open meadows bordering the marshes offer many unexpected, thrilling encounters with wild animals.





A dark, brooding October sky contrasts starkly with these oaks' bright autumn foliage. A ploughed field in the foreground is testimony to the human presence in Biebrza.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of our guide and friend Lukasz Mazurek of WildPoland.com (with whom we had already successfully visited Bialowieza National Park, see [Anima Mundi issue 2](#) for a full trip report) we were not disappointed, and each and every one of our long treks across the Biebrza valley was punctuated by some truly splendid encounter. We cannot recommend enough Lukasz's proficiency and

deep knowledge of the area – getting around the confusing jigsaw of Biebrza's different routes, forest trails and vantage points really requires a guide of his experience to maximize results, and after all he's the author of the highly informative [Biebrza Site Guide](#) (another book one cannot do without when exploring the area is Crossbill Editions' [The Nature Guide to the Biebrza Marshes](#)).

continued on page 36 >

A bright-yellow hedge of cropped willows shines in the biting, crystal-clear air of a late autumn afternoon. The marshes are almost deserted at this time of the year.





Two facets of Biebrza - the clear-water flooded meadows and a Common Toadflax *Linaria vulgaris* blooming on the dry, wind-swept sand dunes of Czerwone Bagno.

A sudden white flash of wings among the burnt gold of dry grasses



A Great White Egret *Egretta alba* (current synonyms are *Ardea alba* and *Casmerodius albus*) takes flight from the marshes (photo Lukasz Mazurek).



The softly-hued autumn landscape of the Biebrza valley, criss-crossed by countless rivulets, slow streams and tributaries of the main rivercourse.



A subadult European Elk Alces alces (notice its first season small, unbranched antlers) negotiates the marshy wetlands thanks to its splayed specialized hooves.



Birch woods top the extensive sand dunes system of Cerzwone Bagno, a relict of the last glaciation. This is an ideal environment for many reptilian species.

Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa* can be frequently observed in Biebrza in late spring and early summer, when the marshes' wetlands become a veritable paradise for birdwatchers (photo Lukasz Mazurek).



And yet make no mistake, large mammal sightings and wildlife encounters in general are not easy to achieve in this environment: most species are active in low-light conditions at dusk and/or twilight (especially beavers, which can be frustratingly difficult and rather disappointing subjects), and getting close to subjects is made even more difficult by the nature of the terrain itself, which is often treacherously waterlogged and often impossible to negotiate. This, of course, makes searching for them so much more interesting, and adds immensely to the satisfaction when one is able to get a decent shot.

But even if one were not to see one single animal – mammals in particular are very shy here - one's visit to the Biebrza marshes would be absolutely unforgettable, as the dizzying variety of habitats and the stunning color palette of the autumn vegetation in October have very few equals. Scenic landscapes which can be viewed from well-established vantage points are countless, and the highly variable weather and lighting conditions typical of the season can be a landscape photographer's dream come true. Bathed in the cool, muted light of the impending autumn evening, the open countryside shimmering in an ice-cold

continued on page 42 >



Click on the images and watch six short videos on the Biebrza marshes environment.

Czerwone Bagno The Watch Towers The Marshes - 1 The Marshes - 2 The Peat Bogs Sights and Sounds




The open meadows and cow pastures around Biebrza are seasonally shrouded in cobwebs, creating hauntingly beautiful landscapes. Right, a Common or Green Frog *Rana* sp. (probably *lessonae*) in a shallow roadside pool - Biebrza's amphibians can still be active at surprisingly low temperatures.



*The calls of waterbirds
fill the ice-cold air of
a glorious morning*



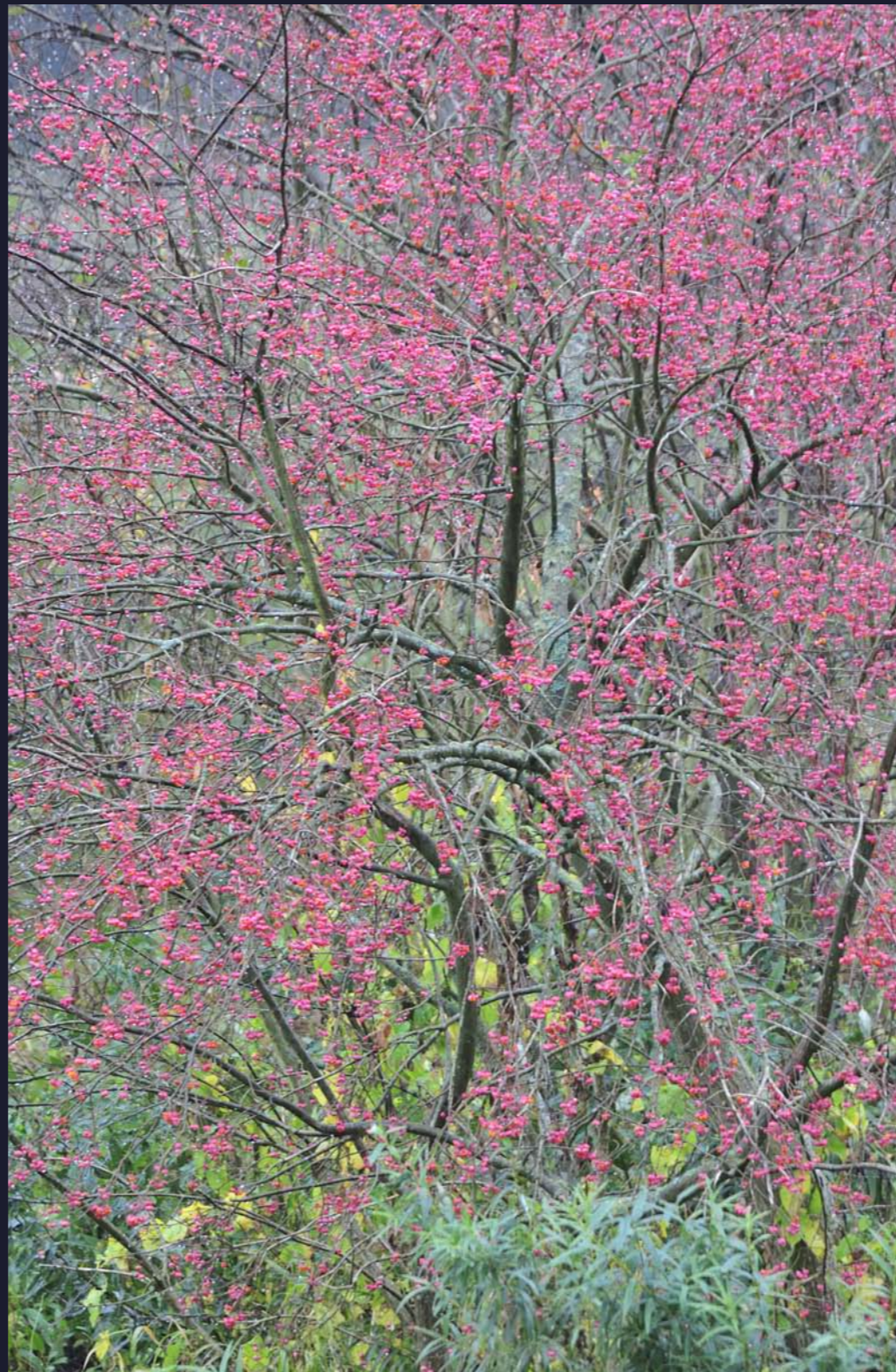
A flock of White-fronted Geese Anser albifrons takes flight, with two Whooper swans Cygnus cygnus and a lonely Mute swan Cygnus olor in the background .

A Eurasian wolf (Canis lupus lupus) is shown standing in a field of fallen autumn leaves. The wolf has a grey and brown coat, alert ears, and is looking towards the left. The ground is covered with a mix of green grass and yellow, orange, and brown leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the wolf.

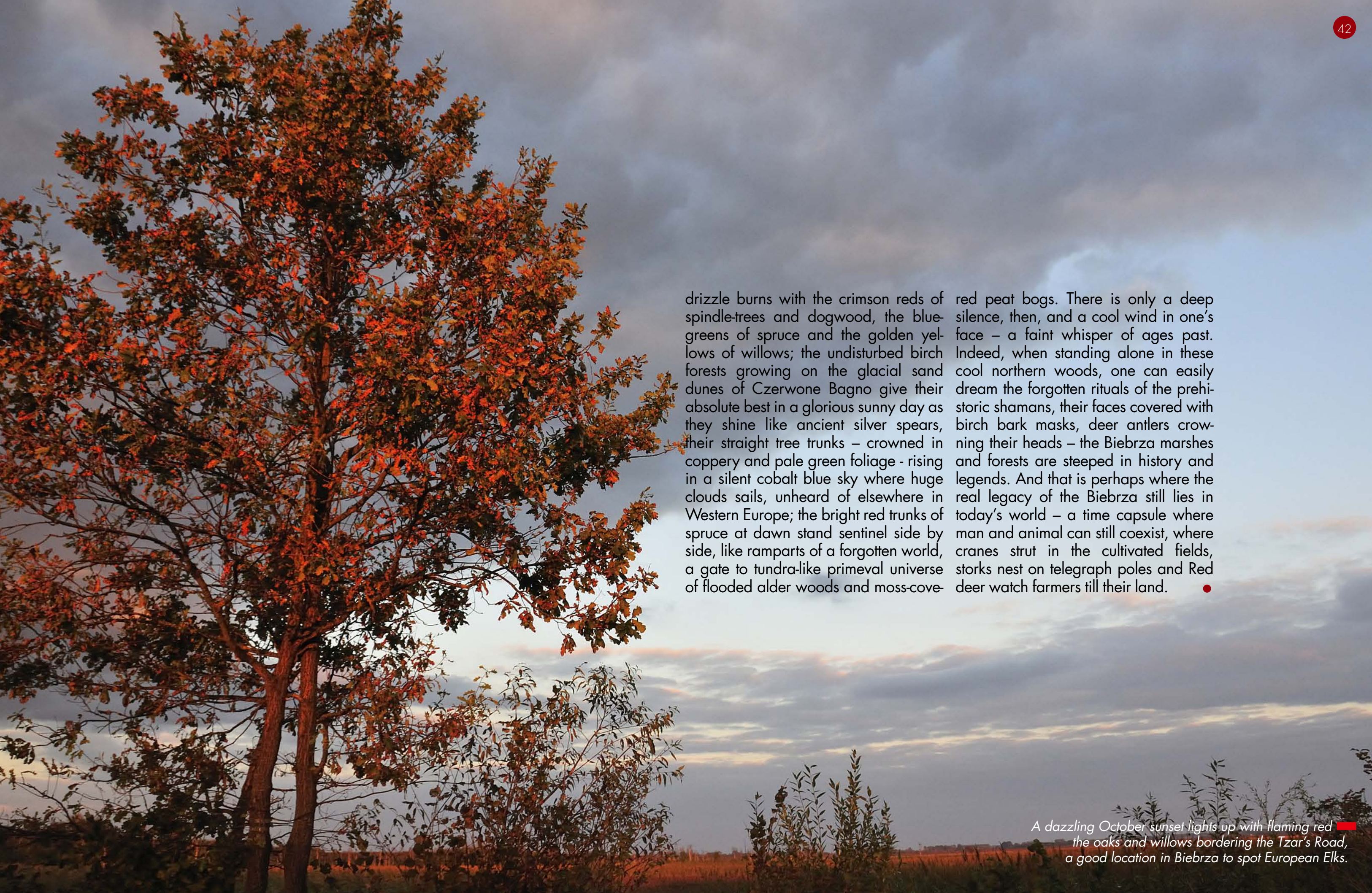
*The Eurasian wolf *Canis lupus lupus* is Biebrza's apex predator, with a few small groups prowling the area. Sighting one in the wild is exceptionally difficult.*

European beavers *Castor fiber* are very shy and almost exclusively active at twilight, making for very frustrating camera subjects. The Biebrza takes its name from the Polish word for beaver (photo Lukasz Mazurek).





■ Fruiting spindle-trees *Euonymus europaeus* create stunning vistas in the autumnal landscapes of the Biebrza wetlands. The very low temperatures are a deciding factor in the brightness and intensity of its October colors.



drizzle burns with the crimson reds of spindle-trees and dogwood, the blue-greens of spruce and the golden yellows of willows; the undisturbed birch forests growing on the glacial sand dunes of Czerwone Bagno give their absolute best in a glorious sunny day as they shine like ancient silver spears, their straight tree trunks – crowned in coppery and pale green foliage - rising in a silent cobalt blue sky where huge clouds sail, unheard of elsewhere in Western Europe; the bright red trunks of spruce at dawn stand sentinel side by side, like ramparts of a forgotten world, a gate to tundra-like primeval universe of flooded alder woods and moss-cove-
red peat bogs. There is only a deep silence, then, and a cool wind in one's face – a faint whisper of ages past. Indeed, when standing alone in these cool northern woods, one can easily dream the forgotten rituals of the prehistoric shamans, their faces covered with birch bark masks, deer antlers crowning their heads – the Biebrza marshes and forests are steeped in history and legends. And that is perhaps where the real legacy of the Biebrza still lies in today's world – a time capsule where man and animal can still coexist, where cranes strut in the cultivated fields, storks nest on telegraph poles and Red deer watch farmers till their land. ●

A dazzling October sunset lights up with flaming red the oaks and willows bordering the Tzar's Road, a good location in Biebrza to spot European Elks.



*The legendary great
denizen of Europe's
ancient forests*

■ Deep in the thickly forested alder bog woods, one last lucky encounter with a strikingly beautiful adult male European Elk - you can't get much closer than this!

At-a-glance travel guide

COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: POLAND



USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

Some simple, common sense, field-tested advice and information to make the best out of your trip and avoid hassles, worries and problems

ROUTE: Your international flight 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, Biebrza National Park, close to the border with Belarus. There are many historically significant and scenic spots along the way so keep cameras ready.

MEANS OF TRANSPORT: You might rent a car in Warsaw and drive yourself to Biebrza 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 daily and then walk - a lot - on very easy trails or in

the marshes themselves, occasionally in very cold and ankle-deep water, peat and/or mud.

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 the beautiful *Zagroda Kuwasy Hotel* to simple, family-run 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 deep connection between history, culture and nature



WORRIES: None. Locals are very decent, private, reasonably friendly country folk. Crime is virtually non-existent in the countryside. Food and drink everywhere are absolutely safe. Trails are easy to follow and usually well marked, there are no seriously dangerous animals (well, don't disturb big Elks or Wild boar!) and you will be really close to hamlets and villages most of the time anyway.

HEALTH: No worries worth mentioning, really.

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 an absolute must as there's a lot of marshy, boggy terrain to

negotiate daily. Photography in the marshes can be occasionally frustrating for the presence of very high grasses and hedges, but light conditions during the day are usually excellent, presenting exceptionally rewarding opportunities to landscape photographers all year round.

BESIDES: Besides its well-known 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 Bejt 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 and vibrant 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, and one of the most beautiful destinations one can think about if wishing to mix culture and nature/wildlife during a single trip within Europe. ●