

THE EUROPEAN BISON
**KING
OF THE
PRIMEVAL
FOREST**

The secret life and habits of the last giant roaming Central Europe's impenetrable woods





TEXT BY LUKASZ MAZUREK
PHOTOS BY MATEUSZ SZYMURA
and LUKASZ MAZUREK

*A*t first you just hear the grunting, then the twigs cracking under the pressure of half a ton of animal. You don't need to see it to be absolutely sure the Bison is close. Some other time you simply stumble upon an animal - be it in the middle of the forest track, right in front of you - or hidden in the dense vegetation, just watching you closely. Whatever the encounter is, you stay frozen almost like you had seen a ghost, you feel your heart racing and among the variety of feelings there is one common to everybody I spoke to - respect towards the huge animal and the forest itself. These meetings stay in your mind forever. Believe me, I remember all my Bison sightings and it has been a few dozens of them over the last several years.

**The story of success...
or is it really?**

Once spread all over Continental Europe, Bison are now rare. There are about 4.000 Bison in the world, but of those only 2.500 in 30 free-ranging populations are living in the wild - in the mountains and forests of

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■ A stunning portrait of an adult snacking on an apple in winter shows the relative slimness of such a large animal - an adaptation to forest life seen also in the Indian Gaur *Bos gaurus*.

■ Mature bison bulls are solitary animals, but young bachelors will form small groups. Adult females tend to form small herds together with their young calves. Devoid of leaves, forests in winter offer good chances to sight and photograph these beautiful, rare mammals (photos Lukasz Mazurek).



■ A huge adult bull in the frozen winter landscape of the Bialowieza National Park, a large protected area straddling the border between Poland and Belarus.



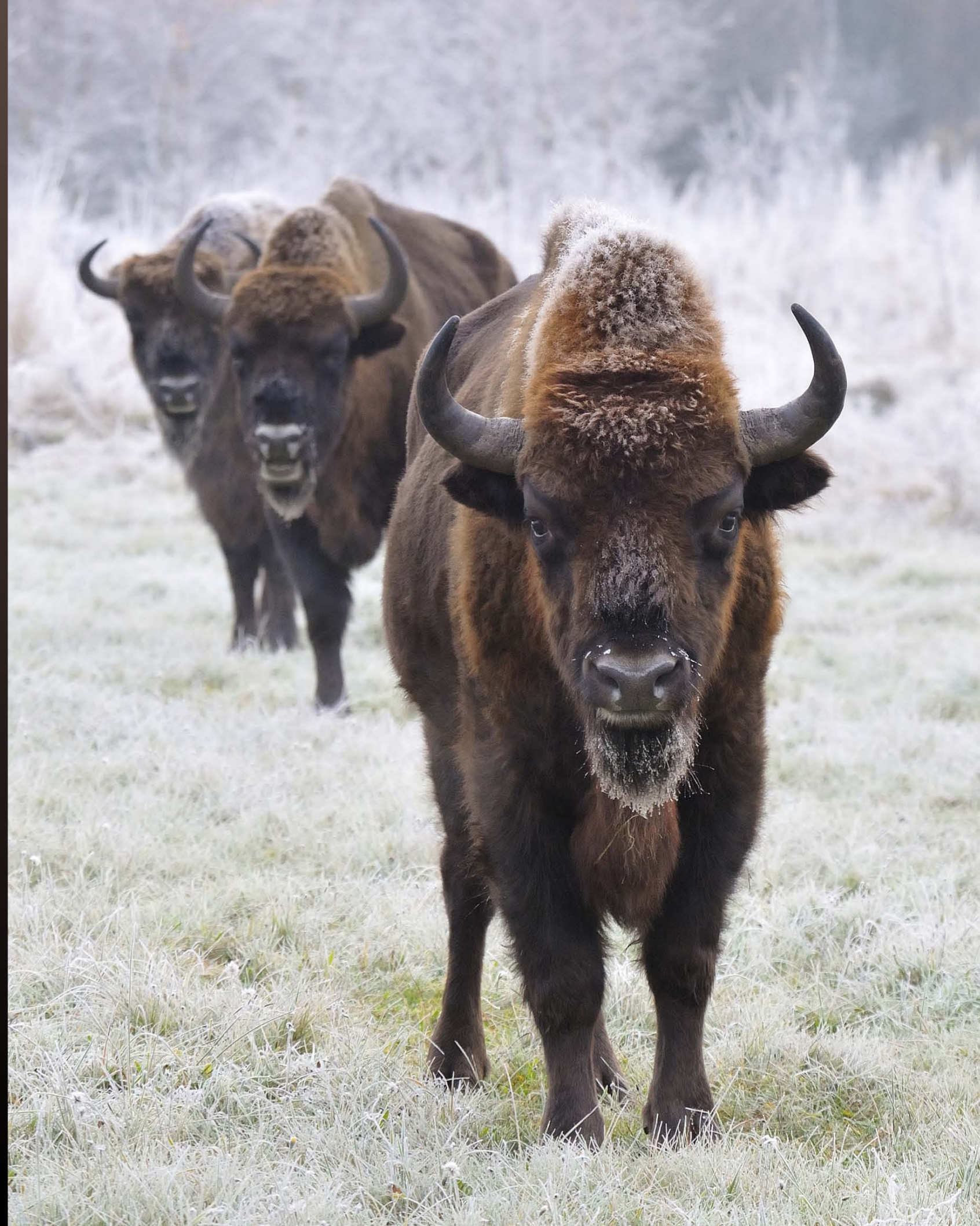
*The horned, shy giants
of the Old Continent's last
remaining primeval forests*

Eastern Europe and Western Russia. The species had been declining quickly, as the forests of Europe shrunk, since the Middle Age, and by the time of World War I there were only two populations left - one in Bialowieza and the other in the Caucasus Mountains. Both disappeared completely in the 1920s. Well, they disappeared in the wild but their descendants survived in the zoological gardens of Europe and having been brought back to their home land they started the new generation that was first released into the wild in 1950s in the Bialowieza Forest. The story looks to be a success but the scientists are not that much content. The key here is genetic variability - or its absence in fact - since all of today's world population comes from only the 12 individuals used for reproduction. Moreover, in the line of the Lowland subspecies 80% of the genes come from just one pair! In the Lowland-Caucasian line (the pure Caucasian had been lost and only its mixture with the Lowland blood could be bred) this share is only half as high, if that might be of any comfort. The effects of this large inbreeding effect so far, have been increased vulnerability to diseases like parasitosis and serious genital infections greatly limiting males reproduction rate. Furthermore, most of the 30 world's populations are

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■ Young bison males in winter acquire a heavy, shaggy mane of hair to survive the freezing temperatures. This is one of the best times of the year in Bialowieza National Park to observe the small herds which often appear at the forest edge at dawn.



■ A dramatic portrait of an adult bull European bison in its prime - here bathed in the warm glow of a summer evening. Notice the broad, thickly maned head typical of bison males.



isolated from one another and there is little, if any, gene flow between them. Will they survive? It seems that they will but the experiment is still going on and future generations shall see how much genetic variability is actually necessary for the species to survive.

Tracking the Primeval Beast

As much joy and satisfaction as watching these majestic animals brings, tracking them in the wild can be a tricky business. After 15 years spent in the forest I can sometimes find them on the first day out but at other times I may still need 3-4 days to succeed. They can walk in groups from a few to over a hundred individuals like mixed herds led by old cows or mixed winter herds. They can also walk alone or in twos like old bulls. Their spatial distribution is mostly influenced by food availability so your general forest ecology and botany knowledge pays. They are on the constant move, however, and never stay in one place for too long. From spring to autumn Bison disperse around the forest to take advantage of the food variety and knowing what's on top of the menu - the season's special - can greatly help in finding them. In the spring their favourite food can be fresh twigs and

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■ Four young bachelors face uneasily the photographer in winter time. European bison are not usually aggressive or dangerous, but one should never position himself between a mother and her calf.



leaves of deciduous trees, in the summer it can be grasses and herbaceous plants found on the forest glades and in the autumn - acorns if they are available in a given year. When it's hot they are more likely to feed in a darker and therefore cooler broadleaved forest than in the more open coniferous stand. Examining the pooch found in the forest can also help. If it's solid it means more bark and twigs have been eaten and if it's liquid you can search for animals in the meadows and forest glades feeding on grasses and generally softer plants. If the winter's severe and snowy they would gather in larger herds near the feeding stations where hay is put out for them by the National Park workers or they would go out of the forest into the meadows where large haystacks were left over winter or even into the corn or beetroot fields. And sometimes none of these ifs and whens seem to work and you just follow your intuition or count on your luck or good wildlife karma. But finding them is one thing and coming close is something completely different and requires both experience and intuition. Most of the time Bison would avoid close contact with humans and just slowly walk away. At times they can also be dangerous, especially the females protecting their calves. It is possible, *continued on page 107* ➤

■ A beautiful portrait of four (yes - four!) subadults. Bison are more afraid of sudden noise than they are of humans, so silence is paramount when trying to approach them.

■ Facing such a massive, powerful phalanx might be rather unnerving for the average mushroom collector, but every wildlife photographer would consider himself exceptionally lucky to behold such a group of European bison emerging from the thick, dark Polish forest.



Raw, primeval power at its best as a large bison bull offers a rare display of nervousness. This species can display surprising agility despite its massive size.



however, especially with male Bison, to come close and not disturb the animals. You will need this skill in order to get back home with great photographs. The best you can do is get yourself a good local guide and do what he or she says. And to maximise your chances come here at wintertime, and I mean -20°C and one or two feet of snow at the very least! Believe me, you will survive and you will have fun. And you can really chill out in the long evenings by the fireplace with your favourite drink with your beloved ones or your (carefully chosen) travelling friends, just enjoying the full spectrum of what Poland has to offer. Isn't that what holidays are all about? ●

Lukasz Mazurek is a founder of [WildPoland.com](http://www.wildpoland.com) and a wildlife watching trips organiser in Eastern Poland since 1998. He is also the co-author of the "Bialowieza Site Guide - Where to watch birds and large mammals of the Bialowieza Forest" - the most comprehensive and detailed guidebook to this area ever published. The guidebooks and trips Lukasz offers are available at www.wildpoland.com.

A photograph of two young bison males standing in a grassy clearing at the edge of a forest. The bison are dark brown with prominent horns. The background shows tall trees and foliage with autumn-colored leaves in shades of yellow and orange. The lighting is soft and golden, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

*The ancient god-kings of the forest
still survive in today's world*

■ The ancient kings of the forest live! Two beautiful young bison males stand guard at the edge of the woods, bathed in the warm, golden light of the coming autumn.