



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

14 Greenfield Road, Eastbourne,
East Sussex BN21 1JJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1323 731865
Mob: +44 (0)7821 640118

Email: jason.woolgar@btinternet.com
Website: www.wildglobetours.com



BELARUS

Date - June 2016

Duration - 5 Days

Destinations

Minsk - Naliboki Forest

Trip Overview

This would be the briefest of tours to research one single location, Naliboki Forest, which lies less than 50 kilometres from the capital Minsk. Although Naliboki is by no means pristine, having been logged extensively over the previous two hundred years, it does still feature sections of ancient oak forest and is home to most of Europe's major mammal species. My main priority would be to assess the possibility of finding the one animal that has eluded me for decades, the Eurasian lynx, but I also wanted to determine how easy some of the other species were to find and whether Naliboki would work as a general wildlife destination for future tours. Even during such a short visit I could tell that the answer was going to be an unequivocal yes, as Naliboki is a very special place and will almost certainly become one of my favourite European wildlife retreats. Having observed eleven species in more or less three days when you exclude travel, I cannot wait to return for a longer stay and from my own experience and the supplementary research that I have completed since that first visit, I believe that Naliboki may finally prove to be the reliable destination that I have been looking for in terms of potential lynx sightings. The professor of biology who very kindly took time out of his busy schedule to guide us is one of the most eminent men in his field and his in-depth and long-term study of the predators in this environment is more or less unprecedented. In addition to being one of the most knowledgeable and qualified ecologists that I have had the pleasure to spend time with, more importantly, he has grown up in the wild and has a real feel for the forest in which he permanently lives and studies. The knowledge gained over several decades, which has been shared with the world in a succession of insightful and revealing books and articles, is starting to produce significant results in terms of lynx sightings and I am fairly certain that if I had been able to return to Naliboki in the intervening period, and sadly I am writing this report more than a year after the fact, I would have seen a lynx already.



Several other groups have and it is my intention to revisit Belarus at the earliest possible opportunity and to help in establishing the first site in Europe where lynx can be searched for with a sense of genuine expectation rather than unjustified hope. No doubt partly as a result of its chequered past, Belarus is a fascinating country, which was part of the Russian Empire until the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the subsequent murder of Tsar Nicholas II and the entire Romanov family in a lonely basement in the infamous 'House of Special Purpose' a year later. Almost immediately swallowed by the Soviet Union, Belarus remained under Soviet control until finally becoming an independent nation in August 1991, following the breakup of the USSR. Even now links with Russia are incredibly strong and over 70% of a population approaching ten million speak Russian and less than 12% speak the official first language Belarusian. Like so many Eastern Bloc nations throughout the turbulent years of the 20th century, the citizens of Belarus suffered horrendous atrocities at the hands of both the Soviets and the Germans. The Soviet secret police are thought to have murdered anywhere between 7,000 and 250,000 people at Kurapaty near Minsk, depending on which source you believe, during Stalin's 'Great Purge', or 'Great Terror', which was said to have ultimately claimed over a million lives across the entire USSR. Although numbers

become almost irrelevant when dealing with this level of inhumanity, Hitler's 'Operation Barbarossa', the code name for the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, was responsible for the deaths of two and a quarter million Belarusians, approaching a third of the population, the vast majority of whom were civilians. It is said that over 5,000 individual towns and villages were obliterated during the Nazi occupation and more often than not the defenceless residents, including women and children, were massacred. However, not all of the atrocities were perpetrated by German forces and Naliboki, which at the time was in Polish territory, suffered its own outrage in May 1943 when Soviet partisans attacked the small town and killed around 130 Poles. The partisans operated out of the adjacent forest and treated the local peasants as enemies, despite the appalling persecution that the Polish had endured at the hands of the Germans since the Luftwaffe launched the early morning attack on the 1st of September 1939 that signalled the outbreak of the Second World War. I hope that I will get the opportunity to explore further and to learn more about the country over the coming years, but for this first trip my focus was very much on Naliboki Forest and the wildlife that occurs there. I was again travelling with my son and invaluable assistant James and our time was so limited that I did not carry my camera a great deal in an attempt to cover as much ground as possible. Although I would have dearly loved to encounter a lynx, I was never confident or even hopeful of seeing one during such a brief reconnaissance, particularly as I have spent months in European forests over the years to no avail and June is not the best time to search for this elusive creature, as they are more active during the spring mating season and easier to track in the winter snow. Instead I wanted to discuss various aspects of Naliboki with our experienced host and to explore sufficient terrain in order to at least partially familiarise myself with a forest significantly larger than the Maasai Mara in Kenya. With a great number of waterways, including several rivers and a network of artificial drainage canals, the beaver population at Naliboki is extremely high and if we had spent time either sitting waiting or searching exclusively for this animal, we would have undoubtedly been rewarded with more than one brief sighting. As it was, we startled one during an afternoon hike and were able to observe the characteristic alarm display as it slapped its broad tail on the surface before diving to safety beneath the water. We had a similarly fleeting other sighting and each day encountered low numbers of red deer, roe deer and Eurasian elk, which some sources now insist is the same species as the moose found in North America. I do not consider this to be the case, but do agree with largely the same experts who state that European and American bison are distinct species. I was very much hoping that we would encounter what is a hugely impressive and highly symbolic animal, as the European bison suffered an even worse fate than its persecuted transatlantic cousin and was hunted to extinction in the wild in the 1920s. Only a few small reintroduced populations remain, one of which occurs at the Bialowieza Forest on the border with Poland, with another at Naliboki. We were actually able to get within a few metres of a pair of these magnificent beasts, but sadly they were partially obscured by the tall grass that had enabled us to get so close and we did not have sufficient time to look for the larger herds that exist here, which I will also certainly rectify on my next visit. Despite the rather annoying lack of a clear photograph, we could still see the bison reasonably well and this spectacularly close encounter with Europe's largest terrestrial mammal was one of two major highlights of our short stay. The second involved a kayak trip to a magical stand of ancient oak trees, some of which are thought to be up to 400 years old. Much of the afternoon was spent exploring this enchanted grove and an already memorable day was concluded with the superb view of an edible dormouse scurrying along the trunk of a tree that its ancestors could have lived in since the closing days of the Elizabethan age. I have always loved the atmosphere that Europe's timeless old growth forests conjure and the feeling of somehow immersing myself in some dark forgotten folk tale or evocative fable. Despite the logging and surrounding human activity, Naliboki invokes the same mystery and haunting intensity and I think that perhaps these forests are where I feel closest to my roots and nature in general. Whilst not as diverse as in other parts of the world, or regrettably now as abundant, the wildlife of Europe is equally engaging to me and I am rarely happier than when searching for the forsaken creatures that once roamed the woods and fields



of my own '*sceptred isle*' until our kings and so called noblemen exterminated all but the meekest of them. Of the wild boar, brown bear, grey wolf and lynx that were all mercilessly eradicated from '*England's green and pleasant land*', we observed a small herd of boars running in the long grass and discovered clear evidence of the three remaining predators, including tracks, scat and carcasses of various age. I was actually surprised by how much wolf activity there was and although our only canid was to be a typically cautious red fox, raccoon dogs, which were introduced to the Soviet Union for their fur in the late 1920s and are now rapidly spreading west, are also present and apparently fairly easy to see in the warm summer months. Most tours of any reasonable length generally experience at least one or two small carnivore sightings, as Naliboki is home to all seven of the mustelids that occur in Belarus, pine marten, beech marten, polecat, Eurasian badger, stoat, least weasel and the invasive American mink, which has replaced the critically endangered European mink across much of its former range, including in Belarus. I would certainly expect to see fifteen to twenty mammal species on a tour of ten days, which is the minimum number I would recommend in order to search realistically for a lynx, and it should be remembered that if you visit in the winter or spring to increase the chances of both lynx and wolf, as I intend to, a few of the other animals are going to be harder to find at best and in some cases impossible. Whenever you visit, the experience is going to be a memorable one at a truly exceptional location and your enjoyment is unlikely to entirely depend on whether you find one specific animal or not. I appreciate that this may sound nonsensical when you are up to your waist in swamp water looking for a lynx on a freezing cold winter morning and if you do indeed find it difficult to believe, perhaps try asking someone who has now been looking for around a quarter of a century.



No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	One crossing a forest road at distance whilst we were driving.
2	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	A brief glimpse of a single animal swimming away.
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Individuals and small herds each day.
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Observed on a daily basis in low numbers.
5	Eurasian Elk	<i>Alces alces</i>	Several individual animals daily and one mother and calf.
6	European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>	Two at close quarters in tall grass.
7	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Partially obscured view of a small herd running in long grass.
8	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>	Four or five sightings over the course of our stay.
9	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	Two on the drive from Minsk to Naliboki.
10	Eurasian Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>	A brief view of one animal slapping its tail in alarm and disappearing under the water.
11	Edible Dormouse	<i>Glis glis</i>	An excellent view of one running up the trunk and along the branches of an ancient oak tree.





14 Greenfield Road, Eastbourne,
East Sussex BN21 1JJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1323 731865
Mob: +44 (0)7821 640118

Email: jason.woolgar@btinternet.com
Website: www.wildglobetours.com

