



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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POLAND

Date - August 2018

Duration - 17 Days

Destinations

Warsaw - Dobarz - Biebrza National Park - Bialystok - Bialowieza - Bialowieza National Park - Zamosc - Roztocze National Park - Bieszczady National Park - Wieliczka - Krakow - Zakopane - Tatra National Park - Kasprowy Wierch - Auschwitz-Birkenau

Trip Overview

Having already toured Norway and Finland, our 2018 European odyssey concluded with a visit to Poland, one of my favourite wildlife destinations on this vast continent and a link between the west and the east, or more formerly between Europe and Asia, both in a cultural sense and in terms of some of the species we were hoping to encounter. Although there might be opportunities to travel together between semesters, this was likely to be my final tour with my son James before he escaped to university. However, as we boarded the plane for the short flight to Warsaw, he was not even certain where he would be studying, as he had received a formal offer from the university of his choice, but it was dependent on the results of his recent exams and he would not know these until the second day of the trip. Whilst I had complete faith that he would achieve the necessary grades, I was aware that as we travelled, this was a slightly nervous time for him and that if anything did go wrong, he would probably need to break away from at least part of the



tour in order to assess alternative options. I had not even considered such an unlikely scenario in the planning stage and the itinerary had been scheduled around the three famous B's in Polish wildlife tourism, the Biebrza Marshes, the Bialowieza Forest and the Bieszczady Mountains. There would be other significant stops along the way, one of which would provide us with one of our best days of the tour and another with undoubtedly our worst, but more or less everything had been organised around these contrasting habitats, each with their own unique landscapes and fauna. In much the same way that I have never visited a perfect country in terms of conservation or animal rights, let alone anything else, Poland has some serious environmental issues, many of which date back to the severe deforestation during the Second World War and the emphasis on heavy industry during the subsequent communist regime. In many respects great strides have been made ecologically since the fall of communism in 1989 and although the country once again stands at a crossroads, as the conservative right threatens to undermine much of the progress made environmentally, in many regards the outlook in Poland is more enlightened than in most western democracies, particularly regarding hunting. Whilst it is true that habitat has been severely compromised in places and that at times you are viewing animals along busy roads or in residential areas, there are still some superb regions to explore and in many cases a respect for wildlife that is largely absent

elsewhere. As so many nations continue to persecute their large carnivores, the Polish are leading by example and it is illegal to hunt wolves, brown bears and lynx and moose and bison are also similarly protected. People still hunt of course and even bison can be killed in certain conditions, but by protecting its apex predators, Poland is sending a hugely significant environmental statement to the other members of the European Union and is also pioneering the use of ecological corridors between wildlife habitats. New motorways are being constructed with dozens of natural passageways to enable the safe migration of a wide range of species, from small reptiles and amphibians to moose and wolves, many of which have been filmed using the new corridors and overpasses at night and during the day. We found a lot of locals watching wildlife at most of the sites we visited, which is always an encouraging sign in any country, and in general our efforts received a great deal of help and goodwill from some of the friendliest people you will meet anywhere in Europe. There are of course a large number of Polish immigrants currently living in the UK, over a million at the last count I believe, and so many of them are employed in the building industry that several people we met joked that it was now impossible to get a decent plumber or decorator in Poland. Certainly the current generation deserves a period of stability and economic growth, as Poland has suffered a chequered history to say the least and modern day visitors are now witnessing the third coming of Poland as an independent state. The entire nation disappeared for over 120 years in 1795, conquered and carved up, partitioned in the formal parlance, but carved up nevertheless, by the neighbouring and colluding powers of the 'Three Black Eagles', Austria, Russia and Prussia, so basically the same Germans and Russians from whom there was to be no escape for the best part of

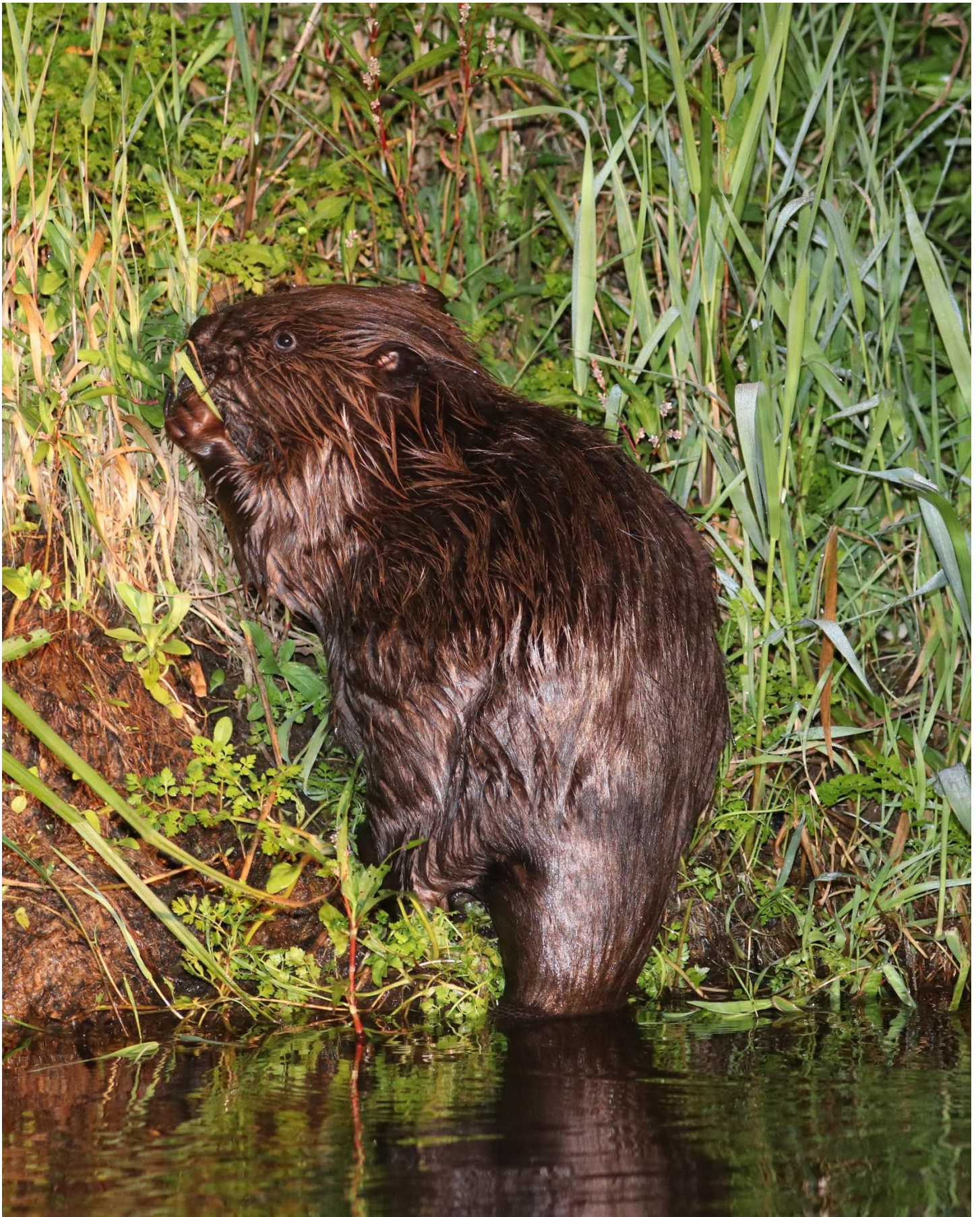
two hundred years. Independence did not return until almost immediately after the First World War in 1918, thanks largely to the defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary and the highly convenient Russian Revolution, which would ultimately bring about a terminal end to the Russian monarchy as well as Tsar Nicholas II and his entire family in the dingy cellar of Ipatiev House or, as it was to chillingly become known, 'The House of Special Purpose'. The brief autonomous respite lasted just long enough for Hitler to rise to power in a now unified Germany and on the 1st of September 1939 his Wehrmacht tanks rolled across the Polish border in an act of hostility that would signal the outbreak of World War II, the single bloodiest conflict of all time. Once again Germany and Russia conspired against their weaker neighbour and as the German 'Blitzkrieg' or 'Lightning War' engulfed Poland from the west, so the Russians invaded from the east. The Russian betrayal signalled the beginning of the end, as Poland had been woefully ill prepared to face the militarised might of Germany and had no chance attempting to defend the country on two fronts. That said, and contrary to popular belief, Poland did not surrender meekly and although the entire invasion took barely five weeks to achieve, the Polish forces fought bravely and inflicted heavy losses on the vastly superior occupying forces. Around 65,000 Polish soldiers died defending their homeland, but thousands more escaped to avenge her demise across Europe and some of these played a pivotal part in 'The Battle of Britain', the aerial conflict that many historians believe saved Britain from invasion and thereby turned the tide against the Nazis, who had previously appeared to be invincible. Around six million Polish citizens died during the Second World War, around 17% of the population, which was by far the highest loss sustained by any of the 60 or so countries involved in this catastrophic global aberration, although individual territories within the USSR also suffered horrific losses, most notably Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, Latvia and Lithuania. Of course millions of these deaths involved European Jews who were murdered in Hitler's extermination camps in the most appalling conditions and the most shocking of circumstances imaginable. I would be taking my son to visit probably the most infamous and dreaded of these, but Auschwitz-Birkenau was just one of a number of death camps, mostly situated in Poland, and no words can really describe the deeds committed in these foul places or the quite terrifying lack of humanity that led to them. Having endured so much hardship and fought so courageously to help free the rest of Europe, at the end of hostilities the people of Poland were rewarded with the yoke of Soviet communism for another 44 years and as a child I became captivated by their struggle for independence when I first learned of Lech Walesa and the trade union Solidarity that he helped to form in 1980. With food prices spiralling and ordinary citizens struggling to survive, Walesa led a number of momentous strikes and the world watched as Solidarity dared to challenge the de facto ruling communist party and threatened to bring the country to its knees, as well as its senses. The response was as swift as it was inevitable and Solidarity was outlawed and the entire country placed under martial law, with thousands of Soviet tanks and tens of thousands of troops patrolling the streets and city squares to quash any vestige of resistance. However, a spark had been lit and the murmurs of freedom continued to spread until student protests and further strikes forced the puppet Polish government to recognise Solidarity once more and to hold elections in June 1989 that would ultimately lead to Solidarity assuming power in Poland and Lech Walesa becoming President. Repression had not been able to stem the tide of freedom and the collapse of communism in Poland has been viewed as the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union, with some justification. By November 1989 the Berlin Wall had fallen amid unconstrained jubilation and a month later the citizens of Romania had overthrown their own communist regime and executed President Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena. The rather grim pictures of his slumped dead body fluttered across the globe on Christmas day and no doubt sent a fairly obvious and uncomfortable message to other Eastern Bloc dictators. Almost exactly two years later Ukraine declared independence and the Soviet Union ceased to exist, a fact that was barely imaginable as I grew up in the height of the Cold War. It was a brief period of immense hope, both in the eyes of the world and to me on a personal level as a young man. However, in historic terms it was just a fleeting moment lost in time, as the world failed to grasp an unforeseen opportunity to take a different path and three decades later we are faced with familiar bloody conflict and more walls. That said, the people of Poland are at least still free to govern themselves and have now enjoyed their longest period of liberty since the late 18th century. We discussed a lot of this history with our guide, who was old enough to remember



events before my time and who kept us both entertained with his interesting stories and dry sense of humour. Although primarily a bird specialist, he was also one of the most experienced biologists that I have travelled with and we were fortunate to have his excellent company for most of the trip. He was aware that our main target was lynx, as is always the case in any region that they occur, and explained that although he only sees one every couple of seasons, he is never looking specifically for them and does very little spotlighting. In fact, he was so impressed with how successful we were at night, that towards the end of our time together he told us that he would include at least one nocturnal activity on every birding tour going forward. It was a nice touch from a first class guide and whilst I was conscious to make sure that he had breaks during the day, he still worked incredibly hard on our behalf and I very much look forward to exploring more of Poland with him. I specifically used his company because their philosophy is very similar to my own, in that they do not use hides or bait animals and believe that wildlife should be observed naturally and without any disturbance to the creatures involved. The only real problem was that they also do not allow their guides to drive, which I still cannot understand and do not think I have encountered previously anywhere in the world. Often the opposite is the case and you are not allowed to drive and the guide has to do everything, but even when I have been responsible for the majority of the driving, the guide has been allowed to at least take a turn, particularly at night whilst spotlighting. The fact that this was not permitted was a complete



disaster from a photographic perspective, as it was impossible to drive, spotlight and use a camera and we consequently took very few pictures at night unless an animal basically stood still, which did happen a couple of times, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, not often with predators. Dense mist in both the morning and evening did not help a great deal photographically or in terms of spotting wildlife, but it did provide an evocative backdrop against which to search and an element of surprise that would work to our advantage on one memorable occasion. That particular highlight would come later in a trip full of them and on day one we made the relatively short drive northeast to Biebrza National Park, the largest national park in Poland and home to the Biebrza Marshes, one of the most intact and important areas of swampland remaining in Europe. A Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance, created by the timeless meanderings of the Biebrza River, the waterways, peatlands and forests of the Biebrza Marshes are a precious haven for a remarkable variety of birds and apparently more than 260 species have been recorded in this diverse ecosystem, a large percentage of which breed here. The region also supports a number of mammals, including lynx and wolf, and our first day at Biebrza illustrated exactly why I consider Poland to be such a superb wildlife destination, as the drive in alone produced common cranes, white storks, marsh harriers and a grass snake and by the end of the first evening we had added a raccoon dog, two moose and several European hares to an already impressive tally. The numbers are never as important as the quality of the sightings of course and we still had one of the main highlights of the entire trip to come, a magical boat ride to watch a family of beavers. I have used spotlights with beavers previously, but usually unobtrusively from the road or riverbank and I was thrilled to be able to watch these secretive animals at such close quarters at night. They were fully engaged in their nocturnal foraging and barely took any notice of us, as they climbed in and out of the water and gnawed through vegetation to float back to their lodge. It was certainly a spectacular start and if we did not sleep as well as normal that night, we were obviously still excited about our wonderful beaver encounter and not at all concerned with the exam results that James would receive in a few hours. We had decided to continue the day as normal and were at the top of a viewing platform scanning the marshes when the news came through that we need not have worried, as James had passed with flying colours and was free to begin the next chapter of life. Any observers that day, including our guide who was genuinely delighted for James, would have thought that we must surely have seen a lynx, as one very proud father was beaming from ear to ear and one very excited son was doing much the same. I have to say that the entire experience was slightly surreal given our location, but I was thrilled for James despite the fact that this would mean he would be leaving home and I would see far less of him. An entirely natural and absolutely essential progression of course, but still difficult to fully digest when you have spent so much time together and shared so



many life changing experiences. At least this trip would not now suffer the slings and arrows that James would go on to face both as an English literature student for the next four years and no doubt in life in general and I think that our guide was probably fairly relieved as well, when he realised just how badly things could have deteriorated with a different set of results. As it was, the tour moved from strength to strength and our stay at Biebrza was as enjoyable as it was productive. A combination of walks and drives resulted in more beaver and moose sightings, including a very special view of an exceptionally calm mother and calf early one morning, as well as our first red foxes and squirrels. Lesser spotted eagles and montagu's harriers were just two of several ornithological highlights, but we did not see or spend a great deal of time looking for an aquatic warbler, which our guide had mentioned was a speciality of the area. Instead, we continued my seemingly eternal quest to see a lynx by repeatedly searching and staking out the location of our guide's previous lynx sighting. We were under no illusions that this was anything more than a long shot, but were encouraged by the presence of several roe deer, the favoured prey of these elusive cats, and I would like to try the area



again when I return, possibly with slightly more emphasis on uninterrupted night time vigils. As is always the case, it was a very good sign that we were not ready to leave Biebrza after our three-day stay and this would apply to every destination of the trip, excluding the last. That said, it is always easier to move on if you have somewhere just as exciting to travel to and from Biebrza we made the short journey south to the Bialowieza Forest, the last remaining tract of old growth forest in Central Europe. Shared with Belarus, Bialowieza occupies an area of around 1,500 km², which is almost exactly the same size as the Masai Mara in Kenya, but only a very small percentage is adequately protected on the Polish side and the forest is severely fragmented as a result. The protection is better in Belarus where they increased their 'strict conservation zone' again in 2017, but in Poland in recent years the opposite has been the case and in 2016 the right-wing administration authorised additional logging that devastated huge sections of what UNESCO



describes as 'an irreplaceable area for biodiversity'. When you consider that Bialowieza is the only natural World Heritage Site in the entire country, the other fourteen are all cultural landmarks, it is difficult to comprehend exactly why the Polish government would be prepared to exploit Europe's last primeval forest in such an abject and ill-conceived manner. Logging has always occurred here, as only about a third of the Polish section of the forest is protected within the small national park and scattered nature reserves, but the increased levels were unsustainable and in April 2018 the European court of justice ruled that Poland had violated European Union law by sanctioning the increase. According to the ruling, thousands of trees had been felled illegally and the court summarily dismissed the Polish claim that they were cleared in order to combat a spruce bark beetle infestation that has also killed a vast number of trees. The environment minister responsible for the outrage Jan Szyszko, who also happens to be a diehard supporter of the coal industry and hunting enthusiast, was dismissed and his replacement Henryk Kowalczyk acknowledged that Poland would accept the verdict. A small measure of consolation perhaps, but too late to save vast swathes of this unique ecosystem and of course logging will continue here to some degree until there is a collective will to stop it permanently and expand the national park to include the entire forest, as per the protection afforded such an ecological masterpiece across the border in Belarus. The existing Polish region of the national park is divided into two sections and it is necessary to hire an officially accredited guide if you want to access the 'strict protection area', which includes the oldest protected areas and consequently the least degraded. It is not pristine by any means and incorporates several roads, a boardwalk and even a war memorial, but the untouched sections are simply breathtaking and I would have really appreciated the opportunity to explore this enchanting patch of ancient forest for a great deal longer and without the official guide. As it was, we were given the type of wildlife guide that you sadly dread, one that knows every last fact about his place of work and insists on reeling them off like a stuck record whilst you do your best to immerse yourself in the glorious surroundings that he has no doubt forgotten are not available to you on a daily basis. He basically chatted away throughout what was a relatively short walk and as a mammal activity it was an exercise in futility and really our only entirely wasted effort of the trip. A solitary red squirrel aside, we did manage to spot four different woodpeckers and to be fair, so little else went wrong throughout the tour that this really was not a major issue. It was just a shame that this was our only opportunity to explore the original old growth forest, as it was the sort of place you could happily lose yourself in for days. Of course many visitors are hoping to see a European bison, the symbol of the national park and the largest terrestrial mammal on the continent. The bison has been protected at Bialowieza for centuries and whilst Polish kings were making it an offence punishable by death to kill one as long ago as the 16th century, elsewhere in Europe they were being hunted to extinction. By the end of the 19th century only two wild populations remained, the animals at Bialowieza and a small remote population in the Caucasus Mountains, which were largely spared as a result of their remote and inaccessible location. It was another German incursion that sealed the fate of the Polish herds, as Bialowieza was occupied by German soldiers during the First World War and they were responsible for killing all but nine of a population of around 600 bison. They are thought to



have slaughtered many of these as they retreated and in January 1919 the very last of Bialowieza's ancient herd was shot by poachers. The population in the Russian Caucasus did not last a great deal longer and by 1927 the European bison was officially extinct in the wild. The animals that visitors flock by the tens of thousands to admire each year are descendants of captive populations that were reintroduced to Bialowieza initially as part of a breeding programme before they were released into the wild in 1952. Although the conditions were fairly bad during our stay and the fog really hampered our efforts, particularly in the morning and evening when the bison could be observed beyond the forest, it was still an absolute privilege to spend time with these magnificent beasts and in all we were to enjoy three encounters with 23 different bison at Bialowieza. One sighting was of eleven animals at distance, the second was also of eleven, but this time in thick fog early one morning at an entirely different location and finally we were able to get close to a lone male during reasonable light, although he stayed right on the edge of the forest and it was again difficult to get decent photographs. That was not important when you consider our proximity to such an iconic creature and my only real disappointment



was the way in which these supposedly wild animals are managed, as managed they undoubtedly are. Around 900 bison are currently said to occur at Bialowieza and during the winter they are fed hay at various sites on the Polish side of the border, a practice that dates back as far as I could ascertain to at least the eighteen hundreds. It has been suggested that several herbivores were once fed here in order to protect numbers for hunting purposes, but obviously these robust animals do not need additional food to survive and one local official told me that Bialowieza was basically so fragmented that the bison would destroy too much of the remaining forest if they were not fed. This is of significant concern on a number of levels, but particularly given that bison are primarily adapted to grazing and that scientists are now suggesting that far from being forest specialists, they were probably driven from the European plains and took shelter in the forests. If this is the case, which does look increasingly likely, we would have entirely changed their ecology across a few centuries and would now be artificially feeding a species to protect a habitat that they would never naturally choose to live in.



Of even greater concern is the fact that these bison are culled each year, as the supplementary feeding increases both an individual animal's likelihood of surviving a harsh winter and consequently the herds reproductive capacity, which in turn of course leads to an increase in bison numbers. So the park officials are basically increasing the bison population artificially and then shooting what they consider to be the excess, which looks suspiciously like creating an annual commercial hunt in my opinion. Although I was told that only weak and old animals are culled, which are unlikely to survive the oncoming winter, it is fairly evident that the bison are controlled according to their numbers and even if the first assertion were true, hunters cannot tell which animals are genetically weaker than others and nature should be allowed to take its course at Bialowieza, as, ideally, elsewhere. That this does not occur appears to have much to do with the fact that licences are sold to hunters who will pay a great deal of money to kill these impressive creatures and that consequently commercial hunting exists in the oldest national park in Poland and of an animal that is protected on both a national and continental basis. Before he was himself removed from office, Jan Szyszko, the anti-environment minister responsible for the inexcusable logging at Bialowieza, sacked Olimpia Pabian, the director of the national park and a critic of what most independent observers recognise is clearly a financially motivated cull. As the scientists at the local Mammal Research Institute maintain, one of the main issues with letting hunters control wild animal populations for profit, is that the meat and fur is sold and the carcass is thereby removed from the ecosystem, where it would normally feed a number of species for several weeks. Exactly like the fallen trees that litter the strictly protected area of Bialowieza, so the weaker bison that do not survive winter should be left to nourish

other animals for whom this natural bounty could be the difference between death or survival. As it is, it is very difficult to argue that Bialowieza is being well managed or that the officials in charge are as interested in the preservation of this extraordinarily important forest than they are in making money for a relatively small number of people. The forest simply needs to be left alone and the resident wildlife likewise. Despite these significant issues, I would still have no hesitation in recommending Bialowieza as a wildlife destination, partly to encourage visitors to show their support for what really should be regarded as a global treasure and also because the wildlife viewing here remains simply amazing, particularly at night. Despite the fact that you are often spotlighting along fragmented forest or even in developed areas, we had some outstanding success at night and on one memorable occasion we



encountered eight different mammals, four of which were predators...well sort of. The evening began in magnificent fashion with three juvenile badgers playing around a sett that our guide knew and has taken guests to see for years. Having watched these incredibly fluffy youngsters rough and tumble for more than half an hour, we moved on to quickly find the first of two northern white-breasted hedgehogs. A succession of roe and red deer followed, as well as a number of red foxes and then a pine marten, perched in traditional fashion on a fallen tree right next to our vehicle. Another marten would follow and in between we had great views of two separate raccoon dogs, which is where I use the term predator in the loosest possible sense, as I find it difficult to classify these gloriously pathetic canids as predators, unless of course predation now includes nibbling daintily at a gooseberry. There was no such doubt regarding the next creature, as we were still discussing the utterly sweet raccoon dogs when suddenly a large wolf emerged from the mist and stood staring at our lights and open jaws from no more than a few metres. This was an exceptional encounter, with the wolf holding our collective gaze before turning on its heels in an instant and vanishing into the night. It was quite a moment, but I have to admit that it did not do my nerves a great deal of good, as our guide spotted the animal first on his side of the car and instantly screamed 'lynx', which rather got my attention, having searched for one of these rare cats for more than two decades. I cannot ever say that I was disappointed to look across and see a wolf and indeed, this was one of the highlights of the trip, but for just a second, I believed that I had achieved enlightenment, discovered the Holy Grail and perhaps solved the unfathomable enigma of why Donald Trump had been elected as the 45th President of the United States. We laughed afterwards of course, as the only alternative would have been to kill my guide, and just two days later I made more or less the same mistake with a roe deer, when I pre-empted, more in hope than judgement it must be said, an animal of roughly the correct height emerging from thick vegetation. It was still some night for all my brief and ultimately unfounded joy and when you add the edible dormouse and water vole seen on subsequent evenings, as well as tawny owls, common toads and several frogs, it is easy to understand why I remain so enthusiastic about spotlighting at Bialowieza. With the exception of the wolf, most of these nocturnal creatures were witnessed on multiple occasions and the days were not at all bad either. The bison were unquestionably the star attraction and we quite rightly devoted a lot of time to them, but there were other special sightings and in a way the real highlight of our stay here was the forest itself, which provided an idyllic

setting for a number of delightful walks. Apart from the unmistakable and heart breaking signs of the destruction that these ageless woodlands have suffered, the only real sadness involved two highly contrasting mammal targets, the European mole, which I never generally expect to observe, and the wild boar, which I more or less always do. We discovered two dead moles at Bialowieza, which in itself is unusual, and were destined to find a third when we moved on to Bieszczady. I have checked whether a common cause may have linked these deaths, as none of the bodies were even partially eaten and all three were found within the forest, as opposed to on or near a busy road. However, this does not appear to be the case and whilst I did not find any disease to connect these fairly rare carcasses, the same tragically cannot be said of the wild boar, which are in real trouble in Poland and increasingly across Europe. For those that are not aware, African Swine Fever has been spreading across much of Eastern Europe since it arrived at the Georgian port of Poti in 2007. Apparently a cargo ship dumped their rubbish on the shore, which included contaminated meat and since then millions of domestic pigs and wild boar have either been killed by the virus or slaughtered in a vain attempt to stop it spreading. Hunters are never slow at spotting an opportunity to kill something and in Germany alone during the 2017/18 hunting season, almost 837,000 wild boar were killed 'just in case', as swine fever has not even reached Germany. Far from selflessly helping to eradicate a deadly disease that can wipe out domestic herds in a matter of days, hunters are thought likely to have helped spread it, as they have attracted wild boar to human settlements with food for centuries, basically just to make it easier to shoot them. Almost incomprehensibly given the immeasurable number of dead animals involved and the correspondingly vast financial losses across



Europe, hunters are still illegally exporting and importing wild boar for sports hunting and it has recently been confirmed that the 2018 outbreak of African Swine Fever in Belgium was caused in exactly those circumstances. If there is a more selfish group of people on the planet I am fortunately yet to meet them and on this particular occasion thousands of domestic pigs had to be culled and the entire area closed for recreational purposes, purely because a handful of individuals thought that their right to shoot defenceless animals outweighed any other concerns, including the biological health and financial security of their own country. In an attempt to protect a pork industry worth \$1.1 billion in exports each year, the Polish government implemented the usual panic measures and announced that 185,000 wild boar would be killed during the 2018/19 hunting season and by December 2018 168,000 of these ecologically indispensable animals had been butchered. Apparently this was not sufficient and Ministry of the Environment officials



ordered that the cull should be intensified in the first months of 2019, in a move that looked as if it was intended to more or less extirpate the species in Poland, which is what so many farmers have been calling for almost since the first case of swine fever was identified in early 2014, less than a kilometre from the border with Belarus. Amid angry and widespread protests, the government argued that although they were offering cash bounties for every boar killed, infected or otherwise, and that hunts would now be able to take place in national parks, their intentions had been misunderstood and that less wild boar would be killed than had been widely reported. Whether this is true or not, the ultra conservative Christian democrats now running the country are quickly establishing the type of appalling environmental record that can ruin a nation in a very short space of time and even some hunters disagreed with the initial mandate to exterminate as many boar as possible and openly refused to participate. Some argued that killing so many animals in one area would only force the surviving populations to disperse and to spread the disease further west, where it has not yet reached, whilst others acknowledged that if there are no wild boar left, which certainly did appear to be the official objective, wolves will begin preying on domestic livestock in far greater numbers. The reality is that not as many wild boar are killed by the AFS virus in comparison to domestic pigs and although they can carry it, they actually play a very minor role in the transmission of the disease, which is largely caused by infected meat or the export of infected animals. According to senior scientists at the Polish Academy of Sciences, there has never been a direct correlation between wild boar concentrations and the spread of AFS and, as the government has been advised on numerous occasions by some of the most respected biologists in the field, the only real answer is biosecurity. If you are prepared to invest in some basic infrastructure and to follow strict procedure regarding hygiene and animal movement, it is eminently feasible to protect a farm from this virus and Polish authorities have conceded that many of the farmers calling for the eradication of the wild boar, have not even installed basic disinfection mats to counter the spread of a disease that they insist is going to ruin them. At Bialowieza one of the local guides mentioned that he had barely seen a wild boar during the previous three years, until he disturbed a sounder of fourteen around a week before we arrived. It was something to cling on to amid such a tragic affair and you can only hope that common sense will prevail and that at least one country will look beyond a rifle as a way of solving what has the potential to be one of the greatest ecological disasters Europe has ever faced. Unsurprisingly, we were not to see one of these terrific little creatures at Bialowieza, but they remain an integral keystone species as far as I am concerned and I was hoping that we might come across one or two at Bieszczady. One mammal that I did not expect to find was a little dog called Houndski, who I noticed soaking wet on the side of the road one morning at around 4am when we went looking for bison. He did not appear entirely right to me, but our guide thought that he was probably a village dog and he was still there when we returned a few hours later, which was by now a slight concern. In regions where dogs are free to roam unattended it is impossible to stop for every one that you see



more than once, but when we went by again and he was still there, I knew that something must be wrong and stopped the car to check him out. It was just as well that I did, as he must have been walking round in circles for the entire day and when I went to pick him up, he just collapsed at my feet, dehydrated and delirious. I told our guide that I could not leave him in this condition and he agreed that we would take him to a local vet. I immediately nicknamed him Houndski, in comic reference to my hopeless inability to pronounce all but the simplest Polish names, and asked James to hold our new friend whilst I drove. To cut a fairly long story short, the vet said that he had been abandoned before and as I was working out how exactly I could get him to England and what my own barmy dog would think, the lovely owners of the lodge that we were staying at came to our rescue and said that they would keep him. They still had a kennel from a previous pet and although Houndski was in a fairly bad way and kept trying to get up to keep walking, that night he slept in a kennel with a blanket, full of sausages. He got stronger and stronger during our stay and now, several months later, I am thrilled to say that he has made a complete recovery and is enjoying a new lease of life in his new home. He also has a proper name now and is called Felek, which I can pronounce and suits him much better. From Bialowieza we would ultimately travel south to the Bieszczady Mountains, stopping on the way to spend a night at the historic town of Zamosc, a UNESCO cultural World Heritage Site. According to their official criterion, *'Zamosc is an outstanding example of a Renaissance planned town of the late 16th century'* and whilst we would not have a great deal of time to explore in depth, our hotel was ideally positioned on the edge of the impressive Great Market Square, home to a fabulously grand town hall and the brightly coloured and elaborately decorated Armenian tenement houses. We also stopped at a few of the surviving sections of the robust fortifications that at one time walled a town that has witnessed a great deal of conflict and bloodshed during Poland's tempestuous past and was besieged on no less than six occasions, principally at the hands of the Russians. As interesting as the history certainly was and as fine as the architecture undoubtedly still is, we were largely using Zamosc as a base from which to explore a local nature reserve that has been created to protect a population of speckled ground squirrels, in what I believe is the most westerly extreme of their range. Also known as the spotted souslik, these ground squirrels are struggling in areas of their former Soviet Union range, largely as a result of habitat loss, and a number of small sanctuaries have been established in Poland, where their numbers have dropped dramatically in recent years. The reserves mainly consist of their preferred open fields and meadows, which makes them relatively easy to spot, but not necessarily to photograph, as the colony that we tried rarely receives visitors and the animals were consequently decidedly skittish. We did get some nice views of a few individuals, as they live in solitary burrows within a larger community, but most of my pictures consist of a tiny furry head peering nervously over an earthen parapet, probably much like the defenders of Zamosc centuries ago, facing a horde of screaming Cossacks. We were also hoping that we might encounter the distinctive common hamster in this region, but we did not find a likely spot to search in the limited time available and every eyeshine that night belonged to either a roe deer, a hare or a red fox, usually right behind a hare. The other advantage of staying at Zamosc is its close proximity to Roztocze National Park, which is barely a 30 kilometre drive away. Wolves and lynx are currently both being studied at Roztocze and although we were very unlikely to spot either of these animals in the two or three spare hours that we had available, I was hoping to see the konik ponies that were introduced to the reserve in 1982. Once considered to be a descendent of the ancient wild horse subspecies the tarpan, it has recently been established that the konik is in fact more closely linked genetically to various domestic breeds and that it only resembles the extinct tarpan. I was still keen to see the breed in its native Poland, as it has been introduced to various reserves across the UK and Continental Europe, in many cases based



ostensibly on its genetic reputation as a direct relation of the tarpan. Although we now know that this is not the case, the konik still has an important ecological role to play and is being used in a number of habitat restoration projects, a couple of which I have visited in England. The idea is to basically allow these horses and other large herbivores to do what they have done since the dawn of time, cultivate the land naturally through their grazing and movement and to provide the right environmental conditions for endemic plants and flowers to thrive. When you remove these major biological engineers, as has occurred in almost every habitat across the world, the ecosystem invariably suffers and we are only now beginning to understand that in order to generate native vegetation and retain biodiversity, it is essential that we preserve or replace the large keystone species that shape the very landscape in which they occur. We were delighted to find a small herd of five during our brief stay and although they are not an authentically wild species, most of the horses at Roztocze and other Polish reserves, are leading a wild existence. Short stops like these usually work well on long tours, often providing one or two new species and at least an overview of an area that you might like to return to. As with our Norway adventure earlier in the summer, it can be difficult to get the balance exactly right between the number of destinations that you would like to visit and the time that you should ideally devote to each. Although I would have liked more nights everywhere in Poland, that



has more to do with the sheer fun that I was having and I was ultimately happy that our longest single stay would be at Bieszczady National Park, where we had five nights in all. Situated in the extreme southeast of the country on the border with Ukraine, the Bieszczady Mountains form part of the legendary Carpathian Mountains, one of the longest mountain ranges in Europe and arguably the greatest wildlife area this side of Russia. Eight Central and Eastern European countries share the Carpathians and the Bieszczady Mountains sit in the eastern range. We now had a realistic chance of encountering a brown bear and I thought that any of the carnivores were conceivable here, particularly as we had a superb local guide for much of our visit and he took us deep into some really promising areas. His enthusiasm and knowledge was actually the difference between a good stay and a great one and he was the type of guide that I am always hoping for, completely at home in the field and oblivious to the conditions. This was just as well really, as the weather was dreadful for most of our time at Bieszczady and we got drenched on almost every hike. It got to the stage where we were not even attempting to dry clothes and would just pull on the soaked ones to avoid getting something else wet. I am not certain how much difference it made in terms of our success, as mammals can be more difficult to find in poor weather, but as far as our mood was concerned, it barely touched us and in one especially severe storm on the side of an open Polish mountain, I found myself grinning inanely at how much I love doing this, as I rubbed the cascading rainwater out of my eyes. Bieszczady is that type of place and I could spend a month there quite happily, rain or shine. Having been dragged all over the world in some of the worst conditions imaginable, or even unimaginable on a few soul destroying occasions, James has a similar disposition and we did some driving and walking on our own here to give our regular guide a break before we dragged him out spotlighting until late. On the first of these we chanced upon another exquisite grass snake, one of four snake species that occur in Poland. Reintroduced to the area in 1963, there are said to be more than 300 wild bison at Bieszczady, as well as a semi wild population that are fed and maintained for the benefit of tourists who do not want to either walk too far or spend hours searching without any guarantee of success. We bumped into members of this habituated herd on several occasions and we also had a momentous encounter with a wild herd on one of the early morning hikes with our local guide, who we would meet before dawn in order to ensure that we were in the best areas as it got light. On this occasion we had been walking for perhaps an hour when our guide informed us that we were in wolf and bison territory and that as we continued, it would need to be silently. Given that we barely talk whilst searching in any case, I could tell that his expectations were high and within fifteen minutes we were lying flat on our stomachs watching as bison began to emerge from the



mist. The rain was steady at this stage without being torrential and as the haze slowly cleared and the sky lightened, a herd of 22 of these primitive beasts was revealed in the most natural surroundings possible. It is difficult to describe just how elated I felt to be able to watch these iconic European animals back where they belong within this equally renowned landscape and I could barely believe our good fortune when a wolf appeared and began running towards his ancient quarry to complete a scene played out across the continent for millennia. The solitary wolf actually cut round the bison and straight past us as well, barely looking in our direction as we lay pressed against the grass with our bodies distorted against the tree line. At this stage the bison, including several calves, were still scattered across a wide area, but that all changed when a second wolf appeared and slowly approached the herd from the opposite direction, which meant that they were now trapped between two wolves and so were their vulnerable young. We watched breathlessly, all fairly eager to take at least a few shots of this extraordinary event, but at the same time acutely aware that we had a responsibility



to not interfere, even inadvertently, or disturb the natural order of things. One movement or noise could have panicked the herd and possibly left an isolated calf at the mercy of the wolves and equally, if the wolves were concentrating on us, they may miss an opportunity or leave altogether. As it was, the second wolf pushed the issue by approaching the lead bison, as if to test the strength of the unit with perhaps other wolves watching out of sight. That was all it took and suddenly the bison packed together and charged towards the wolf as a collective unit, with the young either squeezed in the middle or towards the rear. I have observed this behaviour in North America, but have never had the opportunity to watch wolves and bison interact in this instinctive fashion in Europe and it

was impossible not to be aware that we were witnessing something primeval. Nature's eternal dance, played out between timeless adversaries across the ages. We knew of course that while they were so few in number there was no possibility of the wolves attacking, but just to watch these two persecuted species in the same European landscape once more was enough for me and my thoughts inevitably turned to our previous tour in Finland. On that occasion photographers had wanted to capture wolves and bears in the same shot, but they had been prepared to do so in the most unnatural conditions and it is strange now to even compare the experiences in the same piece, so dissimilar do they feel. This was a truly thrilling moment and the adrenalin simply does not pump in the same way with a wolf running past a hide, as it does when it runs straight past you out in the open without even noticing that you are there. The first wolf did actually become aware of our presence towards the end, but only after the two outnumbered predators had chosen discretion as the better part of valour and were already loping away. I would imagine that we had perhaps relaxed a little and



shown some movement as the intensity subsided and our limbs suddenly realised they had barely moved for the best part of three hours in the rain. Whilst none could ever quite match this intensity or excitement and I can say now that we were not destined to see a lynx on the trip, all of our hikes at Bieszczady were similarly absorbing and there was always the feeling that you could see anything at any time, which is what drives a tour and keeps it exhilarating. Our guide took us right to the Ukrainian border and we spent long periods silently scanning areas where he had seen lynx and brown bear, as well as wild cat, one of thirteen carnivores that occur in this superlative setting. We saw a lot of bear scat, some of it very fresh, and although we would not encounter a bear here, we were just as ecstatic to see our first wild boar, when a huge male broke cover and dashed across a forest clearing and away into the trees. Given the tragic events surrounding these symbolic creatures, we really could not have been more pleased and would see another five young boar together on a night drive. In normal and kinder circumstances, wild boar would have been observed on something approaching a routine basis and all of our walks produced regular sightings of the animals that you would expect to see in a healthy Carpathian forest, including red squirrels and foxes, roe deer and red deer and European hares, which were common, but mainly at night. We passed several beaver lodges, including one spectacular construction, and there was meant to be a beech marten living in or around



our accommodation. Unfortunately, wherever we searched and for however long, the eyeshine that our spotlights picked out always turned out to be one of a number of sheepish foxes, which tend to look as if you have just caught them doing something they should not be, which on many occasions, is almost certainly the case. We had more success with the other marten that occurs here, when we spotted a pine marten in a tree and watched it foraging for eggs and young birds. I did get a picture of sorts, but it was again difficult at night with the car and I had no chance at all with our one and only European polecat, which I spotted running along a fence as I was driving. When you consider that I have to park the car and collect my camera before we all then climb out, it is hardly surprising that the animal had disappeared into the night and that we were able to take so few nocturnal shots on this trip. The bison were easier at



night, but they were the habituated animals that I mentioned earlier and the one time that I did stop to photograph them, a police car pulled up to see what we were doing. They were very friendly and gave us no problems, but security is tight here given the proximity to the border with Ukraine, a major smuggling point of both goods and people into the west, and we were stopped on several occasions. Less so during the day, when there were quite a lot of visitors and we had to walk further afield to avoid any crowds. It was not terrible by any means and in any case, the setting is so ravishing and the wildlife so captivating, that you entirely understand why locals flock here during the summer. Whilst I never have time to mention everything that we see in this format, we were watching beautiful creatures throughout each day, including a wonderful array of birds and butterflies and other insects that I rarely write about, but never entirely ignore. We try to appreciate all of the miraculous life that we are so fortunate to encounter and at Bieszczady the yellow-bellied toads that our guide showed us were just one of what I call the micro highlights, the small and less familiar species that very few people search for, but that make all of the long hours in the field so interesting and so worthwhile. Bieszczady has a wealth of these and as I pulled out of our lovely little lodge for the final time, it was with a real sense of regret that we were having to leave and that our tour was drawing to a close. Our final destination would be the medieval city of Krakow, which dates back to the 7th century and was the capital of Poland until 1596. On the way, we would visit the Wieliczka salt mine, a combined UNESCO cultural World Heritage Site with its nearby sister mine Bochnia, which is even older than Wieliczka, but considerably smaller. Prior to mining, table salt had been produced in the region by evaporating water from brine and in the 13th century rock salt was discovered in both Bochnia and Wieliczka. I have long since considered the Polish to be the dwarves of Europe, not because of any issues regarding their limited stature, but because of their love of and skill for mining. At Wieliczka these two elements combine masterfully to produce a mesmerising labyrinth of epic proportions and exquisite craftsmanship. With almost 300 kilometres of mine shafts over nine levels, the deepest of which lies 327 metres below the surface, the immense scale of the mine only forms part of the story, as it is the artistry and sheer human endeavour that is so evident here. On every level there are galleries of the most amazing and technically accomplished carvings, as well as vast ornate chambers and lovingly crafted chapels, from the small and beautifully intimate The Chapel of St. John to the utter magnificence of The Chapel of St. Kinga. Although the religious idolatry has no significance to me, I can still appreciate the inordinate skill and dedication involved in the creation of these exquisite reliefs and sculptures, all of which are hand carved in rock salt by prodigious artisans. It is difficult to comprehend the staggering scale and astounding ingenuity involved until you consider that our tour only included around 2% of the mine and that the entire complex features subterranean lakes, a

museum, huge dining and conference venues and even an underground health resort where you can spend the night. Weddings, classical concerts and art exhibitions are all held in various chapels and caverns, some of which are illuminated with extravagant chandeliers, the crystals of which have been individually crafted from dissolved rock salt. To take the dwarvish analogy a stage further, some of the cavernous halls of Wieliczka remind me of the scene from Peter Jackson's definitive version of 'The Lord of the Rings', when Gandalf uses his staff to illuminate Moria, or Khazad-dum in the dwarven tongue, and proclaims to the rest of the fellowship: 'Let me risk a little more light' and 'Behold: the great realm and Dwarf city of Dwarrowdelf'. That is one of my favourite scenes from a cinematic perspective and it looked as if we had actually stumbled upon the film set when we came across a chamber of intricately fashioned dwarves, all engrossed in various mining activities. This mining mentality pervades the national consciousness, but it is coal and not salt that dominates the mining industry and for decades Poland was among the top five producers of coal in the world. Sadly, this ardent love affair with both mining and coal has resulted in some dire environmental consequences, particularly in winter when nineteen million households begin burning coal to warm their homes and Poland is once again transformed into one of the most toxic destinations in Europe. During the winter months the smog hangs heavy over cities, mountains and forests alike, a



visible daily reminder of the air pollution that is attacking the health of both the young and the old and actively shortening lives. The figures themselves make disturbing reading and can only be viewed as a damning indictment of a succession of governments and their collective failure to protect their people and their planet. Apparently 33 of the 50 dirtiest European cities are in Poland, as are 80% of the private homes burning coal across the entire EU. In some cities safe levels of pollution have been exceeded by two thousand per cent and an estimated 48,000 people, mostly elderly, die prematurely each year as a result of respiratory conditions and pollution related disease. On average across the country, the contaminated air conditions are shortening the lives of every Polish citizen by approximately nine months. In a belated response, the current government has announced that they will invest around 23 billion euros in a 'Stop Smog' campaign and although that will hopefully make some initial difference, their target to reduce the economic use of coal by 50% over the next twenty years is not particularly reassuring, not perhaps if you live in one of the worst areas and have young children or elderly parents. Krakow is actually one of the most seriously affected cities according to the official figures, but as we made our way there, our only prevailing concern was that we were now without our regular guide and the integral third member of our team, who we had to say a sad farewell to at Wieliczka. For all its pollution issues, Krakow, or more precisely The Historic Centre of Krakow, is yet another UNESCO

cultural World Heritage Site and we would be staying at the heart of the old town in a superbly situated period hotel overlooking the medieval market square. According to UNESCO, this is the largest town square in Europe and although I have no idea whether that is correct, it must surely be one of the most striking and most atmospheric. Our hotel window commanded imperious views of the entire square, including the quite literally towering St.Mary's Basilica, the tiny square Church of St.Adalbert and Cloth Hall, a glorious temple to trade, which dates back to 1555 and is considered to be a particularly fine example of the architecture of Poland's Renaissance period from the late 15th to the late 16th century. In the evening the already busy restaurants would fill to overflowing, as the historic buildings are illuminated and the crowds begin to gather to listen to the talented singers, musicians and street performers. You could walk between a vibrant mix of old and new culture and on the hour the trumpeter would play the haunting Hejnal Mariacki from the tallest tower of St.Mary's Basilica. Translated as Saint Mary's Dawn, there is little consensus regarding its exact origin and whilst it is probably not true, I love the legend that it was first sounded during the Mongol invasion of Poland in 1241, when a sentry spotted the advancing horde and signalled the alarm. In doing so the city gates were closed and the city saved, but a Mongolian archer shot the sentry through the throat, which is why even now, the tune ends abruptly. In reality, the Mongols defeated the European

knights at Legnica during the incursion of 1241, partly by deploying one of their favourite tactics and feigning to retreat, and since the 19th century the Hejnal Mariacki has been played by a member of the Krakow fire brigade, who still use the gothic church as a watchtower. Despite our three night-stay, which is much longer than we normally spend in a city, two of our days were already accounted for, which left us with very little time to explore Krakow or to see everything that we had hoped. We did make a brief stop at Wawel Castle, as well as a longer visit to the National Museum to see the Stanislaw Wyspianski exhibition and Lady with an Ermine by a reasonably well known Renaissance artist, scientist, mathematician, inventor, architect and general genius by the name of Leonardo de Vinci. Stanislaw Wyspianski was also a multi-talented painter, playwright and poet in his own right and we thoroughly enjoyed what was a well curated and interesting exhibition. However, you should probably never view another artist on the day that you see a de Vinci, as Lady with an Ermine, like every de Vinci or van Gogh or like listening to Mozart, reminds us of the heights to



which humanity can attain, heights well beyond our grasp or even understanding and on which any ideal civilisation would be based. We would see the other extreme of this humanity in a couple of days and I would ultimately leave Krakow knowing that I had come face to face with both gods and monsters. For now our only problem with the city and our splendid hotel, was that there was nowhere to park, which meant that we had a fairly convoluted drive around Planty Park to get to the car park that we were using. We missed our road late one night and with so many one way systems, I asked James to put the route on his phone to make life a bit easier. He certainly did that, but possibly not in the manner intended, for instead of guiding me around the park, he directed me through it, which would have been fine had there actually been a road, instead of the public boulevard that I found myself driving down, alongside erupting fountains and bemused locals. If you know London, imagine driving around the Serpentine in Hyde Park instead of taking the legal road that goes through it and you will have some idea of what we were doing and exactly why I was waiting for the flashing lights and the sirens to start erupting. I still have no idea how we avoided arrest, but I guess that no police cars could actually follow us, as I gently nudged late night dog walkers out of the way and smiled apologetically at the courting couples who had to drop each other's hands as I literally drove a wedge between them. You know something is wrong when you have to mount the pavement to reconnect to the road and I can honestly say that this is the first time I have ever used a car to get through a set of traffic lights in the same direction as the pedestrians. Fortunately James is reading literature and not maps at university and we have since reached an agreement that in future we will adopt the more traditional method of driving and only use roads. Although it was nothing in comparison to the mental distress that we would face the next day, our final wildlife adventure would be the most physically demanding of the trip, but also one of the most enjoyable and satisfying. It would take place in the majestic Tatra Mountains, which

form part of the Western Carpathians and also the border with neighbouring Slovakia directly to the south. Our day would involve a 5am start from Krakow and a cable car ride to the summit of Kasprowy Wierch in Tatra National Park, where we would begin searching for two main animals, the northern chamois, a fabulously distinctive goat-like bovid, and the alpine marmot, for which the description uber cute will probably suffice. There would also be the outside chance of brown bear when we dropped down to the lower forested sections of the mountain and they are sometimes even seen from the cable car. We only had this one day available to try and find all three and in future I would stay much longer and also much closer, for although none of the climbs or hikes were particularly strenuous, we basically walked up and down all day and did not return to the car until almost 10pm, at which point I had a long and basically unnecessary drive back to Krakow. Next time I will probably stay in the nearby village of Zakopane or perhaps across the border, as I know some Slovakian guides who have an excellent record of finding bears without using hides or bait. We did not have time to meet them on this occasion, but I made a point of contacting them for next time, as they appear to be the type of knowledgeable and ethical local people that I like to work with and I am always looking for European bear opportunities that do not involve hides, partly as an alternative to the contrived experiences currently offered in Finland. The national park is shared between the two nations and the Slovakian section covers an area of roughly 1,045 km² including the buffer zone, which is about five times larger than its Polish equivalent. Slovakia is also home to the tallest mountain in both the Tatras and the entire Carpathians, Gerlachovsky Stit, which rises to a height of 2,655 metres and has the extraordinary distinction of being the highest mountain in I think eight different countries since 1918, which probably tells us a great deal more about humanity and borders during the 20th



century, than it does about moving mountains. The existing border appears to be fairly relaxed within the national park and at one stage we made a brief foray into Slovakia, partly to explore and also to escape the crowds on the Polish side. The area is certainly very popular with hikers during the summer months, but if you walk hard enough and far enough, you can more or less have the place to yourself and we spent a reasonable part of the day with just our local guide for company. He was good company as well and, as is invariably the case, it was a sensible decision to use someone with local knowledge, particularly given our time constraints. We spotted the first two chamois relatively easily without his help and would eventually see fifteen of these splendid mountain specialists across three separate sightings. The marmots were not as straightforward and having failed to find any in the two most likely areas, our guide suggested a third option, which was a long and steep uphill climb away. Even there, away from the crowds, it looked as if we were going to be unlucky until James spotted something fat, furry and fabulous, which of course, could only be a marmot. There were actually two about 30 metres below our position and for around an hour we watched them interact, taking it in turns to stand guard on a huge flat rock, while the other fed. If, as we suspected was likely to be the case, these were to be the last creatures of the trip, then it was a fine end and we carried on searching the picturesque mountain trails and woodland valleys more in hope than expectation. We dropped to lower ground to deliberately look for bears, which occur on both sides of the border and would have been a far more realistic prospect if the paths towards the base had not been so busy. The visitor numbers increased as we descended and we both knew that we had no real chance of seeing a bear, until we actually saw one, a gorgeous and entirely unexpected brown bear standing on its hind legs feeding from a tree. It was probably taking fruit of some kind, but I never got a chance to check, as other



people spotted the bear and the resulting uproar sent it crashing off into the undergrowth. While we spent the next two hours scrambling back up for better views of the open clearings and mountainside in case it reemerged, the groups who had made all the noise lost interest and wandered off after just a few minutes. Unsurprisingly, the bear was not to reappear, which may have been frustrating in other circumstances, but to see a major predator with this level of disturbance had been almost inconceivable and, instead of dwelling on any disappointment, we took the episode as a triumphant way in which to finish the wildlife element of the tour and our European summer in general. Whilst I had again failed to see a lynx and our experience in Finland had been largely underwhelming, the three distinctly contrasting tours still produced a wealth of memorable encounters amid the most spectacular scenery. Often overlooked as a major wildlife destination, possibly because the culture itself is so phenomenal, Europe includes around 50 countries and territories and it is the incredible environmental diversity that makes the continent such a special one to travel within. Due to its vast size and the ease with which borders can be crossed, there is also a great deal of freedom to explore, which particularly appeals to someone who has grown up on a relatively small island, an island where much of the native wildlife, including all of the major predators, was wiped out centuries ago. To still be able to find these animals on the mainland is as satisfying as it is essential and in my opinion Poland remains one of the best destinations to watch them, despite an often horrific history of suppression and persecution, from which the country still bears some obvious scars. One of these is Auschwitz and on the final day of our tour we visited the infamous extermination camp where around 1.1 million people were murdered during the Second World War. It is easy to write those words and just as easy to read them, however, it is a less simple process to fully grasp their significance. These camps were designed purely for killing people, not soldiers captured in battle, but civilian men, women and children, who were placed in sealed chambers and systematically gassed. As German officials experimented with the most efficient methods of mass murder, thousands more were gassed in converted buses, driven around the country with the exhaust fumes channelled back into the vehicle to deliver a fatal dose of carbon monoxide. Most were Jews, but many other ethnicities and groups were targeted and it is widely known that the 'Hunger Plan' was deliberately devised in order to starve tens of millions of Russians and other Slavs to death throughout the course of the war. German death squads preceded the extermination camps and were responsible for a huge loss of life, particularly in

the Soviet Union where millions died, and the ghettos and concentration camps claimed the lives of countless others. I tend to try and avoid the term Nazi when describing these outrages, as it somehow masks the perpetrators of this great evil, as if normal Germans had developed an affliction termed Nazism and had no choice in the matter. The reality is that Nazis were ordinary Germans, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters and between them, they were responsible for murdering up to six million Jews or, if it helps to provide an element of perspective, around two thirds of the Jewish population of Europe. Although the numbers are unquestionably obscene, to me they are not the most disturbing part of what the world would come to know as the Holocaust, not when you consider that up to 85 million people died during the bloodiest conflict the world has ever witnessed and that between 50 and 60 million of these were civilians. It is instead the ideology behind the crime that terrifies me, the genuine belief that Germans were racially superior and that Jews were an infectious parasite that needed to be eradicated like an infestation of lice. This was not just a general idea or even a misguided belief, it was actual government policy and the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question', launched genocide on an industrial scale, designed for only one purpose, to eliminate an entire people from the face of the earth. Approximately 90% of Polish Jews were killed, as well as millions of ethnic Poles, and although I intentionally do not dwell on them in this format, almost everywhere we visited had witnessed sickening atrocities at the hands of either the Germans or the Russians. I do not intend to discuss our visit to Auschwitz either, other than to say that it is difficult to know what hope there is for man, when we have this abiding testimony of pure evil and have learnt absolutely nothing from it. Instead of describing what I saw and its impact on me personally, I would urge people to visit for themselves, as everyone should see what happened here and the depths to which humanity can descend, lest we ever forget.

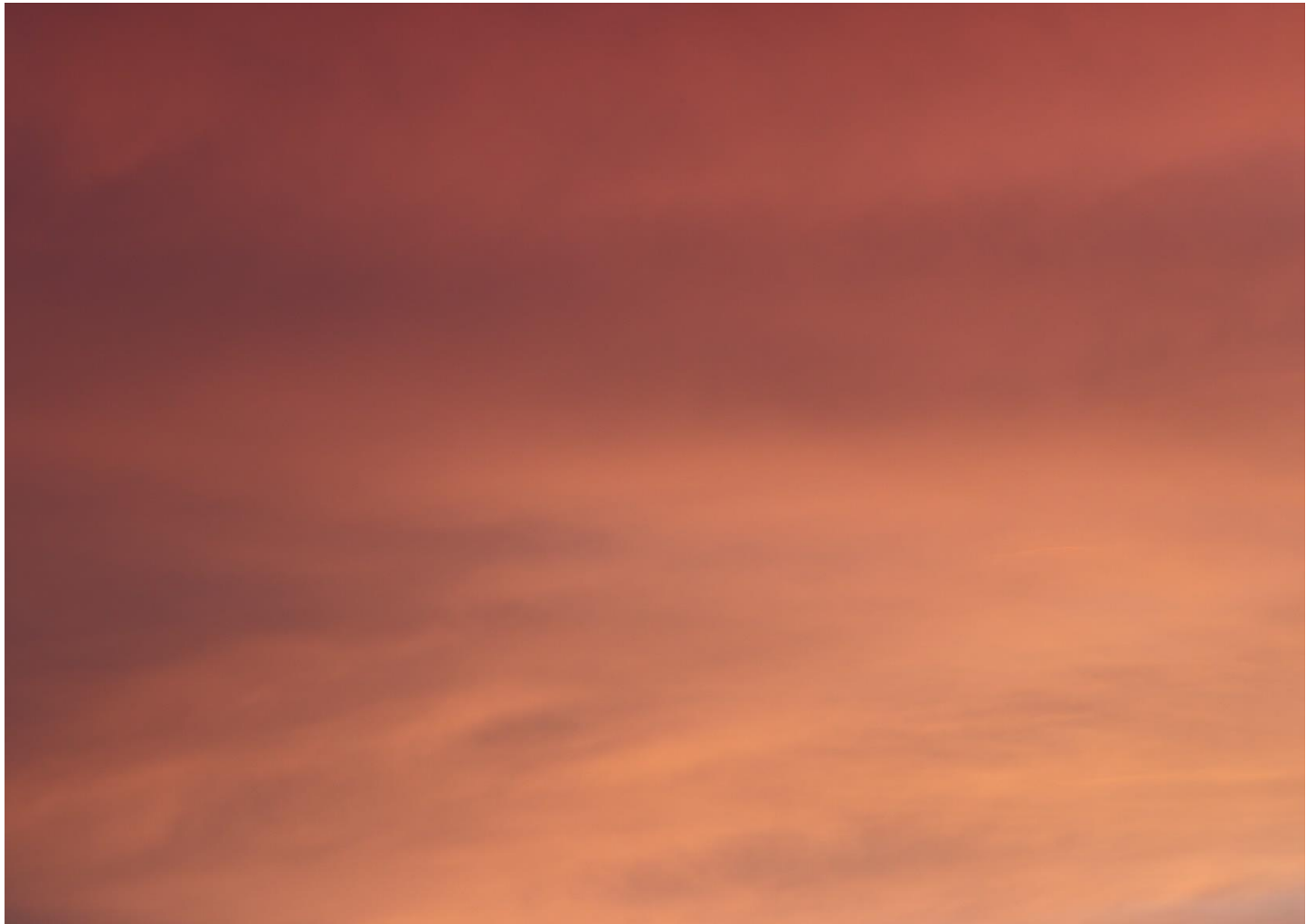
*First they came for the Communists,
and I did not speak out...because I was not a Communist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I did not speak out...because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews,
and I did not speak out...because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me,
and there was no one left to speak out.*

- Martin Niemoller





No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Grey Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	Solitary animal at night at Bialowieza and a pair interacting with a herd of bison at Bieszczady.
2	Raccoon Dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>	One at Biebrza and three individuals at Bialowieza, all at night.
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Commonly observed at every major destination.
4	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	A brief view of an adult at Tatra National Park.
5	European Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	Two excellent sightings of individuals at Bialowieza and Bieszczady.
6	European Polecat	<i>Mustela putorius</i>	A brief, but good view of a single animal at Bieszczady.
7	Eurasian Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	Three juveniles for an extended period at Bialowieza.
8	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Not encountered at Biebrza, but commonly observed thereafter.
9	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Low numbers observed at every major destination.
10	Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>	Several sightings at Biebrza only.
11	European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>	Three sightings of 23 animals at Bialowieza and a herd of 22 at Bieszczady, where we also encountered a semi-wild population.
12	Northern Chamois	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>	15 at Tatra National Park, across three encounters.
13	Konik	<i>Equus ferus caballus ssp</i>	Herd of five at Roztocze National Park.
14	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	One individual in daylight and a group of five semi-adult boars at night, all at Bieszczady.
15	Northern White-breasted Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus roumanicus</i>	Regularly encountered at night at Bialowieza, but nowhere else.
16	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	Common at most destinations, but absent at Bialowieza.
17	Eurasian Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>	Multiple animals on a nocturnal boat trip and further sightings of a second population on foot, all at Biebrza.
18	Alpine Marmot	<i>Marmota marmota</i>	Two observed at Tatra National Park.
19	Speckled Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus suslicus</i>	Around eight at a small reserve near Zamosc.
20	Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	Commonly observed in low numbers at all three major destinations.
21	Edible Dormouse	<i>Glis glis</i>	A brief view at night in a tree at Bialowieza.
22	European Water Vole	<i>Arvicola amphibius</i>	One swimming at night at Bialowieza.









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