



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



NETHERLANDS

Date - September 2020

Duration - 6 Days

Destinations

Amsterdam - Zuid-Kennemerland National Park - Biesbosch National Park - Hoge Veluwe National Park - Vledder - Den Helder - Texel

Trip Overview

This was another trip that I had postponed from earlier in the year due to the global coronavirus pandemic, but whereas Italy had been moderately successful, in Holland my luck began to run out and the tour was severely impacted by the enforced changes, not least the fact that I had to reduce the duration from ten nights to just five. Not only was I unable to spend as long as I needed at each destination, but the guided tours I had booked at the Zuid-Kennemerland and Biesbosch national parks were no longer available, which ultimately meant that I would not encounter either European bison or beaver. I spent a long time searching for both, but the access to the bison enclosure is severely restricted without a park guide at Zuid-Kennemerland and at Biesbosch there were no boats operating, either guided or otherwise, which reduced the likelihood of seeing a beaver to more or less nil. The weather also took a rather unhelpful turn, as the trip took place towards the end of September and the glorious summer that most of Europe had enjoyed was already little more than a fading memory. After a deceptively bright start during which we were searching for a herd of bison on the edge of the North Sea in t-shirts, it rained every day and on several occasions so severely that it was impossible to look for most animals, at least with any realistic prospect of success. Whilst all of these regrettable factors were as disappointing as the overall tour would prove to be, everything in life is of course relative and I was acutely aware how fortunate I was to be able to travel during such unsettled and, for many, ruinous times. Perhaps given the capricious nature of wildlife viewing, where nothing is ever guaranteed or can be taken for granted, I have generally been able to appreciate the natural wonders that I have been so privileged to experience and



that while things rarely go entirely as planned, there is always something unique and astonishing to savour. Having had to postpone my spring version of this tour, and with it my best chance of observing a bison, my hastily rearranged early autumn visit coincided with the annual red deer rut at Hoge Veluwe National Park and I was instead able to watch several magnificent stags bellowing out their challenges across the park. No dramatic clashes materialised during my all too brief visit, but it still perfectly illustrates the unpredictable joy of wildlife travel and my change of schedule also meant that my son was able to join me on tour for the first time in more than a year, which was even better as far as I was concerned. Having said that, and despite having sorely missed his great company and expert spotlighting skills, on this occasion I would have actually preferred him not to be able to participate, as he should have been in Australia on a study year, but his placement had been indefinitely postponed due to the pandemic that has ravaged so many lives across the planet. He appreciates that he remains luckier than most of course, but it was still a great opportunity for a young man and I am hoping that he may be able to salvage at least part of the experience by travelling out to Australia in time for their second semester. Despite the various changes and setbacks, we travelled to Holland in exceptionally good spirits and at this stage I should mention that I am aware that the country is officially the Netherlands and not Holland. However, I grew up knowing it as the latter and old habits die hard. Our first destination would be the sand dunes of Zuid-Kennemerland National Park, a small partially forested reserve tottering on the very edge of the west coast with dramatic views out across the often tempestuous North Sea. The park is home to a variety of fauna and flora otherwise rare elsewhere, particularly in terms of some of the coastal vegetation, but is probably most well known for the European bison that were released into an enclosed section of the reserve in 2007, as part of an organic habitat management system that also includes Highland cattle and the Polish konik pony. Bison were once widespread across much of Europe, but by 1927 they had been hunted to extinction in the wild and the herds that exist today all descend from just a few surviving captive animals. Encouragingly, they are now being reintroduced across much of their former range, often as part of major rewilding projects, and in September 2017 a lone bison swam the river Oder and crossed from Poland into Germany. It was the first wild bison observed in Germany for more than 250 years and the day after it had been spotted, local officials instructed two hunters to kill it. Old habits do indeed die hard and while bison may appear intimidating as the largest of all European land animals, they are



actually extremely gentle creatures and will always try to avoid confrontation or any kind of human interaction. For anyone who knows these animals well, or the North American variety for that matter, the usual view of a bison is from behind, as they will almost always walk away when approached by people. I can testify to this on numerous occasions and their behaviour at Zuid-Kennemerland was entirely typical, in that they were basically nowhere to be seen in any of the areas that visitors could reach or even scan across. They were probably sheltering in the fragmented patches of forest between the imposing dunes and although we did spot some Highland cattle and a few fallow deer from the viewing platform overlooking a small lake, the solitary tourist trail simply did not provide sufficient access and we were not to be lucky, despite returning on our final day for a second prolonged attempt. This was undoubtedly the most disappointing aspect of the tour, not least because another small herd of bison exists in the pretty forested Veluwe region, but again there were no guided tours available and this particular reserve can only be accessed with an official guide. I will consequently have to include both destinations when I next return and this will also need to be the case for what was to be our next stop, Biesbosch National Park, where we also missed our main target animal, the European beaver. Biesbosch is apparently the largest freshwater tidal zone in Europe and was formed as a result of the St. Elizabeth's flood of 1421, which swept away entire villages and is said to have claimed the lives of between 2,000 and 10,000 people. For those who are not aware, around a third of Holland lies below sea level and for centuries the relentless North Sea was kept at least partially at bay by a vast network of dikes, sand dunes and other artificial sea defences. However, they were always vulnerable to extreme weather conditions and exactly seventeen years after another devastating flood on the very same unfortunate saints day, a terrible storm breached a number of dikes and the irresistible black waters of the North Sea rushed back in to complete its merciless conquest. Not that this was Holland's most devastating flood by any means, as hundreds of thousands of souls have perished to the sea over the years and today this low-lying territory is protected by a far more advanced and secure system of dikes, pumps and surge barriers. During our brief stay I did wonder whether even these would be sufficient to cope with the amount of water spilling from the heavens and you really know that you are in trouble when beavers are not showing because it is too wet. If that sounds as if I must be exaggerating, I am of course, but only somewhat, as the rain was so torrential during much of our visit, we would have been incredibly lucky to spot a beaver unless it had been very close and that in itself was unlikely given that our guided boat tour had been cancelled and there were no boats available for private hire. Instead we had to resort to walking along the riverbank for hours at a time in the pouring rain and although we were both thrilled to find two baby hedgehogs within a few minutes of our arrival, as well as a large number of hares and a few roe deer during the course of our stay, there were ultimately to be no beavers. I was still pleased to have included Biesbosch, as it remains a hugely important European wetland and is home to a spectacular array of waterfowl and other birds. One section can only be accessed by car ferry, but we made the effort in order to see as much of the reserve as possible, and also to get out of the inclement weather for a couple of hours, and were rewarded with a number of impressive sightings, including a fairly bedraggled juvenile kestrel, which was either too young or too wet to even consider flying away as I got progressively closer. I will certainly return and for considerably

longer, but for now it was time to move on to De Hoge Veluwe National Park, which, in normal conditions, is unquestionably my favourite reserve in Holland. As such, I had been able to arrange almost two full days within this typical European forest and was expecting to pick up a few common species relatively easily, including wild boar, red squirrel and the ubiquitous red fox. That we were to encounter none of these generally abundant creatures probably tells you all that you need to know regarding the weather, as the rain would simply not relent and we were not helped when I drove slightly off a trail attempting to spot more or less anything and punctured a tyre. It was that sort of trip sadly and even the distinctive mouflon were scarce and took us the best part of our first day to locate. We eventually found a small herd mixed in with some red deer and would observe three more individuals at distance on our final day. The one consolation was that we were visiting during the annual red deer rut and although tourists often dismiss deer in order to move on and search for more exotic species, these are enormously impressive animals and the rut is undoubtedly one of the



highlights of the European wildlife calendar. To hear the bellowing roar of the mighty stags throwing out their challenges and to watch the visceral clash of antlers as two huge beasts turn head on to engage, is a truly magnificent experience and I would encourage all wildlife enthusiasts to plan a specific trip around this event, either in the UK or elsewhere in Europe. There are numerous sites where this ancient mating ritual can be observed and it is as much fun to watch the hinds as they gather and begin to display their own mating behaviour, often jumping exuberantly in the air and mounting each other in order to show the victorious stags that they will be receptive when approached. Males are rarely killed during what can appear to be a brutal spectacle, although it does occur, but a dominant stag will lose around half their bodyweight during the rutting period, as they chase away the eager young bucks and give up eating throughout the entire process, possibly in order to avoid consuming parasites in their weakened state. No actual clashes evolved during our admittedly limited vigils and perhaps this was also as a result of the diabolical weather, but it was still a real privilege to



watch even part of this iconic behaviour and at least we knew that our next destination would be dry, as I had booked a couple of nights in a hide where a biologist had been studying a few of my favourite mustelids. I should state immediately that these small carnivores are attracted to the hide by food, albeit relatively insignificant amounts, which anyone who knows me will be aware I do not really agree with. However, my main issue is with the feeding of large predators in the way that bears and wolves are now fed massive amounts at numerous destinations across Europe and are more or less tamed by what is an entirely unnatural process. I accept that much the same could be said of the martens and polecats that I was hoping to see here in Holland, but the difference, to me at least, is that the amount of food being used is not sufficient to change their natural behaviour. Instead, these mustelids drop by sporadically as part of a normal hunting and scavenging routine within their territory. Sometimes they do not appear at all and it is much easier for me to accept a pine marten receiving a few scraps in the way that an urban fox may forage around your rubbish bin, than a brown bear lying in more or less the same spot each day, literally waiting for a truck to arrive with his dinner. This is particularly unacceptable where hunting occurs, which is almost everywhere sadly, as bears are often hunted in the areas they are fed and of course the feeding process gradually erodes their fear of man and, almost inevitably, their life expectancy. I appreciate that this distinction is my own, but I would also be the first person to acknowledge that, although I greatly enjoyed our visit and it was wonderful to watch these highly absorbing mustelids at such close quarters, the experience was not authentically wild. Hides can certainly play an important role in both conservation and wildlife tourism, but in my opinion they are far less invasive and



consequently far more enjoyable, when bait is not used, so overlooking a naturally occurring water source or a salt lick for example. This particular hide did include a small pool and is artificially lit throughout the night, so no spotlights are required and flash photography would not be an option in any case, as you are observing these secretive nocturnal creatures through glass and there are no photographic slots to poke a lens through. You are so close to the animals that this would unquestionably disturb them and a few were clearly already wary of the artificial lights and grabbed something quickly before disappearing into the night to enjoy their morsel within the seclusion of the forest. The two European polecats that emerged briefly on our first evening were particularly cautious and, coincidentally or not, these are the rarest of the five mammals that I had been informed we could expect to observe. The



other four were beech marten and pine marten, so three mustelid species in all, as well as hedgehog and brown rats, which were especially active around the water and would regularly swim from one side of the shallow pool to the other. Badgers also put in an appearance on occasion, but generally much earlier in the summer and usually in hot weather. Their presence was therefore never likely during the biblical deluge that we were experiencing, but we were extremely fortunate in one way, as all five probable species thankfully turned up on cue on our first night. If that sounds fairly routine given the artificial conditions, the opposite is actually the case, as these are still wild animals and sightings are far from guaranteed. As if to very clearly demonstrate the point, the very next evening, when conditions did not appear to have changed at all, only the rats and a single pine marten returned. I was actually pleased,



as their absence confirmed that these voracious little predators were not habituated and would continue to flourish with or without the hide. I hope that will be able to continue in a modest way, as it is more or less impossible to observe three mustelids in one location and although it is fairly easy to tell the two martens apart, this was a lovely opportunity to watch and compare them at such close quarters. Between our two all night vigils, I made the 270 kilometre or so round trip to Den Helder, where we caught the ferry to Texel, a small island off the north coast. The plan had been to take a relaxing boat trip to photograph the grey and common seals that live around the island, with the added possibility of spotting a harbour porpoise. As it was, and with the rain still teeming down, the generally inhospitable North Sea looked even less inviting than normal and we set out more in trepidation than tranquillity. As the rest of the passengers huddled within the tiny cabin, James and I were soaked within a few minutes, as we attempted to photograph a small group of grey seals that had been perched on a sandbank until our arrival, at which point they all dived into the murky depths. This was repeated on several occasions and although the rain relented just enough for me to take a few quick shots, the skipper and crew did not have a great deal of enthusiasm in terms of searching for other seals, let alone a porpoise. So two more probable species had been missed as a result of the climatic conditions and in all we would encounter twelve mammals, when twenty would have been a very realistic proposition for the original trip. We tried the bison at Zuid-Kennemerland again on our final day, but with no success and these were just one of six animals that the May version of this tour would have almost certainly included, the other five being beaver, wild boar, red fox, red squirrel and common seal, with good additional chances for badger and porpoise. Around twenty mammals is not bad for a country that few consider as a wildlife destination, but, as my August trip to Italy confirmed, timing is everything with the vast majority of wildlife tours and having largely avoided the impact of the coronavirus pandemic throughout the summer, my luck had finally run out. It was already almost impossible to travel beyond Europe and as the virus began to spread once more and the death toll soared, so the world closed down again. James and I had to quarantine upon our return to the UK and Holland would ultimately be my last tour of a profoundly challenging year that had started in such extraordinary fashion, when a friend mentioned that a lynx was being seen with cubs in Estonia and I rushed over just on the off chance of finally seeing a Eurasian lynx in the wild. As it was, I did not find that particular mother, although I did photograph her tracks and those of her young, but my 25-year wait was still about to come to a triumphant conclusion and in all I had three separate lynx sightings across two remarkable evenings, one of which I was delighted to be personally responsible for. Whilst that first lynx was always going to be the highlight of this or any other year for me, there were several magical moments that spring to mind, from the Arctic foxes amid the spellbinding Icelandic scenery and the highly unlikely but altogether majestic humpback whale on the same trip, to the magnificent ibex and chamois in ravishing Italy and the inordinately endearing brown bears in both Italy and Slovakia. At the time, my only sadness was that my son was not with me as I gazed upon that first lynx walking through the snow in Estonia, but who could have guessed what would follow and how the world would change seemingly overnight. I experienced my own issues during what has been the most turbulent and unsettling period I have known, but life goes on for those of us left behind and for me that means searching the wild places of this extraordinarily beautiful planet for the astounding creatures that make my own personal existence worthwhile.

| No. | Species | Scientific Name | Notes |
|-----|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Beech Marten | <i>Martes foina</i> | Three sightings of probably two animals on the first night at the hide. |
| 2 | European Pine Marten | <i>Martes martes</i> | Observed on both nights at the hide. |
| 3 | European Polecat | <i>Mustela putorius</i> | Two individuals on the first night at the hide. |
| 4 | Red Deer | <i>Cervus elaphus</i> | Several herds at Hoge Veluwe. |
| 5 | Roe Deer | <i>Capreolus capreolus</i> | Observed in low numbers at Biesbosch and Hoge Veluwe. |
| 6 | Fallow Deer | <i>Dama dama</i> | Low numbers in and around Zuid-Kennemerland. |
| 7 | European Mouflon | <i>Ovis aries musimon ssp</i> | A small herd and three individuals at Hoge Veluwe. |
| 8 | Western European Hedgehog | <i>Erinaceus europaeus</i> | Two immature animals at Biesbosch and several adults on the first night at the hide. |
| 9 | European Rabbit | <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i> | A few individuals at Zuid-Kennemerland. |
| 10 | European Hare | <i>Lepus europaeus</i> | Abundant at Biesbosch. |
| 11 | Brown Rat | <i>Rattus norvegicus</i> | Common on both evenings at the hide. |
| 12 | Grey Seal | <i>Halichoerus grypus</i> | Around twenty on the boat trip out of Texel. |



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

