



## Bialowiecza Forest

HARRIET TUPPER reports on a visit made after the tour to Poland (see pages 161 - 169) by a small group to the Bialowiecza Forest, an easy three-hours' drive from Warsaw. Ms Malgorzata Karas, Director of the Bialowiecza National Park, graciously welcomed the group.

Bialowiecza Forest is the last primeval forest in Europe, the remnant of forest, which used to stretch across much of the continent. Now it sits across the frontier that divides Poland from Belarus, with 62,500ha lying in Poland and 87,500 in Belarus. The two parts are separated by a 12m wide cleared strip, created during the Cold War. Since 1979 the forest has been a UNESCO World Heritage site. Part of it (10,500 hectares) is one of Poland's National Parks and has a Strict Protection zone of 4,700ha within the Park, and a buffer zone beyond it. As with so many unique habitats in the world, these are under threat in that the buffer zone of managed forest (3,200ha) is still used for hunting, often within the gift of the powerful.

Bialowiecza carries an aura of history and mystery. It has long been a shelter, a refuge for those fleeing political strife. It plays a central role in the epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* (1834) by the great Polish writer, Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855). The story is set in the forest glades, which illustrations in early editions perfectly evoke. It has also long been a hunting preserve for rulers, Polish kings and then Russian tsars. In the 1930s, Bialowiecza caught the eye and imagination of Hermann Goring who appointed himself Reichsjagermeister and hunted there. In 1939, the invading German army swiftly reached the



#### Opposite

Hein and Charlotte Rauwenhoff, Piotr Krasinski, Harriet Tupper, James Harris and Egbert Vinke demonstrating the circumference of the giant *Fraxinus* (it is said to be 42 to 43m high) seen behind them.

#### Above

Ms Malgorzata Karas, Director of the Bialowiecza National Park with James Harris, a member of the IDS Tours Committee.

#### Right

The defining feature of Bialowiecza Forest, the last primeval forest in Europe, is that human intervention is kept to the absolute minimum. There is no such thing as storm damage, only the work of Nature.



forest but, while local people were treated abominably, the forest was regarded as a 'sacred grove' and protected. Nevertheless, partisan bands and Jewish escapees from ghettos managed to survive in the forest.

The main tree group within the forest is *Quercus robur*, *Tilia cordata* and *Carpinus betulus* but amongst these are also *Acer platanoides*, *Picea abies*, *Fraxinus excelsior*, *Betula pendula*, *Populus tremula* and *Salix caprea*. There are other species, a total of 21, but these are the most noticeable. The forest lies at the range limits of *Picea abies* and *Quercus petraea*. The defining feature of Bialowiecza forest is that human intervention is kept to the absolute minimum. In the past there has been intervention in the form of felling (particularly by the British lumber company, Century, in the 1920s), but we were told no planting had ever taken place, and of course nowadays no felling is permitted. No machinery is

allowed in, so you are limited to walking or travelling by horse drawn cart. If a tree falls across an access path, it is cut by hand and left to one side. When we asked about storm damage, we were told there is no such thing as 'damage', only the work of Nature. Nobody, not even a researcher, is allowed to spend the night in the forest.

The Strictly Protected zone happens to have especially rich soil and so broadleaved trees account for two thirds and conifers only one third. The trees tend to grow taller than normal. *Salix caprea*, usually little more than a shrub, can reach 30m. We saw a *Sorbus aucuparia* of 15m and *Ulmus glabra* of 32m. We did not see the enormous oaks, deemed to be National Monuments, which bear the names of Polish kings whose contemporaries they are. However we did see a famous example of *Fraxinus* that is reckoned to be 42 to 43m. Although these exceptional trees flourish, the impression as you walk through the forest is of very even growth, very evenly spaced, creating a forest with few landmarks, where you could easily get lost. Here and there beavers have made dams, and where trees stand in the resulting water, they die. There being no intervention, there is far more dead wood than in a managed forest, about 20% of the trees, either standing or lying. Trees are in every conceivable state of growth and decomposition. This in turn helps support the exceptionally high number of invertebrates (10,000 species) and fungi (4-5,000). A cursory glance at a metre of dead wood revealed ten different fungi and there were probably more that we could not see or did not notice. Fallen trees create space and air for regeneration and frequently are the nursery for young seedlings, which grow directly on them. We were told that for oaks to regenerate it is only necessary for one to survive per hectare per 30 years, a surprisingly low rate. Another feature of the forest is the absence of *Fagus* and *Hedera*: Bialowieza is out of their range.

The deep silence of the forest is broken only by the sound of birds, especially woodpeckers. We were particularly amused to see fir cones wedged into bark crevices which these creatures put there, the better to peck out the seeds. Within the forest live European Bison (*Bison bonasus*), re-introduced in 1929 after they had been wiped out by starving soldiers in the First World War. There are also lynx, wolves, moose, red deer and many other mammals. You are unlikely to see any of these as you walk in the forest but a few are kept in enclosures in a mini safari park outside the forest. The re-introduction of bison has been very successful and is linked to international efforts which we had already seen on the IDS tour to Romania in 2007. They also lend their name, *zubr* in Polish, to Zubrowka, the vodka flavoured with 'bison grass', (*Hierochloe odorata*), a fitting tribute to these huge beasts.

### Bibliography

Schama, S., 1996. *Landscape and Memory*. Fontana Press, London