



Introduction

I had long planned a trip to Poland to see the Spotted Soudliks but this year I eventually got it organised and would also try to break my duck with my bogey mammal the racoon dog. We stayed in the famous reserve of Bialowieza for the duration and spent a long day to get to the sousliks.

You cannot book the weather but according to the totally accurate BBC weather forecast Saturday would be the best weather during our trip so we arranged with our contact to visit the sousliks then, however the weather conditions would hamper us but not in the way we thought.

Temperatures were high upper 20's to low 30's during the day and high teens at night. Heavy rain on Friday morning / early afternoon and late Monday but hot and sunny around this.

The photos are hyperlinked to larger versions.

Diary

8th August 2014

We flew in to Warsaw Modlin in torrential rain and with traffic incredible slow we had to change our plans and ended up at Treblinka, which in the terrible conditions was apt for the location. We spent some time here literally soaking up the atmosphere. We left and headed for our destination the Bialowieza forest. As we arrived the rain finally relented and we found somewhere to stay for the duration.

After a quick unpack we headed out for a walk near Narewka Bridge, here we had a nice family of red backed shrikes and several dragonfly species were nice, but Anna spotted a shrew and after some nice views we identified it as common shrew, a fieldfare was an unexpected sighting. We got some food and then headed into a nearby part of the forest to search for bison as dusk fell. We had no luck but did see a couple of wild boar and heard tawny owls calling before heading for some well-earned sleep; a mouse sp crossed the road on the way back.

9th August 2014

We were up at dawn and had a quick look for Bison but had no luck at any of the recommended sites, we could not linger as we had an epic day planned but did stop for some wild boar. We headed off for the 5 hour drive to the SE corner of Poland to meet some researchers, a white tailed eagle, black kite, red foxes and some roe deer were of note on the journey.

We arrived a few mins late and our host had also been delayed by the Police, due to the close proximity to the Ukrainian border this is quite common. We drove to the reserve aptly named Souslik Hills for a guided tour of this rather small 27 hectare site. I was expecting Russian steppe habitat not rolling farmland but nevertheless it is home to approx. 2000 spotted sousliks and we spotted one within a few mins.



Treblinka



White Wagtail



Fieldfare



Red Backed Shrike



Roe Deer



Wild Boar

We had a good look round and saw all the signs of sousliks such as runs, burrows and crop damage in the adjacent fields all told by the foremost spotted souslik researcher, assisted in translation by his son and he provided us with a plethora of information including his book on the subject (in polish). We also saw evidence of dogs digging up burrows and flyover lesser spotted eagles and Montagu's harriers some of the sousliks major predators. A few butterflies were present on the reserve notably Queen of Spain fritillary.

We had great discussions about the sousliks ecology, how the habitat is managed and how the population has recovered from less than 100 to almost 9000 in Poland. We were informed that the grass had been cut on the reserve especially for our visit to enable us to see the sousliks easier – honoured or what. We settled down to watch the sousliks and had some nice views of them and of field voles which are also plentiful in the reserve, eventually our hosts had to leave and bid us farewell with instructions on what to do if we were stopped by the border patrol.

We stayed a while longer and managed to get some close views of one individual before heading off. We made a stop at the Popówka Reserve where the largest souslik population is present and bumped into our host once more; he was catching some sousliks to translocate to another reserve and had one in a trap to show us.

The grass was quite long and spotting them here would have been much harder. We bid our host farewell and took the long journey home via a quick stop for food a brown hare the only notable sighting. On reaching the forest we took all the minor roads for a night drive, first was an edible dormouse crossing the road followed by a very showy pine marten which was eating the moths attracted to the car headlights, next was a badger and a couple of red deer and then finally a racoon dog but it did not stay for long and disappeared a flypast owl was too quick to ID. The last sighting was a water shrew running about in the road, we spotlighted the meadows for bison but thick mist filled them so we gave up and headed for bed.



Me at the Souslik Hills Reserve



Spotted Souslik



Spotted Souslik



White Stork



Pine Marten

10th August 2014

Again thick mist thwarted us at dawn so after some breakfast we headed to see the captive bison herd and a few other forest animals Elk, wild boar, red and roe deer, lynx, wild horses, wolves. We grabbed some drinks as the temperature was now quite hot and headed for Topilo for a walk round the lake. Halfway there an accident slowed the traffic down and a fireman directed us round the grim site of a dead cyclist! The lake was an ideal spot to cheer up our spirits the only birds of note were a couple of whooper swans but there were plenty of butterflies and dragonflies including silver washed fritillaries, large coppers and beautiful demoiselles and a cafe for ice cream. We spent the rest of the afternoon doing some general birding at a few sites round the forest we found several wrynecks, hawfinches, tree creeper, loads of red backed shrikes to name a few and in the palace park collared flycatcher, middle spotted woodpecker and icterine warbler were added to the list.

We went for some food and found a cafe just down from the palace park which did traditional Polish food and it was excellent suitably stuffed we headed off to search for bison again as dusk fell, we used one of the observation towers that had a large vista but the mist was creeping in and shortly after we had no view at all, and this was repeated in all the other meadows so it seemed that bison would not be added to the trip list. We embarked on a night drive frogs and toads were everywhere this evening and I stopped to inspect many of them, common toad and agile, moor and common frog all present but nothing else.

A dead red squirrel and large sounder of wild boar with tiny humbugs, then another dormouse this time the black face marking was evident - forest dormouse. This was followed by a more accommodating racoon dog. Then it all went quiet for a while with thick mist in the meadows there was still no chance of bison but we did catch up with a couple of foxes and a cracking nightjar sat in the road which flew round us spectacularly taking advantage of the moths attracted to the headlights. We called it a night but added two red deer on the way back to the hotel.



Whooper Swans



Silver Washed Fritillary



Large Copper



Red Fox



Pied Flycatcher



Raccoon Dog

11th August 2014

Again the early morning mist thwarted our bison viewing opportunities and even when the mist had lifted no bison were spotted, but we did finally spot a live red squirrel during a quick drive along the Narewowska road. We headed north to the area around Lake Siemianowska for a day's exploring; stopping at several sites around the lake and the surrounding farmland but it was hard going but we added plenty of water bird species such as marsh harrier, great white egret, black and whiskered terns a selection of gulls etc. but nothing really out of the ordinary. We had a selection of nice butterflies, dragonflies and some marsh frogs. And as the temperature soared to 34°C plenty of ice creams and cold drinks were consumed.

On the way back to the airport we visited Grabarka a historic hill covered in 20,000 crosses and a famous church. We also made a few incidental wildlife stops for grey partridges, white tailed eagle and roe deer. As the heavy rain started once more as we reached the outskirts of Warsaw finishing our trip pretty much as it started.

The only real target missed were the Bison which was largely due to the unforeseen weather conditions, luckily I have seen them in other countries and even in Poland once before.



Map Butterfly



White Stork



Common Darter



Probable Marsh Warbler

Mammals - 18

Red Squirrel	Edible Dormouse	Forest Dormouse
Common Shrew	Water Shrew	Mouse sp
Pine Marten	Spotted Souselik	Red Fox
Raccoon Dog	Badger	Red Deer
Roe Deer	Wild Boar	Brown Hare
Field Vole	Long eared bat sp	Noctule
Hedgehog sp*	Mole **	

*RTA ** Signs only

Birds - 78

Cormorant	Great White Egret	Grey Heron
White Stork	Mute Swan	Whooper Swan
Mallard	White Tailed Eagle	Lesser Spotted Eagle
Black Kite	Marsh Harrier	Montagu's Harrier
Buzzard	Grey Partridge	Coot
Lapwing	Woodcock	Black Headed Gull
Little Gull	Mediterranean Gull	Caspian Gull
Common Gull	Caspian tern	Whiskered tern
Black Tern	Feral Pigeon	Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove	Tawny Owl	Nightjar
Swift	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Middle Spotted Woodpecker
Wryneck	Skylark	Sand Martin
Barn Swallow	House Martin	Meadow Pipit
White Wagtail	Yellow Wagtail	Wren
Dunnock	Robin	Black Redstart
Fieldfare	Song Thrush	Mistle Thrush
Blackbird	Blackcap	Marsh Warbler
Icterine Warbler	Chiffchaff	Spotted Flycatcher
Collared Flycatcher	Pied Flycatcher	Reed Warbler
Blue Tit	Willow tit	Nuthatch
Treecreeper	Red backed Shrike	Magpie
Jay	Jackdaw	Rook
Raven	Starling	House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow	Chaffinch	Linnet
Goldfinch	Hawfinch	Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer	Corn Bunting	Great Tit

Herps - 7

Common Toad	Common Frog	Agile Frog
Moor Frog	Marsh Frog	Pool Frog
Lizard sp		

Insects - 27

Tortoiseshell sp	Map	Red Admiral
Peacock	Queen of Spain Fritillary	Silver Washed Fritillary
Large Copper	Common Blue	Large White
Green Veined White	Brimstone	Wood White
Purple Edged Copper	Comma	Ruddy Darter
Emperor Dragonfly	Brown Hawker	Brilliant Emerald
Black Tailed Skimmer	Southern Hawker	Common Blue Damselfly
Banded Demoiselle	Beautiful Demoiselle	Large red Eyed Damselfly
Azure Blue Damselfly	Common Darter	Common Blue Damselfly

Notes

I purchased the excellent Site guide <http://wildpoland.com/site-guides/bialowieza-site-guide/>

I also contacted the authors who were very helpful with advice for my trip and their website is very useful. <http://wildpoland.com>

Clearly not the best time of year to visit for general wildlife but our key target was the souslik for which summer is good, but May was also recommended as a good month for seeing them this is the time when the young emerge (weather permitting) but despite the time of year we still got plenty of good sightings of the other targets.

Driving in Poland is a slow process with hardly any dual carriageway in the area we visited so plan for additional travelling time.

Night driving and spotlighting down the back roads was fine we saw very few vehicles on these roads and plenty of animals, the main road however was a little busier and we did not spotlight here.

The Polish people were very friendly and helpful and a good deal of English was spoken particularly by younger people in the key tourist areas but even there it was sometimes patchy and it was non-existent in the sticks.

Food was excellent and prices very reasonable.

