



Though it's a landscape formed by human activity, Biebrza marshes are still packed with exciting wildlife.

POLISH MARSHES BIEBRZA NATIONAL PARK

Waterlogged wilderness

Head for Poland's swamp forests for spectacular birdlife and elusive predators, says **Nick Upton**.

What's the big attraction?

This vast mosaic of meandering rivers, swamp forests, sedge marshes, reedbeds and hay meadows (partially created by centuries of cattle grazing and reed cutting) is wonderfully varied and there's masses to see, though the bitterns, crakes and rails do tend to keep their heads down, as do the wolves, lynx and wild boar in the remote interior.

So what wildlife will I see?

Spring highlights include elk grazing in the marshes, huge flocks of geese, swans and ducks, white storks nesting on barns, phenomenal numbers of migrating and displaying ruffs, and spectacular groups of white-winged, black and whiskered terns. Eurasian cranes nest in the swamp forests, but a few are always seen feeding in the marshes and fields. It's impossible to miss the marsh and

Montagu's harriers, while white-tailed and spotted eagles are often seen. Aquatic warblers were one of their last strongholds here, and their songs compete with vibrant choruses of fire-bellied toads and European treefrogs.

What's the weather like?

Sharp showers are common, even during sunny springs, and going 'off piste' can often lead to a boggy end, but boardwalks, viewing towers and raised roads provide access deep into the marshes.

What are the best places to visit?

The lower Biebrza basin between Osowiec and Wizna teems with visible wildlife, as do the Narew marshes south of Wizna. There are great viewpoints at Gora Strekova, Burzyn and Brzostowo, but the best wildlife watching is often from a maze of sandy tracks that fringe, or peter out in, the wetlands. The Red Marsh is a

must for botanists, and in winter mammal-watching is good here.

Anywhere else?

Don't miss the ancient forest of Bialowieza – famous for its bison, black storks and woodpeckers – just a few hours' drive away.

When's the best time to go?

Birders and botanists usually visit in spring and early summer when the flooded landscape is

NOW YOU DO IT

GETTING THERE

» You can do things the easy way by booking an all-in tour, or you can fly to Warsaw, rent a car, brave the Polish roads on the 3-hour drive to Biebrza and organise your accommodation and park tickets.

TOUR GROUPS

» Biebrza Eco-Travel ☎ 00 48 85 738 07 85; www.biebrza.com
 Biebrza Explorer ☎ 00 48 60 406 51 62; www.biebrza-explorer.pl
 Birdquest ☎ 01254 826317; www.birdquest.co.uk

» If you're organising things yourself, contact Biebrza National Park; the website has lots of

TOP SPECIES TO SEE



ELK (or moose) emerge from the woods in spring to graze the marshes, often with calves in tow.



On spring evenings, GREAT SNIPE display in marshes and meadows in a few special places.



The Biebrza river is named after the industrious Eurasian BEAVER, whose presence is hard to miss.

transformed into a patchwork of marshes and meadows. Autumn sees a steady passage of birds, and experts swear by winter for mammal watching and tracking elusive predators, such as wolves and lynx.



useful information ☎ 00 48 85 738 806 20; www.biebrza.org.pl

GETTING AROUND

» One of the best ways to explore the wetlands is by canoe, with rental/access points at Lipsk, Goniadz and Wizna.

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