A 5-DAY FUNGI FORAY IN THE PRIMEVAL BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST, POLAND

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Hardly touched by human management throughout its history and under strict protection for over 75 years, the Bialowieza Forest has developed naturally, sustaining the unique character of its primeval origin. The forest is a unique phenomenon in Europe and an example of the primeval forest that covered our continent several thousands years ago, before man transformed it into farmland.

The unique value of Bialowieza Forest is its biological richness. The flora comprises over 4,500 species: over 1,050 species of vascular plants, 150 species of moss, 210 species of lichens and up to 7000 species of fungi. Many of them are rare relics of primeval forest, either disappearing or not found in most of Europe. Over 10,000 animal species inhabit the forest of which the majority are insects (8,500). One hundred and twenty species of birds breed in the forest, including 12 species of raptors, eight species of owls and an impressive nine species of woodpeckers!

What could be a better home for Europe’s biggest land mammal, the magnificent European Bison. Two thousands years ago, it inhabited most of Europe. Today, in Bialowieza, a free-living population of 420 thrives in their natural environment. The forest is also home to Wolf, Wild Boar, Lynx, Elk, Red Deer, Roe Deer, Beaver and 12 species of bats.

This incredible diversity of plants and animals in its primeval form has been recognised by the UNESCO and the Bialowieza Forest has been included in the list of World Heritage Sites and as a Biosphere Reserve.
Day 1  
Flight from Britain to Warsaw. You will be collected from the airport and transferred by a minibus to Bialowieza Forest. The journey will take just over three hours. As we leave busy Warsaw and head east, we will enter the most rural part of Poland which has a long and diverse historical past with influences coming from different cultures and religions. You will be introduced to some aspects of it as we travel past picturesque churches, roadside crosses and wooden settlements. An evening meal will await us at a comfortable guest house on the outskirts of the Bialowieza National Park, our home for the next four nights.

Days 2-4  
The Bialowieza Forest comprises the protected Bialowieza National Park and the managed part of the forest, where special rules of forest management apply. In the next three days, we will explore both protected and unprotected parts of the Bialowieza Forest to see the full spectrum of different habitats and fungi they support. With about 7,000 species of fungi recorded in the forest, you are in for a real treat here!

There are a number of species that are typically associated with old forest and it is here in the Bialowieza Forest, that we will encounter particularly high abundance of tree fungi of the polyporaceous type, which grow on dead wood. These truly shape the character of the Bialowieza Forest and are seldom encountered in Europe today. Examples include Sparasis crispa, Grifolia frondosa, Hiericium coralloides, Amylocistis lapponicus, Amyloporia crassa and Fomitopsis rosea, associated with lying spruce trunks. The same group also includes Poria albida fusca and Dendripratulum bialoviesiense, which are new to science.

Of interest are also 192 species of parasitic fungi from the orders Pyrenosporales, Uredinales and Ustelliginales, and the family Erisiphaceae. Notable among these is Puccinia fergussonii, a parasite of peat violet Viola epispilla, and gyromitra Helvella sphaerophora.

For some, the highlight of our stay here will be a visit to a strict nature reserve. This is the most precious part of the forest, open only to scientific research. However, a small section of the reserve is accessible to tourists, but there are strict rules; for instance, the entry is by permit only and with an accompanied guide. Here, we will undertake a three-hour walk during
which we will be introduced to the amazing diversity of plants, fungi and birdlife. Walking through this truly magnificent multi-species and multi-layered forest, where trees attain gigantic sizes of up to 50 m in height and an age of up to 500 years, and where dead standing and lying trunks are in various stages of decomposition, will give you a feeling of being taken back to ancient times. In the strict nature reserve, nothing can be brought in or removed from the forest, so all our unidentified species will be digitally photographed and available in the evening for further viewing and identification.

Our visit to Bialowieza Forest overlaps with the international fungi exhibition organized by the national park staff and held every year since 1996. On our second day, we will visit this exhibition, where over 200 fungi collected from Bialowieza Forest by the visiting and resident experts, will be on display. In the afternoon, one of the professional mycologist attending the exhibition will accompany us in the forest and will be able to help us with identification of more difficult and unusual species.

On one of the evenings, we will have a bonfire in the forest (a weather dependent event) where we will barbeque our own sausages. The dishes will also include traditional local cuisine, such as wild boar pate.

It will be difficult to ignore other aspects of wildlife in this magnificent forest and an encounter with a wild boar or a bison, will bring you right into the heart of true wilderness. A local guide will accompany us throughout our visit and will introduce us to various aspects of the forest history, management and its wildlife.

We will leave Bialowieza Forest today and head for Warsaw to catch our flight to Britain. If time allows, we will do a quick tour in the old part of Warsaw.