

THE BUG RIVER VALLEY FOR NATURE LOVERS

Eastern Poland with a difference



By Olivier Dochy, Belgium

From 21st until 25th of June, I got the chance to join a study visit to the valley of the Bug river on the border of Poland and Belarus, in the far east of Poland. The purpose of this visit was to evaluate local initiatives for sustainable tourism, oriented to "riverside & countryside" tourism. This visit was organized by a Flemish-Polish exchange project with the provinces of West-Vlaanderen en Lubelski (Poland), but also the Flemish initiative vzw De Boot (www.deboot.be).

My task was to evaluate which topics in the region could be interesting for nature-lovers in general and keen nature-specialists in particular, such as birders. Well, there is a lot ! It is not like the wild expanses of the well-known Biebrza valley or the untouched forests of Białowieża, but rather a small-scale (agri)cultural landscape. But it still has all the biodiversity that once flourished in Western-Europe and now all (but) disappeared.

Here follow a number of tips voor those who want to visit the region. There is a lot of information great and small on the internet about the region, but you have to surf a lot to find it all. Anyway, there certainly is a lot to discover for naturalists with a pioneer drive !

You can find pictures of our visit here:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/Odee.fotos/BugRiverPoland?feat=directlink>

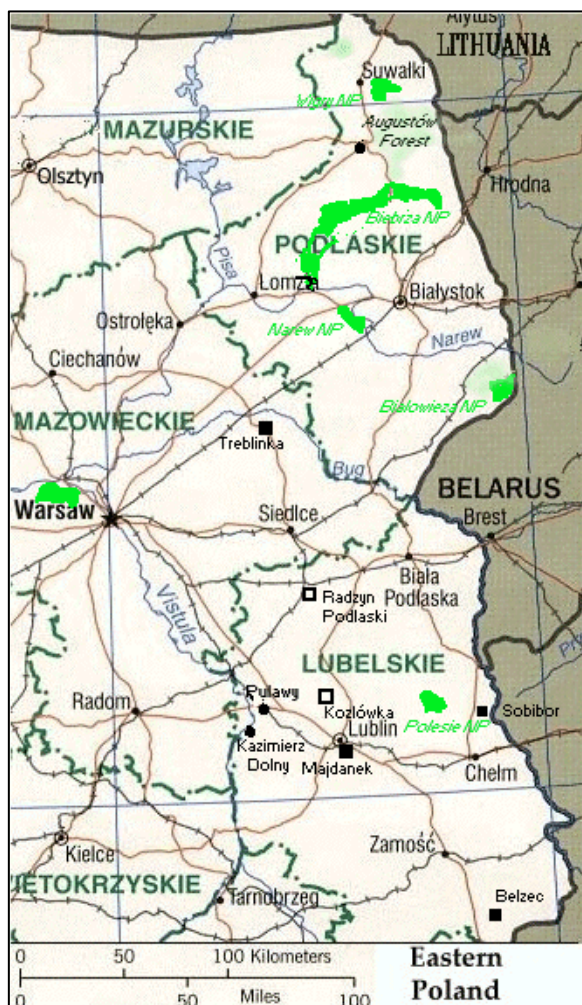
WHERE IS IT ?

The province of Lubelski is in the extreme east of Poland. The Bug-river itself has its well in neighbouring Ukraine, then bends northwards to form the border, and still further on the border of Poland and Belarus. Once past the Belarus town of Brest, the river bends to the west and continues to the Vistula near Warshau.

We only visited the area between Terespol (next to Brest) and Slawatycze, a slice of about 40 km of length.

The area is easy to reach from Warschau. The distance is about 225 km or 4 hours of driving.

The most important nature areas are a bit more to the south than the area we explored, between the cities of Lublin and Chelm. That's also where you find the Polesie National Park. Large parts of the river and its valley are protected by the European Habitat Directive as Natura 2000-areas. There are also "Landscape parks" who enjoy at least some legal protection. In the long run, there are plans to cooperate more with neighbouring Ukraine and Belarus to form one huge protected area along and around the river. Those countries also have a lot of protected areas.



On the map to the left you see that the Bug river area is less than 200 km to the south of the pristine forest of Białowieża. This makes the Bug region ideally suited as a prolongation of a visit to that classic area or as a destination in it's own right.

Without a hired car, you can reach the area with buses and trains, eg to the cities of Lublin, Chelm or Biała Podlaska. This you have to organise yourself. If you hire bicycles, you can have a great time exploring the area.

We met only friendly and hospitable people with a warm feeling for their region and cultural diversity. Food is typically fat-rich with a lot of charcuterie and garden vegetables. Of course, vodka is prominent on every table.



LANDSCAPE

The region we visited is very flat, rising a little further to the south. The Bug is therefore a strongly meandering river. The river beds are often covered with gallery forest, especially on the Belarus side which is not "maintained". This is a paradise for Otter, Beaver, Thrush, Nightingale, Golden Oriole and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, to name just a few. Locally, vertical banks are used by colonies of Sand Martins. At certain places with sand banks Little and Common Tern breed. This year, the Bug level was high so many meadows were still flooded at the end of June. In the alluvial plains there are a lot of oxbow lakes big and small. Most of the valley consists of hay meadows with willow and poplar bushes. Views are therefor limited to a kilometre or less, so you don't have panorama's as in Biebrza. But it teems with life, just as the arable fields outside the flooding areas. In the numerous long and narrow fields they typically grow cereals, potatoes, buckwheat, camomile, and an increasing but still small amount of maize. In these fields you can find arable plants which have disappeared since long in our countries, as well as very high densities of all farmland birds. Little or big woods appear everywhere and often are mixed oak-pine woods. Grazing meadows are rare, most cows are chained individually to a pin which is moved every day or so. The roads are mostly good to very good, except the minor ones between the fields which can be soft sand. The villages are well-kept and there is fair share of churches to choose from. In the numerous orchards and vegetable gardens songbirds are abundant.





WHAT CAN YOU DO OVER THERE ?

Tourism is still in its infancy, but people are working hard to improve the possibilities. This region is very well suited for active and nature-oriented "discovery" tourism, whether you are a species-specialist or not. Making walks or true hiking, biking or kayaking are ideal ways. Very good topographic maps are available at the useful scale of 1/50.000 in shops and tourist information centers (often at the community house) or via <http://www.kartpol.lublin.pl> (in Polish, but ask in English via mail). See "Biking" further on for an example of this map.

Arranging your stay in detail with internet from your home is still difficult, except if you speak Polish. Therefore I recommend a local "fixer" to arrange things for you. A nice guy who speaks English fluently and can arrange really everything is **Marek** Pomietlo. He can make reservations for kayaks, renting bicycles, arrange hotel or other accomodation, restaurants, for a group or just two persons, transport from and to anywhere, everything is possible.

You can find Marek via mp@nadbugiem.pl, phone 0048 (for Poland) 606 972 793. His site is www.kajaki.nadbugiem.pl where you can also see a number of pictures of the region in all seasons.

A wealth of information about what to see and where to go you can find on the link of the long biking routes (see further).

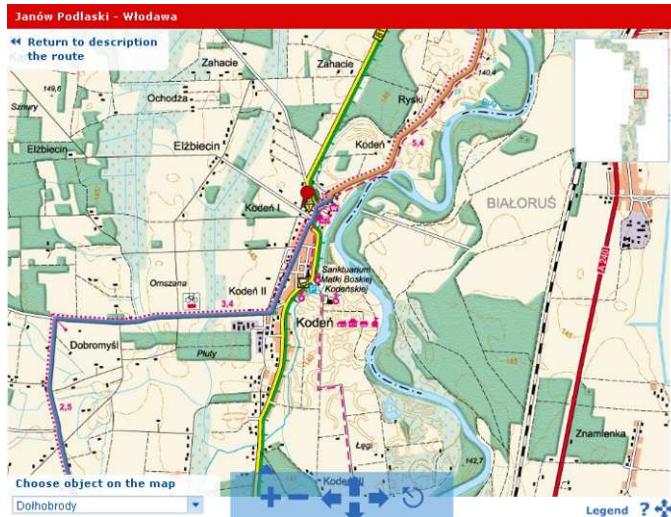
Walking

There are masses of minor roads which are perfect for beautiful, quiet and varied walks, but indicated walks are rare. Take a good map and it gets you everywhere.



Bicycle / Biking

This is THE way to explore this region! There are a few long-distance routes which are indicated and with very good accompanying (and free!) maps. You need the maps some indications might get "lost" over time. There also exists a way to implement the route in a biker's gps, but there is still no information about that on this otherwise very informative site: <http://www.szlakirowerowe.lubelskie.pl/index.php?lang=en>



You can buy these maps in the villages along the route or beforehand through the link above.

Renting bicycles is still a problem though. In most areas people are borrowing bikes from friends and neighbours to help you. Good enough for a day trip, but if you really want to make the long-distance trips, you might better bring your own bike or ask Marek to get really good ones somewhere (see higher for Marek). The same applies for groups wanting 4 or more bikes. A rather solid bike is advisable to hit the sand roads.

Via this same link <http://www.szlakirowerowe.lubelskie.pl/index.php?lang=en> you can find all kinds of addresses of lodgings great and small, restaurants, shops, places to see, etc. On the maps you also find symbols for these things.





Kayaking

It is fun to explore the river in this way. With high water levels it is sometimes possible to watch over the banks into the meadows where the common White Storks are foraging, or flyby's of White-winged and Black Terns. Along the river, Common Sandpiper is a common breeding bird, but you can also see Kingfisher, Otter (if you are extremely lucky), Beaver (also luck is needed but lots of tracks though) and thousands of Banded Demoiselles (*Calopteryx splendens*). Dragonfly-enthusiasts can expect rarities of clean rivers such as *Gomphus flavipes* and *Ophiogomphus cecilia*.

The border with Belarus literally runs through the middle of the river. You are not allowed to cross that "line" ! You risk being arrested by Belarussian border guards and experience a not so nice stay in the prison of Minsk... On the Polish side, the European Union has installed numerous border patrols with special electronics to track down illegal immigrants, so you'd better take some care not to make them too nervous. This is especially the case when you bring your own boat. You need to register at both sides of the border, keep in contact for every 20 km's and so on. Marek can arrange this for you however. After all, this adds a special feeling to the trip...



Horse riding

You can do this about everywhere in the region. There are even famous horse breeding farms eg. in the area of Janow Podlaski in the north, but I don't know any details.

Nature

Nature is everywhere ! Look on your topographic map to areas with a small number of only minor roads and the most diversity in relief, vegetation types, marshy areas and woodlands and you won't be disappointed ! Out of the valley in the arable areas, farmland birds are abundant. In the villages everywhere you see and hear the smaller birds, White Storks, swallows and swifts and even the Red-backed Shrike is a common garden bird.



WHEN TO GO ?

The best period for a maximum amount of interesting nature observations probably is early June. In hot and dry years you'd better go in the second half of May. Our visit was at the end of June and most hayfields were already mown or in any case the flowering season was mostly over. Also the (without any doubt numerous) Thrush Nightingales had stopped singing which counts for quite a few less decibels ! April and May should be good for migrant birds however. April is especially good for lingering wintering birds and forest birds, while in May most summer visitors have arrived and song is in full swing. The end of May is good for spring butterflies. In early June, most pass-through migrants have gone, but the local birds and flora are at their best. Later in the season, other summer species appear and bird song is less. From late July onwards, autumn migration starts again.

The weather in late spring is very variable. Anything is possible between cold and rainy or a heatwave of 30°C or more. We had variable weather with temperatures around 22°C and only a few showers. Overcast and sunny periods were both common.

Mosquitoes are at their most numerous in May and September. We experienced no armies of them. Long sleeves and trousers at night and in the early morning were good enough, with an added use of mosquito repellent. Visitors in May must be well prepared!

AREAS TO VISIT

I hereby give the most important areas from north to south. Most areas we didn't visit ourselves, or only very shortly. Nevertheless, the area is teeming with potential for a high quality nature holiday !

General information about the Natura 2000-areas you can find here (choose region Polesie): <http://nature.poland.pl/regions/polesie/index.htm>

1) Bug Ravine Landscape Park (Park Krajobrazowy Podlaski Przelom Bugu)

Attractive landscape with lots of natural river valley meadows between Janow Podlaskie and Terespol. The only breeding pair of White-tailed Eagle of the northern part of the Bug Valley is breeding in this area. Check the skies on days with good thermals!

2) Old fortresses around Terespol and Brest

Brest and Terespol formerly were one city with an arch of fortresses around it. Now they are two cities in two countries, separated by the Bug. The fortresses are built according to the typical star-like concept of the famous French architect Vauban. That means that there are a lot of wide ditches, now in different stadia of succession to marshland. On a short visit we saw Little Bittern, Great Reed Warbler and Penduline Tit. It should also be good for amphibians and reptiles. The more recent bunkers and the older fortresses are protected as a Natura 2000-site because of the presence of wintering bats. Our Polish guide didn't know which species or which numbers because this still needs to be investigated. Knowledgeable volunteers: contact Marek to arrange contacts with local bat-protection people and you could make some nice discoveries here !



3) Terespol - Kostomloty (small road close to the Bug)

Beautiful meadows which we crossed way too fast on our organised visit...

4) Kodén

Small town with lots of religions. Worth visiting for its different churches and basilica. At the northern edge, there is a bungalowpark where you can stay in a quiet atmosphere with lots of birds on their grounds. Selfcatering is needed because there is no restaurant in town. Alternatively, you can ask the owner Dominik to cook for you.

His site (Polish only) is : www.domkiwkodniu.nadbugiem.pl.

This bungalowpark is on walking distance from the river meadows as well as bird-rich farmland. The rare Red-breasted Flycatcher breeds in the small city park next to it, but also Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Hawfinch and Tawny Owl.



5) Between Kodén and Slawatycze

Take the minor road through the meadows from Jableczna to Nowosiolki. Beautiful landscape. There is an orthodox monastery in the floodplain at Jableczna, with young monks. It's worth the effort to take a look. Every year around 24th June there is a big event where even the orthodox pope comes on a visit from Greece! There also some very old oak trees where you could find the odd flycatcher or woodpecker. We regularly saw White-winged and Black Terns in this neighbourhood, so there may be a colony to the south of this monastery. Worth investigating!

6) Slawatycze

Village where most kayak trips on the bug depart. Good hostel with breakfast with cheerful owner Marta Gorniak (speaks English fluently) in Liszna 26a in the hamlet Liszna to the north of Slawatycze. For reservations: martagor7@tlen.pl. Also adequate for groups. BBQ in garden can be arranged where you can enjoy Corncrake and Spotted Crake calling at night... Website: www.zastronek.nadbugiem.pl

If you want more information about this region, ask for Arek in the community house (town hall). He speaks English very well and can arrange visits to local specialty places such as the milk village, a small exposition about a colony of former Dutch immigrants and an assortment of churches.

7) Slawatycze to Wlodawa

We didn't visit this stretch, but it looks great on the map, especially southeast of the village of Hanna!

20 km southwest of Slawatycze there are a few larger lakes, eg. near the villages of Mosty and Zahajki. Worth checking for birds such as Red-necked Grebe, Great and Little Bittern, etc. Check out possible lookout points via Google Earth.

8) Wlodawa to Chelm

In this area there are real "wilderness" areas where the special species occur where most people go looking for in the Biebrza marshes: Aquatic Warbler, Great Snipe, Black Grouse, Wolf, etc. There are several National Parks and reserves with fens and moors, acidic as well as alkaline. Also sedge marshes, great forests, steppe grasslands and lakes. No doubt there are also lots of special plants, butterflies and dragonflies over there ! This is probably the core area where a visit to the Bug river for nature lovers should concentrate on.

Check this link for this area: <http://nature.poland.pl/regions/polesie/index.htm> (again a site where you have to navigate a lot to find what you're looking for but keep trying, there's a lot of information).

Other information about the areas along the "Cycling route along the Bug river" you can find on the next link. Click on the Włodawa - Hrubieszów section:
<http://www.szlakirowerowe.lubelskie.pl/index.php?pname=716>
You'll have to leave the cycling route to reach the most interesting places: check the map for spots who look interesting.

Białe Lake just south of Włodawa is very crowded on sunny days and especially weekends as it is the tourist attraction number one for Polish tourists in the province.

The 3 most important areas are

Sobiborski Landscape Park

Just south of Włodawa, along the Bug-valley. Large numbers of Elks and Poland's largest population of European Pond Turtle. There is also a Nazi's concentration camp at the village of Sobibor. The cycling route crosses this interesting area.

Poleski National Park and Landscape Park

To the west of Włodawa. Mix of forests, lakes and whatever there is.

Chelmski Landscape park and small nature reserves

Between the city of Chelm and the Bug river there are several large carbonate-rich marshes en fens where a population of Aquatic Warblers breed. Lots of rare plants. In a more hilly area you can find steppe-like vegetation on certain slopes with a southern orientation. Lesser Spotted Eagle, Great Snipe, Short-eared Owl, Black Grouse, all are here. If and where you can see them is not known by me.
Is not along the cycling route, but a detour is very much recommended.

9) To the south of Chelm: Strzelecki Landscape park

Very big forest complexes. Is called the best area for raptors in Poland according to the cycle route information. Worth a try ! Undoubtedly also good for other forest birds like woodpeckers, flycatchers and Hazelhen.

How further south you go, the bigger the chances are for more southern species. Along the Bug you can find Bee-eaters and in the villages there are Syrian Woodpeckers to be found.

FAUNA AND FLORA OF THE BUG VALLEY

BIRDS

This is the birdlist of our visit in 21-25 June 2010. Birding was done in the rare free moments between meetings, dinners and other events, so 95 species is not that bad.

In general this list has no real specialties compared to the classic destination of Biebrza or Białowieża. But keeping in mind the less productive period (early June would have been better) and the "least interesting" area compared with the parks more to the south and the north, and you see that the Bug valley is still hugely promising to be a good birding destination on its own.

Mostly species of small-scale cultural landscapes dominate in the part which we visited. But a lot of them have become very rare in our own countryside or have even disappeared all the way: Corncrake, Ortolan Bunting, Great Grey Shrike, Winchat, Montagu's Harrier, Hoopoe, White Stork, Red-backed Shrike: almost none of them is still breeding in Flanders... Of course there are also typical Eastern European species which we normally don't see in the west: Red-breasted Flycatcher, Black Stork, Thrush Nightingale, River Warbler, White-winged Tern, not to mention the birds I didn't see (eg. Rosefinch, eagles, ...).

Raptors seemed to be rare, except Common Buzzard and Montagu's Harrier. Probably our timing was bad for these species because it was in the middle of the breeding season.

This is the whole list:

- Mute Swan: common on lakes
- Mallard: now and then
- Coot: now and then
- Quail: heard 3x in fields
- Corncrake: 2 heard Liszna (no night excursion done)
- Spotted Crane: 1 heard Liszna
- Pheasant: a few seen
- Little Bittern: 1m Terespol (old fortress ditches)
- Grey Heron: common (10/day)
- White Stork: common (3-10 p./village)
- Black Stork: 2juv and 1ad over Bug-river
- Common Buzzard: common
- Kestrel: only 1 seen
- Marsh Harrier: 4x seen
- Montagu's Harrier: fairly common, daily 1 or more hunting over fields, max. 4m at one freshly mown meadow
- Hobby: 3x 1 hunting
- [Lesser Spotted Eagle: not seen, but to be expected]
- [White-tailed Eagle: 1p breeds in forests between Terespol and Janów Podlaski]
- Lapwing: scarce (c5 a day)
- Common Sandpiper: common along Bug with c1p/km during kayak trip
- Green Sandpiper: 1p along Bug and 2 in small ponds in valley
- Black-headed Gull: common (tens/day)
- White-winged tern: schaars (10/day) flyby's Bug valley; possibly small colony south of Jableczna monastery?
- Black tern: unexpectedly scarce: 1x2 at meander south of Kodén
- Common tern: 2x 1 over Bug
- Woodpigeon: fairly common, especially near maize (!)
- Turtle Dove: 2x 1
- Collared Dove: common in villages
- Cuckoo: few times seen
- Tawny Owl: 3juv seen in park north of center Kodén
- Long-eared Owl: juv heard in park behind Kodén basilica
- Swift: common
- Hoopoe: fairly common (daily heard, 2x seen Kodén)
- Kingfisher: aan Bug
- Black Woodpecker: 1 flyby during kayak trip on Bug
- Green woodpecker: common
- Middle Spotted Woodpecker: common in gallery forest along Bug (calling); 1p. with juv in park at bungalow park Kodén
- Skylark: numerous in fields (5 or more to be heard simultaneously is common)
- Woodlark: here and there 1 heard at woodland edge
- Sand Martin: 10s along Bug
- Barn Swallow: abundant !!
- House Martin: common
- Meadow Pipit: some in meadows along Bug
- Tree Pipit: here and there 1heard at forest edge
- White Wagtail: common
- Yellow Wagtail: (appears?) scarce in fields
- Robin: common
- Thrush Nightingale: probably omnipresent but only once call heard
- Redstart: 1heard in garden at Liszna
- Black Redstart: common in villages and gardens
- Winchat: really common in fields
- Song Thrush: common
- Fieldfare: common
- Blackbird: common
- Garden Warbler: common
- Blackcap: common
- Whitethroat: here and there
- Braamsluiper: here and there
- Reed Warbler: here and there
- Great Reed Warbler: several heard fortress Terespol, here and there heard along Bug meanders with reedbeds
- River Warbler: 1heard in marsh at Liszna, 1heard along Bug while kayaking
- Marsh Warbler: fairly common
- Icterine Warbler: common, in each village, often in gardens
- Wood Warbler: several heard in (mixed) woodland
- Chiffchaff: regularly heard
- Willow Warbler: fairly common
- Spotted Flycatcher: common in villages, also in woodland

- Red-breasted Flycatcher: 1f with 2 fledglings in park at northern edge of centre of Kodén, near to entrance to bungalowpark
- Great Tit: common
- Blue Tit: common
- Marsh Tit: a few heard
- Penduline Tit: heard Fortress Terespol + during kayaking along Bug
- Nuthatch: common in forest (light colour)
- Great Grey Shrike: not rare: several seen while on the road, 1 in Liszna fields, 1p with 1 juv N of Kodén along cycling route and 1 in Kodén fields
- Red-backed Shrike: common, often in gardens (!)
- Magpie: common
- Jackdaw: common
- Carrion Crow: scarce to rare, only common in cities or near mais fields (and thus industrial farms)...
- Rook: common in Warschau, few elsewhere
- Jay: common
- Raven: 2 Kodén fields
- Starling: numerous, nestboxes are everywhere
- Golden Oriole: common, everywhere with poplars, often flyby's to see
- House Sparrow: common
- Tree Sparrow: at least 1x
- Chaffinch: common
- Linnet: common
- Goldfinch: now and then
- Greenfinch: common
- Serin: common in villages
- Hawfinch: common (several daily)
- Reed Bunting: only a few seen
- Ortolan Bunting: 1 heard N of Kodén, just outside village behind gas station; 1 heard W of Kodén in forest edge. Probably more common because these were two rather ugly spots.
- Yellowhammer: common to numerous (max. 200 m between two songsters in the right habitat...); still a lot of singing everywhere
- Corn Bunting: 2x 1 heard in Bug-valley while cycling

BUTTERFLIES

Not so many seen because of cloudy weather, not the good sites or lack of time. Most interesting species:

- *Lycaena dispar*: 1f in Bug-valley N of Kodén
- *Melithaea athalia*: a few along woodland edges
- *Coenonympha arcania*: a few
- *Coenonympha glycerion*: at least one on a *Nardus* grassland between fields

DRAGONFLIES

The Bug valley and the Chelm marshes are without doubt very rich in species and numbers. Also here: not enough time to search or no good weather at the right spots. Anyhow:

- *Leucorrhinia pectoralis*: several times seen patrolling over *Stratiotes*-vegetation, eg. monastery Jableczna
- *Aeshna isosceles*: 1 at same spot
- *Brachytron pratense*: a few
- *Libellula depressa*: a few
- *Platycnemis pennipes*: common along the Bug
- *Calopteryx splendens*: thousands along the Bug !
- *Ophiogomphus cecilia*: probably 1 (greenish gomphid) while kayaking on Bug river
- *Anax imperator*: common
- *Coenagrion puella*: common
- *Ischnura elegans*: common

AMPHIBIANS

- Red-bellied Fire-toad: fairly common in ponds
- Tree Frog: 1x heard at night during BBQ at Zeszczyn; is certainly much commoner than this
- Natterjack Toad: juveniles in wet depression in field N of Kodén
- Green Toad: 1 young animal near basilica at night at Kodén
- Pool Frog: heard several times
- Green Frog: abundant
- Common Brown Frog: common, especially in meadows

MAMMALS

- Red Deer: 4 seen, eg. 2 while kayaking along Bug
 - Red Fox: 1 seen in morning on mown meadow
 - Beaver: lots of traces along Bug
 - Wild Boar: lots of tracks, more or less everywhere
- Elk, Badger and Otter are around according to locals; Wolf sometimes an roaming individual

PLANTS

In such a huge area where agriculture is still very extensive and most parcels have never seen herbicides, one can expect a range of special plant species. In fields and along field edges and fallow lands one should search for those little specialised plants that have been exterminated by herbicides in Western Europe. Blue cornflowers are still a common feature in many cereal fields !

The nature reserves and national parks must be particularly interesting. The carbonate rich Chelm marshes and chalk-rich hillsides with steppe-like vegetation around Chelm are certain to deliver lots of specialties.

To enjoy the colours of the river meadows, one should visit these at the end of May or early June.



CONCLUSION

The visited part of the Bug valley is not as rich in special species as the classical pair Biebrza-Białowieża, but it is indeed a beautiful and charming area. It can be visited as an appendix of the former, but it is also a destination in its own right. A trip to the Bug valley is also a travel backwards in time to the era just before the great intensification of agriculture, however things are changing fast now. A lot of natural and historical landscape elements are still there to see and to study, and so is the assorted biodiversity.

For those who want a Poland trip with a difference, and have a certain pioneering drive, the Bug river valley and its surroundings is certainly a very pleasing destination. It is especially interesting for those who want to explore more actively than just leisurely. There is also no doubt that lots of discoveries just wait to be made !

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