

## ***Morning soundscapes from the Biebrza marshes***

Boundless expanses of virgin wetlands and marshes which stretch as far as the horizon; almost a hundred thousand hectares of wild bogs and swamps - this is the valley of the Biebrza river, one of the last untamed rivers in Europe. The Biebrza river, just as it has done for thousands of years, still flows languidly in wide meanders. Each year in spring, its waters overtop the banks in a huge flood wave, creating life-giving overflow areas. This is the land of wild geese, cranes, beavers, red deer and elks, which so far has managed to retain its virgin, primeval nature despite increasing pressure of civilization.

The following album contains recordings made during morning hours in the Biebrza Valley in May 2016, at the Długa Luka boardwalk, at the Barwik reserve as well as at the Honczarowska causeway. The recordings have not been modified in any way, they provide a faithful picture of what nature itself intended to present. My wish was to capture at least a faint echo of sonic diversity of this beautiful, but at the same time extremely vulnerable place - a world of marshes and wetlands, which slowly vanishes into the past.

### Listening notes:

#### 1. *Sunrise at the Biebrza marshes (39:05)*

A cool, May dawn at the Długa Luka boardwalk. The vast bog is covered with sedges, here and there water stands between tufts of vegetation. Mists fall above the valley - the sun begins to rise, and first bird voices of the day, delicate and somewhat mysterious, as if lost in the vastness of this wetland area, start to reach us from far across the marshes. It is impossible to name all the songsters of this chorus, but the ambience is dominated by sedge warblers and common cuckoos, occasionally accompanied by a common blackbird, willow warbler, reed bunting or thrush nightingale. Magnificent trumpeting of common cranes, sometimes distant, sometimes very close (especially 17:18, 18:31), adds true magic to this evocative soundscape. Their calls majestically travel through the wilderness, often reverberating with such a strong echo as if there were yet another crane responding! Sometimes, mostly around 10:30, 15:56 and 19:04, we may pick out their less typical call - a much quieter, as if mechanical voice, sounding a bit like a kettledrum. In the air, numerous common snipes perform their displays, making a distinctive "bleating" sound, produced when the birds dive towards the ground spreading their outer tail feathers, which causes their vibrations. They also give series of rhythmical, ticking calls (especially around 14:45, 24:30, 26:39). Very far away, northern lapwings can be heard calling as they perform their own display flights. The chorus is enriched with intermittent, plaintive voices of black-tailed godwits, and in 17:40 a redshank gives a flute-like yodeling call. Occasional voices of a wood pigeon, grasshopper warbler, garden warbler, bluethroat, golden oriole and whinchat can also be heard.

## 2. *Aerial displays (26:41)*

Each year, marshy meadows of the Biebrza valley become witnesses to a magnificent aerial spectacle, as northern lapwings engage in their display flights. These birds gracefully show off their acrobatic skills - at times they dive down, at times do barrel-rolls, at times they tumble over and over, giving distinctive plaintive calls. When they pass close by, we can hear a steady, low-pitched sound of their wingbeats. However, there are not the only acrobats on this scene - common snipes perform their aerial displays as well. Those fast and agile fliers describe circles and spirals high above the ground, and time after time they dive down with folded wings and fan-spread tail, filling the air with a distinctive "bleating" sound. In the background, against the accompaniment of falling dew drops, we can hear intermittent edible frogs, cranes (most clearly 10:33, 25:57), cuckoos and long-tailed godwits (especially 5:12). From 0:51, a song of a thrush nightingale, beautifully deepened and enhanced by a remarkable echo, starts to sound from the nearby brush. From 1:58, a hawfinch starts to give high-pitched calls, around 4:20 it passes just next to the microphone. In the background, mostly at the beginning of the recording, we can hear soft, flute-like syllables of a greenshank as well as a sharper voice of a redshank (most prominent at 13:46, 17:24). From 13:58 the redshank delivers a distinctive yodeling song, near the end a reed bunting starts to sing close by. In the background we can hear a sedge warbler, Eurasian blackcap, willow warbler, garden warbler, marsh warbler, common whitethroat and wood pigeon.

## 3. *Silence full of voices (12:47)*

Morning soundscape at the "Barwik" reserve. Everything seems quiet and calm, but can we really describe as "quiet and calm" a place which actually throbs with a multitude of voices? We can hear so many birds that it is impossible to identify them all, but the basis of the chorus is created by a thrush nightingale, common snipes, cuckoo, Eurasian bittern, grasshopper warbler, willow warbler, song thrush and wood pigeon. They are occasionally joined by a blackbird, sedge warbler, Savi's warbler and garden warbler. Once in a while we may hear a crow cawing in the background, and from 2:38 a gaggling of a distant greylag goose.

## 4. *Soundscape with a grasshopper warbler (4:55)*

As the time passes, yet another voice gradually adds to the marsh dawn chorus. This is the voice of a grasshopper warbler, which owes its name to its remarkable song, more resembling a grasshopper than a bird. The background is dominated by thrush nightingales, cuckoos and great snipes, at times joined by great bittern, song thrush, wood warbler, sedge warbler and even a few crows. Further away, at 3:25 a mute swan takes off from the water with a series of rhythmical wing beats.

5. *Master of improvisation (4:07)*

From the top of a tuft of reeds which densely cover the Biebrza wetlands, we can hear a constant chattering filled with varied rasps, rattles, long trills and warbles. This song belongs to a male sedge warbler, which has settled back on the top of one of reed stems. Once in a while the bird takes to the air in a short song flight, and then, with wide-spread wings and tail, it slowly descends onto a different stem. Sedge warblers tend to enrich their songs with mimicry of other birds. This male imitates the voice of an anxious common whitethroat (0:46) as well as contact call of a willow warbler (2:19, 2:41). In the background we can hear another sedge warbler, cranes, common snipes, a cuckoo, thrush nightingale, and near the end also a bluethroat. This energetic and complex song will carry across the marshes even at night, when many birds become silent.

6. *One flew over the sedge warbler's nest (2:43)*

A dissonance creeps suddenly into the harmony of the wetland dawn chorus. The male sedge warbler, which was just singing his heart out, now flies nervously from place to place, giving an anxious rattle. In 0:19 we can hear voice of the reason of this anxiety - a male cuckoo has perched right next to the sedge warbler's nest. Common cuckoos tend to dump their eggs in nests of small songbirds such as sedge warblers, therefore small birds often react very strongly to their appearance close to the nest - they try to chase the intruder away by fiercely attacking and scolding the enemy. Finally the cuckoo gives up and the sedge warbler flies away, but its alarming calls reach us from the distance long afterwards.

7. *The marshes resound (4:05)*

Morning at the Honczarowska causeway. A marshy forest is filled with voices of countless birds. Most of all, we can hear a chiffchaff, willow warbler, thrush nightingale, cuckoo, garden warbler and a hoopoe, at times joined by a blackcap, blackbird and chaffinch, but the most beautiful adornment of this soundscape is the trumpeting of a pair of cranes, which resounds, as if solemnly, from the nearby alder grove. Their sonorous voice travels through the air, reverberating majestically. From a distance we can hear other pairs responding to the call. In morning stillness, the most enchanting music of nature flows in all directions, like a hidden message. Somewhere from the very depth of feelings, yet enough to be touching. Somewhere beyond words, yet enough to be understandable. Let us remain silent, as the most true and most wonderful hymn of the triumph of life carries across the wetlands.

8. *Noisy songster (4:18)*

Against the background of cuckoos, cranes, a garden warbler and a thrush nightingale, a Savi's warbler, hidden among the reeds, delivers its simple and rather monotonous song. The sharp, piercing sound seems to penetrate right into our head and perforate everything we hear - what a remarkable power in such an inconspicuous voice!

9. *Vigilant presence (1:22)*

My visit at the Honczarowska causeway does not escape the attention of such cautious and alert inhabitant of the forest as the roe deer. It has already heard a noise and caught wind of a disturbing scent... Startled, it breaks the morning stillness with loud barking. As it runs further and further into the forest, its voice begins to fade away, therefore I increase the recording volume. When the roe deer becomes very distant, its barking powerfully reverberates against the background of a general bird hubbub. From 0:19, in the background we can hear the alarm calls of blackcaps at nest.

10. *Nightingale with a blue bib (3:41)*

A loud, melodious song reaches us from within a patch of willow thickets on a reed field. A bluethroat, the smallest, but at the same time the prettiest nightingale found in Poland, sits on the top of one of reed stems and tirelessly sings resonant phrases. This is a common inhabitant of the Biebrza marshes. While singing, the male puffs out its throat, presenting a bright blue bib under its beak. Bluethroats are remarkably skillful mimics of voices of other birds. This male enriches its song with harsh calls of a chaffinch (0:17), contact call of a chiffchaff (mostly 1:04) and alarm call of a barn swallow (2:32). At the end, the bird flies away to sing from a different spot. In the background we can hear cranes, blackcaps, willow warbler, wren, cuckoo and wood pigeon. If we listen intently, especially at the beginning of the recording, we may hear quiet, high-pitched buzzing - this is a huge swarm of mosquitoes, hidden in marsh vegetation.