

## **Echoes from the Ancient Forest**

In central Europe, in the borderland between Poland and Belarus, where two Slavic cultures meet, there lies an ancient, primeval forest, where for thousands of years nature has lived by its own rules - the Bialowieza Forest. This is a last memento of truly virgin forests that used to cover European lowlands centuries ago. The mysterious ancient woodland, full of entanglements of fallen trees and whispers of the wind, brimming with birdsong in the spring and with roars of rutting red deer in the autumn, looks at us from the height of several hundred years old oaks and spruces. Mutilated throughout the ages, stripped of plants and animals, but against odds always throbbing with life, it has survived till the present day as a biosphere reserve, but most of all as a legacy, as a task for humanity.

The following album contains recordings made in Bialowieza in May 2015, both in the primeval forest and on meadows in the Narewka river valley. The recordings have not been modified in any way, they provide a faithful picture of what nature itself intended to present. I deeply wish them to describe, in nature's own words, the unique beauty hidden in this remarkable place, and to reveal at least a tiny bit of the mystery of the soul of the primeval forest of Bialowieza - ancient, but always young and always alive.

## *Listening notes:*

### **1. Morning in the primeval forest (13:31)**

A sunny morning at "Stara Bialowieza". Feathered inhabitants of the ancient forest greet the day with their songs. Silence resounds with a symphony of their voices, enhanced by amazing echoes created by large oaks and other tall trees that provide the forest with wonderfully spacious, cathedral-like acoustics. This enchanting chorus is so rich that it is impossible to name all the voices here. The basis is created mainly by song thrushes, blackbirds and wood warblers accompanied by distant drumming of woodpeckers and calling of cuckoos. Against their background we may hear intermittent songs of a coal tit, great tit, chaffinch, blackcap and common chiffchaff, cooing of a wood pigeon or short, sharp syllables of great-spotted woodpecker. Every now and then, most clearly from 1:19, a song thrush makes an alarm call. We can hear a flutter of wings of birds passing nearby as they forage for food. From 4:45 a blackbird starts to sing in the foreground, at times an Eurasian jay and a golden oriole can be heard in the distance. From 8:35, against the buzzing of insects and very distant songs of European robin and goldcrest, the smallest of all Polish birds, a collared flycatcher can be heard singing and giving high, soft whistles. From 11:44 a woodpecker starts to tap at a nearby tree.

### **2. Close encounters (5:55)**

We explore the primeval forest, surrounded by a beautiful dawn chorus. As we walk, we have a chance to encounter many individual birds singing nearby. This track captures three such close encounters - with an Eurasian wren, a song thrush and a chaffinch, all of them singing against the background of charming birdsong orchestra dominated by blackbirds. Each species has a distinct song, but all of them contribute magnificently to the chorus. Eurasian wren is the second smallest bird in Poland, but its voice is so incredibly loud that one can see the bird's whole body tremble as powerful notes pour out of its open beak. Suddenly the wren, anxiously lifting its short tail, gives a rattling alarm call and flies away. Now its song resonates from a greater distance. From 2:28, a song thrush can be heard singing its varied, melodious tune from a tree top. After the thrush becomes silent, a chaffinch joins in with a lively cascade of notes. At 5:37 it flies away with a flutter of wings.

### **3. By a small stream in the rain (2:38)**

Morning near the ponds not far from the forest. A marshy valley is filled with birdsong, while a small stream murmurs nearby. From the top of one of the trees we can hear the song of a collared flycatcher, quite common inhabitant of the Bialowieza forest. The soundscape is enriched even more by drops of gentle rain playing their joyful, refreshing tune on the branches. At the end the flycatcher flies away and starts to sing from a different spot.

### **4. Rainy soundscape with a robin (3:16)**

Rainy and windy morning in an ancient woodland. Birds are not eager to sing in such an uninviting weather. Against a torrential rain rustling on leaves and tapping on branches, accompanied by wind stirring the trees, a European robin, as if out of spite, delivers a liquid, slightly melancholic tune. European robins sometimes enrich their songs with imitations of other birds. This male copies a trisyllabic motif typical for a great tit (0:8, 2:44). In the background we can hear a wood warbler, a chaffinch, a goldcrest and a very distant cuckoo. Great-spotted woodpecker calls intermittently.

### **5. Tale of ancient trees (3:29)**

Midday in the primeval forest. Everything is quiet and a little mysterious. Now the voice belongs to the true kings of this ancient woodland - to trees. They grow here, tall and majestic, crowned with glory of their often several hundred year history - quiet witnesses of distant past of the forest. Rustling their leaves at different tones, creaking and groaning with old branches, half-whispering - they spin the tales of their old times to everyone that is willing to listen. Let's stop here for a while, and perhaps, if we listen intently, with simple amazement at the beauty of the world, we will manage to understand this speech, so familiar to us, but so much forgotten in its primeval nature... From the depths of the forest, against distant singing of a goldcrest and a wood warbler, the echo brings us a resonant voice of a blackbird. A male chaffinch gives single, sharp notes, known as rain call. We are surrounded by a silence of a thousand tones: the forest speaks.

### **6. Evening songster (4:30)**

Warm, bright evening in the forest. A blackbird sat on a top of a tall tree and started its solemn, melodious tune. There are few places that compare to the ancient forests of Bialowieza, where, because of unique acoustics created by tall

trees, the song of the blackbird may resound in all its splendour. Now, when the hubbub of bird voices has subsided, this majestic, deep and flute-like song will carry far, far across the forest. Blackbirds sometimes enrich their songs with other sounds from their surroundings. This bird has learned a trisyllabic mating call of a green sandpiper (2:52). In the background we can hear another blackbird, some song thrushes, a common chiffchaff, a Eurasian jay, a wood warbler and a chaffinch.

#### **7. Morning on a meadow in the Narewka river valley** (7:19)

A vast meadow in the Narewka river valley. Morning silence is filled with a concert of a large variety of birds, too numerous to name all the singers. The basis of the chorus, together with calling cuckoos, cooing wood pigeons and drumming woodpeckers, is created by great reed warblers and sedge warblers. Every now and then, a river warbler joins in, its voice sounding more like a grasshopper than a bird. In the distance we can hear an occasional common reed bunting, common chiffchaff, blackbird, blackcap, finally a golden oriole. At 0:40, a passing red-backed shrike gives a series of wheezy squawks, and at 1:45 starts to make single, hoarse calls. At 2:28 a nutcracker flies by with a croaking sound. Very far away a common snipe can be heard drumming during a courtship display flight (especially 4:12, 5:10, 6:58, 7:15), as it makes rapid dives, spreading outer tail feathers and causing their vibrations. From 3:49, a ticking call of an anxious green sandpiper adds to the soundscape. Every now and then, most clearly from 5:30, a black woodpecker gives a plaintive call. From 5:02, drops of an approaching rain occasionally start tapping on the microphone.

#### **8. Midday on a meadow** (2:14)

In the midday, the atmosphere on a meadow is rather quiet and calm. Most birds are silent and only few faint voices reach us from the distance. A common rosefinch sat in a low shrub nearby and began to repeat its simple, but soft and flute-like phrase. Whisper of trees and rustle of leaves in the wind beautifully harmonize with its voice. Thrush nightingale starts to sing in the distance. At the end, the rosefinch flies away with a flutter of wings, and from now on, we can only hear an echo of the nightingale's song.

#### **9. Concert at the Narewka river** (6:37)

In the afternoon, a beautiful concert takes place at the Narewka river - a concert performed by edible frogs and pool

frogs. Sometimes they call gently, sometimes passionately, and then the air overflows with a wave of sound, as if it was going to explode. In the background a river warbler, a song thrush and a blackbird can be heard. In the air, a few barn swallows twitter while chasing insects, making shrill alarm calls from time to time (mostly 0:47, 1:47, 1:55). At 5:48, a startled white wagtail passes nearby.

**10. When the wagtail visits (4:05)**

As the evening slowly approaches, thrush nightingales start to dominate the scene, singing intensely in the bushes near the Narewka river. Their song resonates with a charming echo. Great reed warbler joins in, while a chorus of preoccupied edible frogs and pool frogs responds from the side of the water.

Every now and then, a white wagtail flies nearby with a flutter of wings. We can hear this fidgety bird twittering constantly, as it chases insects wagging its long tail. Sometimes it gets really close, and as the frogs become more quiet, we get a rare opportunity to listen to its varied and melodious song, which in white wagtails is not heard very often.

**11. Evening orchestra (6:14)**

The evening has fallen in the Narewka river valley. The air is cool, filled with a smell of damp and of waterside plants. A tireless orchestra of edible and pool frogs can be heard from the rushes, now supported by European tree frogs. Their loud croaking beautifully harmonizes with distant voices of a river warbler, great reed warbler and a thrush nightingale. At 0:52 we can hear a rhythmical, rasping sound of a corn crake, and at 1:56 silent contact calls of a water rail, which at 2:19 produces a series of harsh squeals. Soon the weather changes and it starts to rain. Now a chorus of European tree frogs together with a distant thrush nightingale and a river warbler breaks through the sound of heavy rain drops.

**12. Nightingale's lullaby (5:53)**

The sun is setting above the Narewka river valley. Another day comes to an end. Everything is still and quiet. From a nearby tree we can hear one of the most beautiful bird songs in the world - the song of a thrush nightingale. Charmingly melodious, liquid tune, enhanced by an enchanting echo, creates a unique, fabulous soundscape together with distant flutes of blackbirds, with a rustling voice of a river warbler and with dreamy whisper of trees. From 1:42, another remarkable singer, a garden warbler, joins in. We listen, struck with

amazement at the nightingale's extraordinary voice strength, enormous scale of tones and masterly sense of rhythm. Sometimes the song is gentle and wistful, sometimes joyful and energetic - music of flutes, delicate strings, tiny bells...Let's hold our breath for a moment, as magic takes place beneath the evening sky.