

Board 7

We are near the so-called *Kosy Most* (Diagonal Bridge). The place is named after a no longer existing wooden bridge which used to be placed diagonally across the Narewka River.

The place marks the beginning of a walking 'Bison Trail', yellow-marked, leading to Siemianówka (roughly 3.5 km in the park area). It spans three winter feeding sites open to visitors, i.e. the bison habitats. Two of them - „Kosy Most” and „Czoło” are located in the north of the park.

The Narewka River is the longest river in Białowieża Park, 61.1 kilometre-long. It springs from the group of Wild Nikor swamps on the Belarusian side. The 2/3 of its length flows through the Polish land. Despite repeated attempts at engineering the river in several sections, it has regained its natural character. There are a number of animal species occupying the river habitat, such as the **Eurasian beaver**, inhabiting this area. The beaver is the largest rodent in the whole of Eurasia – it can weigh up to 30 kg, i.e. it weighs more than a doe. Beavers build their lodges in flat river valleys on gradually sloping banks, using branches, grass and leaves mixed with slime. First, however, they erect a dam to pile up water and create an elevated water surface at the structure. In the Narewka valley, due to its sheer banks, they only dig holes to which the only access is below the water line, as is the case with the lodges. The beavers are thus protected against the predators – a wolf and a lyn. Between late spring and early autumn beavers mainly feed on water plants and those overgrowing the river banks. From October, when fresh plants are scarce, they start feeding on bushes and deciduous trees, which they also stock for winter time. As regards trees, they most frequently cut softwood trees, such as aspen and willow. They avoid alder and coniferous trees. By elevating the water level, the beavers create new forest water reservoirs, which are then inhabited by insects, fish and reptiles. The swampy forests often attract extremely rare animal species, for example a black stork. Hence, the beaver activity is conducive to increasing biological diversity.

The river habitat is home to other river animals, for example the **otter or the polecat**.

Flying over the river is sometimes the **kingfisher**, which is one of the most colourful birds in Poland. It's plumage is cyan on the outside and orange green on the inside. The bird is the size of a starling. It hunts in clean, deep, still or slowly flowing waters. Its prey most often include small fish, aquatic insects, frogs and tadpoles. The kingfisher attacks from the air. Sitting on a branch, it looks out for prey and then rapidly plunges into water. Contrary to what

the Polish term for this bird suggests, *zimorodek* (born in winter), the bird does not hatch in winter. In the past it was known as *ziemiorodek* (born in the soil), which suits the bird more. The fact is that the kingfisher nests in deep holes (up to 1 metre) which it digs in the steep banks of the water reservoirs. In Białowieża forest the nests can often be found in fallen trees. In extreme cases, their homes can be located at a distance of 1 km from water.

The kingfisher hatches two or three times a year, which compensates for its high mortality rate in winter, when feeding on freezing tanks and rivers is harder. The main reason for decreasing the number of the kingfisher is the environmental changes, including paving the river banks and water pollution.

The banks of the Narewka River are surrounded by meadows, which make some of the rare open spaces in Białowieża Forest. At the beginning of the 1970s most of them were mown. Today, they are gradually being overgrown with bushes and trees. The progressing secondary succession is turning them into forested areas again. The riverside meadows are perfect for watching the game, for example does, deer, wild boars and bison which come here to feed. Sometimes it is possible to see an elk.

The river reeds and numerous willow bushes are inhabited by a multitude of small songbirds, such as the **sedge warbler, the river warbler, the Savi's warbler, the rosenfinch, the marsh warbler or the reed bunting**. In open spaces, it is possible to spot the most common Polish butcherbird, **the red-backed shrike**, sitting at the top of the bush. It is smaller than a blackbird and is easily recognized by a black mask running along its eye and a rust-coloured coat. Looking out for prey, the red-backed shrike likes to sit at the top of the bush. It is a surprisingly effective predator. Apart from large insects, such as beetles or grasshoppers, it manages to catch small vertebrates like rodents, birds, reptiles and amphibians. It is typical of the bird to impale the prey on the tree and bush thorns, and even the barbed wire. Thus immobilized prey is easy to fragment with a beak. The bush with impaled animals serves as a pantry for rainy days, when the bird is less successful hunting the insects.

High grass and other dense earthbound flora resounds with the calls of the **corncrake**. This rail, not much bigger than a common quail, inhabits wet meadows with their high greenery and clumps of bushes, as well the drier areas within damp. It spends winters in Africa, south off Sudan, and stays in Poland from mid-April to October. In the period before or after migration, the skittish bird travels mainly on foot, skillfully evading even the predators. It is unwilling to take wing and flies with its legs dangling at short distances only. Male birds mark their presence with their loud course calls, usually at night and early in the morning, but also during a day. The sounds they produce are among the most peculiar bird sounds, which resemble rubbing the comb or winding up an alarm clock. The species has become very rare

on the intensively cultivated areas. Young birds often die during haymaking. The birds require extensively utilized areas, mown after the hatching season. In Białowieża National Park there is an estimated number of at least more than a dozen territorial males, which designate their districts with their voices. The bird inhabits mainly the south border of the forest and the valley of the Narewka River.

The predator birds in the area of the Diagonal Bridge include **hawks, buzzards, lesser spotted eagles**. In winter you can encounter the **white-tailed eagle** and occasionally the **short – toed eagle and the booted eagle**.