

Includes
a HUGE
fold-out
tree!

Under the Starlit Sky

Explore the forest
layer by layer

James Aldred

Illustrated by

Good Wives and Warriors

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The Brushwood Layer

Large areas of Bialowieza forest remain completely wild and untouched by humans. Unlike commercially managed forests where deadwood and wind-blown timber is often cleared away, here it is allowed to lay where it falls. It may look untidy, but such debris provides shelter and food for countless insects, fungi and epiphytes. In turn, these support large and diverse populations of birds and small mammals, as well as the predators that feed on them. Deadwood is key to maintaining a healthy forest ecosystem and high biodiversity.

Taking a rest from climbing, you spin slowly round on your rope to take a good look at your new surroundings. The air feels less muggy, and a cloud of tiny stingless bees buzz around you to lick salt from your sweat-soaked t-shirt.



Eurasian Wren

This wren loves hunting for spiders, grubs and insects amongst the fallen timber. Males build several domed nests and females chose their favourite to lay eggs in. A single male can have three or four active nests, all belonging to different females. In European folklore, this tiny bird is the king of all birds and has a loud, beautiful song to prove it!

Eurasian Sparrowhawk Plucking Post

This pile of discarded songbird feathers tells us that these woods are home to a pair of sparrowhawks. Small but deadly woodland hunters, these raptors often bring prey to the same place to pull out feathers prior to eating. These plucking posts are a record of which birds the hawks are targeting; a quick reveals the remains of thrushes, blackbirds, robins, tits and finches.



Yellow-necked Mouse

This yellow-necked mouse is just as at home in the trees as it is on the ground. Excellent climbers, they can be found foraging for seeds, nuts and berries high amongst the branches at night. This one has found a tasty fungus lower down, but it had better be careful: small rodents like this are on the menu for many predators, including owls.

Mosses and Ferns

Mosses, ferns and bryophytes don't grow very tall. Instead they grow as epiphytes upon the surface of other larger plants. Deep crevices of tree trunks and the soggy, rotting wood of fallen branches are perfect. By soaking and storing rainwater like a sponge, they help to create suitable conditions for other damp-loving organisms, such as slugs, snails and woodlice.

Norway Spruce Seedlings

These tiny spruce seedlings have taken root on a fallen tree. Safely above the reach of browsing deer, boar and bison, their young stems push up quickly towards the light gap created by the fallen tree. Moss provides their roots with water, whilst nutrients are absorbed from the decaying timber beneath. By the time this nursery log crumbles away, the young spruces will be large enough to support their own weight.

Northern Eurasian Lynx

Supreme predators, European lynx require large territories in which to live – Bialowieza is home to around forty individuals. They hunt birds and mammals, from small rodents to wild boar and young elk. This one ambushed a Roe deer. Leaping down onto its prey's back, the lynx killed the deer with a bite to the neck before dragging its carcass onto a fallen tree, safely out of the reach of other predators such as wolves that would not only steal its food but also kill the lynx.



European Tree Frogs

Two European tree frogs call from a leafy branch with strange, rhythmic croaks. Their inflated throat sacks tell you that these are males singing to attract mates. If successful, the female will lay her eggs in rain-flooded root hollows left by toppled trees.

Carpenter Ant

With queens measuring 20 millimetres in length (about as long as a paperclip), carpenter ants are Europe's largest ant species. This colony has taken up residence inside a felled spruce. By chewing away the soft summer wood lying between the hard growth rings of winter, they have created a rambling network of tunnels and chambers to raise their young.



Small-Leaved Lime Tree

Protected from hungry deer and bison by the surrounding fallen timber, this young lime tree is now safely above the browse line: the maximum height that herbivores can reach. Its young, tender leaves are now out of reach from even the tallest elk, but still provide food and cover for many other smaller creatures.

