

Practical aspects of European bison breeding in the Żubrowisko reserve

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Abstract: The Pszczyna enclosure is the oldest European bison breeding center in the world, and has a rich tradition that has played an undisputed role in the restitution of this species. With the establishment of the Żubrowisko Nature Reserve in 1996, and the transfer of responsibility for keeping the European bison from the Ojcowski National Park to the State Forests, in 1998, the latest phase of breeding these magnificent animals in the Pszczyna Forests began. The aim of the reserve is to preserve the European bison population for scientific, educational, and tourist purposes. The European bison is undoubtedly the reserve's most valuable natural feature. It lives in a forest area of around 750 hectares, where rational management is essential to ensure the sustainability and continued existence of the forest. For almost 30 years, the former Pszczyna Forest District, now Kobiór, has undertaken a range of activities to protect the European bison and preserve the diversity of its habitat.

Keyword: European bison, reserve Żubrowisko, Pszczyna center, education

The State Forests have been looking after the European bison herd in Jankowice continuously since 1998, initially as part of the Pszczyna Forest District and since 2003, as part of the Kobiór Forest District. The history of these animals in Upper Silesia begins much earlier, in 1865, when the then owner of the local forests, Prince John Henry XI of Pless, exchanged 20 red deer with Tsar Alexander II for four European bison (one bull and three cows) captured in the Białowieska Forest. The herd initially lived in an enclosure in the Murcki Forest. After two bulls and five cows were added (in the winter of 1877/78), the herd was relocated to the current breeding area in Jankowice.

The local conditions favored the development of the herd, which reached its peak in 1918 with 74 animals. In the 1930s, the Duke of Pszczyna's estate, was forcibly administered and in 1937, the Hochbergs lost most of their property, but the European bison remained in their possession until the outbreak of the Second World War. Despite various threats, including foot-and-mouth disease, the Pszczyna herd thrived, numbering 24 animals in 1939. After the outbreak of war, the European bison were handed over to the German authorities. 17 animals survived the Second World War. In 1945, 17 European bison

were transferred to the Pszczyna Forest District on the basis of the Protocol on the Transfer of the Pszczyna Forest Estate, which belonged to Prince John Henry XV, to the State Treasury. In 1948, on the initiative of foresters, a reserve for breeding European bison was established. The reserve's herd was looked after and managed by Józef Hławiczka (for 28 years), who passed on his knowledge and experience to his son. Mieczysław Hławiczka grew up among European bison. He studied veterinary medicine and has been looking after the animals in the reserve since 1970.

Between 1945 and 1953, the herd grew by 26 animals. 1953 proved to be a tragic year for the Pszczyna European bison. A foot-and-mouth disease epidemic wiped out the entire herd. The rebuilding of the herd began soon after, with the arrival of animals from Białowieża, Smardzewice, Niepołomice, and Wrocław. Ten years later, eight more European bison of the Pszczyna subline from Białowieża joined the herd. They were directly descended from European bison that had been transported there between 1947 and 1952.

The rebuilt herd was cared for by nature conservation organizations. The European bison breeding center was initially a branch of the Babiogórski National Park, and later of the Ojcowski National Park. In this form, the park was responsible for the care of the herd, while forest management was in the hands of the foresters. This status was changed in 1996 by the Minister of Environmental Protection, Natural Resources and Forestry, who granted the Pszczyna Reserve the status of a fauna reserve with the name "Żubrowisko". On January 1, 1998, the Pszczyna Forest District took over the management of the 30-head herd. The most urgent tasks were the reconstruction of around 12 kilometers of fencing and the renewal of the breeding facilities and infrastructure for the European bison. After the dissolution of the Pszczyna Forest District in 2003, the Kobiór Forest District took over the management of the European bison herd.

In 1998, the most modern period of European bison breeding began in the forests of Pszczyna. The Żubrowisko Reserve, established in 1996 with the aim of protecting and preserving the European bison population for scientific, educational, and tourist purposes, has led to a number of initiatives in the following years, both for the animals and for their habitat. The European bison is undoubtedly the reserve's most valuable natural resource. It inhabits a forest area of around 750 hectares, where rational management is essential to ensure the sustainability and continued existence of the forest. For almost 30 years, the former Pszczyna Forest District, now Kobiór, has been carrying out a range of activities aimed at both caring for the animals and preserving the diverse habitat in which they live. The reserve's infrastructure has been modernized, including the renewal of the outer fencing, the reconstruction

of the central enclosure system, and the renovation of feed stores, feeding stations, and drinking troughs. A quarantine enclosure was built, which serves both as an additional enclosure to isolate individual animals from the herd, and primarily as a temporary sanctuary for newly arrived European bison. The reserve's meadows and pastures require special attention. They are a picturesque feature of the landscape, but primarily serve as grazing land for the European bison and deer. They are the main source of hay. The habitat of European bison includes 200-year-old pine stands, numerous oak avenues and fragments of moorland forests with characteristic, rare vegetation. The breeding efforts are aimed at restoring the original character of the stands, but also at improving and diversifying the European bison's diet. The forest reserve carries out measures that affect both the habitat of the animals and the European bison themselves. Within the reserve, the health of the European bison is constantly monitored, and preventive measures are taken to reduce the risk of animal diseases within the herd. The animals are under constant veterinary care. Due to the occurrence of a disease in male animals, necrotic preputial necrosis, in the herd a few years ago, several animals were culled and detailed monitoring of the male animals was introduced. An electronic identification system was introduced in 2015. The animals are fitted with ear tags and microchips.

The Pszczyna herd consists of around 40 animals. Between 6 and 10 animals are born each year. Since 1998, 165 European bison have left the Żubrowisko reserve, most of them to breed abroad, but about a dozen animals have also participated in the establishment of new herds in Poland. So far, three conferences on the European bison have been held in Pszczyna. The first was held in 2000, before the European Bison Friends Society was founded, the next in 2006 and 2015. The conclusions drawn at the 2000 conference on European bison breeding were implemented in subsequent years. In order to achieve one of the goals of preserving the European bison population, namely education, the "Pszczynskie Żubry" Education Center was established in 2006, which is now the European Bison Breeding and Forest Education Center. A breeding enclosure for the Pszczyna subline was established in the center, which also serves as a demonstration enclosure, as this is the only place where European bison can be seen. The European Bison Breeding and Forest Education Center conducts educational activities, workshops, and nature excursions and also coordinates European bison breeding. The core herd living in the reserve consists mainly of the Lowland line, with some animals belonging to the Pszczyna subline. One of the main objectives in establishing the breeding area is to preserve the Pszczyna subline as a historical line that has played an important role in the restitution of European bison.



Ryc 1. European bison in Pszczyna reserve (appr. 1950) fot. E.Falkowski



Ryc 2. European bison in Pszczyna reserve (appr. 2010) – fot. M.Hławiczka

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Praktyczne aspekty hodowli żubrów w rezerwacie Żubrowisko

Streszczenie: Hodowla pszczyńska to najstarsza na świecie hodowla żubrów, posiadająca bogatą tradycję, która odegrała niekwestionowaną rolę w restytucji gatunku. Utworzenie w roku 1996 rezerwatu przyrody Żubrowisko a następnie przekazanie przez ówczesnego zarządcę, Ojcowski Park Narodowy żubrów pod opiekę leśników, co miało miejsce w 1998 roku rozpoczyna najbardziej współczesny okres w hodowli tych wspaniałych zwierząt w lasach pszczyńskich. Jako cel ochrony w rezerwacie uznano zachowanie ze względów naukowych, dydaktycznych i turystycznych populacji żubra. Niewątpliwie żubr to najcenniejszy element przyrodniczy w rezerwacie jednak bytuje on na powierzchni około 750 hektarów lasów, gdzie niezbędne jest prowadzenie racjonalnej gospodarki gwarantującej zachowanie trwałości i ciągłości lasu. Przez ostatnie prawie 30 lat ówczesne Nadleśnictwo Pszczyna a obecnie Kobiór podejmowało szereg działań związanych zarówno z utrzymaniem żubrów jak również z zachowaniem różnorodności środowiska, w którym żyją.
