Belarus

Ancient Forests & Fens

1st to 10th May 2018 (10 days)

Trip Report

Trip Report compiled by Tour Participants Ann and Trevor Jones

Tour Leader - Milan Vogrin

Tourist Guide - Aleksander Duka



Belarus – Ancient Forests & Fens

Although there are large areas of southern Belarus given over to mechanised agriculture, vast tracts of woodland and fenland still remain as they have done for hundreds of years. This is why

Belarus has become one of the prime birding destinations in Europe. These wild areas prevented the south from undergoing much of the destruction that took place elsewhere in the country during the last century. In consequence, change has been slow with many small villages of traditional buildings remaining as they were. The elegant onion-domed Orthodox churches adorning many of the towns and cities of the area, along with other historical buildings, provided cultural interest during transfers.

A variety of wildlife was seen on the tour topped off with some stunning highlight species such as Great Grey Owl,
Azure Tit and European Bison. There was little traffic and the network of rural roads and tracks provided easy access to prime birding sights. The accommodation was generally good and, equally important, close to the best birding sites.



Orthodox Church, Sporovo

Overall we felt safe during our journey around this Eastern European country that still retains close links with its large neighbour, Russia. We shared lots of wonderful experiences, saw some amazing wildlife and thoroughly enjoyed our time there.

Tour Summary



Statue of Stalin in Minsk

The four participants of the inaugural tour of Belarus arrived in Minsk, the capital, in the days prior to the start of the tour and spent some time exploring the wide avenues, parks, museums and memorials of the city. This was a pleasant diversion and a chance to experience the different culture of this former Soviet Republic.

In addition, a number of interesting species were found in the woods within the city, including; European Pied Flycatcher, Wood Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat.

On the evening of the first day (1st May) the group members plus the Tour Leader, Milan Vogrin, and the

Belarussian Tourist Guide, Aleksander Duka, gathered together for dinner and to discuss plans for the days ahead.

The following morning after an excellent breakfast we set off on the 4 hour drive south to the Pripyat National Park and our comfortable hotel in Turov. Along the way we saw our first Harriers; Marsh, Hen and Montague's drifting overhead. The hedgerows produced the first sounds of Thrush Nightingale and Golden Oriole, sounds that would follow us throughout our journey. Two Hawfinches also showed well.



After checking in at the hotel we started birding by looking over the flooded meadows alongside the Pripyat River. This was an amazing location with lots of water birds and waders. We had great views of displaying Ruff in summer plumage plus Black, Whitewinged and Whiskered Terns. The strident calls of Common Crane alerted us to a group coming in to land close by and a pair of Garganey was another good find.

Next day, we set off for Alsany and the 'well known' Water Pumping Station. This is an area of flooded meadows, willow and oak woodland and extensive arable farming. It is also famous as a breeding site for the highly sought after Azure Tit. Sadly the unusually high temperatures had caused the tits to abandon their nest in a large metal box – hardly surprising as it was barely possible to touch the metal sides. A highlight was extended views of Eurasian Wryneck and a number of the commoner warblers were also seen e.g. Reed, Sedge, Great Reed and Common Whitethroat.

Later we visited an area of open meadows and mixed woodland near Liadziec, an attractive village with many original wooden cottages still in good condition. Black Storks, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Northern Goshawk were seen at a distance. A pair of Great Grey Shrikes



Traditional wooden cottage, Liadziec

were spotted on a nearby bush and we had wonderful views of Eurasian Hoopoe.

Driving to the Bieleje Fishponds, we stopped briefly alongside the Pripyat River for our only sighting of a Eurasian Elk. At the various ponds at Bieleje some key species were observed including Caspian Gull, Savi's Warbler, Bluethroat, European Serin, Bearded Reedling and several White-tailed Eagles. Several Eurasian Bitterns were 'booming' from the reedbeds. Many water fowl were in evidence including two pairs of striking Smew and breeding

Whooper Swans.

The following day we went to Biecanskeje Forest where we saw both Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles overhead. A walk in the forest gave us Black and Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Eurasian Treecreeper. We had lunch at a nearby lake where Barred Warbler, Red-backed Shrike and Spotted Flycatcher were observed.

At dusk we travelled by boat up the Pripyat River to an area of wet meadow to watch over a Great Snipe lek. We were able to view about half a dozen displaying birds while trying to

fend off the many flying insects! Also during the evening both Corncrake and Little Crake were heard but sadly not seen. A local bird researcher informed us that the Azure Tit had been seen near the Pumping Station earlier that afternoon. We were all keen to try one last time to see this much sought-after bird.

A prompt start the following morning gave us time to find 2 Terek Sandpipers that had also been reported, along with 2 Little Stints. Pressing on we reached the Pumping Station and finally located a pair of Azure



Fire-bellied Toad

Tits which provided superb views – it was definitely worth the effort!

Still having a long journey ahead, we pushed on to one of the highlights of the whole trip — the ancient forest of Belowezhskaya Pushcha National Park. En-route we had our only view of Pallid Harrier, a beautiful male alongside the road. After quickly checking in some of the group walked around the hotel grounds and had clear views of Middle-spotted Woodpecker.

Up early the following morning, we set off with our local guide Anton for a day in this amazing place, pristine ancient woodland that covers 1418 square kilometres. As soon as we climbed out of the vehicle, a Hazel Grouse responded to Anton's whistle, which was amazing, and we had good views of a single bird on the ground and in flight. As



European Bison

we walked through the forest, birds of note were Stock Dove, Black Woodpecker, Eurasian Jay, European Crested Tit, Common Firecrest, Common Redstart and 2 new species of flycatcher; Collared and Redbreasted. A White-backed Woodpecker was heard and briefly seen by some of the group. Later in the day, we searched for Great Grey and Eurasian Pygmy Owls but without success.

However, we had wonderful views of approximately 25 European Bison and many Red Deer coming out of the forest to feed in the meadows – a highlight for everyone.

After a relaxed breakfast we set off for our hotel in Beloozersk and the nearby Sporovo Reserve. En-route we stopped for lunch and birded along the waterside at Sieliec Fishponds

where we were treated to close views of a pair of Eurasian Penduline Tits. Later, after a brief



Local transport, Sporovo Reserve

stop at our hotel we visited the Sporovo Reserve - an extensive area of wet grassland and reedbeds along the Yaselda River which is one of the European strongholds of the 'vulnerable' Aquatic Warbler. In the reedbeds we had great views of Citrine Wagtail, Bluethroat, Sedge Warbler and Whinchat. Most surprising of all was a Corncrake which responded to playback and repeatedly flew up out of the vegetation and even joined us on the boardwalk!! As the light faded, we looked over the wet grassland known to be favoured by the Aquatic Warbler and saw a bird perched and also in flight but were unable to make a positive identification.

The tantalising sightings of the previous evening encouraged us to return once again to Sporovo Reserve where we quickly found the bird seen the previous evening. In the improved light, it was agreed that this bird was a Sedge Warbler, away from its normal habitat. However, we eventually did spot an Aquatic Warbler singing as it performed its short display flight – sadly not the greatest of views.

Following a tip-off we departed for Vyhanascanski Reserve, an area of mixed woodland, just over an hour's drive away. After going through the now familiar bureaucratic procedures we set off in two small Lada vehicles to enter the forest.A rather bumpy ride was followed by a walk of around 30 mins through a damp area of the forest full of biting insects. It was however worth it as we eventually saw we were hoping for, a female Great Grey Owl on the nest – it was breathtaking and, without doubt, the highlight of the trip for everyone. On the return journey we stopped at a fuel station and heard a River Warbler singing from a drainage ditch. It



Great Grey Owl

popped up and gave short but clear views. This was an amazing end to the birding and left us all feeling in high spirits...

A Total of 144 species were identified including 7 heard only.

Top 5 birds of the tour as voted for by the tour participants:

- 1. Great Grey Owl
- 2. Azure Tit
- 3. Hazel Grouse
- 4. Bluethroat
- 5. = Corncrake & Terek Sandpiper

TRIP LIST BELARUS 2018	Date		01- May	02-1	Vlay	03-N	Лау	04-1	May	1-20	May	06-	May	07- May	1-80	May	09 Ma	
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DUCKS, GEESE, AND WATERFOWL - Anatidae																		
Greylag Goose	Anser anser	*												*				
Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus	*							*						*			
Garganey	Spatula querquedula	*			*	*			*									
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata	*				*			*		*							
Gadwall	Mareca strepera	*			*				*		*							,
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	*	*		*	*		*	*		*	*		*		*	*	
Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	*							*									
Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula	*							*									
Smew	Mergellus albellus	*							*									
PHEASANTS, GROUSE, AND ALLIES - Phasianidae																		
Hazel Grouse	Tetrastes bonasia	*												*				
Grey Partridge	Perdix perdix	*								*								
GREBES - Podicipedidae																		
Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus	*							*					*		*		
STORKS - Ciconiidae																		
Black Stork	Ciconia nigra	*			*		*		*	*								
White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	*				*	*		*		*		*	*	*	*	*	
HERONS, EGRETS, AND BITTERNS - Ardeidae																		

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Eurasian Bittern	Botaurus stellaris	h							h		h	h						
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	*		*	*	*		*	*		*	*	*		*			
Great Egret	Ardea alba	*				*		*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*	
CORMORANTS AND SHAGS - Phalacrocoracidae																		
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	*			*				*							*		
HAWKS, EAGLES, AND KITES - Accipitridae																		
European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus	*					*											
Lesser Spotted Eagle	Clanga pomarina	*					*							*				
Greater Spotted Eagle - VU	Clanga clanga	*								*								,
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	*		*			*	*						*				
Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis	*		*			*											
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	*			*	*		*	*		*	*		*		*		
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus	*		*														
Pallid Harrier - NT	Circus macrourus	*											*					,
Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus	*		*														,
Black Kite	Milvus migrans	*		*														,
White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla	*							*		*							
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	*			*		*							*	*			
RAILS, GALLINULES, AND COOTS - Rallidae																		

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Corn Crake	Crex crex	*					h		h							*	h	
Little Crake	Porzana parva	h				h					h							
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	h								h								
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	*							*		*							
CRANES - Gruidae																		
Common Crane	Grus grus	*			*		*	h						*	*			
OYSTERCATCHERS - Haematopodidae																		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	*			*						*							
STILTS AND AVOCETS - Recurvirostridae																		
Black-winged Stilt		*										*						
PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS - Charadriidae																		
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	*			*	*		*	*							*	*	
Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius	*									*							
SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES - Scolopacidae																		
Black-tailed Godwit - NT	Limosa limosa	*			*	*		*			*	*						
Ruff	Calidris pugnax	*		*	*	*		*			*	*						
Little Stint	Calidris minuta	*										*						
Eurasian Woodcock	Scolopax rusticola	*												*	*			
Great Snipe - NT	Gallinago media	*									*							

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Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago	*				*		*			*					*	*	
Terek Sandpiper	Xenus cinereus	*										*						
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	*			*											*		
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus	*			*			*			*	*						
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	*			*	*	*	*	*		*	*						
Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola	*			*	*		*	*		*	*						
Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus	*						*			*							
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia	*			*													
GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS - Laridae																		
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	*		*	*	*		*	*		*	*	*			*	*	
Caspian Gull	Larus cachinnans	*			*			*	*		*					*		
Little Tern	Sternula albifrons	*			*			*			*	*						
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo	*			*	*		*			*	*				*		
Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybrida	*			*	*		*	*		*	*						
White-winged Tern	Chlidonias leucopterus	*			*	*		*			*	*						
Black Tern	Chlidonias niger	*			*	*		*			*	*						
PIGEONS AND DOVES - Columbidae																		
Stock Dove	Columba oenas	*												*				
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	*	*		*	*	*		*	*	*	*			*	*	*	
European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur	h					h											

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Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	*			*		*			*	*	*						
CUCKOOS - Cuculidae																		
Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus	*					*		*	*	*	*		*		*	h	
OWLS - Strigidae																		
Great Grey Owl	Strix nebulosa	*																*
SWIFTS - Apodidae																		
Common Swift	Apus apus	*					*		*						*		*	
KINGFISHERS - Alcedinidae																		
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis	h							h									
HOOPOES - Upupidae																		
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	*					*	*	*	*		*		*			*	
WOODPECKERS - Picidae																		
Eurasian Wryneck	Jynx torquilla	*					*			*		*		h		h		
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocoptes medius	*											*	*				
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	*			h					*		*		*				
White-backed Woodpecker	Dendrocopos leucotos	*				h								*				
Black Woodpecker	Dryocopus martius	*								*				*				
FALCONS AND CARACARAS - Falconidae																		
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	*		*	*		*		*	*			*			*		
Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo	*												*				
SHRIKES - Laniidae																		

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Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio	*							*		*		*	*				
Great Grey Shrike	Lanius excubitor	*					*											
OLD WORLD ORIOLES - Oriolidae																		
Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus	*		*		*	*	*		*		*		*		h	h	
CROWS, JAYS, AND MAGPIES - Corvidae																		
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius	*										*		*		*	*	*
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	*	*		*		*			*						*	*	
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	*					*		*	*		*	*	*		*	*	
Rook	Corvus frugilegus	*		*	*	*		*			*	*	*		*			*
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	
Northern Raven	Corvus corax	*		*			*			*				*	*			*
CHICKADEES AND TITS - Paridae																		
Coal Tit	Periparus ater	*												*				
European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus	*												*				
Willow Tit	Poecile montanus	*				*					*							
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	*			*		*	*	*		*	*		*		*		
Azure Tit	Cyanistes cyanus	*										*						
Great Tit	Parus major	*	*		*	*	*	*		*		*		*		*	*	
PENDULINE-TITS - Remizidae																		
Eurasian Penduline Tit	Remiz pendulinus	*													*			
BEARDED REEDLING - Panuridae																		

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Bearded Reedling	Panurus biarmicus	*							*		*							
LARKS - Alaudidae																		
Woodlark	Lullula arborea	h												h			<u> </u>	
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	*		*	*		*	*		*		*		*		*	*	
SWALLOWS - Hirundinidae																		
Sand Martin	Riparia riparia	*			*	*		*	*		*	*						
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	*	*	*	*		*	*		*	*	*		*		*	*	*
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*			*		*	
LEAF-WARBLERS - Phylloscopidae																		
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	*	*	h	h	*		h		*		*				*		
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	*	*						h					*		h		
Wood Warbler	Phylloscopus sibilatrix	*	*	*					h	*		*		*		*	*	
REED-WARBLERS AND ALLIES - Acrocephalidae																		
Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus	*				*		*			*	*		*		*	*	
Aquatic Warbler - VU	Acrocephalus paludicola	*														h	*	1
Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus	*		h		*		*			*	*				*	*	
Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus	*						*	*									
GRASSBIRDS AND ALLIES - Locustellidae																		
Common Grasshopper Warbler	Locustella naevia	*														*	h	

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River Warbler	Locustella fluviatilis	*																*
Savi's Warbler	Locustella luscinioides	*							*							*	h	
OLD WORLD WARBLERS - Sylviidae																		
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	*	*						*					*			*	
Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin	*				*		*	*		*	*						
Barred Warbler	Sylvia nisoria	*									*				*			
Lesser Whitethroat	Sylvia curruca	*	*	*	*	*			*		*	*					*	*
Common Whitethroat	Sylvia communis	*				*	*				*	*				*	h	
KINGLETS - Regulidae																		
Common Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla	*												*				
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus	*														*		
TREECREEPERS - Certhiidae																		
Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris	*								*				*				
STARLINGS - Sturnidae																		
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	*	*	*	*	*	*		*		*		*	*	*		*	*
THRUSHES AND ALLIES - Turdidae																		
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	*	*	*			*											
Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*		*		*		*		
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	h												h				
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus	*	*	*														*
OLD WORLD FLYCATCHERS - Muscicapidae																		

TRIP LIST BELARUS 2018	Date		01- May	02-1	May	03-N	Лау	04-1	May	05-1	May	06-1	May	07- May	1-80	May	09 Ma	
	Site		а	b	С	d	е	f	g	h	i	j	k	I	m	n	0	р
		Trip	Minsk	en-route Minsk to Turov	Pripyat NP	Alsany flooded meadows, woodland	Liadziec village and forest	Pripyat River	Bieleje Fishponds	Biecanskeje Forest	Pripyat River	Pripyat River/Alsany flooded meadows, woodland	en-route Belowezhskaya Pushcha National Park	Belowezhskaya Pushcha National Park	en-route to Beloozersk	Sporovo Reserve	Sporovo Reserve	Vyhanascanski Reserve
Bluethroat	Luscinia svecica	*																
Thrush Nightingale	Luscinia luscinia	*		h	h	*		*	*		*	*		h		h	*	
Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata	*												*				
European Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca	*	*	*			*	*						*				
Collared Flycatcher	Ficedula albicollis	*												*				h
Red-breasted Flycatcher	Ficedula parva	*																
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	*	*				h	*			*		*	*				
Common Redstart Whinchat	Phoenicurus phoenicurus Saxicola rubetra	*					*		*		*			*		*		*
OLD WORLD SPARROWS -	Saxicola rubetra																	
Passeridae																		
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	*		*	*		*	*			*						*	
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*				*	*	
WAGTAILS AND PIPITS - Motacillidae																		
Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava	*			*	*		*	*		*	*		*		*	*	
Citrine Wagtail	Motacilla citreola	*														*	*	
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	*		*	*		*	*			*		*	*		*	*	
Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis	*															*	
FINCHES, EUPHONIAS - Fringillidae																		
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	*	*		*	*	*	*		*	*	*		*				
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes	*		*				*			*							

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		Trip	Minsk	en-route Minsk to Turov	Pripyat NP	Alsany flooded meadows, woodland	Liadziec village and forest	Pripyat River	Bieleje Fishponds	Biecanskeje Forest	Pripyat River	Pripyat River/Alsany flooded meadows, woodland	en-route Belowezhskaya Pushcha National Park	Belowezhskaya Pushcha National Park	en-route to Beloozersk	Sporovo Reserve	Sporovo Reserve	Vyhanascanski Reserve
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	*			*	*			*	*	*	*		*				
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	*		*					*			*					*	
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	*	*		*		*	*			*	*		*		*	*	
European Serin	Serinus serinus	*	*		*		*	*			*							
BUNTINGS, SPARROWS AND ALLIES - Emberizidae																		
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella	*						*			*					*		
Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus	*			*	*		*	*	*				*		*	*	