

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



Thrush Nightingale

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.

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.



Orthodox Church, Sporovo

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.



Eurasian Golden Oriole

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, White-winged 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 Bieicanskeje 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 Tits which provided superb views – it was definitely worth the effort!



Fire-bellied Toad

Still having a long journey ahead, we pushed on to one of the highlights of the whole trip – the ancient forest of Belovezhskaya 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 Red-breasted. 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

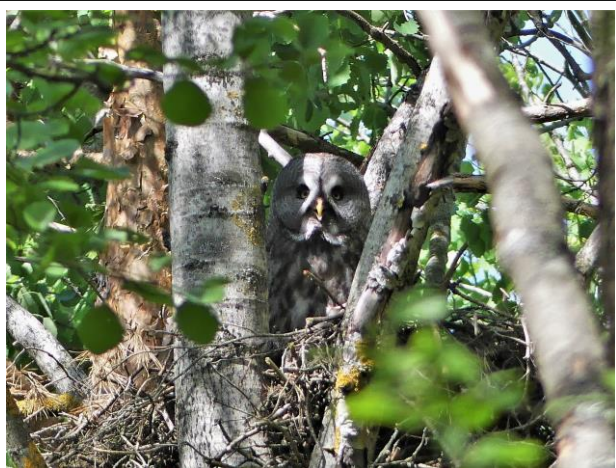
where we were treated to close views of a pair of Eurasian Penduline Tits. Later, after a brief stop at our hotel we visited the Sporovo Reserve - an extensive area of wet grassland and reedbeds along the Yaselda River which is one of the European strongholds of the 'vulnerable' Aquatic Warbler. In the 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.



Local transport, Sporovo Reserve

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



Great Grey Owl

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

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TRIP LIST BELARUS 2018	Date		01-May	02-May		03-May		04-May		05-May		06-May		07-May	08-May		09-May	
	Site		a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p
		Trip	Minsk	en-route Minsk to Turov	Pripyat NP	Alsany flooded meadows, woodland	Liadziec village and forest	Pripyat River	Bieleje Fishponds	Bieicanskeje Forest	Pripyat River	Pripyat River/Alsany flooded meadows, woodland	en-route Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park	Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park	en-route to Beloozersk	Sporovo Reserve	Sporovo Reserve	Vyhanascanski Reserve
Corn Crane	<i>Crex crex</i>	*					h		h							*	h	
Little Crane	<i>Porzana parva</i>	h				h					h							
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	h								h								
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	*							*		*							
CRANES - Gruidae																		
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	*			*		*	h						*	*			
OYSTERCATCHERS - Haematopodidae																		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	*			*						*							
STILTS AND AVOCETS - Recurvirostridae																		
Black-winged Stilt		*										*						
PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS - Charadriidae																		
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	*			*	*		*	*							*	*	
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	*									*							
SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES - Scolopacidae																		
Black-tailed Godwit - NT	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	*			*	*		*			*	*						
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	*		*	*	*		*			*	*						
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	*										*						
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	*												*	*			
Great Snipe - NT	<i>Gallinago media</i>	*									*							

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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	Phoenicurus phoenicurus	*												*				*
Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra	*					*		*		*					*		
OLD WORLD SPARROWS - 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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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	*			*	*		*	*	*				*		*	*	