

Belarus

Wild 'White Russia'

Thu 02nd – Fri 10th May 2019



Trip photos (clockwise, from top left): Azure Tit • Great Grey Owl • Grey-headed Woodpecker • Tengmalm's Owl © Colin Bushell/Limosa Holidays

**Report compiled by tour leader:
Colin Bushell**

Belarus | Wild 'White Russia'**Tour Leaders:** Colin Bushell with Gabor & Andrea Orban

I'd heard so much about Belarus a step back in time; birding in ancient woodlands, unspoiled countryside and relics of Soviet rule. I returned with a very positive outlook - beautiful deciduous woodlands with hidden woodpeckers and Wood Warbler song ringing through the rides, wetlands (although admittedly a little dry this year) with Great Snipe, White-tailed Eagles, Smew and Penduline Tits. Accommodation and food was very acceptable and better than I'd been led to believe, roads were good and therefore Belarus was a very 'comfortable' tour. Flying to Minsk, we headed generally south and then south-west towards the border with Poland. Traveling through towns with huge war memorials, ornate churches and colourful wooden houses we experienced some charming sites on our journeys. The exquisite Azure Tit is of course 'the poster bird' of Belarus, but there is so much more

2nd May

Our Belarus team met at London Heathrow for a very early check-in at the LOT Polish airlines desk for our flight to Minsk via Warsaw. The desks were opened promptly and the efficient check-in process saw us clearing security with time for breakfast before our 0630 flight to Warsaw. The two-hour flight was pleasant enough and we adjusted our watches an hour forward on arrival in the Polish capital, taking time for a light lunch before continuing our journey to Minsk.

Arriving in Belarus we adjusted our watches once again, the extra hour meaning we arrived early afternoon in Minsk. We cleared Immigration, collected our luggage and met Gabor, Andrea and our driver, Valesi. With Belarusian Rubles purchased we left the airport by 15.15 hrs for the four-hour drive to Turov. The afternoon was rather overcast with sunny spells and a few showers. We drove the long, straight roads through forests of pine, oak, birch and alders, seeing very few birds until we reached more open landscape. Small flocks of Ruff could be seen over the flat plains with the occasional Marsh Harrier, White Stork and Hooded Crow.

Small towns and villages with ornate wooden houses, brightly-coloured fencing and decorative orthodox churches opened up once again to the rather uniform flat countryside and we crossed the Pripyat river, noting the Willow riparian habitat - we would bird watch here the following day. Arriving in Turov we had time to freshen up before taking a short walk to a local private restaurant for a fine meal and beers, before retiring to bed after a long day.

3rd May

With a fine and sunny start to the day most of the group headed out for a pre-breakfast walk close to the hotel. Singing Eurasian Wryneck, European Serins, Whinchats and Wood Warbler could be found in the scrub and copses across the river from our hotel. Black-tailed Godwits and Common Redshanks displayed over the damp meadows, Wood and Common Sandpipers fed at the river edge and Blue-headed and Grey-headed Wagtails called as they flew over. A few Black Terns were seen on the wider stretch of the river in the distance before it was time to return to the hotel for breakfast.

Arriving at Alshany, Andrea found our target bird almost immediately. Views were tantalisingly brief at first, but everyone enjoyed Azure Tits this morning. In fact by the time we returned to our bus for lunch it was clear they were nesting nearby. Our picnic was interrupted on several occasions by the Azure Tit's forays into the neighbouring Willow scrub and woodland borders. The enigmatic Azure Tit was of course the main attraction here, but the supporting cast of European Pied Flycatchers, Hawfinches, Eurasian Penduline Tit, a briefly seen Bluethroat, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Garden Warblers, Common Cuckoo and Spotted Flycatcher kept us very busy indeed.

A convenient shelter with benches made an excellent place to have lunch prepared by Andrea. Meats, cheese, salads, fruit and hot drinks made an excellent 'field buffet'. We didn't have to wander far to find birds this afternoon either. No sooner had the buffet been declared closed, a superb male Montagu's Harrier flew along the embankment, only to be joined briefly by a ringtail. A Great Grey Shrike hovered nearby and with patience we located singing Great Reed and Savi's Warblers in the reed-fringed ditches. It was strange to see Little Terns here, as we are so used to them frequenting coastal regions back home in the UK.

Heading back to Turov we stopped for Gadwall on the river near town, where a few of us glimpsed a passing Eurasian Hoopoe. Black Kite flew across the road as we left. Stopping at the hotel briefly to use the bathrooms,

we then continued to the meadows in hope of seeing Terek Sandpiper. Unfortunately the weather had other ideas and heavy rain had us retreating to the bus earlier than planned. Black Terns, Black-tailed Godwits, Ruff and Eurasian Oystercatchers were logged, but no Tereks unfortunately. We returned to the hotel, damp but not disheartened and hoping for more luck the next day. We dined in our favourite restaurant once again before retiring for the night.

4th May

The usual pre-breakfast walk produced up to three drake Garganeys, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Syrian Woodpecker, all just across the river from the hotel!

After finishing breakfast we headed towards the Tzarskeles Forest, calling in at the administration centre to collect permits and meet our guide for the morning. We made use of 'the facilities' here and also enjoyed a few birds in the grounds including European Serins and a fine male Black Redstart. After a short drive we arrived at the trailhead and entered the forest. Despite rather overcast conditions, the forest (as is often the case at this time of year in eastern Europe) was alive with birdsong. Wood Warblers, Garden Warblers, Blackcaps, Spotted Flycatcher, European Pied Flycatcher, Hawfinch and Tree Pipits could all be heard as we walked the trail. By the time we reached the first clearing, accessed by a boardwalk, we had also heard Grey-headed Woodpecker, Common Redstart and Eurasian Nuthatch, but seen very little! Reaching the end of the trail, we walked a loop with some of the party seeing Short-toed Snake Eagle and a Lesser Spotted Eagle; the 'tail-enders' hearing a Common Firecrest and everyone missing a White-backed Woodpecker that had been calling!

Retracing our steps towards the boardwalk our luck changed with a White-backed Woodpecker that showed quite well. We heard Collared Flycatcher, but we'd be birding better areas for this species soon and nearing the bus a few of us had a close encounter with a Coal Tit collecting nesting material from the path at our feet! It had been hard work in the morning, but our fortune was about to change. Aczerjane was our picnic lunch site today and Gabor said we should look for Terek Sandpiper on the river while he and Andrea prepared our meal. A Terek Sandpiper was found almost immediately with the first scan of the sandbar on the river bend! European Turtle Doves 'purred' as we enjoyed our lunch and, just as Gabor predicted, a White-tailed Eagle (a fine adult) circled over the river and disappeared behind the forest. Our post lunch walk produced great views of Grey-headed Woodpecker, surprisingly protracted looks at a singing Thrush Nightingale, Great Grey Shrikes and Hawfinches.

We ended our afternoon birding session a little earlier than usual today; heading back to Turov for an early dinner. After a brief opportunity to visit our rooms, we gathered once again and drove the short distance to Turov Meadows where we took an evening stroll along the river. A flock of 44 White-winged Terns patrolled the river, gracefully dipping onto the surface of the water to pick some of the insects as they went. They were joined by three Little Gulls and briefly by a brace of Whiskered Terns; the latter departing over the forest as the tern flock turned a bend in the meandering river. This spectacle was described as 'moment of the tour' by a few of the group! Our main quest this evening was a search for Great Snipe, however. Reaching their lek site we could see a few photography hides set up, so we kept a respectable distance and watched as several Great Snipes jumped (they have a very strange display) in the grasslands, their calls could be heard periodically as they leapt. Satisfied with our views and with sufficient evening light left to complete our return walk to the bus, we set off as the sun began to set.

5th May

This morning's pre-breakfast walk failed to produce any new birds for the trip, although the rather inclement weather no doubt had something to do with the lack of bird activity. After breakfast we drove to Budha, a typical small Belarusian village with wooded borders and forest patches. The village itself was remarkably good for birding with singing Eurasian Wryneck the first 'highlight' as soon as we left the bus. Ten Common Cranes flew over and a pair of Red-backed Shrikes showed briefly as an Icterine Warbler introduced his song with the characteristic 'squeaky dog toy' notes. Eurasian Treecreeper and Eurasian Golden Oriole were added to the day's tally, before the bizarre sight of a flock of at least 40 divers (probably Black-throated, but too distant to be sure) flew across our views of a Lesser Spotted Eagle in the blue sky! Montagu's Harrier, White-tailed Eagle and Eurasian Hoopoe were all seen as we walked through an open area before entering a beautiful forest block, dominated by beeches and oaks. Entering the woodland we saw a Black Woodpecker briefly and then enjoyed wonderful views of singing male Collared Flycatchers before the weather deteriorated. With darkening skies we headed back to the bus, deciding on a restaurant lunch in preference to the planned picnic.

After a very nice lunch in Turov we drove the short distance to some meadows with a female Common Goldeneye escorting 10 chicks on the river and Common Cranes with Savi's Warbler singing in the background. Heading back towards the town we stopped at Kremnoe where we saw Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers,

European Pied and Spotted Flycatchers and Eurasian Penduline Tit in some gallery woodland before popping in to Turov Ringing Station. The rangers here explained that we were experiencing the areas driest spring in 60 years or so (hence the lack of pools in the meadows). It was fascinating to hear that thanks to geolocator technology one of the local Great Snipes had been traced to its wintering grounds in the Congo!

6th May

This was a 'travel day', but it was soon evident that we'd see many good birds as we left Turov for Beloozersk. Two Whooper Swans over the garage as we broke our journey were a good omen! Arriving at Beloe Fishponds we immediately found a fine pair of Smew. By the end of our visit here we would see at least 10 of these splendid ducks, including three drakes. Scanning the largest fishpond we found our first Common Coots, Black-necked Grebes and Common Pochards of the tour. Scrutinising the gulls we discovered several Caspian Gulls, a couple of Common Gulls and an immaculate *fuscus* Lesser Black-backed Gull.

The weather was rather overcast and light showers punctuated our stay, probably forcing some migrant terns down over the fishponds. We counted 74 White-winged Terns as well as several Black and Whiskered Terns over the course of the morning. Great Bitterns 'boomed', Little Crakes and Common Moorhens made various strange noises, hidden in the reed beds while Tufted Ducks, Common Goldeneyes and Great Crested Grebes swam around. White-tailed Eagles and Black Storks were overhead, but the European Honey Buzzard just overhead crossing the causeway was splendid indeed and despite the poor weather many smaller birds such as Eurasian Wryneck, Wood Warblers and Great Reed Warblers still showed. Eventually the rain became heavy and we retreated to the bus and headed for lunch, before completing our journey to Beloozersk. Unfortunately the rain and cold winds prevented us from looking for Aquatic Warblers this evening. However we all enjoyed a good meal and drinks in our nice hotel, hoping for better fortunes the following day.

7th May

A slightly earlier-than-usual start saw us heading for Sporava in the hope of seeing Aquatic Warblers. The rain had stopped, but the morning air was still very cold indeed! Arriving at Sporava we waited, overlooking the damp, marshy grasslands. Alas there was no sign of our target bird this morning; it seems many migrants were arriving in eastern Europe a little late this Spring, or had the cold weather simply discouraged them from singing? The area was not totally devoid of bird life, though. During our pre-breakfast watch we recorded Citrine Wagtails, Woodlarks, Eurasian Golden Orioles, Eurasian Penduline Tits, Savi's Warblers and Montagu's Harrier. A Hawfinch was flushed off the road by the bus as we headed back to the hotel for breakfast and to warm up!

After breakfast we packed our bags (this was the only one-night stay of the tour) and left for Belovezhskaya via Selet Fishponds. There were many birds at Selet to take our minds off the freezing conditions. Birding here was a strange mix of 'winter meets summer' for a birder from western Europe with ten Whooper Swans on the first pond and a singing Barred Warbler just before we left the area. In between we saw as many as seven White-tailed Eagles in the air at one time, Black Storks, a flock of 20 Little Gulls and Bearded Reedling. Wildfowl included Northern Pintail, Garganey and Eurasian Wigeon and waders, though generally thin on the ground, included a smart, black Spotted Redshank. There were the by now, familiar 'marsh terns' and we saw our first Stock Doves of the tour here too.

Once again a restaurant lunch was favoured over the planned picnic due to the cold weather, so we drove into Byaroza. We enjoyed a good meals here before strolling around the impressive Afghan War Memorial dominating the main square. Arriving in Belovezhskaya we had time for initial exploration of the forests, seeing European Crested Tits, Goldcrest, Common Firecrest and Eurasian Nuthatch. Dinner was an entertaining affair, celebrating two birthdays with musical entertainment throughout.

8th May

Our first full day at Belovezhskaya Pushcha started well with a pre-breakfast walk into the forest, following an extended loop trail past a lake and through deep coniferous woodlands. Gabor definitely had a plan as we made haste towards the loop where he stopped to use a little playback of Eurasian Pygmy Owl calls. A bird responded almost immediately and in no time we were watching one of these tiny owls in the tree above us! Making our way back for breakfast we could hear and see some of the, by now, familiar species of these forests. Green Woodpecker was heard only, Wood Warblers were of course common, some saw and heard Goldcrest and Common Firecrest and by the time we reached the restaurant Common and Black Redstarts were singing near the car park.

After breakfast we were joined by Anton, our local guide for the day. Anton really knew 'his patch' well and we were soon watching Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and Collared Flycatchers after hearing Common Crossbill immediately we disembarked from the bus. White-backed Woodpeckers were elusive, but eventually seen well.

Red-breasted Flycatcher proved very tricky indeed as it skirted the edge of a small open patch of beech and birch woodland. We all had reasonable views of this bird eventually and moved on to an area dominated by hornbeams where a few Hawfinches were coming to a pool.

We returned to the bus for our picnic lunch, before driving a short way to another patch of forest. Here Anton led us to an area where he knew of a Tengmalm's Owl territory where he showed us one of these special birds. We watched at a safe distance, taking photos without disturbing the bird and leaving after we'd all enjoyed good views. A short stop at a lake produced White-tailed Eagle, several Eurasian Hobbys and a mixed flock of around 40 White-winged and Black Terns. We then drove to the edge of Dzikaje Mire where Anton took us to a nesting site for Great Grey Owl. Once again, observing from a respectable distance, we enjoyed good 'scope views of another spectacular forest owl. Returning to Belovezhskaya we chanced upon a couple of European Bison crossing the forest roads before seeing another group at forest edge in meadows. Thanking Anton we returned to the hotel after a fabulous day birding in Belarus.

9th May

Our pre-breakfast walk in Belovezhskaya was very pleasant indeed. In perfect, crisp and clear weather we walked only a short distance to a small clearing and without too much effort we saw a nice variety of birds including a flock of Greylag Geese, two Whooper Swans, Great Grey and Red-backed Shrikes and a Green Sandpiper on top of a pine tree! The usual Common Redstarts, Common Firecrest, Spotted Flycatcher and even European Crested Tits could still be seen near the hotel as we set off after breakfast once more. A lake at Shishova was our first site. It was a little disappointing to find that access to the edges was virtually impossible, but we did find a few Northern Wheatears, Fieldfares and Blue-headed Wagtails in the surrounding fields. A small flock of Wood Sandpipers flew over as we scanned across the lake where our attention turned to Odonata and the Common Winter and Siberian Winter Damselflies here; the former very rare in this region. Moving on once again, in search of raptors, we stopped at Beliyles where a pair of Hobbys were patrolling the plains and our first Corn Bunting of the tour was singing nearby. There was no sign of large birds of prey however, so we headed for a suitable area for our picnic lunch where we watched a displaying Woodlark and found Four-spotted Chasers and Yellow-spotted Whiteface in the nearby forest clearings.

After lunch we revisited one of the previous day's sites - Dzikaje Mire. Most of us hadn't even climbed the steps to the observation tower when Gabor found our first Greater Spotted Eagle of the tour. Soon to be joined by another, this eagle began displaying, giving us marvellous views in the afternoon sunshine. A huge flock of over 200 Common Cranes was a spectacular site, but it was the short burst of song from an Aquatic Warbler that excited us most. Despite being a regular site for this declining species, the vast Dzikaje Mire is a difficult place to see this bird, but we decided to return in the late afternoon (apparently their preferred singing period).

Birding the nearby woodlands was rather disappointing and returning to Dzikaje we failed to see the Aquatic Warbler, despite hearing it sing on a few occasions. We did hear Spotted Crakes above the cacophony of calling Edible Frogs!

10th May

Our final day dawned rather overcast and prior to departure for Minsk we managed some birding in the forest. We probably had our best views of Grey-headed Woodpecker this morning and White-backed Woodpeckers and Willow Tits performed well. Returning to the hotel for the last time, we gathered our belongings and packed the bus, ready for the journey to Minsk. A nice picnic spot for lunch gave us an opportunity to watch our last White-tailed Eagles of the trip, with Thrush Nightingale singing around the scrubby margins of the lake. We arrived at the airport in good time for check-in at the LOT desk, our flight to Warsaw leaving a little late. With an already 'tight' transfer time, it was some relief that the onward connection to London was delayed a little and everything went smoothly and we arrived in London in good time.

Many thanks to Gabor and Andrea for organising everything in Belarus for us during this tour. Valesi drove us around this fascinating country safely and was very helpful indeed, so we really had a great team! Of course we also had a great group - my thanks to you all for your enthusiasm, sense of humour and patience. I am very grateful to David Walsh for his help with some Odonata identification issues and also Ken Copleston who provided me with some instructive photos of eagles and flycatchers post-tour. Every day is a school-day!

Annotated List of Species

TM = Torov Meadows

BVZ = Belovezhskaya Pushcha

BF = Biela Fishponds

SF = Selets Fishponds

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Our only sighting was a flock of 10 over the old sewage beds at BVZ 9/5.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Seen daily at most wetlands we visited and on rivers as we travelled between sites.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*

Recorded on three dates. On 4/5 a bird flew over the petrol station where we stopped for a quick coffee and bathroom break on the way to BF. We saw another later that morning at the fishponds as well. A nice flock of 10 noisy birds were at SF and the final two birds of the tour flew over BVZ on 9/5.

Garganey *Spatula querquedula*

Seen at TM on 4 & 5/5 (daily max. 4 drakes) and SF 7/5.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*

Twos and threes around TM and a pair at SF were the only records.

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*

A couple of pairs were seen in TM area on two dates. Most were seen at fishponds however, with BF and SF holding groups of up to 10 birds.

Eurasian Wigeon *Mareca penelope*

At least five were at SF on 7/5.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Recorded daily.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

A single female with Mallards and Wigeon at SF on 7/5 was our only record.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

A very mobile drake was seen at BF on 6/5.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

A pair at BF on 6/5.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

A female with 10 chicks was seen from the Turov Bridge on 5/5. The largest numbers of the tour were seen at the BF on 6/5 with the final sightings on 8/5 in BVZ area.

Smew *Mergellus albellus*

We saw at least 10 at BF on 6/5, including three 'White Nuns' as the drakes are known. A couple of the 'redheads' were seen perching up a tree at one stage.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*

Heard calling at TM 5/5

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*

Two scurrying away along the side of the road at Budha 5/5, were the only ones recorded during the tour.

[Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica*]

We were quite surprised (to say the least!) to see a flock of about 40 divers, flying high and at great speed, across our view of a soaring raptor over Budha 5/5. Although high and distant, they certainly did not look like Red-throated Divers. Migration routes (of birds wintering on Black Sea) would also support this, but I prefer to leave this species as 'square bracketed' given our inconclusive views.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Heard at BF 6/5.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Seen 6 - 8/5 at BF, SF (25+) and a pair in BVZ.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

At least eight at BF 6/5.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*

Seen on five dates, with most (3+) at BF 6/5.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Seen daily and nesting outside our hotel in Turov.

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

Heard at BF 6/5.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Seen virtually daily.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

One seen at 6/5 at BF.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Seen daily.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Seen on four dates; mostly 'flyovers' and ones and twos. The exception was a flock of 20 over TM on 4/5.

European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*

Splendid views of one over BF 6/5, was surprisingly our only sighting.

Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

Singles over Alshany 3/5, Tzarskelles Forest 4/5 and Budha 5/5.

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Clanga pomarina*

Our first was over Tzarskelles on 4/5. The following day we saw a rather 'troublesome' individual (that proved difficult to identify) and another 'classic' bird over Budha. Singles were seen at BVZ on 8 & 10/5.

Greater Spotted Eagle *Clanga clanga*

At least two birds, including one in its spectacular display flight, over Dzikaje Mire on 9/5.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Just one record on 7/5.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Seen daily and possibly the most frequently encountered raptor of the tour. A few 'sky dancing' males were observed.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*

Seen on five dates, often as we travelled between sites. Perhaps our best views (involving two males and a 'ringtail') were at Alshany, with birds quartering the raised riverbank there.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

One near Turov 3/5 was our only sighting of the tour.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*

This spectacular eagle was seen on seven dates. The best gathering was at SF on 7/5, where at least seven birds could be seen in the air at one time. Most observations involved full adults.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Seen on four dates, but nowhere numerous.

Corn Crane *Crex crex*

On 4/5 birds were heard at TM and at Aczerjane as we enjoyed another picnic lunch.

Little Crane *Porzana parva*

Heard at BF 6/5.

Spotted Crane *Porzana porzana*

At least one heard at Dzikaje Mire 9/5.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

One heard at BF 6/5.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

Only seen at BF 6/5.

Common Crane *Grus grus*

Recorded on seven dates, mostly in open country, but also some flying over as we searched for birds in deep forest! A flock of at least 200 was seen over Dzikaje Mire on 9/5. The evocative trumpeting call of this species was a delight to hear at so many of the sites we visited.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haemantopus ostralegus*

Seen regularly by the River Pripyat at TM during our stay there.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Seen daily in suitable habitat.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Recorded 3 - 6/5, usually in small numbers by the banks of the Pripyat in Turov. We saw a few at BF as well.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

Recorded at the same sites as the above species, as well as at SF on 7/5.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Seen 3 - 7/5 around Turov and at the fishponds we visited. It was nice to hear them displaying over the meadows near our hotel in Turov.

Ruff *Calidris pugnax*

Seen during the first six dates of the tour, with some large flocks over fields and meadows near Turov. Seen again later in the tour at Shishova lake 9/5, when four flew over.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

Six by the Pripyat near Turov 3/5 and a few the next day at Aczerjane were the only records.

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*

One seen roding at dusk 7/5 BVZ.

Great Snipe *Gallinago media*

On 4/5 we trudged out along the banks of the Pipryat to the lek of this enigmatic wader near Turov. We weren't disappointed! Several birds could be observed from a respectable distance by using telescopes, as they veered in and out of tall grassy tussocks. Some leapt in display briefly, but the clicking and 'tinkling' as the birds stretched upwards, was clearly audible from our vantage point.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Recorded on six dates, with some birds 'drumming' over open damp forested areas.

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*

One on sandy riverbanks at Aczerjane 4/5 could be watched feeding as we enjoyed our picnic lunch!

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Seen on five dates around TM and the fishponds we visited.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

One seen on the final two days of the tour was on territory near our hotel in BVZ. It was surreal seeing one of these waders atop a tall conifer and later hearing it singing as we walked back for breakfast!

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Common around Turov.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Seen on six dates around Turov and when we watched the fishponds. A flock of eight birds flew over Shishova lakes on 9/5.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

A stunning, black, summer-plumaged bird at SF 7/5.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Apart from a couple of brief sightings and 'heard onlys', the easiest to see were the couple at SF 7/5.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Seen on most days and the most common gull on our tour.

Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*

Three with 'marsh terns', hawking insects over the Pipryat on 4/5 were a splendid sight. A flock of 20 was tracked from a distance and then passed over SF on 7/5.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

Recorded on three dates, all couples. Seen at TM 3/5, BF 6/5 and SF 7/5.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*

Ten or so at BF 6/5 and up to 80 the following day at SF.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

A crisp, slender and jet black-mantled *fuscus* bird at BF 6/5.

Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*

Five at Alshany 3/5.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Seen daily (though not particularly numerous) over rivers, fishponds and lakes.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*

Two with White-winged Terns over the Pripyat as we walked out to the Great Snipe lek, were the first seen.

On 7/5 we had seven with White-winged Terns at BF and then singles the following days at SF and BVZ.

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

Two seen near Turov 3/5 started the ball rolling. The following day we watched 44 of these graceful birds patrolling the river, dipping through clouds of insects low over the surface of the Pripyat as we walked out to see Great Snipes. This spectacle, on a perfect Spring's evening, with the setting sun, was one of the tour highlights for many of the group members! At BF flocks were dropping in due to the rather inclement weather conditions and we counted at least 74 through the area, during our visit. Three were at SF 7/5, with the last birds over the lake at BVZ in a mixed White-winged/Black Tern flock totalling around 40 birds.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*

Six at TM 3/5 were the first of the tour. Thereafter we saw them on five dates over lakes and fishponds.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Seen on six dates.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Only seen on three dates and in small numbers. Apart from a couple of sightings in BVZ at the end of the tour, the only other birds were at SF.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Seen daily.

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

One at Aczerjane was the only encounter.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

A couple around the hotel at Turov.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Recorded on eight dates.

Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa*

The bird in the nest box (our third owl of the day), in woodland at the edge of Dzikaje Mire on 8/5 was undoubtedly yet another tour highlight.

Eurasian Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium passerinum*

One responded well to limited playback and showed nicely, during our pre-breakfast walk in BVZ on 8/5.

Boreal Owl *Aegolius funereus*

One seen in BVZ 8/5; one of the tour highlights, without doubt.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Recorded on seven dates during the tour, but as is often the case with this species, they were flighty and rarely seen on the ground.

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*

Recorded on five dates; more often heard than seen. We did get some great views though, particularly near our hotel in Turov and at Budha.

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocoptes medius*

Heard and seen briefly at Tzarkeles Forest 4/5. We all enjoyed good views through 'scopes at BVZ on 8/5.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dryobates minor*

We had our best views at Kremnoe on 5/5, when we watched a pair in riverine woodland borders. Also heard elsewhere during the tour on three dates.

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*

A woodpecker that is more at home away from forested areas in my experience, preferring lighter woodland edge, parks and even villages with a few trees. This could explain the paucity of records for our tour, as we justifiably concentrated on dense forest and consequently encountered this species on only a few occasions. Singles were seen around Turov on two dates, but not by everybody, unfortunately.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Recorded on the last seven dates of the trip (as we birded more heavily wooded locations).

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos*

One of the 'most wanted' woodpeckers of the tour, and we saw them well on two dates. The first appeared after calling frequently in boggy woodland edge at Tzarkeles on 4/5. The presence of a calling Middle Spotted Woodpecker clouded the issue a little, to say the least! Our best views of the tour were at BVZ on 8/5, where a pair played hard to get in the tops of dead trees.

Black Woodpecker *Drycopus martius*

More often heard than seen, but we managed sightings on four dates. Our first, rather fleeting views of this species, were in the woodlands of Budha on 5/5 as we searched for Collared Flycatchers. Thereafter things played out quite well, with good views in BVZ on every day of our stay there.

European Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Heard in BVZ 8/5.

Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus*

A personal favourite of mine; the neck-less shape of this woodpecker making it instantly identifiable as it flies by. Our first encounter was after lunch at Aczerjane in woodland edge, but perhaps the best sightings were in BVZ where birds allowed excellent perched views, much to the delight of the photographers in the group.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Rather scarce with sightings on just four dates, mostly during journeys.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

At least seven hawking insects over a lake in BVZ on 8/5, were marvellous to watch in the sunshine and a welcome break from the forest birding. Two were seen the following day over open fields at the Belyes 'raptor watchpoint'.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

Our first birds were a pair that appeared briefly in Budha on 5/5. We had to wait until the penultimate day of the trip for more sightings with a female at BVZ and a very distant male at Dzikaje Mire.

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius exubitor*

Some nice views of birds at Alshany 3/5, Aczerjane 4/5 and BVZ and Dzikaje Mire on 9/5.

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*

Recorded on eight dates but, as is so often the case with this species, rather hard to observe. Seen in Turov, Budha and BVZ and heard at various other sites.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Seen on five dates. Many were seen from the bus as we travelled along the seemingly endless, straight roads through blocks of forest.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*

Seen on five dates.

Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*

Heard in BVZ early morning 10/5.

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Recorded on seven dates, mostly seen from the bus as we travelled between sites.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Seen on six dates, mainly away from the forested areas.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

Seen on seven dates; again, mostly seen in open country.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*

Seen daily in small numbers; often 'cronking' over the forests.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

Recorded on four dates; mainly in forested regions such as BVZ and Tzarkeles where a bird, seemingly oblivious to the close proximity of the observers, collected nest material on the forest trail. The grey-toned mantle of this continental *ater* subspecies was particularly evident on this bird.

European Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*

Seen on the last four days of the trip in and around BVZ. Great to have these charming birds on our doorstep near the hotel there!

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*

Recorded on three dates in BVZ.

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus*

Heard in Tzarkeles Forest on 4/5 and seen well on the final two days of the tour in BVZ. At least one bird, seen on territory at BVZ on our final morning, showed very well indeed. The rather 'frosty' appearance of these birds is typical of the subspecies *borealis*.

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Rather scarce and only seen on four dates.

Azure Tit *Cyanistes cyanus*

Possibly the main 'target species' for most birders visiting Belarus, we found them quite easily at Alshany this year. A pair performed very well indeed not far from our disembarking point on a windy 3/5 morning and continued to show intermittently as we ate our picnic lunch. The birds frequented light, willow-edged reedbeds and scrub and were easily observed from the raised banks at the site.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Recorded every day, usually by voice and only seen in small numbers.

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

Seen very well at Alshany 3/5, but thereafter mostly heard in light gallery forest and scrubby reedbed edge.

Also seen by at least one observer at Kremnoe 5/5.

Bearded Reedling *Panurus biamicus*

One at SF 7/5.

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

Seen at Sporovo 7/5 and then on 9/5 in a car park at our lunch stop. The latter bird was seen 'parachuting' and singing during its display flight. We were fortunate to see this individual on a patch of short grass, where the 'wrap-around' supercilia (joining on the nape) and the wing patch could be seen.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Seen on eight dates.

[Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

One from the vehicle on 6/5, was unfortunately only seen by the leaders sitting at the front of the bus.]

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Seen on five dates and missing once we concentrated on forests towards the end of the tour.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Seen on eight dates.

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Seen daily but easier at Turov and over the restaurant at BVZ, where they were nesting.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Heard in Tzarkeles Forest 4/5 and seen in woodlands at the edge of Dzikaje Mire, but no 'white-headed' birds were observed.

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*

Recorded every day, the song being one of the 'sounds of the tour'.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Recorded daily.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Recorded on seven dates; one seen well in woodlands at the Dzikaje Mire edge was quite greyish in upperpart tone.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

If Wood Warbler was the sound of the forests, then this beast was the sound of the fishponds! They proved hard to see at first at sites like Alshany, but we saw many at the fishponds and even in ditches around BVZ.

Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

The evening of our scheduled visit to Sporovo was rather wet and cold – not the best conditions for seeing these birds. The following morning was dry, but still very cold indeed and unsurprisingly we failed to detect any Aquatic Warblers there in these conditions. It was unclear as to whether the birds didn't perform due to unfavourable weather, or simply hadn't arrived (a few other species being 'later than usual' this year).

Although another known site for this declining species, we were rather surprised to hear one start singing at Dzikaje Mire in the afternoon of 9/5. The bird failed to sing again, so we revisited the area later the same evening (supposedly a better time for Aquatic Warbler's song to be heard), but despite hearing several bursts of song, we failed to locate one in the vast expanse of wetland.

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

Recorded on six dates in suitable habitat at Alshany, Turov, BVZ, Dzikaje Mire and at the fishponds visited.

Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

Heard at Alshany and Kremnoe.

Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*

One burst into song at Budha on 5/5; its 'squeaky dog toy' introduction to the song, highlighted by Gabor, was clearly audible.

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*

Two seen well at Alshany 3/5 were located after picking up the rather 'flat' reeling song, characteristic of this species. We enjoyed some prolonged views with the 'scope here. Heard on three other dates at Turov, Sporovo and near BVZ.

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Recorded on eight dates.

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*

Recorded on seven dates.

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*

Seen well at SF 7/5, with one watched as it sang close to the road. Every now and then it would perform a song flight, sometimes landing in view. Not the most 'barred' male I've seen, but very smart, all the same.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

Quite widespread and regularly heard and seen. Recorded on seven dates.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

Seen on seven dates.

Common Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*

Heard in Tzarkeles Forest and regularly in BVZ where a couple were seen on early morning walks.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Heard and seen in BVZ during the final four days of the tour.

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Seen or heard on six dates; usually at woodland edge.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Seen at Tzarkeles 4/5 and then regularly heard or seen at Dzikaje Mire and BVZ at the end of the tour.

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

Seen on five dates at Tzarkeles, Kremnoe and BVZ.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Seen daily.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Seen on eight dates. One of the finest songsters in the woodlands.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

We recorded this 'winter thrush' on five dates. A pair were very vocal at Alshany as we watched the Azure Tits and we saw small numbers over the following three days. We reacquainted ourselves with them after a gap in the middle of the tour at Shishova on 9/5, where several were hopping around in tiled fields.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Small numbers recorded on seven dates.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Recorded on five dates, usually around villages and towns, but a few in song in the forest at BVZ.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

Recorded on seven dates at Alshany, Tzarkeles Forest, Turov, BF, Dzikaje Mire and BVZ.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Recorded on six dates, but only in small numbers.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

One was heard and seen very briefly at Alshany on 3/5 but disappeared very quickly indeed. We need not have worried, as another two were seen on that very cold morning of 7/5 at Sporovo. Birds were observed singing at the scrub and reedbed interface near the boardwalk and even allowed 'scope views for a time.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*

Our first 'Sprosser' burst into song in deep scrub at the edge of the path on 4/5 at Aczerjane. We all enjoyed great views of this individual as it sat quite high, allowing 'scopes to be trained on the bird as it belted out those strident notes, with harsh "toc,toc" interspersed throughout the song. A marvellous performance indeed. We heard this species on three further dates, but none were in sites accessible for viewing.

European Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*

Recorded on five dates in Turov, Tzarkes Forest, Kremnoe the edge of Dzikaje Mire and BVZ. These were seen in a variety of woodlands, often mixed with conifers.

Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis*

The first was heard at Tzarkes forest on 4/5, but the following day was very productive for this stunning flycatcher at Budha, where we watched some singing males in beech woodlands. Undoubtedly the best views were reserved for our stay at BVZ, where males were holding territory in deciduous forest (mainly beech, oak and hornbeam), sometimes venturing to lower levels to visit drying pools. At least one male was 'scoped here for all to appreciate the features of this stunning flycatcher. Very few females were seen (presumably they were busy at nests), but one descended to the path where the rather 'frosty' brown upperparts could be noted. Interestingly this female only exhibited the white patch in the primaries on one wing, the other patch completely missing.

Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*

Another 'late arrival' this year apparently; our only sighting was of a singing male in BVZ on 8/5. It was very vocal, but rather difficult to follow, as it moved around the deciduous trees surrounding us.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Recorded daily, with some very handsome males seen near our hotels.

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Heard in Tzarkes Forest and a couple of males in BVZ near our hotel at the end of the tour.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*

Seen on seven dates, but most numerous in the meadows opposite our hotel in Turov.

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

One seen at the Great Snipe lek 4/5.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

One at SF 7/5 and a couple at Shishova on 9/5 were the only records.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Seen daily until we reached BVZ.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Recorded on six dates.

Western Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

Recorded daily in meadows, fields, marshes and fishponds. Most were *flava* 'Blue-headed' birds, but we also saw many *thunbergi* 'Grey-headed' birds, mainly near Turov.

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*

Two were seen at Sporovo 7/5 and on Shishova and two were at Dzikaje Mire.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Recorded on eight dates.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Quite common at Sporovo, the only likely site for this species on the tour apparently. Scant compensation for the lack of Aquatic Warblers there though!

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*

Seen or heard on six dates in forested regions.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Seen daily.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

The only day we failed to record this species was on our arrival in Belarus, which was mainly travelling! What a delight to frequently encounter this declining species in the UK. Knowing the calls helps the recording process immensely – not just the classic, emphatic "tipp", but also the rather wispy "twisk" flight call. We enjoyed some fine views of this retiring finch and some came down to ground level at the dry pools in BVZ.

Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

Seen on two dates in BVZ. These birds had a 'trumpeting' call.

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

Recorded daily, but nowhere particularly numerous.

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Recorded on five dates, but more common around Turov.

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirosta*

Heard in BVZ 8/5, but not seen.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Widespread and seen virtually every day.

European Serin *Serinus serinus*

Recorded daily in a variety of habitats from open fields and fishponds, to forested areas.

Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus*

Two seen in Tzarkeles Forest 4/5 were the only records until we reached BVZ where we saw them daily.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

One singing at Beliyles was the sole record. Always nice to hear the 'jangling bunch of keys' song.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

Seen and heard every day of the tour.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Recorded almost daily, but not particularly numerous at any site, even fishponds.

MAMMALS

Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus* Seen at SF 7/5.

Brown Hare *Lepus europaeus* Seen on two dates.

Western Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus* Seen on two dates.

European Bison *Bison bonasus* Two seen crossing the road in BVZ 8/5, followed by a dozen at the forest edge of a meadow shortly afterwards.

AMPHIBIANS

Fire-bellied Toad *Bombina bombina* (H) Heard BF 6/5.

Edible Frog *Pelophylax esculentus* (H) Heard at Dzikaje Mire 9/5.

BUTTERFLIES

Scarce Swallowtail *Iphiclides podalirius* Recorded 3 – 5/5

Large White *Pieris brassicae* Sightings from four dates.

Green-veined White *Pieris napi* Seen on six dates.

Common Orange-tip *Anthocharis cardamines* Seen on three dates.

Common Brimstone *Gonepteryx rhamni* Recorded on four dates

Wood White *Leptidea sinapis* Seen at Alshany and Budha.

Green Hairstreak *Callophrys rubi* Seen on two dates in BVZ.

Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas* Only seen at Alshany and BVZ.

Short-tailed Blue *Cupido argiades* Seen at Budha.

Camberwell Beauty *Nymphalis antiopa* One BVZ 8/5.

Comma *Nymphalis c-album* Seen at Alshany and BVZ.

Peacock *Aglais io* Seen on five dates.

Map *Araschnia levana* Recorded on three dates.

Small Heath *Coenonympha pamphilus* Seen on two dates at Alshany and Tzarkeles.

Speckled Wood *Pararge aegeria* Seen on two dates in BVZ.

DRAGONFLIES

Siberian Winter Damsel *Sympecma paedisca* Seen at Shishova 9/5 only.

Common Winter Damsel *Sympecma fusca* Photographed at the same site as the above species.

Large Red-eye *Erythroma najas* Seen on 5/5 only.

Variable Bluet *Coenagrion pulchellum* Seen on the final two days of the tour.

Hairy Hawker *Brachytron pratense* Two by the Turov Bridge 5/5.

Downy Emerald *Cordulia aena* Several seen by the Turov Bridge 5/5.

Four-spotted Chaser *Libellula quadrimaculata* Only seen at Alshany.

Yellow-spotted Whiteface *Leucorrhinia pectoralis* Seen on 9/5 only.

MOTHS

Clouded Border *Lomasipilis marginata*

Latticed Heath *Chiasmia clathrata*

Common Heath *Ematurga atomaria*

Burnet Companion *Euclidia glyphica*