



BELARUS in spring

"We came into land at the very compact, shiny and neat Minsk Airport set out in the open countryside. On our approach we'd flown over vast swathes of woodland, be it Birch, Beech, mixed deciduous or coniferous there was lots of it and we couldn't wait to go birding! We were soon on our way south and, although brief, to our first birding stop along the river in Turov which produced White Stork, Great White Egret, lots of Ruff, a few Wood Sandpipers, Little Ringed Plover and Common Tern - the waders setting the scene for what was to come around the Turov area.

The flood-plain opposite our hotel was very busy indeed as we embarked on the first of several early morning walks. Hundreds of Ruff, many in full summer plumage, were busy in their courtship battles and the air was filled with the 'chiff-if-if' calls of migrant Wood Sandpipers, whilst Lapwings guarded their young against marauding Hooded Crows and Ravens.

Nearby summer plumage Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns showed well as did several groups of Garganey, Pintail and Teal which were joined briefly by six Taiga Bean Geese. One morning we were also treated to views of a European Beaver swimming across the river!

The trees within reach of the hotel held Wood Warbler, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers with both Common and Black Redstart on roofs and chimney pots, several Hoopoes feeding on open ground, whilst a very smart male Golden Oriole sang from the grounds of the nearby farm. A nearby marsh echoed to the song of several Bluethroats most mornings, and there was normally a Wryneck or two to be found - and all this before breakfast which included hearty local sausages and delicious strawberry pancakes!

One of the avian highlights of Belarus is undoubtedly the Azure Tit. During our early morning visit we enjoyed great views of at least four birds, busying themselves along the river feeding in catkins, quite unconcerned as they fed sometimes at only a few yards range. A Cuckoo was also most obliging, flying into some low trees opposite and a Wryneck gave great views as it perched and sang on an open branch. A pair of Penduline Tits eventually gave very good close views as they held onto the reed-mace in strengthening winds along the river bank. A little further along, a Savi's Warbler reeled away in the reeds and a Thrush Nightingale gave great views singing from a dead tree.

The Turov area is in the centre of Pipriyatski National Park, which is home to two very special waders; Great Snipe and Terek Sandpiper. On two consecutive evenings we watched Great Snipe flying in, displaying and calling as the lek progressed. At one stage we had at least 10 birds in full view - some showing the white in the wings and tail especially well as they attempted to jump higher than their competitors. Terek Sandpipers led us a merry dance with two flight views of a yodelling bird leading us to a lush riverside, only to find the bird had slipped out of view unbeknown to us. Overhead, the 'wacka wacka' displaying call of Black-tailed Godwit was a constant background noise as were 'chewit' Spotted Redshank, 'drumming' Common Snipe and thousands of Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns, uttering their very harsh grating flight call. On our way back to the bus at dusk up to five Spotted Crakes started calling.

Raptors were well represented in this area with several enormous White-tailed Eagles, a couple of Greater Spotted Eagle (small by comparison!), Peregrine, Hobby, lots of Marsh Harriers together with smaller numbers of both Montagu's and Hen Harriers. One evening, whilst watching the Great Snipe, a superb male Goshawk hammered across the floodplain at head height - what a sight for the group standing only 50 yards away!

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Turov forest is a mixture of deciduous, coniferous and mature Beech, Birch and Oak forest. This combination proves irresistible to woodpeckers and our early morning visit here produced great views of Black, Great Spotted, Grey-headed and an ultra-confiding Three-toed. Flycatchers were also well represented here with singing male Spotted, Pied, Collared and a beautiful male Red-breasted entertaining us. In the wetter areas, Four-spotted Chaser dragonflies and European Tree Frogs provided extra interest together with many woodland plants such as May Lily, Touch-me-not Balsam, Lesser Celandine and Bilberry.

Beloveshkaya Pushka is the Belarussian part of the Bialowieza Forest. This magnificent primeval forest straddling the border with Poland holds high densities of woodland species including all four flycatchers and lots of woodpeckers. Our first early morning walk producing no less than 5 Black, 3 Middle Spotted, 2 Grey-headed, White-backed, Lesser Spotted and at least a couple of Three-toed Woodpeckers. Nearby Treecreepers and Nuthatches showed well as did Firecrest, Hawfinch and numerous Wood Warblers.

Whilst searching for Hazel Hen and Pygmy Owl we found several Crested Tit and a displaying Green Sandpiper perched in the Spruce trees which, on several occasions, treated us to its spectacular territorial display flight - an added bonus! Nearby the more open woodland gave great views of Lesser Spotted Eagle, several Black Storks, Osprey and a few Honey Buzzards.

Spring can be a tricky time to see large mammals on account of the foliage but this year we had great views of a herd of European Bison as they fed in the forest and also of a young Wild Boar feeding on the edge of a meadow in the early morning. En route to some fishponds we (and the driver coming the opposite way!) were somewhat surprised by two Elk which ran across the main road - the expression on the other driver's face said it all - that was very close, very close indeed! Other mammals noted during the tour were Serotine Bat, Red Fox, and Red Squirrel. Notable butterflies included Map, Small Heath, Pearl-bordered and Queen of Spain Fritillaries, Green Hairstreak, Large Tortoiseshell, Grizzled Skipper and European Swallowtail whilst moths included Common Heath and the spectacular Tau Emperor, one of which was seen in the hand.

Having had superb views of Azure Tit on our first morning, the second of Belarus' mouth-watering target species were the Great Grey Owls. On our arrival, we were taken (in silence!) on a gentle mile long walk through beautiful deciduous forest which itself was full of birdsong. A short while later we arrived at a bend in the track and there, in full view only 30 feet away, was a magnificent male Great Grey Owl, staring down at us as we got binoculars, 'scopes and cameras focussed on him - what a fabulous bird!

Admiring his subtle delicate grey and brown plumage tones and the bright yellow eyes set in those huge facial disks we watched as he turned from watching us to occasionally snoozing, often keeping one eye on us standing below. It's hard to believe that this huge owl feeds on voles - such a small prey item for a bird which, from head to tail, is approaching 3 feet long! After enjoying prolonged views of the male with a female sat low on the nearby nest we headed off to our next stop - full of 'owl talk' the bus was buzzing - without a doubt we had just witnessed one the superstars of the avian world! Nearby a dazzling male Sand Lizard showed well as did two Long-eared Owl chicks as they peered over the side of their nest.

Another species which Eastern Europe is famed is the Aquatic Warbler. Belarus, in addition to Poland, is the species stronghold, however this year's cold spring had resulted in fewer numbers than would normally be expected. Nevertheless we persevered and eventually early one morning we had good looks at a male singing from low vegetation. Also here was a male Citrine Wagtail, several Great Grey Shrikes on the wires and a good scattering of Whinchat - the first of many to come.

BELARUS: Bird List...3

As our tour progressed we still managed to find new birds at every stop. A large lake at Pinsk produced Little Gull and a flock of Common Cranes whilst some very productive fishponds produced nesting Smew, many Goldeneye, Black-necked Grebe and a brief Little Crane. Our tour finished at a wetland dominated by reeds. Savi's Warbler and Bittern were heard with the former showing very well perched atop a reed as he churned out his mechanical reeling song. Also here was a very obliging male Bearded Tit, several hundred Sand Martins and a very handsome male Citrine Wagtail; our third of the trip.

At the end of the tour, Stuart asked the group to nominate their bird of the trip which, with all the great birds we'd seen, proved a little tricky but the undoubted winner was the stunning Azure Tits, closely followed in second place by the magnificent Great Grey Owls.

The difficulty of deciding which bird is best, when there were so many wonderful sightings to choose from, underlines the fact that Belarus in spring is a superb birding location with many highlights for all participants. The birds are wonderful but combine those with great views of butterflies, moths, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and countless wild flowers you can see why Belarus is proving itself to be one of the best European destinations to watch wildlife!

Bird List:

Column A = number of days seen

Column B = maximum number recorded

H = mostly heard; N = nesting evident

	A	B	
Little Grebe	1	1	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	3	48	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	1	10	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Cormorant	4	20	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Bittern	3	2	H <i>Botaurus stellaris</i>
Black-crowned Night Heron	1	1	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Great Egret	8	50	<i>Egretta alba</i>
Grey Heron	6	30	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Black Stork	3	11	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
White Stork	8	50	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Mute Swan	6	20	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Whooper Swan	1	2	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Greylag Goose	3	10	<i>Anser anser</i>
Bean Goose	1	26	<i>Anser fabalis</i>
Wigeon	1	4	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Gadwall	3	10	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Teal	1	3	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Mallard	8	30	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Pintail	1	3	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Garganey	5	20	<i>Anas querquedula</i>
Shoveler	5	10	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Pochard	5	95	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	2	15	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Goldeneye	2	17	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Smew	1	4	<i>Mergus albellus</i>
Honey Buzzard	1	1	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>
White-tailed Eagle	3	6	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Marsh Harrier	8	10	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	1	1	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>

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Montagu's Harrier	3	3		<i>Circus pygargus</i>
Goshawk	1	1		<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Sparrowhawk	5	3		<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Buzzard	8	6		<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Lesser Spotted Eagle	3	2		<i>Aquila pomarina</i>
Spotted Eagle	1	2		<i>Aquila clanga</i>
Kestrel	4	2		<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Hobby	3	15		<i>Falco subbuteo</i>
Peregrine	1	2		<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Hazel Grouse	1	1		<i>Bonasa bonasia</i>
Grey Partridge	1	2		<i>Perdix perdix</i>
Water Rail	2	2		<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Spotted Crake	2	10		<i>Porzana porzana</i>
Little Crake	1	1		<i>Porzana parva</i>
Corncrake	2	2		<i>Crex crex</i>
Moorhen	3	3		<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Coot	5	6		<i>Fulica atra</i>
Common Crane	2	8		<i>Grus grus</i>
Oystercatcher	4	4		<i>Haemotopus ostralegus</i>
Little Ringed Plover	1	5		<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Ringed Plover	5	6		<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Lapwing	9	40		<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Ruff	6	1000		<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Common Snipe	6	10		<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Great Snipe	2	12		<i>Gallinago media</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	5	40		<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Spotted Redshank	2	4		<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
Redshank	5	20		<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Greenshank	2	1		<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Green Sandpiper	5	4		<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Wood Sandpiper	6	50		<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Terek Sandpiper	2	2		<i>Xenus cinereus</i>
Common Sandpiper	2	6		<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Little Gull	1	2		<i>Larus minutus</i>
Black-headed Gull	6	100		<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull	1	2		<i>Larus canus</i>
Caspian Gull	1	10		<i>Larus (cachinnans) cachinnans</i>
Common Tern	7	20		<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Little Tern	6	10		<i>Sterna albifrons</i>
Whiskered Tern	5	20		<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
Black Tern	5	20		<i>Chlidonias niger</i>
White-winged Black Tern	7	1000		<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	7	30		<i>Columba livia</i>
Stock Dove	4	4		<i>Columba oenas</i>
Woodpigeon	9	10		<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Collared Dove	6	3		<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Turtle Dove	2	4		<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>
Cuckoo	7	6		<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Tawny Owl	2	1		<i>Strix aluco</i>
Great Grey Owl	1	2	N	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>
Long-eared Owl	1	4	N	<i>Asio otus</i>
Common Swift	2	1		<i>Apus apus</i>
Hoopoe	8	5		<i>Upupa epops</i>
Wryneck	6	4		<i>Jynx torquilla</i>

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Grey-headed Woodpecker	4	2		<i>Picus canus</i>
Black Woodpecker	5	10		<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	5	10		<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Syrian Woodpecker	1	1		<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	3	5		<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
White-backed Woodpecker	4	2		<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	2	1		<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>
Three-toed Woodpecker	2	1		<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>
Crested Lark	1	1		<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Woodlark	3	2		<i>Lullula arborea</i>
Skylark	9	10		<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Sand Martin	1	200		<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Swallow	9	100		<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
House Martin	9	20		<i>Delichon urbica</i>
Tree Pipit	6	2		<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
Meadow Pipit	3	6		<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Blue-headed Wagtail	7	20		<i>Motacilla flava</i>
Citrine Wagtail	3	1		<i>Motacilla citreola</i>
Grey Wagtail	1	1		<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White Wagtail	8	10		<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Wren	5	1		<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Robin	6	2		<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Thrush Nightingale	7	2		<i>Luscinia luscinia</i>
Bluethroat	5	2		<i>Luscinia svecica</i>
Black Redstart	7	5		<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Redstart	4	2		<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
Whinchat	5	10		<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>
Northern Wheatear	1	1		<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Blackbird	7	10		<i>Turdus merula</i>
Fieldfare	5	7		<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Song Thrush	6	2	N	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Mistle Thrush	4	1		<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Savi's Warbler	3	4		<i>Locustella luscinoides</i>
Aquatic Warbler	1	3		<i>Acrocephalus paludicola</i>
Sedge Warbler	4	2		<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Reed Warbler	1	1		<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Great Reed Warbler	5	5		<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>
Lesser Whitethroat	6	2		<i>Sylvia curruca</i>
Whitethroat	5	2		<i>Sylvia communis</i>
Garden Warbler	4	3		<i>Sylvia borin</i>
Blackcap	5	30		<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Wood Warbler	6	40		<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>
Chiffchaff	5	10		<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Willow Warbler	7	5		<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Goldcrest	1	1		<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Firecrest	2	1		<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>
Spotted Flycatcher	5	3		<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
Red-breasted Flycatcher	2	4		<i>Ficedula parva</i>
Collared Flycatcher	4	25	N	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>
Pied Flycatcher	5	10		<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>
Bearded Tit	1	2		<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>
Long-tailed Tit	2	3		<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Marsh Tit	1	2	N	<i>Parus palustris</i>
Willow Tit	6	2		<i>Parus montanus</i>

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Crested Tit	3	6	<i>Parus cristatus</i>
Coal Tit	5	5	<i>Parus ater</i>
Blue Tit	5	3	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>
Great Tit	6	10	<i>Parus major</i>
Azure Tit	1	4	<i>Cyanistes cyanus</i>
Nuthatch	5	5	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Treecreeper	3	2	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Penduline Tit	5	8	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>
Golden Oriole	6	4	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>
Red-backed Shrike	1	1	<i>Lanius collurio</i>
Great Grey Shrike	5	6	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
Jay	6	8	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Magpie	6	5	<i>Pica pica</i>
Jackdaw	7	20	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Rook	7	20	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Hooded Crow	6	15	<i>Corvus (corone) corone</i>
Raven	8	10	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Starling	8	100	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
House Sparrow	7	30	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Tree Sparrow	6	10	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Chaffinch	10	20	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Serín	6	5	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
Greenfinch	7	2	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Goldfinch	9	8	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Siskin	4	10	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Linnet	1	2	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Common Crossbill	1	1	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Bullfinch	2	4	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
Hawfinch	4	10	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Yellowhammer	7	10	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Reed Bunting	5	10	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Corn Bunting	1	2	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>

Mammals:

Eurasian Red Squirrel	2	4	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
Eurasian Beaver	1	1	<i>Castor fiber</i>
Eurasian Wild Boar	2	3	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
European Bison	1	9	<i>Bison bonasus</i>
Serotine Bat	1	2	<i>Eptesicus serotinus</i>
European Elk	1	2	<i>Alces alces</i>

Reptiles and Amphibians:

Common Frog	1	1	<i>Rana temporaria</i>
European Tree Frog	1	3	<i>Hyla arborea</i>
Grass Snake	2	2	<i>Natrix natrix</i>
Viviparus Lizard	1	1	<i>Zootoca viviparus</i>
Sand Lizard	1	1	<i>Lacerta agilis</i>