

Azure Fix, Belarus 2008

Contributed by Jos
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It was time for my annual fix, a voyage into the depths of the legendary Pripyat Valley to seek out the enigmatic Azure Tit and other birds of allure that reside in this secret treasure trove. With visa arranged and car packed, I was ready for adventure and the inevitable queues that I would meet at the border. What I wasn't ready for, however, was the tree that came crashing down burying me and the car! Fortunately, swerving at the last moment, I ended up beneath the canopy rather than trunk and soon extracted myself! With an additional dent or two to my car, off I trundled for a weekend of eastern promise, birds galore in settings that rival nothing in Europe.

Azure Tit, Terek Sandpiper, Greater Spotted Eagle, Syrian Woodpecker, a list of mouthwatering species...

17 May

Having crossed the border late the preceding evening, dawn saw me not far from the Ukrainian border, sitting outside a favoured toilet at the western end of the Pripyat Valley. Now I can't claim to be aficionado of toilets, but this was a rather special toilet by any reckoning - a year previous I had found a pair of Azure Tits nesting in it! As the sun climbed and Thrush Nightingales competed with Common Rosefinches to drown out a multitude of warblers in a dawn chorus that was little short of spectacular ..., it soon became apparent that the toilet had lost its appeal this year. A lone Great Tit appeared briefly, but nothing to suggest its special residents had returned for another season.

Overhead, White-winged Black Terns cut across the sky and, a hundred metres or so across the village, a Wryneck sat calling from an old willow. And then, barely twenty minutes later, a familiar call caught my ear ...Azure Tit, it had to be! And sure enough it was, the male flitting along an adjacent fence, a stunning specimen of a bird, simply sparkling in the morning sunshine. Over a darted and in a lucky guess I positioned myself just at the right place - he flitted straight into the bush a few metres from me, then right onto the fence about a metre in front of me!!! Far too close for a photo, I just stood and admired, this jewel of Belarus giving views I could not hope to beat. And then back into the bush he went, time for a couple of quick photographs and he was off, disappearing into a high willow and then further. Another hour or so and no further sign, but still plenty to entertain - a River Warbler trilling, a couple of Red-backed Shrikes, a solo Hoopoe flopping over and the first Marsh Harriers of the day. Back at the car, now just 9.00 a.m., I decided breakfast was in order, but barely had I started and I heard an Azure Tit again! Not brilliant views this time, but it was the female, I guess incubating somewhere, for she too vanished as quickly as she appeared.

Suddenly, the blue skies turned grey. Rain seemed in the offerings, so I took that as cue to leave. Five kilometres further, having taken a 'scenic route' that threatened to shake the last remnants of my suspension into smithereens, I was pleasantly surprised to find myself watching a Booted Eagle flying low over an overgrown pasture, not a common bird in Belarus. I was even more surprised when a Short-eared Owl rose from the field to mob it! Being a long time since I last saw a Short-eared Owl, I wandered over for a closer look and then found myself surrounded by four of them! Two displaying and two taking a decided interest in me, I could only conclude they were probably nesting, so retreated and enjoyed their presence from the car.

Further to the east, 90 km up the river at Mikashevichi, I arrived at my second destination, an expanse of riverine forest that usually oozes with woodpeckers, reveals gems such as Bluethroat and Barred Warbler and offers access to the rich floodplain that hugs the Pripyat river itself. I got there and it started to rain, not just a few drops, but absolutely bucketing it down! Having driven through the night, I decided a quick snooze was a better option than a walk in the rain! Back went the seat and soon I was asleep. An hour later, blue skies had returned, the sun was beating down and I woke to a car that felt little different to a sauna! Out I stumbled and ambled down to the river, straight into a surprise colony of Whiskered Terns. The day was getting better and better, about sixty or so Whiskered Terns hawked in front of me, a few dozen White-Winged Black Terns too. With the sun making the day just perfect, an hour or so here was most pleasant, a few Great White Egrets plodded the shallows, a White-tailed Eagle soared overhead.

Eventually, I turned back, a walk through the flooded woodland was next on the cards ...following a path that follows a deep channel and cuts through mixed woodland, bushland and open marsh, all too soon a White-backed Woodpecker appeared, followed shortly thereafter by a Wryneck and, totally engrossed in chasing each other about, three super Barred Warblers. Butterflies, from Swallowtail to Dingy Skipper, were in abundance, dragonflies too, plus several Grass Snakes, all sunning themselves along the path, the entire collection just a reflection of the amazing place that is the Pripyat Valley.

I was feeling quite content and still it was barely mid-afternoon!

There was little that was going to change my mood for the remainder of the day - another 50 or so kilometres or so east

and I arrived at Turov, a village at the heart of the Pripyat valley and overlooking some of the best flood meadows that I have witnessed. White-winged Black Terns were everywhere, a few Little Terns too, but it was the small islands that particularly interested me. The islands tend to be crammed with waders, Ruff frequently in their hundreds or thousands, other species dotted in. Every trip I hope to see Terek Sandpiper, every trip so far I had failed ...but not this one! On the second island I scanned, there amongst a few Ruff and a couple of Ringed Plovers, was a corker of a Terek Sandpiper, banana bill in all his glory. An hour I sat and watched, hoping he might venture closer, but it was not to be, the photographs having to be record affairs grabbed by placing the DSLR up against the telescope ...but regardless, a Terek Sandpiper is a Terek Sandpiper, a special bird in any setting, but here I was finally watching one on its breeding grounds, very nice indeed. And then something else very nice - calling from the trees immediately behind me, a woodpecker got me swinging around and there, not twenty metres away, a splendid Syrian Woodpecker! The Pripyat boasts ten species of woodpecker, most in the rich woodlands that border the river, but until now I had not encountered Syrian in the valley, partly because they tend to favour the villages and small towns, the wilder areas. But here I was, finally face to face with one, another Pripyat speciality under the belt.

I began to think about my abode for the evening, a quiet locality where I could camp, preferably birdrich and scenic if possible. I knew just the spot - a handful of kilometres further east, a border between forestland and meadow. I was not alone ...a Black Stork roosted in an old oak, a White Stork in a tree in the meadow, Corncrakes called all around, a Woodcock patrolled his territory and, as dusk fast approached, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker alarmed in trees nearby and, the finale to the day, a Tawny Owl began to call. So ended day one in Belarus.

18 May

Day two, Belarus continued to enchant. After some minutes taking in the singing Wood Warblers and a Black Woodpecker, I decided upon a return to Mikashevichi, a walk down a sandy track revealing many of the same birds as the day before, plus a few Hawfinches, three Hoopoes and a pair of mixed breeding Long-tailed Tits, one being of the caudatus race, the other europaeus! Broad-bodied Chasers and Downy Emeralds hawked the rides and increasing numbers of Swallowtails drifted over, all pointing to an excellent day in store all round. Overhead, the first Honey Buzzard of the day appeared and very good numbers of Common Buzzards.

A little later, back at the meadow where I had seen Short-eared Owls the day before, things were about to get a whole lot better - before even stopping, two Honey Buzzards had launched themselves from an embankment and, over adjacent sedge fields, a Hen Harrier winged its way off into the distance. My eyes, however, were for the Short-eared Owls, one criss-crossing the field not very far in front of me. I would have been quite happy to just watch them, but then I spotted a 'biggy'! A big bird in all senses of the word - large, dark and rare, a sub-adult Greater Spotted Eagle. What a hulk of a bird it was, slowly quartering the far side of the same field as the owl, with a backdrop of two Marsh Harriers and five Common Buzzards, quite a sight indeed. After a while, I decided to return to the car and see if I could drive nearer and get some photographs. My car was not amused to be bouncing along yet another track that was not designed with suspension in mind and, despite my best attempts, I got there to find it had vanished! I eyed suspiciously a marsh that extended off to the horizon. The Greater Spotted Eagle never returned, but no less than fifteen minutes later, two Lesser Spotted Eagles appeared, little midgets in comparison, but still nice enough.

By now, although remaining sunny, quite a wind had picked up, something that meant my planned afternoon chasing butterflies was not going to be very productive. So instead I decided to return to my special toilet in the Azure Tit village ...didn't see the Azure Tits again, didn't see very much to be honest, bar a Wryneck and another Honey Buzzard, so as I spotted a dirty big grey cloud approaching, I decided to turn tail and head for home. Ten kilometres up the road, it began to rain. And it rained all the way to the border, heavier and heavier. Five hours later I was at home, another trip to Belarus a phenomenal success.