

May 2008. Flights of fancy, Lithuania and beyond.

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With plans to travel to Kazakhstan aborted, it was left to Lithuania to provide most of the highlights of May ...and the country did not disappoint! Not only a Terek Sandpiper at Baltoji Voke, but massive flocks of waders and terns in the Nemunas Delta, concentrations that included over 4500 Ruff, 1550 Wood Sandpipers and a single flock of 1800 White-winged Black Terns, all quite staggering. On top of these, several Whiskered Terns, a singing Aquatic Warbler and the first good flights of butterflies and dragonflies, these including a Camberwell Beauty, hundreds of Downy Emeralds and a good number of other species. As the month progressed, in weather that was decidedly mixed, birding continued apace, the best of the variety including a Quail flushed on my land in Labanoras and, all during a crazy day of bird rallying, a Blyth's Reed Warbler, a Black Stork and a super close sighting of a Nutcracker singing in a pine.

It wouldn't be month complete, however, without at least a short venture beyond the borders, so Belarus took the honours, ever the treasure of eastern Europe. Azure Tits, a Greater Spotted Eagle and a Terek Sandpiper amongst the crowning glories of a superb weekend.

1-5 May. Aborted Steppes, Lithuanian compensation.

The plan had been to leave Lithuania on the 1st, a couple of weeks wandering the Steppes of central Asia, scaling the heights of the Tien Shen. That was all to begin in the evening, but before that I had a few hours to spare, quite sufficient time to squeeze in a quick trip to Baltoji Voke - what a good move that was, I arrived to find an impressive influx of birds. On Lake Papis, a White-winged Black Tern had arrived, joining a number of Black Terns and Little Gulls. Great Reed Warblers called from reedbeds all around, the first Thrush Nightingales sang from undergrowth, it was certainly spring at last. But for the highlight of the day I had to travel another few hundred metres ...a flooded field was alive with waders! Paddling in the shallows, at least 140 Ruff in full breeding plumage, 60 or so Wood Sandpipers and, amongst them, one rather special bird. After finding a Spotted Redshank, a Greenshank and a few Dunlin, a wader suddenly appeared at the back of the flock - dark carpal patch and stonking bill ...a Terek Sandpiper, very nice indeed, only the second I have seen at this locality!

Otherwise, in this very brief visit, the usual highlights - a couple of Hoopoes, White-tailed Eagles here and there, then I had to dash, a plane to catch!

And so it was, off to the airport I went for my flight to Kazakhstan, thoughts of Ibisbill and exotic larks floating high. All went well, the first leg took me to Riga where I would wait a connecting plane to Almaty. And then in stepped Air Baltic and completely buggered it all up, cancelling the onward flight ten minutes after it was supposed to depart!!! After a night of total incompetence on their part, when they showed a spectacular lack of respect for anybody there, refusing to even provide information, I was finally forced to accept the trip was over and a return to Lithuania would be necessary. 10 a.m. next morning I was back at home, a Feral Pigeon outside the terminal at Riga the only bird I logged on the whole sorry journey!

So, there I was, back in Lithuania and fully intending to sulk for a week. A Black Woodpecker flopped over the garden next day and a Common Redstart arrived, the latter causing some rumblings for nest box occupants, but much as they tried, they hardly compensated for what I was missing. That said the garden was getting a tad busy - two boxes were now filled by Pied Flycatchers, one by a Great Tit, one by a Blue Tit, another by a Tree Sparrow and two more by Starlings! On top of those, one more Tree Sparrow had occupied an artificial House Martin nest that I made, a Robin was nesting under a garage roof and the Common Redstart soon began to establish territory!

Down at Baltoji Voke, butterflies were coming to life - Holy Blues, dozens and dozens of Orange Tips, a few Map Butterflies, Green-veined Whites, plus both Small Tortoiseshells and Peacocks. Still not quite on the scale of what I would be seeing in the Tien Shen, but there was also a good smattering of birds nevertheless - raptors in abundance, Marsh Harriers, one White-tailed Eagle, two Hobbies, a male Goshawk. But better, one Penduline Tit peeping out of his nest in a birch and more and more migrants arriving ...flocks of Little Gulls on the lake, several Cuckoos.

By the 5th, with the sun belting down and migrants pouring in, I decided to bring the period of mourning to an official end with a trip to the deep south of Lithuania, the hope being to find a Ferruginous Duck or Red-crested Pochard at Lake Metlys, both species occasionally occurring here at the very north of their range. Not a sign of either, but I couldn't complain too much, my chosen lake did boast a Black-throated Diver, a Red-necked Grebe and three Red-breasted Mergansers, none of which are everyday birds so far inland. Plus a flock of about 200 Greylag Geese, and at least three pairs trailing goslings. Also big and noisy, 25 Cranes flew over, very musical, but the day's best was a Thrush Nightingale who, rather than singing in the depths of a bush as they usually do, decided to pop out a little, all the better as I had carefully placed myself just at the right place.

Green Hairstreak and a Montagu's Harrier too. And, the woodpecker that I see least of all out here, a Green Woodpecker landed in a tree nearby, calling loudly (one Black Woodpecker too, but see those far more often). Back home in the garden, a Hawfinch arrives at the feeder.

6 May. Baltic Magic.

Simply superb, Lithuania at its best!

With reports of good movements filtering in from the coast, the lure of numbers got me into action, a pre-dawn rise and drive of 300 km and I was there, in the south-west of the country and the Nemunas Delta. The first good bird came before I had even arrived - whilst on the wrong side of the road, overtaking a car at a spot that wasn't going to be forgiving in the event of an emergency stop, a Red Kite appeared right over the car at a height of not many metres! Not a common bird in Lithuania, I did contemplate hitting the brakes for a photograph, but thoughts of the abuse I might receive from the other driver kept me going!

Half an hour more and I reached my main destination - flooded meadows not far from the Minge River. Some had said there had been perhaps ten thousand waders here a couple of days before, I don't know about that, but there were certainly a lot! As far as the eye could see, Ruff and Wood Sandpipers everywhere, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them! Quite an extensive area, accurate counts were never going to be very reliable, but one single scrape had over 1300 Ruff and 350 Wood Sandpipers on it, the next pool pretty much the similar. Quite impressive it has to be said, especially given the Ruff were naturally in their finest plumes and a good number strutting their stuff and engaged in territorial squabbles, all very nice. A couple of hours later, my scruffy notebook had a few numbers scribbled down - totals, conservative minimums, read as follows ...Ruff 4500, Wood Sandpiper 1550. In amongst them, I had high hopes of a Marsh Sandpiper or two, but variety was remarkably absent, the best I could do was a few dozen Spotted Redshanks, a handful of Dunlins and a smattering of Ringed Plovers, Black-tailed Godwits, Common Redshanks and Greenshanks. Seven Cranes paddled the shallows, a male Goshawk paid a visit and, precursor of things to come, occasional flocks of White-winged Black Terns danced their across the pools, about 40 in total.

26 May. Bird Rally, 24 hours of rain!

There is a weird tendency amongst bird rally organisers in Lithuania - either they are scheduled for once the birds have all migrated out of the country (the main annual one) or, this one, are in nondescript middle-of-the-country type places that lack in variety of habitats to guarantee a good mix. And so it was, the Nemuno Kilpa Regional Park, 7.30 p.m., the start of a 24 hour rally, the only rule being all birds had to be within the 25,000 hectares of the regional park, a monotony of pine forest and open meadow, truncated by a the meandering Nemunas River. No lakes, no marshes.

Things started well, I was late and only arrived near 9.00 p.m., it was absolutely chucking down with rain and, having never been to the area before, I was almost immediately lost in the extensive forests! So, with a co-partner hijacked from an opposing team, off we drove down an endless maze of wet tracks, slippery slopes and not a lot of birds. Dripping branches, steamed up windows, the first species fell ...Whinchat, Song Thrush, soggy White Stork, Cuckoo. Hardly gripping stuff, barely a bird was singing, but given the weather, it was not a surprise. At 9.40, already almost dark, we had recorded a staggering 14 species! I pulled up at an area of clearfell, the next half an hour would be make or break for two species. I didn't fancy our chances. However, right on cue, despite the rain, over flew the first ...roding and calling, a splendid Woodcock! Maybe there was chance for the second too, a short masochistic walk got me wet, but flushed a couple of Mallards, plus a Crane, not bad. And then up started the main target of the evening, churring somewhere close, a Nightjar, another somewhere off in the distance. Idiotic birds, wouldn't catch me singing in the rain. Nevertheless, I was content with that.

Now it was dark, we were lost in the forest and it was still raining. What to do, I really couldn't understand why we couldn't find the river, it had to be just in front of us. It wasn't! Next followed two hours going up and down random tracks, wondering where the river was and also questioning why I wasn't at home in Vilnius. Then we flushed a Long-eared Owl, very good. Not far off midnight, still without a clue as to our location, wound the seats back and took a kip. Nothing

singing outside, lot of water dripping on the car.

4.30 a.m., still raining, nothing happening. 5.00 a.m., still raining, but birds singing, time to get moving. Tons of songsters already bleating their hearts out - Pied Flycatcher, River Warbler, Wood Warbler, Common Whitethroat, the list was up and rising, soon Tree Pipit and Great Spotted Woodpecker joined the ranks, Thrush Nightingale too. Began to drive, the next half hour brought the total to a reasonable 40 species, including a very lucky Tawny Owl, the first Red-backed Shrike of the day and a few other bits. Still raining rather on the heavy side. A singing Wryneck came next, followed by Tree Sparrows and Woodlarks. More impressive, we finally found the river! Nothing special there, but both Golden Oriole and Icterine Warbler singing nearby. After almost ten hours into the race, we were on 53 species and I had finally understood why I had been lost up until that moment ...the map was upside down!

Now fully in control of our location, the morning began to get better and better. After a quick loop through the town of Prienai to collect House Sparrow, Greenfinch and some corvids, it was time for the best part of the Nemunas River - a series of sand islands that, if luck were to be on our side, might hold a good few new species. We were lucky, the rain began to slacken a little and the islands were pretty productive ...colonies of breeding Common Terns, a number of Little Terns too, plus Little Ringed Plovers and, along the river in general, Mute Swans, Goosanders and Goldeneyes. With the rain now a mere annoyance, it almost became pleasant - short walks knocking off Black Woodpecker, Grey Heron and overhead Swifts, then Black Redstart, Hawfinch and Great Reed Warbler. Two Grey Partridge were seen too. The list was climbing steadily and for the first time in the day it looked possible that we might achieve a hundred species by the end. The end, however, if I hadn't died of pneumonia in the meantime, was still 10 hours away!

Just before 10 a.m., Serin was added, then a whole hour eeked away with just a single additional bird making it to the list, then another hour with just two more! By now, were at the small hamlet of Punia, location of a famous hill fort overlooking the river far below. All very nice, but far more stunning was a Black Stork circling overhead, a right nice bird and number 81 on the list. It was now 12.30 and we had seven hours left.

Seven hours and 19 species to my target - couldn't be that hard, could it? Weather gave a helping hand by ceasing to rain for the first time. Yellow Wagtail and Meadow Pipit were the next to fall, followed by Crested Tit, Coal Tit and Bullfinch, then Jackdaw. A long drive through yet more pines came to an abrupt halt when the track suddenly came to an end, hmmm! Silence all around, then 'pjuu pjuu' type call, a bit weird, so went in to investigate. Then it started many more calls ...squawks, harsh screeches, plus a mellow rather melodious song. And then I was watching it, a very nice Nutcracker sat singing in a pine! A Marsh Tit just behind added another, and a Willow Tit not much later brought the total to 90. The time was now 2.00 p.m. and the deadline was 7.30 p.m. It began to rain again. Though there was still plenty of time left, we really needed a few raptors to stand a reasonable chance of success, plus a few 'simple' woodland birds. Right on cue, over shot the first raptor, a Hobby! One hour and twenty minutes later, during which time not a single new species was added, a very distant Marsh Harrier took the total to 92, but we were struggling and would need some luck. Tried to find more raptors, failed. Tried to find Reed Bunting, failed. Tried to find Wheatear, failed. Gulp! At 4.00 p.m., Magpie and Stock Dove inched the total ever upward, but we needed more. At 5.00 p.m., with failure a distinct possibility, I decided to throw everything at trying our luck in the woodlands. We struck gold! In a damp valley, black alders standing in water and mature oaks all around, there were birds by the bucketload ...a Hobby in a treetop, plenty of Pied Flycatchers, various warblers, another Black Woodpecker, but more importantly four new species in a matter of minutes! A noisy Middle Spotted Woodpecker, a pair of Long-tailed Tits and, when I decided to try to find a Red-breasted Flycatcher in the damp alder woodland, both Snipe and Green Sandpipers. Unfortunately no Red-breasted Flycatcher, but at least we were on 98 species now!

Two more and two hours! Wasted half an hour by trying again for Reed Bunting or Common Rosefinch at the river, saw absolutely nothing. With time ticking away, I decided to return to the wooded valley and try a little harder for Red-breasted Flycatcher. Arrived to rather a lot of commotion, birds were mobbing something, almost certainly an owl, so that would be a good extra! Sneaked in and off it flew, a shape vanishing but a completely unidentifiable shape, in hindsight probably a Tawny Owl, which we had recorded anyhow. The good new though was amongst the mobsters was species 99, a Nuthatch! The bad news was I spent the next one hour searching in vain for Red-breasted Flycatcher! However, as all good stories have to have a good ending, so too did ours ...having followed the stream for about a kilometre, it opened out into a clearing, a bit boggy with bush and scrub adjacent. At exactly 7.00 p.m., just 30 minutes before we had to be crossing the finish line, I encountered an acrocephalus warbler in the low bushes near the water. Out of habitat to a degree, but the most likely candidate was going to be Marsh Warbler, a nice enough bird to be the 100th. And then it popped out and it wasn't a Marsh Warbler, it was an even better bird, a Blyth's Reed Warbler, species number 100 and the last of the day. It began to sing and possibly a second appeared just behind. No matters, it was time for a quick dash to the finish point, some kilometres through the forest.

Pulled in with three minutes to spare. The race was over, 24 hours and 100 species.

Results trickled in and the ceremonies proceeded, teams from all Lithuania moaned of the weather and lack of birds, we had all suffered ...but I went home with a smile, we had won second place!

28-31 May. Hatchlings, Absentees and Little Corkers!

And so came the end of the month, glorious sunshine, high temperatures and a good run of birds. It all started on the 28th. A little head peeping over the rim of twigs, new life had stirred up upon the nest at the end of the Labanoras garden. My White Stork chicks had hatched, two proud parents feeding the little squawkers. I have to just hope for no battles this year! Elsewhere, a certain absence was apparent ...on the wires I had hoped they might be sitting by now, there was nothing - no sign of the Rollers. A species on the verge of extinction in the country, I fear they may be no more, one of the specialities of my land perhaps a thing of the past. If so be, a very sorry state of affairs. More positive, it appears though that Black Terns are breeding in the forest, regular birds flying back and forth into the central swamp. Also one Hobby overhead and many dragonflies on the wing.

Over the next couple of days, on the back of the warm weather, late migrants poured in - Icterine Warblers in force, Marsh Warblers padding out embankments and yet more White-winged Black Terns in flocks here and there. As the month reached its conclusion, a day at Baltoji Voke brought things to a fitting conclusion, with not only a pair of Red-throated Divers dropping in, a rare bird indeed at this locality, but also a very nice collection of breeders in full voice - River Warblers in abundance, a stunning Barred Warbler and a good scattering of Common Rosefinches and other assorted songsters. White-winged Black Terns, so much a feature of this month, continued to pour through - at least 70 in three mobile flocks.

Watch this space, updates coming in the next day or so ...including the gap in the middle of the month!