

January 2009. A Cracking New Year!

Contributed by Jos

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The year just hours old, a Raccoon Dog scampered across the road. Dawn had just broken, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker appeared in a tree. While most the world still slept off celebrations, mine were just beginning - primarily with a flock of Pine Grosbeaks, a major rarity in the Baltic States. In a New Year excursion, taking in Latvia and Estonia and adding Hazel Grouse, over 800 Steller's Eiders, several White-tailed Eagles and rafts of seaduck that numbered in their thousands, it was already looking to be an excellent year in the making.

Later, White-backed Woodpecker on my feeders, a trip across to Sweden for Europe's eighth ever Yellow-browed Bunting, plus Oriental Turtle Dove and Hawk Owl, the month just got better and better!

1-2 January. So starts 2009, Latvia & Estonia, international birding.

Day One.

At the stroke of the midnight hour, as Vilnius celebrated and fireworks lit the night, I was preparing a mini-trip to our northern neighbours. Fresh back from the high temperatures and sun of the Middle East, there seemed no better way to see in the New Year than to bird in the snows of Latvia and Estonia. My intention had been to merely travel up to Saaremaa, an island off the north-east coast of Estonia, the winter home to impressive numbers of Arctic seaducks, but with news of an unprecedented influx of Pine Grosbeaks into Latvia, a slight detour seemed much in order.

By 3.00 a.m., with dog in the back, several sleeping bags in the boot, I was motoring north - deserted roads, snow falling, the year had begun! And then, padding across the road, my first sighting of the year, a Raccoon Dog! Super start to the year. Just over the border, in increasingly heavy snow, the mammal tally rose yet further - one Brown Hare and two Roe Deer.

My destination, presuming my understanding of Latvian was correct, was a park in the village of Raiskums. However, as dawn approached, I realised I was entering a national park - was the 'park' actually a national park not village park? Oo er, the perils of international twitching, finding eight Pine Grosbeaks somewhere in a national park might be rather hard, especially given I didn't know if they had been seen for five minutes or all day! Ah well, I also knew the birds were favouring larch, a tree not so common in this neck of the woods. Find the larches, find the birds, so went my thinking.

First stop, still a tad dark, produced my first bird of 2009 - a fine Middle Spotted Woodpecker tapping away of a rotten trunk, followed moments later by a number of Jays flying across. No Grosbeaks though. In the distance I saw more larch, so headed that way. Hmm, what's that bloke doing, thought I. Coo, a birder! Didn't expect that, even better it was a birder who spoke English and better still the very birder who had found the Pine Grosbeaks the day before! Well that was lucky, and we were only 500 metres from the trees they had been. Up there we wandered, a Hawfinch sat in a hedge, an immature White-tailed Eagle flew over, Tree Sparrows and Magpies appeared too.

Arriving at the spot, the larches were majestic old things and indeed right in the village. Plenty of Jays, quite a few Nuthatches, but certainly no chunky finches in shades of red or orange. Searched high and low, checking nearby trees, but nothing. After an hour, my Latvian companion was preparing to leave, a little sad not to have seen the birds in 2009, so I decided to walk back and retrieve my car. Half way back, I spotted a few more larches, so trudged through the snow to have a look. Jeepers, there're birds in those trees! And then I saw it, a cracking male Pine Grosbeak! At least two female types too, super! I raced back and got the Latvian, then we returned to savour the moment ...eight birds were feeding there - three bright adult males, an immature male and five female types, splendid. An hour later, it was time for me to depart too, I had a ferry to catch in Estonia. Took a few photographs of the location, then just as I was leaving, a male Hazel Grouse flew up from the roadside, an unexpected treat.

Some hours later and 300 km north-east, I was on a ferry, making the 30-minute crossing to Saaremaa Island. No birds of note on the crossing and, with the days being short in these northern latitudes, it was approaching dusk by the time we were actually on the island. For some mad reason, not forgetting it was minus five with snow on the forecast, I was set to camp out this night, but not wishing to start that long night at 4 p.m. (!), I decided on a bit of 'owling'.

Drove to the ancient forests of Vidumae in preparation for my search, I thought a few hours touring the forest trails should do the trick. Then it began to snow, very heavily! A rather major spanner in the works - half the time could barely see the trees, let alone any birds! One Wild Boar, one brief call of a Tengmalm's Owl and that was that. At 9.00 p.m., I found a nice spot and prepared for the night - two sleeping bags, the dog under a third. Parked the car on top of a hill, hopefully the snow wouldn't be too deep by morning!

Day Two.

I woke at 5.00 a.m. .The snow was deep and still falling like crazy, I though it prudent to get going before I got stuck in that forest forever more! Gingerly, on roads none too easy to see, I drove to the Undva peninsula on the far north-west of the island. Then I waited almost three hours for daylight, watching as the snow swirled and the wind picked up, it was going to be a wild day!

And it was a wild day, blizzards and snow throughout the day. Fortunately, between the squalls brief lulls allowed the beauty of the place to be admired - small bays and rocky outcrops, birds galore. From the tip of the Undva promontory, White-tailed Eagles hugged the shorelines, whilst offshore the birds began to reveal themselves - masses of Goldeneyes, flocks of Goosanders, a few Red-breasted Mergansers too. Long-tailed Ducks zipped low over the surf, three Slavonian Grebes bobbed between the waves, distant Red-throated Divers flew low. And then I found the birds I had travelled all this way to see - Steller's Eiders. Though I can see them in Lithuania, here the setting was so much more dramatic - flying in over blocks of ice rising in the swell, a flock of 800 or more came crashing down onto the turbulent waters just off the point. Magical birds wherever, on those waters in that weather, they were simply in their element, amazing.

Another snowstorm approached, soon I was in white-out, the sea no longer visible. I stumbled along, surprised to find 16 Starings feeding on the tideline. Such birds don't even winter in Lithuania, but here they were, 600 km or so further north. Back in the car, still not stuck in the snow, I drove near blind for a while, taking a backroad back round the peninsula to look over other bays. Occasional other birds seen - Whooper and Mute Swans, a few Velvet Scoters, rafts of Long-tailed Ducks, occasional gulls here and there, but the weather was now plain awful, it seemed the day's birding was over!

Some kilometres on, I reached the small port of Veere, it would have been nice to check the bay I thought. Then a break in the storm, the sun briefly shone and the waters were still ...and absolutely packed with birds! In the gentle arch of a bay, raft upon raft of seaduck - perhaps a couple of thousand Common Scoters, dozens of Scaup, hundreds of Long-tailed Ducks and a good scattering of other birds, including 30 more Steller's Eiders, a few Velvet Scoters, occasional Great Crested Grebes and heaps more Goosanders and Goldeneye. A very nice bay indeed.

Had the weather held out, I fancied a return to the Undva peninsula, but just as suddenly had the sun come out, so too did the snow return! By now, the afternoon was drawing to an end, the weather was closing in and I decided it time to head for home. In appalling conditions, drove 750 km home, sometimes at a crawl as the snow became ever heavier, arrived home at 4 a.m.!

3-4 January. Woodpeckers on home turf.

The snow had followed me down, Vilnius was gradually disappearing under a blanket! With two days at my disposal, the birding was confined to my feeders, in Vilnius and Labanoras. Yellowhammers joined the Tree Sparrows in the garden, a Fieldfare rooted about for buried apples, but far better was waiting me in Labanoras.

Arriving early on the 4th, shivering in the crisp temperatures that had slipped to minus 10, I settled into my cabin and got the heater going. Outside it was medlam at the feeders, Great Tits and Blue Tits packed in and squabbles were breaking out. A Black Woodpecker called off to the left, a Fox trotted across the ice. The bolshy Great Spotted Woodpecker was still much in evidence unfortunately, chasing off everything from Jays to Nuthatches and certainly not letting another woodpecker even a sniff of the feeders. An earlier attempt at relocation had failed, she'd simply flown the 10 km back, so for the sake of the feeding station, I decided upon another attempt, catching her and taking her to an area of old forest 35 km to the south. I have a feeling she'll be back!

With her removal however, the difference to the feeding station was immediate - returning, I found no less than two Middle Spotted Woodpeckers on the feeders, a male Great Spotted Woodpecker and a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, all feeding in close proximity and not bothered by each other at all. Then a mega of a bird arrived - something had dropped down onto the back feeder, a distinctively large bird. A flash of white barring, I knew what it had to be! Grabbed the binoculars and checked, yep a female WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER, wonderful. A rare bird, this was the first female to visit my feeders - and only the second individual ever (a male wintered two years previously and, presumably the same bird, paid an occasional visit the following summer). Then she flew in close to the cabin, alighted on one of the nearest feeders, briefly sharing it with a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, then fed quite contently for almost quarter an hour. Hopefully, she'll be with me for the whole winter.

5-15 January. Winter chills and the lady returns ...again!

The winter chills are certainly in - up to half a metre of snow in places, temperature dipping below minus 20 for the first time this winter ...but still the birds keep showing, 40 Waxwings in the city on the 5th. Then several days of heavy snow, followed by blue skies and super sunshine on the 10th.

With skies blue, snow on the ground and temperatures rising to just a few degrees below freezing, conditions were perfect for taking a few photographs at the feeding station. Arrived at Labanoras to find the lady back!!! Miss Bolshy Woodpecker had returned! An amazing bird, taken 10 km to the east and she returned, taken 35 km to the south and she was back in less than a week! Okay, she wins, she stays!

Setting up the hide, I settled down to take my snaps - my first ever Greenfinch for this locality popped in, the winter's first

Willow Tit joined the many Marsh Tits, very pleasing both. Rather apprehensive to see how the Miss Bolshy would play up, but she seemed to have learnt her lesson, a tad more tolerant! At the feeders, now widely spread, four separate Great Spotted Woodpeckers fed, two Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and a single Lesser Spotted Woodpecker too, the regular female. Birds rather edgy on occasion, I had the feeling a Pygmy Owl was somewhere about, perhaps perched and watching. Till my feet began to freeze, I sat there for about three hours, most peaceful, two Roe Deer also sauntered in, sniffing the feeders before continuing on their way, but sadly no sign of either the Grey-headed or White-backed Woodpeckers of previous weeks. I am sure they are both visiting. A vocal Black Woodpecker echoed through the trees.

On the 11th, I decided to see if I could dip on Dippers, I was successful! A rare winter bird in these parts, I undertook my periodic attempt to find one - through snowfields and along ice-encrusted streams and river, I trudged for over three hours. Naturally, with the banks and potential feeding areas buried beneath thick ice, the chances were small, so I can't confess to being surprised at the absence. What I did see, however, were singles of Grey Heron, Little Grebe and Coot, a pair of Tufted Ducks, plus three Blackbirds and two Wrens, all fairly scarce birds in winter in most of Lithuania. Also, rather more expected, at least 60 Goosanders, a few Goldeneyes and a couple of dozen Mute Swans, along with flocks of Mealy Redpolls and a nice Black Woodpecker.

Then followed the lull before the storm, a few days in the city, essentially working, trying to stay upright on the paths and roads that were decidedly lethal due to a layer of ice that somehow managed to coat the standing snow! Stopped to check a flock of Fieldfares, was rewarded with three Hawfinches, but otherwise another wintering Blackbird was the best of the bunch.

17-18 January. Baltic wanderings, Sweden.

Surnia ulula, Northern Hawk Owl, a bird I've seen several times, but one of almost magical qualities. This particular story starts way back in late winter of last year, a trip to the frozen expanses of Arctic Lapland to search out the northern specialities. Pine Grosbeaks, Siberian Jays, King Eiders and even a Wolverine, a spectacular trip. Barely a bird was missed, but I did not return home with Hawk Owl, the only pair I searched for eluding me. Fast forward one year and I had another chance, one more mini-trip, a quick zip across for Baltic Sea for two days of unadulterated twitching in Sweden. Dawn on the 17th saw me at Norra Järvafältet - a site now destined to become part of Sweden's birding history. The setting was a small clearing in a forest, crisp under a frost of minus eight. The reason was Sweden's first ever Yellow-browed Bunting, a stunning adult male no less. Europe rarely provides me with more than a single new bird per year, but here I was, just 17 days into the year, about to get my first.

The sun began to creep up, Red Squirrels darted about, attracted by the very same feeding station that was the lure to this avian superstar. Greenfinches appeared, a Coal Tit or two, a few Yellowhammers, then a Black Woodpecker overhead. At near 10 a.m. local time, the call went out, Yellow-browed Bunting on the ground - followed by something in Swedish that I later learnt meant 'right of the rock'. Had I learnt rudimentary Swedish, I would have understood that and not missed the blighter at this first showing! No worries, soon it was back and what a little stonker it was, a superb little thing, grubbing around in the grass, its right flashy head like a little beacon! Up into a bush it flitted, views very nice indeed.

Quite content with the proceeding so far, on I continued with the trip, a Grey-headed Woodpecker flew over, a Dipper appeared on a stream, Rough-legged Buzzards made appearances, then it was time for a rather long drive southward to the small town of Falköping, famed home to a returning Oriental Turtle Dove back for its fourth winter in the bird-friendly suburbs of this Swedlandia. Arrived rather late in the afternoon and as dusk rapidly approached, it was time to give up and head to a nearby hotel. Next day, after two hours and more, having intimately grown to know every garden in the district, finally the dove had the good grace to appear, not just appear, but waddle about on a lawn just metres in front of my camera, finally a very well-behaved Oriental Turtle Dove. Basking in the light of an overcast winter day in Sweden, picture quality leaves a little to be desired!

Next up, time for Hawk Owl again. Just 50 km to the south, in a river valey north of Ulricehamn, a bird had been found some weeks earlier. Shouldn't be so hard to find, thought I. It did not prove so! Tramped up and down, spoke to some locals, at least two hours passed in search, not a sign anywhere. Then a chance glance at distant pines and there sat a little blob atop one of the trees - a Hawk Owl in all its glory! Intent on staying exactly where it was, scoped it a while, then took a wander a back to the car. Another successful day nearing its end!

Far to the west, more good birds beckoned - Buff-bellied Pipit, Eagle Owl, Iceland Gull, but to the east so too did the airport, it was time for the long journey home. En route, I stopped beside a stream, Dippers bounced about on chunks of ice, bobbing in the bubbling waters, that was the farewell to Sweden.

Six hundred kilometres in the Baltic States, 1100 km in Sweden, one Yellow-browed Bunting, one Oriental Turtle Dove, one Hawk Owl ...not a bad way to spend the weekend!

24-25 January. Harmony restored.

Grey gloomy skies, melting snow and next to nothing at Baltoji Voke, but all bliss and peace up at the feeders at Labanoras. After weeks of woodpecker wars, thanks to a certain lady, it was pleasing indeed to see the place buzzing again. All the usual Great Tits and Blue Tits packing out the assorted feeders, but better still was the return of woodpeckers galore. Near constant presence by one species or another, the impressive climax was the arrival of seven woodpeckers together, all occupying adjacent feeders - two Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, three Great Spotted Woodpeckers, one female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and, current superstar, female White-backed Woodpecker.

In two hours, three times she popped in, the White-backed Woodpecker is now a regular visitor, a most welcome addition to my feeding station.