

The Final Fling. Belarus 2009.

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The legendary Pripyat Valley, an amazing place that has captivated year after year, luring me across the border in search of its hidden gems and birding delights. What started out as a quest to see Azure Tits in 2006 turned out to be pure enchantment straddling four years and numerous trips, the Azure Tits never losing their appeal, the mouth-watering extras added pleasure. However, this trip is likely to be my last visit to Belarus for the foreseeable future - so the idea was to end it how it all began, another quest to find Azure Tits, hopefully sealing the trip with some photographs.

I was not to be disappointed - on a two-day trip, in amongst Black Storks, Terek Sandpiper and Bluethroats, no less than four fantastic Azure Tits, including another breeding pair. All very nice indeed, plus dozens of Whiskered Terns, thousands of White-winged Black Terns and tens of thousands of Ruff, plus Wrynecks, Hoopoes and singing Spotted Crakes. Day One. 1 May.

At 2.30 a.m., after a couple of hours languishing on the Lithuanian-Belarussian border, I was in the country and motoring south, Pripyat ahead. Dawn was not a kind affair - countless weeks the sun had shone, but just a few kilometres short of my destination I hit a wall of cloud, the morning was to start cold and windy. Lenin looked on, clearly a proud birder. One Black Kite hung in the sky above, another banking over woodland, I had arrived at the riverine forest at Mikashevichi, a site I had previously found excellent for woodpeckers. Decidedly cool, I emptied a coffee down my throat and began my wanders - I had high hopes of Bluethroats here, but not a squeak. Two Wrynecks hopping about on the path, a couple of Garganey rising from the canal, but the weather sure wasn't helping. As the forest opened to river, birdlife picked up. A Black Stork flew across the valley, three Great White Egrets paddled the shallow and flocks of several hundred Ruff, multi-coloured and in lek, gathered on grassy isles. Their backdrop, White-winged Black Terns hawked, Wood Sandpipers rose and Common Snipe dived from the skies above, drumming in display. However, with a wind seemingly bitter, this was not the Mikashevichi I was accustomed to enjoying - I retreated to the car and left. Bar the Wrynecks, I had not even seen a woodpecker!

I meandered around a little, and then drove to Turov, the legendary flood meadows that absolutely brim with birds. Regardless of the weather elsewhere, and no matter what the weather forecast, Turov and I have a unique relationship - it always either snows or rains when I go there! Today, it chose the latter and it absolutely bucketed it down! No chance of me getting out in that, but the Turov meadows are still amazing come what may. I parked the car under a tree and on a slant, opened up the window and enjoyed the spectacle out in front - many thousands of Ruff huddled in the rain, fluffing up their feathers and chasing each other about. Couldn't have found a nicer spot to pass a couple of hours in the rain, vast clouds of White-winged Black Terns still wafted across the meadows beyond, rasping Whiskered Terns in their midst, an occasional Little Tern zipping through too. The tern flocks alone numbered at least 3000. For all the birds though, Turov is perhaps most famous for one species, the much sought-after Terek Sandpiper, easier here than almost anywhere else in Europe. It took a couple of maneuvers of the car and all of fifteen minutes to find one, a super bird feeding on a grassy island about 50 metres distant. I decided it was time to take a few photographs, rather dodgy in the rain, but no choice. Pictures of Ruff in the rain, Little Terns in the rain and Terek Sandpiper in the rain! As the day ticked by, with no let up in the weather, I decided it was time to leave Turov and head a little further west. Naturally, it now stopped raining!

South of the river, an hour west took me to another stretch of riverine forest, again my hope was Bluethroats. The rain had stopped, but it sure hadn't got any warmer. A cold damp walk followed, a Black Stork drifted over, Grasshopper Warblers and River Warblers were in song, so too my first Thrush Nightingales of the year, plus a selection of other migrants - Cuckoos, one more Wryneck and Whinchats. Again no Bluethroats, so I decided on a change of strategy - this day was nearing its end, I would drive round to Pinsk to position myself in a fantastic place for the beginning of day two, hopefully in better weather. At the car, a Black Stork stood sentinel, a guard for my car!

Day Two. 2 May.

What a fantastic night - having chosen to camp adjacent to pools and marshes, I'd spent the night surrounded by booming Bitterns, the poop-poop-ooop of numerous Spotted Crakes and the melodies of a Bluethroat, very nice indeed. And with dawn, the sun was shining, all promised to be a wonderful day. A quick wander around and quickly I saw one of the Bluethroats and then I drove off to a nearby village to begin explorations. Truly memorably, a right bevy of bird action - from White Stork nests with burgeoning Tree Sparrow colonies through to Hoopoes and Wrynecks competing in a dawn chorus with the assorted songs of Whitethroats, Lesser Whitethroats, Blackcaps, Thrush Nightingales and Willow Warblers. A positive feast for the ear drums! Fieldfares hopped across the grassy banks, Linnets and Whinchats popped up to sun themselves on fence posts.

It was here that I had pinned my hopes on finding the gem of Belarus - Azure Tit. In the past four years, most of the Azure Tits I have found have been in old villages, especially riverside villages with overgrown gardens and marshy backdrops. This was such a village - there just had to be an Azure Tit! I got a fleeting glimpse of what had to be one, but one hour later, I still had not see anything definite. I returned to my car for breakfast. And then, as so often happens, I heard a familiar trill 'Oo, that's an Azure Tit' thought I, jumping out of the car. And sure enough, it was - a male flitting overhead and flying off to an old willow standing lone in a flooded meadow. Views were distant, but I wanted a photograph, so I persevered. Two hours more and I found another, again a male in a garden nearby. I got my first photographs. Over the next hour, this bird then began fitting back and fro from a nearby clump of trees, finally joined briefly by a female. I suppose she busily incubating on a nest.

Ready to leave, I walked over towards a singing Wryneck, hoping to get a photograph, but then the male Azure Tit landed in a fruit tree immediately adjacent. A cautious turn, I finally got the photograph I had been waiting for, the grand finale to my four year Azure Quest. With that, I turned and left, the day was still young, but I had a few more places to visit. Tried one more village and found one more Azure Tit, stopped at a ditch and found another Bluethroat, then drove westward, best birds of the afternoon another Black Stork, plus six Montagu's Harriers. Two Swallowtail butterflies too.

With the birding over, it had been my intention to leave Belarus and enter Poland. Belarussian immigration had other ideas - despite my best attempts at two crossing points, I wasn't allowed through the border! Ah well, back to Belarus. My visa was only a two-day transit, so I was now stuffed. I decided on a return to the Lithuanian border, 300 km north. Technically, I was not allowed to return across that border either, as transit visas require travel to a third country only, but fortunately the guards didn't mind, a cheery wave and I was out of the country, my travels to Belarus at a successful end.