

May 2009. Lithuania, Belarus & Georgia, Home & Away.

Contributed by Jos
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A fantastic month, neatly split into two halves - the first travelling the eastern extremes of Western Palearctic, the second concentrating on my Labanoras reserve. With Azure Tits in Belarus and Guldenstadt's Redstarts, Caucasian Snowcocks and much more in Georgia, the travels were spectacularly successful. Back home, Labanoras also enjoyed something of a golden period - no less than four pairs of Wryneck with territory, White-backed Woodpeckers continuing to incubate and, at the month's end, the return of the Rollers. On top of all this, the three Garganey that arrived at the end of April remained all month, the female becoming elusive and presumed to be incubating eggs, a new breeding species for the land.

1-15 May. Eastern Wanders.

With eyes to the delights of my east, the first few days of May were spent on back-to-back trips, first to the legendary marshes of the Pripyat Valley in Belarus and then further afield to the High Caucasus of Georgia, with an additional couple of days on the steppes close to the Azerbaijani border. Fantastic trips both, Belarus every bit lived up to its reputation, bagging the amazing Azure Tits for the fourth consecutive year, along with the expected clouds of White-winged Black Terns and breeding Ruffs. With Terek Sandpipers, Black Storks, Whiskered Terns and Bluethroats as added extras, I returned very much licking my lips in expectation - the next days would bring even greater rewards! And indeed they did. In stunning landscapes and glorious weather, Georgia exceeded all expectations. At Kazbegi, high in the mountains, birds galore - a mega flock of 44 Guldenstadt's Redstarts, numerous Great Rosefinch, plus scree slopes that echoed to Caucasian Snowcocks. Lammergeiers and Red-fronted Serins, Caucasian Black Grouse and Wallcreepers, all first-class birding in first-class surroundings. Similarly, in landscapes that could not have contrasted more, the fabulous steppe did Georgia proud - larks and buntings abundant, shrikes common and raptors equally so, Bee-eaters in colonies and Pygmy Cormorants on lakes, the two days down here really left me in awe of Georgia, a fantastic country at the eastern extreme of the Western Palearctic.

Full accounts and photographs of the two trips can be found in the following links: ['CLICK HERE FOR BELARUS'](#) and ['CLICK HERE FOR GEORGIA'](#)

16-25 May. Home Territory.

With travels over, it was time to become reacquainted with my Labanoras reserve. Visiting several times within these days, the birding was superb. Plenty of incoming migrants to drool over - Common Rosefinch in the regeneration, at least four singing Thrush Nightingales, plus Golden Orioles in the forest, several pairs of Redwings and an impressive total of four Wrynecks holding territory (two in the forest, singles in the regeneration and garden). On top of all those, the Garganey from the previous month lingered throughout, the female going 'absent' by the 24th, presumably incubating eggs in a hidden thicket - if confirmed, becoming the latest addition to the breeding avifauna. Action too out in the meadows - clouds of dragonflies taking to the wing and the first Swallowtails amongst the butterflies, while overhead raptors included the now-resident Lesser Spotted Eagles and the first Black Kite of the season. All idyllic on the land, even a dash of mammal action - two Raccoon Dogs, one Brown Hare plus one new species for the land, a Red Squirrel dancing about in the trees a mere 100 metres from the feeders, hmm maybe one day! In the meantime, one little vole already enjoys the feeders!

Last, but not least, woodpeckers. Usually elusive as the summer builds, these mainstays of my winter birding tend to take the backstage during summer. Not so this year - as well as the Wrynecks, another six species vie for a slice of the action. In a somewhat golden period, the star pair of White-backed Woodpeckers continued to incubate, while both Black and Grey-headed Woodpecker appeared in the forest off yonder, the calls of the latter echoing across the waters. Completing the set, both Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers still at the feeders daily, whilst Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers breeds nearby.

Meanwhile, over at Baltoji Voke, things continued to tick over much as they always do - plenty of birds, plenty of butterflies and plenty of dragonflies. With a conscious decision to quit regular visits to this locality (other than for butterflies), my occasional visits still prove fruitful - a visit on the 17th revealing a Common Nightingale in waterside scrub, a real turn-up for the books. Still present a week later, a Thrush Nightingale was also present, the two birds seemingly sharing a single patch of bushes, vagrant and common resident hand-in-hand! Also two Temminck's Stints, a singing Barred Warbler and, possibly a record count for the country, the rather nice sight of 16 Broad-billed Sandpipers in a single flock. As for the butterflies, the real reasons of my visits, two Swallowtails, three Green Hairstreaks and the first Small Heaths of the season.

30-31 May. Ending the month in style, the return of superstars.

With the temperatures rocketing to 26 C and a glorious sun firmly in control, May was creeping towards its finality - migrants were mostly in, an invasion of Ortolan Buntings had left the species easy to find around Vilnius, but there was one thing missing ...the pair of Rollers on my land.

As in years past, I was undergoing my annual nervous wait, would the birds reappear? On the brink of extinction in the country, the Rollers really are the true stars of my reserve. So it was, I visited my land. No Rollers the previous week, no Rollers on my first scans of their favoured areas. With a visiting photographer from Scotland, we went up to the raptor viewpoint - one Lesser Spotted Eagle, a Hobby, three Marsh Harriers, several Buzzards, but I lamented the absence of my Rollers.

'The next week is critical', I said, 'if they don't arrive, I guess they are no more'. With these words barely off my tongue, I turned and scanned to the east - 'Ooo, Roller' exclaimed!! And there he was, proudly perched upon wires, one smart Roller. Seconds later, two smart Rollers, the pair were back ...yippee! It was the same male as in previous years, back for at least the sixth summer, my veteran superstar. A slight change in their territory this year, the pair returning to a locality last favoured in 2006, an insect-rich arid slope. Watched them through the day, the pair displaying and mating, frequently flying towards a stand of old trees, it would seem a possible nest location is already decided.

With the Rollers back in place, I could now relax, the summer is going to be a fine affair. The White Storks now had chicks, Common Cranes flew over. Adjacent, the Garganey remained in the forest, Teal, Mallard and Goldeneye too. The calls bouncing around the forest, Green Sandpipers and Redwings are both in good numbers, also Golden Oriole singing and Hawfinches flying over. All in all, a very nice day ... not, perhaps, for one of the pairs of Fieldfare however. With the nest high in a birch, sandwiched between the trunk and a limb, the nest seemed secure, the adults were in and out, feeding the youngsters. Suddenly a lot of commotion, a female Marsh Harrier arched down through the sparse canopy and landed near the nest. The adult Fieldfares went berserk, dive-bombing the harrier. All to no avail, the harrier jumped across, flew a couple of branches and landed upon the nest. One by one, the chicks were consumed, mere snacks to the passing harrier. The harrier returned to the skies, the forest became quiet, a tragedy to the thrushes, just another event in the life of the forest.

On the non-bird front, already masses of dragonflies, clouds of them rising at the forest edge - Downy Emeralds, Scarce Chasers, Four-spotted Chasers, Black-lined Skimmers, Northern White-faced Skimmers. Butterflies too, several Green

Hairstreaks, the first Scarce Copper of the season and the much awaited arrival of Painted Ladies. With tens of thousands moving across southern and western Europe, it was only a question of time before they began to influx Lithuania. On this day, I saw my first, about thirty feeding on bog myrtle, all in pristine condition. Hopefully the first of many.

One day later, the last day of the month, more Painted Ladies - a mere dozen or so, but moving purposely. Also Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, a few Brimstones and the first Mazarine Blue of the year. However, for all the butterflies, the highlight of the day was the surprise find of a massive marsh tern colony. I had wandered onto a marsh I rarely visit, maybe Black Terns would be breeding I thought. On arrival, Marsh Harriers were zig-zagging, Savi's and Great Reed Warblers churring, and indeed Black Terns were flocking. However, what was more amazing were the birds with them - heaps of White-winged Black Terns, a far from common breeding species in Lithuania. Watching them, they appeared to be concentrating on an area of shallows far beyond the reeds I was standing by, but much as I tried I could not get a vantage point over the area - were the birds breeding or merely feeding? Then a harsh grating, a call I recognised - I turned and there, amongst the terns, a super pair of Whiskered Terns, an even rarer breeder in eastern Lithuania.

I needed to relocate, a track on the far side of the marsh seemed to offer better viewing conditions. Being a tad lazy, decided to try to access by car - oops, half wrecked the vehicle by ramming it down a beaver-destroyed embankment, saying goodbye to my rear bumper in the process. However, via a few rather hard bumps got to the other side. A short walk, then a hop across a ditch (at which point a photographer in my company disappeared near up to his waist in water) and then we there, at a point that overlooked the colony - most impressive, 30-40 pairs of Black Terns, many more White-winged Black Terns and, amongst them, the single pair of Whiskered Terns. Well worth the hassle of getting there! Also Little Ringed Plovers, Redshanks and Yellow Wagtails. Retreated to the car, chucked a few branches in one big hole and then scooted on out, homeward bound.