

Into the lands of Azure Tits. Belarus 2006, a cross-border jaunt

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2.00 a.m., the Belarussian border and the hunt is on. Three days earlier, as a diplomatic meltdown saw the E.U. closing its doors to Lukashenko and his top aides, things were not looking too hopeful for my quest. But here, in the darkness on the Lithuanian-Belarussian border, a lone Black Redstart's song rang out, standing testimony to the two hours I stood in the chill … declarations filled, custom checks, visa control and paperwork, then a final wave on and I was through, into Belarus and the land of Azure Tits!

Flirting with the Western Palaearctic, Azure Tits are gems of almost mythical standing, occasional mid-winter vagrants in far away Finland, otherwise a bird very much at home across the Siberian taiga. Belarus though, a secret treasure trove of excellent birding potential, supports the gem too – a population of some hundred or so pairs scattered through the remote forests and marshes of the Pripyet Valley, a fabulous area not very far from the Ukrainian border. On top of the Azure Tits, the valley is one of the most important wetlands in the whole of Europe …the of list breeding species reads like a ‘Who’s Who’ of most desirable birds! All this lying just 450 km from my front door – quickly a plan started taking shape, the idea to see Azure Tit by the end of 2006. I hoped to wrap it up in one trip, but thought it prudent to bargain for three to maximise chances of finding this elusive special – an early trip to make best of conditions before the leaves closed the canopies of the extensive forests, a June trip to enjoy the birding in this valley at its best, and a later trip if the two previous had failed in their mission!

Part One. 17-18th April 2006

Day One

And so it was, slightly weary-eyed, the early dawn hours saw me arriving in the valley ...and within minutes enjoying a Black Stork drifting over! Contacts had identified a couple of starting points, so I headed onto the first, a wetland not far from Turov …only to find high spring floods prevented access to the forests! Nevertheless, birding got off to a good start – White Storks all over the place, Blue-headed Wagtails strutting the banks, rafts of Garganey on the water. Here and there, occasional Great White Egrets stalked reedy corners and Bitterns boomed unseen. A half-month early for the valley’s massive wader populations, tantalising glimpses of what was yet to arrive came with occasional small flocks of lekking Ruffs, a Marsh Sandpiper, plus assorted Oystercatchers, Black-tailed Godwits and others. Trying to find some good Azure habitat, I happened on a small dyke leading across the flooded valley – a good vantage point, I was soon watching a half dozen Marsh Harriers, an adult White-tailed Eagle and, not long after, a Penduline Tit busying itself at a nest, plus several Black Redstarts and a few Wheatears in a drier meadow. Here, though, there was going to be no Azure Tit, so I decided to seek out the second locality, two-score kilometres down the valley. What an excellent spot – old flooded alder forest, occasional open marsh and a winding river. Here I spent the afternoon, Redwings sang out throughout the forest, a Common Redstart popped out on a exposed branch and, along the river, a half dozen Bluethroats put on a show to be proud of. Real smart males singing atop bushes, each was of the race basically without a spot, almost pure blue with just the slightest hint of white on some. Overhead, a Goshawk soared, then a little later another Black Stork. A Black Woodpecker also flew over. However, still no sign of the Azure Tits! Took a paddle into the depths of the forest – good for Willow Tits, a pair of northern Long-tailed Tits too, and a Woodcock, but I was beginning to get the idea that my target bird might need more than a single trip! Late in the day, returned to the village of Turov and found the local ringing group – news was that no Azure Tit sites were known for the current year. Oo err, this was going to be one monumental search – next day would be make or break!

Day Two

Under the watchful eyes of a Lenin statue standing proud in the village green, day two in my search for Azure Tit started in the settlement of Mikashevichi. Meandering down a maze of dirt tracks, I eventually reached a fabulous area of wet woodland – mixed oak, alder and birch, the whole area alive with a dawn chorus quite resplendent. Joining abundant Redwings and Song Thrushes, Golden Orioles echoed through the woodlands, a variety of woodpeckers drummed and called and Bluethroats popped up on virtually every bush. By the morning’s end, I had seen no less than two dozen Bluethroats, probably more on this single morning than I have ever seen in Lithuania! In one noisy moment, a pair of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers had clearly got the hump, screeching and going quite bonkers on a tree …then the cause became apparent, a third Middle Spotted Woodpecker sharing the same tree! From tree to tree, on went their little merry go round, no less vocal as they departed!

A few metres down, the first Hawfinches of the day appeared, a pair quietly gathering nest material, then sitting up on a dead tree just opposite. Not at all uncommon, this corker of a finch was to appear several times more during the day. Next up, a Hoopoe joined in the chorus with its poop poop poop sounding from just off from the track. Very soon saw the bird in question, then another pair a bit further down. So many birds were appearing, it would have been easy to forget the point of this walk was Azure Tit, but the frequent appearance of Great and Blue Tits reminded me there was another bird out there! A very elusive one! Onward I walked and the next good bird that served to distract was a fine Grey-headed Woodpecker – even louder than the earlier woodpeckers, this one sat at the top of a dead tree and literally screamed to the listening world! More Bluethroats appeared and my first Cuckoo of the year …but still no sign of my target. By now, it was turning into a fine warm sunny day, several Grass Snakes were out to bask and a whole host of butterflies flitted about – Brimstones, Comma, Small Tortoiseshell and, a new one for me, a couple of Large Tortoiseshells. Great to finally see the butterfly season open.

As noon began to approach, I decide it was time to find a caf   – none too easy in this part of Belarus! A few stops en route, best being where a farmer was burning and ploughing a field – it’s common to see White Storks behind tractors in this part of the world, but this guy was dragging a real good queue of birds behind him – eight White Storks, a couple of hundred Starlings, a Black Kite and a Lesser Spotted Eagle! After eventually finding something that passed for a caf  , I resolved to bring a bootful of snacks next time! Then headed off to explore another spot further west – wasted quite a bit of time here, failing to really find any habitat that I would deem fantastic for Azure Tit, but nevertheless did see a number of good birds – some Cranes, a couple of Smews, another Black Stork (sharing a thermal with a White Stork), more Great White Egrets and yet more Bluethroats. As the afternoon wore on, I decided to go back to Turov and check out some woodland there – not much luck, other than a passing Osprey, so opted for another drive, this time going a bit further east. What a great decision – a raptor low over a meadow turned out to be a classic male Pallid Harrier! Watched quartering the field, giving absolutely great views, this bird is not a common species, so my luck was really in there!

Last stop of the day was at the end of a track I had happened upon – walked off and soon found myself in a great area of old oak woodland. Birds were singing everywhere, but most of all, the whole forest seemed to be ricocheting to the sound of woodpeckers drumming and calling! Quickly found a male Green Woodpecker, then set off to track down a drumming that appeared to be a little different …several Great Spotted Woodpeckers later and I was at the end of my walk – in front of me lay floodwater. Sat and watched a while, more Hawfinches were nest building, then suddenly a bird appeared in the tree opposite me. Snapped the binoculars up and …fantastic, in full view, what a brilliant bird, very much my secret second target of the day, there was a male White-backed Woodpecker! I have to say a certain contentment settled upon me as I watched this special bird! After a few minutes, it flew across to another tree and vanished out of view. Moments later, it reappeared and again I was treated to more excellent views …but of a female!!! Having been looking for this bird for some years, finally here I was looking at my second in a matter of minutes! Just for good measure, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker also started to drum, the seventh woodpecker species of the weekend!

As the sun set, I wandered back to the car, a last Black Stork drifted over and then I had to decide – look for somewhere to spend the night or drive back home. Opted for the latter …five and half hours later, I was back home in Lithuania.

So, the long and short of it is, I dipped! Part two of the ‘Quest for Azure Tit’ to come, hope to be back in Belarus within two months…

Part Two. 24-25th June 2006

Day One

Two months on, Belarus again beckoned, time for another try at the elusive mystic that is Azure Tit.

Step one, visa - successfully obtained. Step two, navigate the border - hmm, can be problematic. Decided on a strategy to cross at night, so avoiding the horrendous queues that typify the place. So, at midnight, out I headed into the darkness. Strategy one, mistake number one - got to the border at 12.20 a.m., nice and early ...then found an enormous queue of cars tailing back a kilometre and more! It was going to be a long night! And so it was, over FIVE hours of queues before I finally cleared the last of endless hurdles of stamps and checks!!! Had hoped to be in the Pripiyet Valley by dawn, some 400 kilometres further south, but instead spent it in company of border guards …by the time I was through, I was so shattered that I needed to waste another a couple of hours with a quick snooze in the car alongside the road. So, eventually at 7.30 a.m., having travelled all of 40 km east of my home, I was finally inside the country and ready to begin my journey south. Then it began to rain! Jeepers, was beginning to think someone had it in for me - it hadn’t rained for weeks and now it was chucking it down! Rained on and off all the way down and then the heavens absolutely opened just as arrived at Turov, the heart of the Pripiyet Valley!

Hmm, this weekend just wasn't following the expected plan! Well, nothing I could do about the rain, so drove the car out into one meadow and did a bit of watching from the car - a few soggy Lapwings wandered past the car, but beyond them there was a real spectacle to be enjoyed …the meadows I had chosen to park alongside were a mass of White-winged Black Terns! Across the meadows as far as the eye could see, these super birds literally were everywhere - I had stumbled across a massive breeding colony and, paying no regard to the rain, many hawked right up close to the car, with dozens of others on the river to the right and countless more flying in and out with fish for waiting youngsters. Wound down the window and started to shoot off a few pictures, of the soggy Lapwings too, what a good way to spend a rainy morning!

About midday, the skies suddenly cleared, the sun came out and almost immediately it became rather hot! Now, into the field, let's wrap up the Azure Tit, I thought. Took a long walk along a most pleasant stretch of riverside woodland to a spot where the good folks at the Turov ringing station had seen Azure Tit a month before. All too soon, the specialities of Eastern Europe were appearing as they should - Thrush Nightingales belting their songs out, two Hoopoes flitting up, a Wryneck on an old stump, Common Rosefinches here and there, and plenty more. Some hour into my walk I encountered a large mixed tit flock, oodles of youngsters and a prime spot to locate my target. Scanned every blighter in the flock at least three times I reckon - plenty of Great Tits, plenty of Blue Tits, a couple of Willow Tits too, but one certain bird was obvious by its absence! Walked on for another hour, slowly becoming rather sleepy, a Black Stork circled overhead, a continual stream of Grey Herons headed into a colony nearby, but as the sun beat down and fatigue set in (not forgetting the night on the border), I began to realise my quest would not be finishing on this day! Decided to make camp about 50 km further up the valley at a nice spot I found on the trip two months previous - got there about 7 p.m. and immediately saw another Wryneck, a Hoopoe, a stack of Cuckoos and not much more …largely due to an urgent need to crash out, dozed off to a backdrop of singing River Warblers and was fast asleep by 8p.m.!!!

Day Two

Then came day two! Waking to a nice sunny morning, seems I had chosen a good spot to camp - taking a peek out from my sleeping bag, there sharing my meadow were a family of Cranes plodding about, not bad company to share breakfast time with! Of course my thoughts of Azure Tit were not far away, so got myself out of bed and took a quick stroll adjacent to a wet alder woodland, no Azure of course, but couldn't really complain - top class birds popped up all over the shop - Hoopoes feeding young, a pair of Bluethroats showing briefly, Marsh Harriers doing a late bit of display, yet another Wryneck for starters.

By mid-morning, a certain resignation was beginning to set in, so decided on a change of strategy - notch up the footwork, put in the kilometres and, sooner or later, I had to bump into an Azure Tit ...or at least, so I convinced myself! Chose to walk along the river, hugging the bank where possible, the habitat a mosaic of mature trees, swampy hollows and meadows, a fantastic piece of landscape. A few kilometres passed, flushed another Black Stork, paused to watch a flock of seven Whiskered Terns, then got to a small grove full of tits, mostly youngsters. Sat and started to scan, a good three dozen or so Great and Blue Tits flitting in and out of the trees, alternating between low riverside willows and a couple of bigger trees. A quarter hour of constant watching and it was clear that my target was not here - it was a pleasant spot though, so lingered longer, absent-mindedly watching the tits moving about, putting the bins up onto any that landed in good view. Nuthatch and Treecreeper appeared too, plus a rather irate pair of Fieldfares feeding some fledged young ...

Then, jolting me from semi-slumber, a bird flitted across that looked distinctly 'different' ...it couldn't be, could it? Jumped up, got the bins on it ...and there it was, it was one - an adult Azure Tit!!! Oh wow, it had really got to the stage when I was not expecting to see one, but here it was, in all its glory before me! It popped out into the open, then flitted out back and was gone! View was good, but it was rather characterised by a sense of relief, rather than true admiration. Couldn't be having with that, so set off for another view, more relaxed and suited to the beauty of this thing. The entire tit flock didn't appear on the move, just going in circles round the grove, so it was only about ten minutes before I relocated the Azure Tit.

Top corker, the pale azure back sure living up to its name. Picking up its call, then got on and off views for the next half hour, even managing a few record photographs, before it and the entire tit flock suddenly disappeared, didn't even notice which way they went, they simply vanished. But hey, I had seen the bird, so sat a while longer, wandered over and photographed the young Fieldfares, some Whinchats and Yellow Wagtails too. Added Middle Spotted Woodpecker to the tally of birds seen for the day, but basically couldn't see any way to top the stunner that had performed so nicely.

The 'Quest for Azure Tit' was over, two trips into this my eastern neighbour and the bird, one of mystical allure, had finally revealed itself. With that, I turned tail, drove back across Belarus, mercifully managed to get across the border in just 30 minutes and returned home in time for tea. Rather happy it has to be said.