

April 2007. Lithuania, Belarus and Poland, good days in all.

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With Red-breasted Geese in Lithuania on the first weekend and Azure Tits in Belarus on the second, April certainly kicked off in style! Add on that, no less than five White-backed Woodpeckers, returning Penduline Tits, a photographed Black Woodpecker and the White Storks back to my house, then all the ingredients were there for a classic month of birding. In addition, in both the Vilnius and Labanoras gardens, Hawfinches were regular and Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers continued to visit the feeders. As the month progressed, the kettle just kept bubbling ... Lithuania's second breeding Mediterranean Gull, several Caspian Terns and incoming migrants, including Lesser Spotted Eagles and Black-necked Grebes. And, for the grand finale of the month, Collared Flycatchers in Poland.

1 April, a Lithuanian twitch!

It's a rare day indeed that I twitch anything in Lithuania ...in fact, excluding Baltoji Voke, I don't think I have ever done so. Strange really, as I seriously mooted twitching the Long-billed Murrelet from here and am quite happy to zoom round the world for next to nothing!

Anyhow, some days back, the vast White-fronted Goose flocks that congregate in coastal quarters at this time attracted in Red-breasted Geese, at first a pair, then four together on Friday. Hmm, that would be nice I thought, even more so as I haven't been to the coast this spring yet. Saturday no news either way, pretty typical for out here, rarity news is generally either hazy in detail or several days old, often both. Whilst Red-breasted Goose is an extreme vagrant to Lithuania, I did see one on my local patch some years back, so in the absence on updated information, I began to sway against a trip.

So, to bed on Saturday I went, having decided I was too lazy to drive to the coast, but somehow Sunday saw me on the road - 350 km west to the Nemunas Delta! Rarity hunting in Lithuania means getting out there and finding it, there will be no other birders to help you ...so arriving just after dawn (not quite, it was 10.30!), I began what could be a long search - the delta is absolutely crammed with goose flocks! Once in the correct general area, I quickly found the first flock to sift through ...about 6000 White-fronted Geese, 70 Barnacle Geese and about 20 Greylags, nothing more colourful! One White-tailed Eagle sat behind them.

Three kilometres more and I was at exactly the right spot and, sure enough, there was a massive goose flock! Scattered over several meadows adjacent to the track, there were perhaps another 6500 White-fronted Geese! Set up the scope and worked through - good numbers of Barnacle Geese again, perhaps 55 this time, then bam, smack bang in the middle of my scope, two stunning Red-breasted Geese. What fabulous birds, especially in the bright morning sun!

I watched them for about half an hour until one of the circling White-tailed Eagles decided to play havoc - it came powering into the goose flock, putting every last bird into the air, then the eagle turned into a turbo-charged falcon type thing and went storming after a single White-fronted Goose. How that goose survived is beyond me, several times the eagle was almost on its tail, the goose then doing a panic dive to survive, only to find the eagle was still there, surely an acrobatic raptor beyond its usual reputation!

Gripped by this, I naturally lost the two Red-breasted Geese and never saw them again - most the flock landed over a river, a half kilometre away but many kilometres by road! Instead, I watched the White-tailed Eagle - having lost its intended prey, he didn't give up, he flew up and scattered the flock high in the sky. Still no luck, so he then did give up, eventually drifting off.

A top site for White-tailed Eagles, I saw about 15 during the day, plus another 10,000 or so White-fronted Geese, plus a late Rough-legged Buzzard. I then went to one site just a few kilometres north of the border (Russian Kaliningrad border) to look for Smew - normally a good spot, flocks of over 100 are common, but today I could manage just a dozen or so.

2-6 April. Cool days in Lithuania!

After the unseasonal warmth of March, when butterflies became the order of the day, April saw a reversal - temperatures

took a tumble, migration stalled a little and jumpers needed to be dug out again!

On the bird front, Hawfinches continued to visit the feeders in Vilnius and were showing every sign of breeding at the bottom of the garden, whilst down on the local patch things were not so rosy. All the earlier hints of spring seemed to have vanished and very few migrants were about ...top bird in that category fell to Penduline Tit, a male of which bravely sang in the chill airs. With little to amuse on the fish pools, bar the odd Smew, I decided to try to refind the Black Woodpeckers of the week before. Then, not having a camera, the birds had been almost falling over themselves to pose just metres from my car! How would it fare on my return with a camera? Of course, the birds came no where near so close! Still, the male came within range for a few distant shots, so not a bad day in all!

7-8 April. Belarus, the enchantment continues.

Day One.

After a night drive down, the border a mercifully short two hours, I couldn't have had a better start in the Pripyat Valley. For my trip this time, my focus was on a village some 150 km west of Turov, a village I hoped would reveal a certain gem of a bird.

Left the car and started to walk round this most picturesque of villages - cut in half by floodwaters and only accessible via a bumpy causeway, this sleepy backwater sits on the confluence of the Pripyat and Yaselda rivers and is truly enchanting. A few old folk sat out in the morning sun, but White Storks certainly seemed to outnumber them, with at least a dozen or so nests adorning the cottages around the village. A very pleasing place to bird - a Bittern was booming somewhere nearby, a Marsh Harrier drifted over and Tree Sparrows, Linnets and Yellowhammers were all over the place, a particularly stunning male of the latter posing very nicely for a photograph. Within just ten minutes of arriving, only about two hundred metres from my car, my attention was grabbed by a distinctive call, a call coming from a small tree across a pool. Now my mind flashed back, I had heard that call just one time before, about nine months before, also in the Pripyat Valley! I knew what it had to be, and sure enough it was one! Less than two minutes later, I was standing admiring a male Azure Tit singing in the morning sunshine! Totally fantastic, it had taken me two trips the year before to find this Belarussian jewel and here I was, barely out of the car, with one giving breathtaking views right in front of me! No sooner than I had time to enjoy thank my lucky stars and a second bird flitted in ...now I was not watching a singing male, but a courting couple! Over the next couple of hours, the male repeatedly returned to this tree to sing, the female appearing every now and again, often appearing to show interest in an adjacent old house, presumably will be the nest site. At one stage, the two Azure Tits flitted across to a small bush sitting isolated in a pool of floodwater, then spent the next ten minutes feeding in the company of both Great and Blue Tits. In the nest above them, a pair of White Storks bill clapped, I almost could believe in admiration of the Azures too. Feeling well and truly satisfied, I eventually left the birds and wandered back to the car for a bite to eat ...only to bump into another pair of Azure Tits!!! And of this pair, the male was an absolute corker, real bright and sparkling. Very nice indeed, but soon they moved off, crossing some water and gone. Ah, what a good start!

After some lunch, watching a Black Redstart on a nearby fence and a flock of about 12 White Storks circling over ahead, I decided to check out the rest of the village for more Azure Tits. A bit of a problem as a boat is needed to visit much of it, but in the few tracks I did wander, I did find yet another Azure Tit! Only a single bird and only a brief glimpse, but what a remarkable morning, five Azure Tits in the space of three hours or so!

Then, having spent the night driving, I drove a few kilometres to a nice spot overlooking a reedbed and had a quick snooze ...in the few times I opened my eyes, up popped a pair of Great Grey Shrikes, two Great White Egrets flew over and a few Green Sandpipers and Redshank landed nearby. In what was a perfect spring day, several Large Tortoiseshells, a few Small Tortoiseshells, a Peacock and a Brimstone just added the icing to the day. In fact, it seemed such a nice place that I decided to spend the night there too, the back of my car folding down to reveal a bed ...sleeping in the land of Azure Tits, the world is an okay place!

Day Two.

Well what a surprise, I woke to see the windows of the car all iced up and the sky looking a tad wintery! Hmm, getting more photographs of the Azure Tit seemed off the agenda, so I had a quick look in the village and indeed there was the Azure Tit in his favourite tree, then decided to head further east. A quick stop a few kilometres up the road to scan a large pool and I added another six Great White Egrets to the list, along with a pair of Garganey, quite a few Shoveler and Wigeon and a few flocks of Ruff and Black-tailed Godwits.

About 60 km on and I got to Mikashevichi, a small town with some excellent birding nearby. I revisited a walk I had discovered the year before ...always the chance of Azure Tit here too, and later in April it would be crawling with Bluethroats, but for now it was picidae that were on my mind. With the trees still bare of leaves, the walk took me a few kilometres through mixed oak, damp alder and birch and occasional open areas of marsh, the entire route resounding to

the racket of drumming woodpeckers and displaying Snipe! For the picidae, it did the trick - on the walk down, I found both Great and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, plus a Grey-headed Woodpecker, then on the way back added a Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Of course, the almost obligatory pair of Hawfinch also appeared on cue. Almost back at the car and I picked up and a faster, short drumming - almost sure this was going to be White-backed Woodpecker, I hung about for a few moments and, sure enough, soon found myself face to face with a pair of these stunning birds! Though I was spoilt rotten by the male at my feeders earlier in the year, this pair did only constitute the fifth and sixth birds I had ever seen, so I was happy with that!

Then it began to snow! Snow quite heavily. By the time I got up to Turov, conditions were little better than a blizzard and viewing across the wader meadows was severely limited ...through the driving snow, I could pick out only a few Ruff, occasional Ringed Plover and plenty of Lapwings! Enough of that, I thought it better to stick to woodland birding, so headed a few kilometres further east to another locality I had found the year before - again good for woodpeckers, I was soon in the the midst of them once more! Only one Great Spotted Woodpecker, but at least two Middle Spotted Woodpeckers within minutes of getting into the wood! Further in and I had a real treat - thinking myself quite lucky, I found another White-backed Woodpecker, a female, and whilst watching her, a second female flew in and the two began chasing and displaying at each other, often within just a few metres of me. Then, just nearby, the distinctive drumming started again and very soon I was also watching a male White-backed Woodpecker! Five White-backed Woodpeckers in a day, more than in all my previous years put together! Adding to the feast, also saw a female Grey-headed Woodpecker in this wood, heard a Green Woodpecker and, topping the lot off, one Black Woodpecker too! Several Hawfinches fed overhead.

With dusk approaching and the weather not looking too promising, I decided to quit whilst ahead, turned tail and headed for the border, several hours to the north. A few kilometres up, a quick detour added a Black Stork at a small area of fish pools, plus common species such as Great Crested Grebes and Goldeneyes, then it was a simple drive all the way home. One Long-eared Owl en route.

9-13 April. Back on home turf!

After my cross-border exploits, it was back to Lithuania and up to my land for a bit of management - with two sets of Beavers now on the land, I had the 'pleasure' of doing my spring wander round with a chainsaw to clear the paths through the woodland. I'm sure the Beavers chew the trees down on purpose to land right across my carefully cut paths! Armed with a chainsaw, my task was to reopen the paths through the woodland ...don't know what's got into the Beavers this year, they are going crazy and trees are down everywhere! several hours later and the paths were once again clear, though more like tunnels than open paths! Of course, I did take enough time to look out for birds too ...a lot of Redwing in the forest, plus a pair of Goldeneye not far from a nestbox put up specially for them and a pair of northern Long-tailed Tits holding territory.

Best bird though was the return of my White Stork on the 9th...seeing neighbouring storks return over previous days, I had been getting a tad nervous, perhaps something untoward had happened to mine - but no, there sat the male, bill clapping and looking just the perfect garden adornment! No sign of the female.

Back in the forest, another star put in an appearance - I noticed the Redwings were alarming and clearly something was up, I took a guess it could be my Tawny Owl back for the second year. I got a bit closer, but whatever it was, it then moved and the alarming birds shifted across close to where the owl had used one of my nestboxes. Put up the binoculars and there she was, the Tawny Owl in the nestbox peering out. No photo, but alongside is the same bird from 2006.

14 April. A classic day!

Sun shining, good temperatures and a lake full of birds, I was at Baltoji Voke and already in a good mood. Duck numbers were quite high, with fresh arrivals including good numbers of Shoveler, Tufted Duck and Pintails, plus a Shelduck (a scarce bird this far inland), but I was hoping for new migrants ...Chiffchaffs were singing, so some new birds in, a couple of Bitterns boomed not far away, but soon it would get a whole lot better!

My first surprise of the morning was a stunning Caspian Tern roosting on a small island, my very first tern of the spring! Then I decided to check the gulls ...generally a thankless task involving a scan through the thousands of breeding Black-headed Gulls. Though the result is usually zilch, any flagging enthusiasm can quickly be rekindled by remembering another spring day, back in 1997 - in that spring I had found a pair of breeding Mediterranean Gulls in another colony of gulls, still to this day the only breeding record in Lithuania. So, with thoughts vaguely drifting back to that event, I began the search ...and, stone me down, within a few minutes I was gazing at a jet black hood, deep red bill and brilliant eye

ring, another Mediterranean Gull!!!

Erm, wow, I thought as I settled down to enjoy the bird - all too soon it was apparent that this bird too was taking an interest in breeding ...very territorial to neighbouring Black-headed Gulls, the bird appeared to frequently settle on a nest, a fact confirmed when it began to add extra nest material. All I need now was a second bird, and one promptly obliged, joining the original bird at the nest for a few minutes before departing again. Fantastic, all looks set for the second known breeding of this species in Lithuania!

Just as I was leaving, I happened upon something even rarer! Other birdwatchers! Well, they were in for a treat, so I returned with them and pointed out the Mediterranean Gulls, then was rewarded for my endeavours by a Great White Egret appearing behind the gull and by about 170 Bean Geese and a few White-fronted Geese flying over!

To top off what was becoming a quite fine day, I then went over to the fish pools - had to watch the road more than birds - dozens of Common Toads crossing everywhere - but then found a pair of Penduline Tits building a nest right adjacent to one track ...I simply opened the car roof and sat and watched, the loop of their hanging nest already complete, the birds paid no attention to me whatsoever and popped in every few minutes, adding more material and skillfully weaving it in. Very engaging birds! Just adjacent, 33 Smew amused themselves, plus a few Garganey!

15-18 April. The long big wait.

He had arrived on the 9th, but where was she? All the neighbours were paired up and settled, married birds atop their poles! But mine still sat alone! Yes, only one half of my White Stork pair had returned! And a sad sight it was, it would certainly be a dent to my spring, and no doubt to the male stork's too, if she failed to show up.

As the days ticked by, things were not looking good - the nest looked like failing before the season had even started, very bad news. By the 15th, there were about a dozen active nests in the neighbourhood and from my kitchen window alone, I could see four nests - pairs on two, one still empty, plus my solitary bird. But on that day, another pair of White Storks arrived - at about 10 a.m., they drifted in from the south, enough to persuade my male to begin his bill clapping, perhaps to entice the female. However, that pair had other ideas - they descended and tried to steal his nest! A good bit of squabble, but he stood his ground, they circled round a couple of times, then drifted off and spotted the other empty nest, immediately taking it and not leaving for the rest of the day! Hmmph, now I could now see three pairs, but still my male continued his solo duty! The next few days would be critical.

Still, it was not such a bad day - a Marsh Harrier roosted just below the garden and a male appeared in the morning, the pair displaying actively, so hopefully they will breed too. Also a Black Redstart arrived, singing from the roof, an adult White-tailed Eagle soared about in the afternoon and a few skeins of White-fronted Geese winged over. Two 'garden ticks' - a Reed Bunting and a Curlew.

On the 18th, almost resigned to the inevitable, I arrived at the garden to see the nest empty ...probably he was off feeding, but it did suggest that still the female had not returned, a full nine days after the male arrived. Gloom, no nest this year I thought.

Indoors I went and almost immediately heard him bill-clapping, looked out the window and there he was, snapping away with his beak, fluffing up his feather and arching his neck, a nice bit of classic display ...but there was something more, all his actions were for one thing only, for the attention of the female standing on the opposite side of the nest!!! She had arrived, super! And throughout the day, there they stayed, touching up the nest, showing off to each other and generally doing what they should.

21-23 April. Topsy turvy spring!

A right yo-yo of a spring - one weekend plus 20 degrees, then the next snow! And so it continued, the weekend began with a near-on blizzard! I basically stayed in the house the whole day, my White Storks continued their nest building, but otherwise the only news was on the non-bird front - I collected my two bee hives and now proudly set them up in the front garden ...pity it was snowing, barely a bee as much as peeped its head out! Still, a Black Redstart was most interested in the latest additions and spent half the morning flitting up and down, I'm sure eating any bees not intelligent enough to stay inside.

The next day couldn't have been more different - though it started darn chilly, it turned into a fantastic day, full of birds and sunny too! Up early, I began with a trip to Baltoji Voke, where huddled in the relative warmth of my car, I was soon

enjoying the offerings - the Mediterranean Gull remained in the colony, still nest building and territorial, four Caspian Terns sat just adjacent, joined now by three Common Terns too. A quick scan and count, also relocating the Shelduck of the week before, then it was off to the fish pools. Being cold and windy, I was not expecting any migrants ...how wrong I was! All new in, hirundines abounded - about 70 Swallows, a single House Martin and two Sand Martins, the latter especially early (traditionally the last of the hirundines to arrive in Lithuania). Also plenty of Yellow Wagtails, both of the flava and thunbergi races, a nice collection of Black-necked Grebes and the first Little Gulls of the season, about six hawking the pools.

As the day was still young, I also decided to almost pop up to my land at Labanoras, about 100 km to the north. A good move, the sun had broken out and the afternoon was turning most pleasant, not least due to my first migrating Lesser Spotted Eagle of the year, a late Rough-legged Buzzard and, a rather bigger surprise, a Great White Egret on the lake just below the garden (the first for this area). With the sun out, the lake also got the Marsh Harriers displaying, whilst at the new hives, the bees made their first flights! Overall though the afternoon was one of labour ...a new pond came into being, a couple of trees got planted and I went crashing through a floor into a basement, landing flat on my back!!!

26-28 April. Seventh woodpecker species rolls in, plus migrants and butterflies!

A couple of days on and the temperatures were back to tee-shirt level, glorious! And with the sun came yet more migrants - up at Labanoras, a Wood Warbler in the garden somewhat compensated for the first bee sting from the little fellows in the new hives! I guess that will teach me to stick my nose in their house!!! But still, the day was good and the forest was looking very nice, a lot of flowers and a new flush of butterflies. Plenty of Brimstones on the wing, a few Small Tortoiseshells too, plus the first Holly Blues, Green-veined Whites and Orange Tips of the year.

On the bird front, a Common Redstart was singing in my Vilnius garden and Willow Warblers were newly arrived, but the prize of the day was yet to come - the arrival of the seventh woodpecker species of the year, all at exactly the same spot! My goal had been to find Pied Flycatchers, which I did with at least three males singing, but very soon my attention was grabbed by a loud calling just across from the cabin, very distinctive and very obviously a bird I hoped would occur in the forest. A few minutes more and I was watching a stunning Wryneck, singing from a dead tree in a fairly open part of the forest! Not the first on my land, but the first in the forest ...just hope it will stay to nest, a stunning addition to the breeding fauna that would be! One Tawny Owl was also very vocal, calling from near the nestbox, plus two pairs of Goldeneye seemed to be taking a very healthy interest in an area with another large nestbox!

Two days on and my fortune for the year was settled - 100 euros, 200,000 Belarussian roubles, 50 zloty and 550 Lithuanian litas, the money in my pocket ...yes, I would be a rich man this year!!! Today I saw my first Cuckoo of the season, rather early for this part of the world, but better than, according to a traditional Lithuanian saying, whatever the money in your pocket when you see your first Cuckoo, then that indicates your wealth for the upcoming year! On top of the Cuckoo, I also notched up my first Lesser Whitethroats of the spring, smart singing males appearing in both my gardens, Vilnius and Labanoras.

Butterflies continue to become ever more abundant, so long as the sun is out, and new species on the wing on the 28th included both Large White and Wood White, plus all the species noted above. It's been a splendid spring for Large Tortoiseshells this year, at least six also seen on this day, more than I saw in the whole on the same period a year earlier!

29 April. Cross-border shopping, Poland.

If you're going to drive 900 km just to go to a shop, then you might as well do a couple of hundred extra and savour a bit of excellent birding too! IKEA in Warsaw was again calling, so Poland was to be my destination! I had for some time wished to photograph Collared Flycatchers and the best place I know is Bielowieza Forest straddling the Polish and Belarussian borders, fortunately only a little over 200 km from the IKEA store!

So leaving home at 4.00 a.m., the dawn hours saw me motoring southward, skeins of late Bean Geese seen in Lithuania and Black Redstarts at the Polish border. A couple of coffee stops later and I was there ... 9.00 a.m., ever so slightly bleary-eyed, I jumped out of the car and was ready - tic tic, two Hawfinches flew over, a Great Reed Warbler grated its song out from a nearby reedbed.

Knowing Bielowieza reasonably well, I headed for a few territories from previous years ...within ten minutes I had found my first Collared Flycatcher of the day, a stunning male, but none too co-operative, just sticking to tree tops and not even singing! Perhaps the rather cool start to the day was not to his liking, but still there would be plenty more, so on I walked. Lots of migrants about, an almost constant trill of Wood Warblers, quite a few Blackcaps and Lesser Whitethroats also singing here and there, but most amazing were the Wrynecks ...they were everywhere! Calling and chasing, I found at least fifteen in just two hours, wow, never have I seen so many so quickly! But Collared Flycatchers were not playing ball!

Still very early in the season, the females had yet to return and perhaps this was reason, but the next male was even less co-operative than the first, basically spending the entire time in the canopy! At about this time, a Goshawk went steaming over, surprisingly causing almost no commotion amongst other birds, and then I began to get engrossed by the many Hawfinches and Song Thrushes all over the paths! I began to think I would have to return later in the season, but then remembered one territory I had yet to visit. Strolled over and there he was, a male Collared Flycatcher singing ...and not just singing, but singing out in the open, in full sunlight and very low down. Perfect, a real classic bird, I settled down to enjoy the bird and no sooner had I begun to take pictures and ... some old Polish guy decided to come up and ask me directions!!! Dispatched him as soon as heavenly possible, then got back to the bird - what a corker, made the whole journey worthwhile! And just for added value, a Red Kite drifted over too.

Another hour or so in the area, bumping into three more Collared Flycatchers, none very photogenic, plus three Wrynecks together, a few Serins and yet more Hawfinches, then it was off to Warsaw. One Black Woodpecker on route, but otherwise a quiet cruise all the way. Did the shopping, then back in the car and back to Vilnius. Arrived home at 1.30 a.m. - over 22 hours on the road, 1170 km on the clock, several smart Collared Flycatchers under the belt!