

The Enchantment Continues. Belarus 2007

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Following on from the successes on the year before, the lure of Belarus remained strong ...those enigmatic Azure Tits enough to pull me over the border yet again. For 2007, the goal was to photograph them, either on an early April trip before the leaves would be out or in early June, a time I hoped to also find Bisons in the extensive forests that border the Polish border. Trip one proved absolutely fantastic, Azure Tits seen within minutes of arriving, White-backed Woodpeckers equally easy to find and plenty of other birds to keep me happy.

Photograph ...not the standard view, but the jewel in the crown of Belarussian birding.

And then there was the second trip, a few days in early June that was just staggering - no less than six Great Grey Owls and a pair of breeding Azure Tits, could it get any better?!

Part One, 7-8 April.

Day One.

After a night drive down, the border a mercifully short two hours, I couldn't have had a better start in the Pripjat 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 Pripjat 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 Pripjat 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.

Part Two, 1-3 June.

Day One

Another cross-border fling with the excitement of this amazing country lying to my east. However, for this trip, I had a new goal - a bird that had eluded me before, a big impressive bird that lurked in the depths of a few forests in the deep south of the country. The target was Great Grey Owl, surely the most striking of all the European owls, one I had long desired to see. However, with perhaps a few as 150 pairs scattered across the forests that epitomize the very meaning of vastness, the task to find one would be nigh on impossible without the very generous help of some excellent birders on the ground. Fortunately, I had that help - Belarus is not only a fantastic country for birds, it also has some fantastic people and to these I can only offer my sincere thanks, both on this trip and for all the help they have offered on previous voyages.

So it was, I crossed the border early evening, almost immediately had White-winged Black Terns flying across the road, then headed over to Minsk, the Belarussian capital and home to a man extraordinaire, one who would show me Great Grey Owl the next day. I arrived in Minsk to a most impressive thunderstorm, the rain absolutely bucketing it down!

Day Two

7.00 a.m. and we were off, a three hour drive southward to the heartlands of Great Grey Owl territory ...we had plans to ring nestlings, so together we made quite a team, a climber who had a most amazing ability to almost run up vertical tree trunks, a local forest game keeper with the all-important owl knowledge, plus the two of us. Arriving in the forest, the previous two weeks of unbroken sun had been replaced by a rather grey overcast sky, but nothing would dampen the spirit ...if all went to plan, I would soon be gazing at my first ever Great Grey Owl!

And then I was! The first nest we visited was almost too easy! A ten minute walk and there she was, what a stunning bird! Pure enchantment peering down, pure amazement peering up! The nest, an old raptor nest tucked into a fork, appeared to still be active, a little bit of grey fluff just visible over the rim. Up went our climber and down came the chick to await its ring, part of a conservation scheme to protect these endangered birds. Now mother bird was none too sure

this was to her liking, so in she came and sat watching, barely three metres from the climber ...so close in fact that he was able to catch her! Now we had something I really had not expected, a massive mother owl in our arms and a big scrawny chick perched on a branch! On went the rings, back to the nest went the chick, up to the tree went the mother and off back to the car went we, one certain visiting birder feeling quite chuffed indeed!

However, if the first nest had been a stroll in the park, the next three certainly did exercise the legs ...I swear we hiked half the way to Ukraine, kilometre after kilometre through forest deep and dark! Occasional Great Spotted Woodpeckers nested here and there, families of Wild Boar went trotting past, a Roe Deer too, but it was for the owls we had come and it was those that we saw. Nest two was empty, signs were that it had been predated, a common cause of failure for these mighty, but vulnerable birds. Nest three, many more kilometres along the route, seemed more hopeful - an adult again gazed down, the chick had been near fledging, so the empty nest was no surprise. We began a search, surely a chick the size of a big chicken couldn't be so hard to find ...it wasn't, but what we found was not what we hoped, the chick was dead, just a few feathers left as a clue. Almost certainly, this bird had met its end with a Pine Martin or Goshawk, a sad ending for such a bird.

Lunchtime came and we sat with the mosquitos to enjoy our snacks, then it was off for the next nest - again an adult Great Grey Owl was present, but no sign of a chick, perhaps failed, perhaps nesting elsewhere, I am not sure, but by now my legs were wondering what was going on!

Anyhow, we still had one more nest to check - two kilometres said someone, I soon understood Belarussian kilometres are rather longer than those I was accustomed to! But what we found at the end of this hike made up for all the effort - stunning views of another Great Grey Owl, another chick we were able to catch to ring and, just to provide a final finale to the day, a Short-toed Eagle overhead!

Back in the village, Belarussian hospitality did me proud, the kindness of my hosts extended well beyond the birds they had shown. For my Minsk friends, it was time to return home, I dropped them late evening at a train station and then had ideas to drive a hundred kilometres or so to my next destination, the legendary Pripyat Valley. Good idea, but I soon found myself falling asleep at the wheel, so pulled into a field and promptly fell asleep!

Day Two

As fields go, I couldn't have chosen a better one to fall asleep in - I woke, sat up and looked about ...oo er, 53 White Storks plodding about, with another 20 in the next field! Started up the car and drove the last leg of my journey, down to the village of Kudrichi.

Whereas my last visit here, during the heights of the spring floods, had seen the village surrounded by water, this time it could not have been more different - luxuriant green growths resounding to the songs of Thrush Nightingales, River Warblers and occasional Common Rosefinches. White Storks, then busy displaying and nest-building, now had young to feed, whilst nearby White-winged Black Terns hawked the meadows, two Whiskered Terns too.

On that visit, six weeks earlier, I had found a pair of Azure Tits, a pair that had seemed interested in nesting in an old house, so it was there that I headed. Arrived to the voice of Azure Tit, immediate success, there was the bird, like I had never been away! However, what had been threatening all weekend then started ...the rain! It tipped it down and I, being a fair-weather birder on occasion, decided the best course of action was to go back to sleep! At midday, things seemed to be clearing, so I wound down the window and there again was the Azure Tit ...but, though he appeared every now and again, he did not seem to be showing any interest in the house. Hmm, maybe no nest here after allI decided to follow him a little, a path took me past another cottage and then an old toilet. Oo what was that? My eye caught a flash of white disappearing into the toilet, could it really have been? An Azure Tit using the toilet? Then out it flitted again ...and sure enough it was, they were nesting in the toilet!!! So it is official, Belarus has the best toilets in the world!!!

Despite the rather grey skies, this was too good an opportunity to miss, photographs of a pure jewel of a bird enjoying the delights of an outside khazi! Rattled off quite a few shots, the birds not in the slightest bit worried by my presence ...in hindsight, I should have used the loo, what a claim to fame - the only birder in the world to have shared a toilet with an Azure Tit! But, alas, I did not, so that claim will have to wait another year.

With my two-year quest to find, see and photograph Azure Tits near satisfied, I decided to visit one last area of the valley, my favoured woodlands and floodplain near the village of Mikashevichi. Down the path I strolled, Hawfinches bombing over, a Wryneck singing in a tree and, down by the river, a few dozen White-winged Black Terns posing for photographs, before getting all narked by a passing pair of White-tailed Eagles. As evening approached, I left the area to a backdrop of calling Quails and Corncrake, drove back up through the fields, stopping to view three male Montagu's Harriers, then motored on home, the border mercifully free of congestion. Another fantastic weekend in Belarus at an end.