

June 2007. Stunning days, Belarus and Lithuania both!

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If ever a month got off to an amazing start, it was this month! With two days in Belarus notching up no less than six Great Grey Owls in the forests of Vygonoshchanski and a pair of Azure Tits nesting in a toilet in the Pripyat Valley, I didn't think this could be upstaged. However, for reasons completely different, the events in Lithuania on 4th June will long be remembered too - the massacre of the White Stork chicks in my garden by another stork. Dramatic days in Belarus, traumatic days in Lithuania ...and the month has barely started!

As the month progressed, it was really a story of breeding birds - at Labanoras, Rollers and Wrynecks hatched their young, good numbers of both Quail and Corncrake called from the meadows and raptors appeared in abundance. Even as the breeding season continued, however, the first hints of autumn appeared in the air - Coot numbers began to climb at Batoji Voke and the first six Great White Egrets appeared, the beginning of their traditional autumn influxes.

For all the bird interest though, it was dragonflies that occupied much of my time. A relative novice in this area, I set myself the goal to log all the species on my land - many surprises and headaches later, the tally had risen to 30 by the month's end, including such impressive beasts as Emperor and Lesser Emperor, Norfolk Hawker and a multitude of damselflies, many of which are in Lithuania's Red Data Book.

1-3 June. Belarus days

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.

4-10 June. Stork wars, a messy tale.

There are many things that just can't be expected, the events of 4th June were one of those! Up in my Labanoras garden, all had been fairly normal till early afternoon - a Corncrake was calling across the road, a Lesser Spotted Eagle drifted over, a multitude of dragonflies emerged in the high temperatures prevailing. Then the day darkened - an intruder stork arrived, an almighty battle broke out atop the nest and the bloody aftermath saw the four chicks paying the price ...within

12 hours, two would be dead and the other two going into care. The full story here. I really could not fathom the reasons for such an attack, but presumed it to be the end of the season for the storks on my garden.

How wrong I was. Five days later, the pair were back in business - arriving at the garden late in the evening I was rather pleased to see the birds back on the nest, merely roosting I supposed. Next morning, at 4.00 a.m. to be exact, they were up and about ...but against all my expectations they seemed intend of starting a new clutch, very late indeed. All morning the pair added fresh nesting material, engaged in a lot of mutual preening and display and generally acted as though it was April again, even to the extent that mating occurred. Should they continue, they will certainly be very late, a full eight to nine weeks behind many of the neighbouring pairs and fledging the young into the uncertain weather days of September ...however, by the 15th there was still no sign of eggs, but still a lot of courtship and display!

12-15 June. The dragons are flying.

With the arrival of Red-eyed Damselflies, the last days of May had seen me taking a renewed interest in dragonflies ...by mid-June the interest had become a preoccupation! Species were appearing by the dozen, leaving me sometimes struggling to identify several! By mid-month, the list of species recorded was hurtling towards the 30 mark, led by some real stunners including both Emperor and Lesser Emperor Dragonflies, Norfolk Hawker, a variety of chasers and darters and many damselflies. Still a few photographs to be identified ...watch this space!

With nose firmly planted to the ground, it was a wonder I saw any birds during this period, but the occasional glance upwards from my dragonflies did reveal some nice avian extras. Up in Labanoras, all the 'garden bench specialities' continued to flourish - Rollers were incubating and Wrynecks hatched their young, whilst Golden Orioles continued to sing, often appearing close to the house.

With the weather unbroken sun and high temperatures, the land crept into its 'high summer' mode, one of fledglings everywhere, Corncrakes and Quails in the meadows and abundant raptors overhead. Most abundant though were Marsh Harriers, one pair nesting below the house, several more hunting the meadows. As well as these, Lesser Spotted Eagles frequently soared over, along with Black Kites, an Osprey on several occasions, three Honey Buzzards too, plus a Hobby storming through a couple of times.

Down below, flocks of Black Terns continued to hawk the waters.

14-25 June. Summer delights.

I had some entertaining to do, a UK birder arrived on the doorstep, more or less literally - my land would be their base for a week! Before that though, with the delights of a summer in the Baltic states never sampled before, our first destination had to be Baltoji Voke ...a feast of songsters kicked off the action, with Savi's, Great Reed and Marsh Warblers in full song, plus a few Thrush Nightingales and Common Rosefinches too.

Not a good host, I soon got distracted by butterflies - deserting my guest to such birds as Hoopoes and Red-backed Shrikes, the first Amanda's Blues of the year got me scampering through the meadows in search of a photograph or two. Needless to say, dragonflies delayed me even more and then I was further waylaid by Large Skippers, Ringlets and Red Admirals too! Eventually, the bird tour resumed - onward to the fish pools and there, I think my guest became mildly overwhelmed - new birds everywhere, plus Whooper Swans and Goldeneyes trailing youngsters on several pools, Marsh Harriers two a penny and, surprise of the day sighting, a pair of Whiskered Terns in company with the Black Terns - a month after the mini-invasion, perhaps they were breeding somewhere nearby! And just to dispel the image of a lazy summer day, the first signs of autumn were there too - part of a traditional late summer-autumn build up, the first six Great White Egrets had appeared, rather early and a sign that the annual increase might again occur.

With temperatures up over 30 C, it was then time to head to my land, home to my guest for the next number of days. Arrived to a bit of a shock - a thunderstorm, weeks of dry finally punctuated, but not for long. Spent the evening doing a nestbox check in the forest - Pied Flycatchers and Spotted Flycatchers in usual numbers, but low success for Great and Blue Tits it seems, perhaps due to the cold early spring. Out in the meadows, Corncrakes called and Whinchats zipped from stalk to stalk, a couple of Red-backed Shrikes too, along with Common Rosefinches in adjacent bushlands, singing Golden Orioles near the house and Black Redstarts breeding in an old building.

The first full day in the field had finished, no idea how many new birds my guest got to see!

Up early next day, the forecast said it would be a scorcher ...and so it was - started off with Wryneck from the garden

bench over morning coffee, continued with the appearance of the female Roller, on a break from nest duties and concluded with a female Golden Oriole in the garden. Many dragonflies also on the wing, more Norfolk Hawkers and several Emperor Dragonflies.

Back in the garden, thoughts remained with my White Storks - still they continued to display, nest-build and engage in mating, but as the month crept towards its finality, still there were no eggs, the chances of a new clutch faded. Still, it was very pleasing they remained faithful to the nest, the early morning bill-clapping really a sound worth waking to.

As the days ticked by, all the ingredients were there for a typical patch of summer's birding - in reality, there was little reason to actually leave the garden! All recorded overhead, one White-tailed Eagle, several Lesser Spotted Eagles, a Black Kite a few times, two Ospreys, a Honey Buzzard, Hobbies hurtling past twice and the usual Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzard!!! On top of that, the Rollers hatched their young on the 23rd, Golden Orioles kept calling from just about everywhere, yet rarely showing and a Redwing popped in. However it would be a lazy person not to wander over to the land itself, so fortunately the offerings were not so bad there too - Corncrakes and Quails continued to call, three Cranes appeared later in the week and, top bird for me, a Hoopoe flew across the road just nearby, the first I have seen in this area.

For all the birds though, the best was yet to come! A week before, on the edge of the flood forest, I had reestablished the forest feeders after a short summer break. Though I had expected a few birds back, perhaps a Middle Spotted Woodpecker or two, I was not prepared for what did arrive! We settled into the cabin and gazed out - a Spotted Flycatcher flitted across to its nestbox, an Icterine Warbler sang nearby, but the feeders showed little action. Then it all started! In came a Middle Spotted Woodpecker ...plus two youngsters disturbing the peace. Moments later a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was on the feeders too, then another! Two males, both adults. So now five woodpeckers together, then another one came swooping in through the trees, a mother of all woodpeckers and a real stunner ...it was the White-backed Woodpecker! Haven't seen him since the days of minus 20 and, though I suspected he might be breeding somewhere in the quiet floodforest, I absolutely did not expect him on the feeders in mid-summer! Fantastic, and then in came a family of Great Spotted Woodpeckers, and then a young male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker!!! And the female. Oo, er, it was getting a bit like winter with all the activity and then, just to blow me away, the female Grey-headed Woodpecker also appeared on the scene ... another one I have never seen on the feeders in summer before!

What with Wrynecks breeding just adjacent, that made it a 'six-woodpecker species' day, plus a Black Woodpecker almost made it seven by calling nearby! A Redwing also hopped about in the forest nearby and, a few hundred metres away, I discovered my Tawny Owl family, the three fledglings now well grown and right scruffy to boot!

25-27 June. The butterfly season opens!

Time for a change of tactics! Creeping about amongst the flowers, barely casting an eye skyward, it just had to mean the fabled month of July was approaching, the highlight of the butterfly year. As in prior years, the last days of June saw a real upswing in the number and variety of butterflies, both on my land and at Baltoji Voke.

On the 25th, a day 30 C and sunny, Ringlets exploded in abundance, Mazarine Blues and Chestnut Heaths flitted everywhere, both Silver-washed and Dark Green Fritillaries appeared and the first Scarce Coppers of the year appeared, along with the first Wood Whites since the early spring and a whole host of other species. And next day was even better - down in the forests of Batoji Voke, most of the above occurred again, plus the first Weaver's Fritillaries and, always a special butterfly, a Lesser Purple Emperor! Roll on the next few weeks!!