



Aquatic Warbler, Sporovo Reserve (all photos taken on the 2015 tour by Mike Watson)

BELARUS

13 – 21 May 2015

Northern Belarus Extension from 10 May

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I was wondering how we could follow our successful first visit to Belarus in 2014... I need not have worried. New for 2015 on our expanded itinerary were: Hazel Grouse (both in the north and the south, including a female on its nest); Western Capercaillie, Black Grouse and Ural and Tengmalm's Owls on our Northern Belarus pre-tour extension, to the wonderful Krasny Bor reserve on the Russian border and we also enjoyed some great encounters with old favourites, including: point blank views of Corn Crakes; lekking Great Snipes on meadows by the Pripyat River; 46(!) Terek Sandpipers; hundreds of 'marsh' terns (White-winged, Black and Whiskered); Great Grey Owl (an even better close encounter than last time!); Eurasian Pygmy Owl; nine species of woodpecker including White-backed (three) and Eurasian Three-toed (five); Azure Tits at five different sites including our best views yet; Aquatic Warblers buzzing away in an ancient sedge fen (again our best views yet of this rapidly declining bird). With the benefit of the new pre-tour extension to the boreal zone of northern Belarus as well as some good fortune on the main tour we recorded a new high total of 184 bird species and other avian highlights included: Smew; Black Stork; Greater Spotted, Lesser Spotted and White-tailed Eagles; Northern Goshawk; Wood Sandpipers and Temminck's Stints on passage in the south and breeding Whimbrels and Common Greenshanks on raised bogs in the north; Eurasian Nightjar; a profusion of song-



WWII memorial at Sosnovy

sters mostly only known to western birders as scarce drift migrants including Wrynecks, Red-backed Shrikes, Marsh, Icterine and River Warblers as well as gaudy Citrine Wagtails and Common Rosefinches and lovely old forests full of Wood Warblers and Red-breasted Flycatchers. However, the encounter of the tour was not a bird, instead a fabulous Eurasian Lynx on a night drive at Belovezhskaya Pushcha. Other mammal highlights included: Eurasian Beaver (3); Pine Marten (2); Elk and European Bison (2). All of these, plus good hotels and tasty food, a modern road network and the welcoming people of Belarus are the reasons why many birders in the west will be making their way here in the near future!

My impression of the cold war Soviet Union was of grim salt mines and gulag labour camps. Although much has changed since then, Belarus is still the world's third largest producer of Potassium (mostly used as fertilizer) and we passed by one of the largest mines on our journey south at Salihorsk but it also has a huge proportion of natural vegetation cover compared to most European countries (more than 40% forest!) and with a sparse population (it has never fully recovered from losing one third of its people in WWII) wildlife flourishes here. After making our way through immigration at the newly refurbished and modern-looking Minsk airport we were soon heading north, past Cyrillic road signs on broad highways with only light traffic. Fields in Belarus are a lot larger than back home, owing to communist co-operative farming methods but away from them, swathes of silver birch trees cloak vast Scots Pine forests that stretch to the horizon. Several hours later we reached our guide, Dima's lodge in the lovely Krasny Bor reserve, not far from the Russian border. Krasny Bor means 'red forest' after the brick red bark of the upper halves of the Scots Pine trees that predominate in the boreal zone. The landscape here is one of mostly pine forest with some spruce, birch and aspen interspersed with raised acid bogs and glacial lakes. The northern half of Belarus also marks the southernmost extent of glaciation during the last ice age 10,000 years ago and many features can be seen in the landscape such as moraines and erratic lumps of granite deposited as the ice retreated. Much of the countryside in the north was returned to nature following World War II as the Germans burnt villages to the ground and their inhabitants either perished or never returned. In fact between 1941-44, the Germans destroyed 209 out of 290 cities in the republic, 85% of the republic's industry, and more than one million buildings! More recently an exodus of the younger generation to work in the towns and cities has further depleted the countryside's human population.



Ural Owl, Sosnovy

The village where Dima's lodge stands, Sosnovy ('*village made from pine*') originally consisted of around 20 homesteads, which were destroyed by the Germans in 1943. Some folks returned but when Dima moved in around eight years ago there was only one old lady living there and she is now no longer with us. A few homes that are still vaguely habitable are used during the summer and the general area consists of a mosaic of abandoned hay meadows, marshes and pine wood lots and is full of wildlife. Eurasian Beavers have a lodge at the bottom of his 'garden' and we could see them from the dining table each evening as they emerged from their lodge to feed on waterside vegetation. Green Sandpiper breeds along the stream below the lodge and one of his nestboxes was occupied by a female goldeneye. We also saw the recent tracks of wolf, hazel grouse and cranes as we crossed a small field used by hunters to lure deer and elk into the open during the autumn. Each evening we attempted to see Dima's local pygmy owl, however, we did not have any luck. It was probably pre-occupied with its nest by now? Whilst we did not have any luck with the owl, our evening excursions featured numerous encounters with roding woodcock against a chorus of Thrush Nightingales, cuckoos and the blood curdling howling of Dima's tamed wolf pack. No wonder he does not have any neighbours! A short distance from the lodge we saw an impressive female Ural Owl at her nest site, a large species with a nasty reputation but this individual was fortunately rather docile. The Collins guide describes its big, pale, flat face and small dark eyes as giving it a 'deceptively gentle look' but it is well known for attacking intruders near its nest. We also had a good look for Tengmalm's Owl after dark on our second evening here, in Dima's Soviet-built UAZ 452 (= Ulyanovsky Avtomobilny Zavod), known as the '*bread loaf*', which promptly broke down deep in the forest. However, they are renowned for their simplicity and Dima was able to fix the problem, which involved sawing a section of tree trunk from a fallen tree and jacking up the entire front and then the rear axles in succession, an incredible sight! There was no sound of Tengmalm's Owl unfortunately as Mike's biggest bogey bird continued to elude him but we were all simply relieved to avoid a couple of hours walk home in the dark.

We had two full days plus an evening and a morning in the Krasny Bor reserve. The mornings were spent looking for grouse and our first venture deep into the forest produced all three species we were looking for: Western Capercaillie, Black Grouse and Hazel Grouse. Black Grouse emerge from the forest to lek in open fields and clearings and we easily saw some, very conspicuous against a plain green background, their peculiar bubbling calls filling the air. With the help of Dima's radio-collars we tracked down some male capercaillies and got a



Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker (female of the N European form tridactylus), Krasny Bor Reserve.

brief view of them as massive black birds crashing through the branches of the trees. However, we did get a very good view of a cryptic-plumaged female perched in a pine tree and on our last evening we also had a good view of a male that flew across a clearing, its inner primaries now being replaced. The trickiest of the trio is usually Hazel Grouse and this proved to be the case again. After hearing one calling and then another's wings whirring as it flew away from us we saw a male fly across a forest track and then make off away through the understory. A small pile of feathers suggested that one of the local birds had succumbed to a predator as we searched for a nest one afternoon. Finally, on our last morning at Krasny Bor, an extensive drive on forest tracks resulted in two males flying across the road in front of us, one of which perched up for a while, visible through a small gap in branches for Mike only.

Our first morning's birding of the tour also included Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker, a male zooming in to inspect us in an area of flooded birch forest that also held goldeneye, Green Sandpiper, Black Woodpecker, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, the cute northern, white-headed form of Long-tailed Tit and Red Crossbill. The surrounding forests were full of Tree Pipits, Mistle Thrushes and Common Chaffinches. We did well for woodpeckers at Krasny Bor, as well as three-toed and Black we also saw White-backed easily, finding a bird feeding young at a nest hole in a birch stump in a flooded area of forest – a great site for a picnic! The flooded forest was the work of beavers, damming a small stream, which drowned the trees and provided numerous nest sites for woodpeckers. There is a strong association between beaver and woodpecker populations here. Lesser Spotted, Great Spotted and Grey-headed Woodpeckers were also noted here. Nearby glacial lakes were quite productive, with breeding Whooper Swan, Garganey, Western Osprey, Northern Goshawk, White-tailed Eagle, Black and White-winged Terns, Little Gull, Great Reed and Savi's Warblers as well as some large Grass Snakes. We also made a visit to a vast raised acid bog, accessed by a precarious dilapidated wooden boardwalk, sometimes partly submerged it was a challenge to place your boot in the right place at times, however, the result of a mistake was just a boot full of muddy water rather than a dangerous fall. Once out on the wide-open bog the view of the surrounding area was wonderful, with shorebirds calling all around us. Mostly Black-tailed Godwit but I was surprised to see Eurasian Whimbrel (alongside Curlew) song-fighting here, well to the south of its main breeding range. A Common Greenshank was also calling and Dima had a Citrine



Krasny Bor Reserve: raised acid bog panorama, Great Grey Shrike, Dima radio-tracking capercaillies & Scots Pine forest.



Camberwell Beauty (or Mourning Cloak), Sosnovy.

Wagtail on his more extensive exploration of the bog. There were at least two Great Grey Shrikes, presumably breeding here as well as three Eurasian Hobbies overhead – an unfamiliar combination of birds that we see on UK raised bogs in opposite seasons. Spring butterflies were much in evidence here in the sunshine, including gorgeous Camberwell Beauties patrolling up and down the forest tracks.

During our stay at Dima's lodge, which comprises a modern extension to an original village house with recovered parts of other wooden properties, we saw a variety of birds from the veranda including: European Honey Buzzard; Common Whitethroat; Common Grasshopper Warbler; Common Redstart; Whinchat; Red-backed Shrike; Eurasian Siskin and Yellowhammer. It would make a good place for a big sit we thought. A Corn Crake finally called for the first time from the meadow by the lodge on our last day, the first of the year and arriving much later than usual but it did not show itself. Olga's superb traditional style Belarusian cooking was also a real highlight of our stay at Krasny Bor as was the feeling of isolation in the forest, where we saw few other vehicles on the dirt roads and of course no other birders! Our last evening produced a fantastic nocturnal encounter with a Tengmalm's Owl perching in the open for us numerous times in an open pine canopy on the edge of a forest clearing. A noisy badger snuffled his way past us here not seeing us until the last moment and the hares in the north are Mountain Hares that turn white in winter. We saw four live ones in total, plus a dead one.

All too soon it was time to say goodbye to Krasny Bor and Olga as we made our way south to Minsk airport to meet the rest of the group for the main tour. We paused at the Berezina River, near the site of the famous 1812 battle during Napoleon's retreat from Moscow where he and his army narrowly avoided being trapped and annihilated. They suffered massive losses of maybe as many as 45,000 of their number, roughly 50%, at the hands of the Russians but they managed to cross the river and escape. The word Bérézina has been a French synonym for a disaster ever since. Minsk Airport really has become very easy to negotiate and it only takes minutes to pick up your bags and clear immigration. We were quickly back on the road again and about the third bird of the main tour was a fine male Montagu's Harrier over an intersection on the M1 motorway just beyond Minsk airport. What a nice welcome to Belarus for some! Once we had checked in to our riverside hotel in Turov, complete with Terek Sandpiper statue outside, we had time for a brief evening visit to the lovely



Thrush Nightingale, Kremnoe.

meadow, only a short walk away across a side channel of the Pripyat. Common Terns flew overhead and Little Terns also breed here, it always seems strange to see them so far inland in Europe. A few Wood Sandpipers, Ruffs and Dunlins were on the meadow but the highlight was a single lekking Great Snipe, clicking and popping away in an area of longer grass. Most folks got a reasonable view of it before it moved off to another area but there was no need to worry with a visit to the main lek to come later.

The following day spent exploring the area around Turov was simply fantastic again! Early morning started with showy Thrush Nightingales, singing in full view and collecting nest material. It is always more extrovert than its thicket-loving Common relative and its rich but slightly discordant song (more Jimi Hendrix than Eric Clapton to my ear) and is a common sound of the Belarusian spring countryside. Other welcome migrants seen on the edge of the small village included: Red-backed Shrike, the first of many; Golden Orioles including a pair building a nest high in a willow; Icterine Warbler (with its song full of loud buzzing and wheezing notes); European Pied, Spotted and Red-breasted Flycatchers; Common Rosefinch (a red songster) and a gorgeous nest-building female Serin. The bird that most folks wanted to see more than any other on this trip was the gorgeous Azure Tit, breeding at the western limit of its range in Belarus, and sure enough one appeared in the usual place, feeding on phragmites reed heads. Although we enjoyed some nice views, we were not able to find a nest in one of the rickety houses here this year, the female probably incubating rather than feeding young like last time. We got the impression that most birds were breeding a little later than in 2014.

However, Terek Sandpiper is *the* emblematic bird of Turov and we were lucky to enjoy some nice views of a couple, reminiscent of Common Sandpiper, on the banks of an ox-bow lake. Exploring a little further into the myriad channels and marshes along the Pripyat we found more waterbirds, which included: Terek Sandpiper (another two pairs); Northern Shoveler; Garganey; Common Goldeneye; Common Oystercatcher; Northern Lapwing; Common Ringed Plover; Black-tailed Godwit; Common Redshank; Wood Sandpiper; Temminck's Stint; Curlew Sandpiper (a brick red bird); Dunlin and Ruff but the star of the show was probably a young Northern Goshawk, which zoomed past us chasing shorebirds, Quentin could even hear the rush of air(!). Later another goshawk, this time an adult was hunting low over the meadow, they must find rich pickings during spring



Wood Sandpiper, Beloe Fishponds.

migration here. Less interesting but much less common was the second calendar year Greater White-fronted Goose feeding quietly by the hordes of feral geese out on the marsh, presumably a lingering wild bird. Soaring overhead were our first Black Storks, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Black Kite, Common Kestrel as well as plenty of Western Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards and a Common Raven. A Stock Dove flew over the meadow, an uncommon bird here. Sedge Warblers buzzed away nearby and ‘*Dombrowski*’ form Yellow Wagtails were a common sight on the meadow. Whinchat and Meadow Pipit were also new for the tour and in the middle of town a pair of lovely Syrian Woodpeckers delighted near their nest hole as we passed pretty wooden village houses, many with lilac bushes in full bloom and most of which were smallholdings with cultivated fields for back gardens.

After lunch we made our way to an area of open country bordering the forest of Pripyatsky National Park that is usually good for raptor watching. We had not been in position long when a fine adult Greater Spotted Eagle soared into view, this time showing all the requisite features without any hybrid anomalies: seven obvious fingered primaries; suffuse pale base to primaries on the upper wing and no double comma below; darker coverts than flight feathers and particularly, very dark brown, almost back plumage (it is called Black Eagle in Hungarian). Five Black Storks were also up soaring over the forest here as well as several Common Buzzards and a Lesser Spotted Eagle for Dima. Three Common Cranes had flown in from the forest to feed on the agricultural fields and a nearby reed-filled ditch produced our only Marsh Warbler of the trip, singing away in the open and allowing us to see such as its pale claws and silver-tipped primaries. They also appeared to be a little late in arriving this year. Nearby we checked the same area of flooded oak forest as last year, where White-backed and Grey-headed Woodpeckers and also Collared Flycatcher showed very nicely in the afternoon sunshine. A Garganey was disturbed from a ditch, a Wryneck also showed briefly, forest-breeding Green Sandpipers flew around calling loudly and a pair of Grey Partridges was our only sighting of the tour. Smart Red-backed Shrikes hawked for insects and a Great Grey Shrike was nearby – these two shrikes breed side-by-side here.

The grand finale to a superb day’s birding was an evening visit to a Great Snipe lek by the River Pripyat near Turov. The main act here also did not disappoint on a sunny evening we were able to watch the snipes arriving



Smew, Beloe Fishponds.

at their display ground. I have visited the Narew Valley lek in Poland several times and have always been a bit disappointed by poor views of the birds in long grass so it was a pleasure to be able to watch the snipes here in much shorter grass and at closer range once again. Their display starts with a clicking of the bill and then the birds eventually fluff up their plumage and throw back their heads, while making peculiar popping sounds, ending with a flash of their striking wing markings and their bright white outer tail feathers. We counted nine birds here dotted around the lekking area. Many of the males are ringed and also carry geolocators that have tracked them to their wintering grounds in the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo), taking a mere two days from Turov, one of the fastest migrating bird journeys! The supporting cast this evening included Black-tailed Godwits flying around but Corn Crakes were strangely almost absent with one bird calling where we had around eight last time. They also appeared to be late this year or maybe simply absent? Nevertheless this was another classic birding day that few of us will forget.

We followed up this success with our first walk in the woods. Turov lies on the edge of the vast Pripyatsky National Park, much of which consists of pine forest bog. We enjoyed a very productive walk through mixed deciduous and pine forest, interspersed with pretty dammed bogs, the work of the local beavers. The forest floor itself had a lovely flora with many ancient woodland indicators such as May Lily, Solomon's Seal, Toothwort and Herb Paris. The walk got off to a good start with a Red-breasted Flycatcher singing, complete with red breast (some songsters are first year birds in female type plumage). Collared and European Pied Flycatchers were also present, the latter included a couple of grey-brown variant males, which are apparently commoner in eastern Europe. A huge Black Woodpecker nest hole was located in an area of flooded forest, the adults feeding their hungry youngsters. We also added Eurasian Nuthatch and 'Northern' Treecreeper here – both with bright white flanks unlike their western counterparts and as the walk came to an end several Hawfinches were feeding in roadside trees.

Departing from our usual schedule, after breakfast we made a visit to Beloe Fishponds, located around 45 minutes drive north of Turov, where we found a good concentration of water birds on the southern ponds. Gadwall, Mallard, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck and Common Goldeneye were numerous and amongst them



Azure Tit, Alshany Pumping Station.

we were pleased to find at least 7 pairs of Smew, which breed here at the westernmost limit of their range. Beloe is designated BirdLife International's IBA BY019 '*Bielaje fish farm*' in recognition of its waterbird breeding populations, particularly its c.20 pairs of Smew, it is the sole breeding site for this smart duck in Belarus. Dima had a fly-by Ferruginous Duck and around four White-tailed Eagles soared overhead, a handful of shorebirds included Wood Sandpipers and Little Ringed Plover. A few Eurasian Bitterns boomed from distant reed beds and there were some large gulls around, mostly Caspian and a handful of Commons but one large white-headed second year gull, which had a heavy pale based bill, advanced head and body, pale under wings and dark slate grey adult feathers emerging in its mantle was presumably *heuglini* = 'Siberian Gull'. In between heavy rain showers, passerines on the fringes of the fishponds included some smart Red-backed Shrikes, a lovely white-spotted male Bluethroat and plenty of Great Reed Warblers. We then switched our attention to the northern collection of ponds, where we were treated to a marsh tern spectacle. Hundreds of White-winged Terns were hawking low over a large marsh, with smaller numbers of Black and Whiskered also present. Eared Grebes frequented a colony of Black-headed Gulls for protection and on a nearby drained fish pond at least 12 Black Storks were feeding on fish in the shallows, a similar number of Great Egrets was also here and shorebirds included Wood, Green and Common Sandpipers but unfortunately not the hoped-for Marsh. Four rusty-necked Whooper Swans and some very instructive views of second calendar year Caspian Gulls followed before it was time to head back south to Turov.

The next morning was cold and windy but again not windy enough to stop us from enjoying some nice views of Great Reed Warbler and Savi's Warbler at another regular site at a dyke beyond the fields containing endless cucumber greenhouses at Alshany. A Eurasian Penduline Tit also afforded some excellent views, as ever like a miniature Red-backed Shrike while a northern Long-tailed Tit flitted past. From the same spot a River Warbler started up its crazy sewing machine-like song and gave great views as its whole body shivered. Another star attraction here was a pair of Azure Tits in riverside willows, which stayed put taking in the morning sunshine and allowed some ridiculously close views, the male occasionally feeding the female. Presumably they had also not nested yet. A Eurasian Hoopoe was searching for ants along the sandy path atop the dyke and to our surprise a huge Elk broke from cover in the reeds and galloped north over the farmland.



Corn Crane, Prip'yatsky National Park.

After our introduction to the forest of Prip'yatsky National Park we were looking forward to heading deeper into it! After breakfast it was time to head east towards our next accommodation. Not far from Turov a male Hen Harrier flew by, an uncommon bird in Belarus and another one new for the Birdquest Belarus list. We made several stops along the way, seeing a Lesser Spotted Eagle following the plough and as we watched it another goshawk flew over. Another regular stop produced a fine Barred Warbler in almost the same bush as in 2014 but this time a much nicer view of its intricately barred plumage and evil orange eye. We stopped again to investigate some more nice seasonally flooded oak forest, seeing the dark tide marks around the trunks of the trees that marked the highest extent of previous floods. A pair of Terek Sandpipers was on the bank of a creek and Middle Spotted Woodpecker was new for our list here. At a large clearing we added Short-toed Snake Eagle to the Birdquest BY list, while more Black Storks flew overhead along with a European Honey Buzzard and a couple of White-tailed Eagles. After another nice picnic lunch in lovely surroundings we reached the Prip'yat River's southern shore at Doroshevichy. The ferry was waiting for us and a short crossing took us to the northern bank of the river and our wonderful wooden lodge, home for the next couple of nights.

The surrounding area of mostly forest with river valley scrub, marshes and small villages, adorned with lovely lilac bushes, dotted here and there is very birdy and we explored a couple of villages, finding a pair of Azure Tits building a nest in a fence post at one and a couple of very co-operative Corn Crakes at another, where we also enjoyed some very nice views of a singing (if you can call it that) wryneck. They are always a real pleasure to hear singing as well as to see. Deeper into the forest we had a superb encounter with a pair of Eurasian Three-toed Woodpeckers in a flooded pine bog. This was a relief for those on the main tour only and took our tally to five this time round! By mid-May when they are busy feeding young they can be unresponsive and tricky to find. In between excursions we did some river watching from the sandy bluff above the Prip'yat in the grounds of the lodge. I fancied this as a good visible migration watch point and we started to back this theory up with some evidence. Looking south across the river it is possible to scan a very wide area of countryside for birds following the course of the Prip'yat, which should represent a major flyway for migration between the Baltic and Black Seas. The best sessions were around lunchtime and one produced a total of 21 European Honey Buzzards heading northwest across the river in less than two hours, OK not exactly Eilat or Batumi



European Honey Buzzard (male), Doroshevichy river watchpoint.

but still interesting inland in Eastern Europe. Frequent Black Storks, White-tailed Eagles and Western Marsh Harriers also livened up the sessions but these were no doubt local birds. There was a small eastward passage of Caspian Gulls one evening and I think that earlier in the season when there is more migration taking place things could be very interesting indeed if someone fancies staying at a very nice lodge with birding on the doorstep. The village itself and its surrounding meadows and riverside willows is picturesque and an early morning pre-breakfast walk produced a very showy Corn Crake calling from wild boar diggings, singing River Warbler and Azure Tit as well as a pair of Terek Sandpipers on the riverbank. Wonderful stuff! Our evening spotlighting drives in the Pripyatsky National Park produced a couple of nice encounters with Eurasian Pygmy Owl, which can sometimes be a tricky bird to see at this time of year as well as some good views of Tawny Owl and Eurasian Woodcock. A couple of Corn Crakes were attracted to a recording of their song landing right next to us in the dark! Brown Hare, two Eurasian Beavers, a Wild Boar and Red Fox were other notable sightings.

During our time here we also made a very enjoyable afternoon river cruise for several hours along the River Pripyat, seeing the lovely riverine habitat and some of its inhabitants from a different perspective. The highlight was at least 34(!) Terek Sandpipers along the riverbank to the west of Doroshevichy. Impossible to tell whether these birds were all holding territory or on passage as they were accompanied by Ruffs, Common Green-shank, Wood Sandpipers and Temminck's Stints but some were engaging in courtship behavior and this is a very impressive count in Europe regardless! Five species of terns (Little, Common, White-winged, Black and Whiskered) were present along the river, Thrush Nightingales sang from the shadows, River Warblers belted out their weird sewing machine reeling songs, another Azure Tit flashed its snazzy blue-and-white plumage in an old willow and towards evening family parties of Wild Boars emerged to drink at the water's edge.

As I watched news coverage of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl back in April 1986, now only around sixty miles downstream of us, I never imagined that in less than 30 years I would be quite so close to it. The radiation levels of the core zone are now such that the entombed reactor has even become a tourist attraction. It has also become a haven for wildlife, which thrives undisturbed there, particularly wolves and elk. Obviously a nuclear disaster is preferable to human habitation from a wildlife point of view.



Pripyatsky National Park: Doroshevichy river watchpoint panorama at dawn, abandoned WWII veteran's house at Polezhai Gora, ancient willows at Doroshevichy - home to Azure Tits and storm clouds over the Pripyat.



Great Grey Owl, Vygonoshansky Reserve.

Heading further west we spotted a pair of Crested Larks by the roadside, a bird we had missed last time. One of them was busily collecting nesting material, including a piece of string! Eventually we stopped in a small village to pick up our local guide, who devotes his life to, amongst other things, studying the population of Great Grey Owls in the forests of Vygonoshansky. He took us straight to one of his six nest sites this season. The massive female owl of the pair stared down at us while we stood not far from where her young were hiding for half an hour or so, her partner was somewhere not far away but we did not search for him or their youngsters, keeping our disturbance of their secret lives to a minimum. The concentric barring of her huge round face is like no other owl and although I have seen many in captivity there is nothing like seeing Great Grey Owl in its natural forest home. The owls in southern Belarus are found far to the south of the true taiga zone and are birds of mixed Alder and pine forest bogs, specializing in preying on *hydrophilus* vole species. Also in this area we visited a Tawny Owl nest box, where a couple of well grown fluffy chicks poked their heads out to take a look at us. Their parent was nearby but did not show well for anyone, the mobbing of Blackbirds and jays marking its position.

A very nice surprise here was a Hazel Grouse nest that we were taken too, tucked in close to the trunk of a birch tree and complete with a female sitting on it. This was a great 'pickup' for those on the main tour only but also a better look for those not. The woodland here is particularly lovely with carpets of May Lily. A group of 38 Common Cranes were in roadside fields outside the forest and we also stopped to take a quick look at the German WWI fortifications. This area also marked the front line between German and Russian forces in 1918 and some of the bunkers have proved difficult to remove for developments almost 100 years later. Apparently a road was planned to go through the site of one of them but all attempts to destroy it failed. Owing to the sandy soil, the Germans had sunk very deep foundations into the ground and eventually the road builders gave up, buried the bunker and built the road over the top of it!

We were not quite finished yet today. Pressing on towards our hotel at Bereza we started our exploration of the vast sedge fens of the Sporovo reserve. The main attraction here is the rapidly declining Aquatic Warbler. Time really is running out for this sedge fen specialist and sooner rather than later is a good plan. The sun was



Aquatic Warbler, Sporovo Reserve.

still shining and we had no trouble in locating one of these buzzing little warblers not far from the roadside, sometimes singing atop bull rush stems. A couple of Sedge Warblers allowed a good comparison with the much simpler buzzing song of Aquatic Warbler.

The following morning we visited another sedge fen area where we found another very obliging Aquatic Warbler. There were many Sedge Warblers here as well as a few Eurasian Reed Warblers and a Common Grasshopper Warbler but the stars of the show were the lovely Citrine Wagtails, including two lemon yellow males. After lunch we headed off further west to the edge of the vast Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park. An evening drive north into the protected area of the forest produced around 20 Wild Boars, 10 Red Deer, 2 Western Roe Deer as well as the desired European Bison, a bull in the evening in a quiet meadow followed by another nearby at dusk. A Eurasian Nightjar and a Long-eared Owl were also spotlighted but the highlight of the drive (and the whole tour for all) was the Eurasian Lynx that Dima spotted trotting along the side of the road, wagging its short black tail. It occasionally veered off into the understory next to the road but soon returned to continue on its way somewhere. Dima was able to attract its attention to look round at us from time to time before it finally disappeared after about 20 minutes. Fabulous! After hearing that our guide at Vygonoshansky had only seen lynx twice ever and our guide at Belovezhskaya sees it around three times per year we were not expecting this!

The weather was still rather changeable and rain hammered down as we headed to the forest again for our final day's birding. Happily the downpour gradually eased to another fine sunny day and we enjoyed a pleasant morning with a couple of surprises. First of all we visited a Tengmalm's Owl nest hole in a dead pine tree stump, formerly home to a Black Woodpecker family. Its occupant soon popped its head out of the hole with its Collins Guide 'astonished look' on its face and glared at us for a while before deciding we were not worth any more attention and shuffling back into the dark hole. En route to another hole appointment a Pine Marten crossed the road, soon followed by another. Eventually we reached the place to be and were surprised to see that the Eurasian Pygmy Owl we were hoping to see was already looking out of its hole in our direction. It duly obliged with a nice view for all before we left it to tend its nest. What a great trio of sightings to start the day!



Once in a lifetime! Eurasian Lynx at Belovezhskaya Pushcha.

After lunch we had a quick look around the animal enclosures, with their sad inhabitants before making our way to the ancient oak grove. Woodpeckers abounded here with White-backed and Middle Spotted particularly welcome. It was hard not to be impressed by the size of some of the ancient deciduous trees, now a rare sight in lowland Europe and their fallen ancestors left to rot where they fall providing much food for the rest of the ecosystem. Flycatchers were also here too - European Pied, Collared and Red-breasted as well as a Common Firecrest for sharp-eyed Pete.

The long journey back to Minsk next morning was uneventful and the hours passed by quickly on the new highway, bringing us back to the airport in the forest and our journey's end. Thanks to our very capable and expert local guide Dima Shamovich for making this tour such an enjoyable one! Go to Belarus!

'Bird' of the trip (as voted for by group members)

1. Eurasian Lynx
2. Great Grey Owl
3. Azure Tit
4. Tengmalm's Owl
5. Corn Crake



Azure Tit, Alshany Pumping Station.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species which were only recorded on the Northern Belarus extension are indicated by the symbol (E).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from Threatened Birds of the World, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home> E = Endangered, V = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened, DD = Data Deficient.

Hazel Grouse ◊ *Tetrastes bonasia* Four seen plus five heard at Krasny Bor and a female on a nest at Vygonoshansky.

Western Capercaillie ◊ *Tetrao urogallus* Four males and a female seen over three days at Krasny Bor. (E)

Black Grouse *Lyrurus terix* ◊ Five males plus calls of more heard echoing through the forest at dawn at Krasny Bor. (E)

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix* A pair near Bechy in the south.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser* A couple of birds from the M1 south of Minsk.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* A second calendar year bird at Turov Meadow.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* Noted at Krasny Bor, Sporovo and en route from the M1 south of Minsk.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* Noted at Krasny Bor (including a pair plus seven cygnets) and Beloe Fishponds..

Gadwall *Anas strepera* Noted at Krasny Bor, Turov and Beloe Fishponds.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Common throughout.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* Two drakes at Turov Meadow.



Corn Crake, Pripyatsky National Park.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* Noted at Krasny Bor, Turov Meadow, Beloe Fishponds and Pripyatsky NP.
Garganey *Anas querquedula* Around 10 at Turov were followed by a small scatter of other sightings.
Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* First noted at Krasny Bor and then Turov Meadow with small numbers thereafter.
Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* One for Dima briefly at Beloe Fishponds. **NT** (LO)
Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* First noted at Krasny Bor and then Beloe Fishponds.
Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Noted at Krasny Bor, Turov and Beloe Fishponds.
Smew *Mergellus albellus* A total of seven pairs at Beloe Fishponds.
Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Two at Beloe Fishponds.
Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* Maximum around 100 at Beloe Fishponds.
Eared Grebe (Black-necked G) *Podiceps nigricollis* Around 30 at Beloe Fishponds.
Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* The first of a total of 29 was seen at Turov Meadow.
White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* Happily still a common sight throughout Belarus.
Eurasian Bittern (Great B) *Botaurus stellaris* Heard booming at Beloe Fishponds and Sporovo. (H)
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Small numbers throughout.
Great Egret *Ardea alba* Three en route from Minsk to Krasny Bor was followed by a scatter of 23 birds.
Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* One at Turov was the first of 12 birds seen.
European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* A total of 30 included some nice overhead views.
Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* One hunting over a large forest clearing in Pripyatsky NP.
Lesser Spotted Eagle *Clanga pomarina* A total of four seen, the first of which was over Turov.
Greater Spotted Eagle *Clanga clanga* An adult near Bechanskaya Buda. **VU**
Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* One at Krasny Bor was the first of four sightings.
Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* Two at Turov Meadow and another near Bechanskaya Buda.
Western Marsh Harrier (Eurasian M H) *Circus aeruginosus* A scatter of 60 seen throughout.
Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* An adult male just east of Turov was our first in Belarus.
Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* A total of eight, the first near Minsk on the M1 motorway.
Black Kite *Milvus migrans* One near Minsk on the M1 for Dima then another for all at Turov Meadow.
White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* A good total of 18, the first at Krasny Bor in the north.
Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* A scatter of records throughout.
Corn Crake ♦ *Crex crex* Only 22 heard, compared to 50 last time but the five seen all gave stunning views!



Terek Sandpipers, Pripyatsky National Park.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* One at Turov and c.10 at Beloe Fishponds.

Common Crane *Grus grus* Three en route to Krasny Bor then a scatter of sightings, maximum 38 at Vygonoshansky.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* Four at both Turov and Pripyatsky NP.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* Common throughout.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* Maximum around 15 at Turov Meadow.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* One at Beloe Fishponds and another at Sporovo.

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* Seen roding at Krasny Bor, Pripyatsky NP and Belovezhskaya Pushcha NP.

Great Snipe ♦ *Gallinago media* One lekking at Turov Meadow followed by nine at their main lek by the Pripyat River. **NT**

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* Small numbers seen throughout.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* Maximum around 40 seen in the Turov area. **NT**

Whimbrel *Numenius [phaeopus] phaeopus* Three seen at the large raised bog at Krasny Bor, where they breed. (E)

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* One song-fighting over the large raised bog at Krasny Bor. **NT**

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* Around 30 in the Turov area and 32 seen on the river cruise at Pripyatsky NP.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* Two on breeding territory at Krasny Bor and another by the River Pripyat.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* First noted at Krasny Bor, a common breeding bird of forest bogs in Belarus.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* Around 15 at Turov, 30 at Beloe and six on the river cruise at Pripyatsky NP.

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* Four at Kremnoe, 2 pairs at Turov plus 38 in Pripyatsky NP inc. 34 on the river cruise.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* Singles at Berezina River, Beloe and 14 on the river cruise at Pripyatsky NP.

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii* Seven at Turov Meadow and four on the river cruise at Pripyatsky NP.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* One at Turov Meadow in fine brick-red breeding plumage.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* Around 30 at Turov Meadow.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* Around 50 at Turov Meadow were the late stragglers of the thousands strong spring passage.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Small numbers noted throughout.

Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus* Five on the glacial lakes around Krasny Bor. (E)

Common Gull *Larus [canus] canus* Five at Beloe Fishponds and one later en route to Kameniuki.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* Of 40+ large gulls, c.20 at Beloe and 7 at Doroshevichy were identified as Caspian.

Siberian Gull *Larus [fuscus] heuglini* A second calendar year, presumed to be of this form was at Beloe Fishponds.

Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* Around 15 noted around Turov and five at Pripyatsky NP.



Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker (female with densely barred breast sides/flanks), Pripyatsky NP.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* Small numbers noted throughout.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* Maximum of around 30 at Turov.

White-winged Tern (W-w Black T) *Chlidonias leucopterus* C.40 at Turov, 300 at Beloe and 7 at Pripyatsky NP.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* Around 30 at Krasny Bor, 50 at Beloe and 3 at Pripyatsky NP.

Rock Dove *Columba livia* Common throughout.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas* One at Turov Meadow and two heard at Beloweshskaya Pushcha NP.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* Small numbers noted throughout.

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* One heard at Bechy and five roadside birds in the southwest.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Noted in Turov and Doroshevichy, uncommon in rural Belarus.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* Many heard and seen, still pleasingly common in the Belorussian countryside.

Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* One spotted in Pripyatsky NP and two chicks and an adult at a nest in Vygonoshansky.

Ural Owl ♦ *Strix uralensis* Great views of a female by its nest and brief views at another site at Krasny Bor. (E)

Great Grey Owl ♦ *Strix nebulosa* Great views of a female near its nest site in the Vygonoschansky Reserve.

Eurasian Pygmy Owl ♦ *Glaucidium passerinum* One Pripyatsky NP and another at a hole Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.

Boreal Owl (Tengmalm's O) ♦ *Aegolius funereus* One Krasny Bor and another at a hole Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* One seen during a spotlighting drive at Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.

European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* One seen & two heard at Krasny Bor plus one at Belowezhskaya Pushcha.

Common Swift *Apus apus* Small numbers throughout.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* Three on our river cruise at Pripyatsky NP.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* A total of five recorded.

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* A total of 10 recorded inc. in the grounds of Doroshevichy Lodge, down on last time.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor* A singleton at Krasny Bor, the decline in Europe continues. (E)

Middle Spotted Woodpecker ♦ *Dendrocopos medius* One at Pripyatsky NP and three at Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.

White-backed Woodpecker ♦ *Dendrocopos leucotos* Seen Krasny Bor, Bechy and Beloweshskaya Pushcha plus six heard.

Syrian Woodpecker ♦ *Dendrocopos syriacus* Some nice views of a pair besting in a willow in the centre of Turov.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* A good scatter of sightings, especially in pine forest.

Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus* Three at Krasny Bor and two at Pripyatsky NP.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* Three seen at Krasny Bor plus four on the main tour.



Crested Lark with nest material.

Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus* Heard at Krasny Bor and a pair seen in Pripyatsky NP.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* A total of four throughout the tour.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* Three over the large raised bog at Krasny Bor. (E)

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* A singleton perched by the Pripyat from our river cruise in Pripyatsky NP.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* A total of at least 65, another declining migrant, which is still common in Belarus.

Great Grey Shrike (Northern S) *Lanius excubitor* A pair at Krasny Bor and singles noted at Bechy and Pripyatsky NP.

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* A small number of sightings throughout, including a pair at a nest at Kremnoe.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* A scatter of sightings throughout the tour.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* A small scatter of sightings.

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula* Commonly seen throughout.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus* Commonly seen throughout.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* Commonly seen throughout.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax* A total of around 40, a common sight in the Belarusian countryside.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater* Heard at Vygonoshansky and seen at Beloweshskaya Pushcha NP.

European Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus* Two seen at Krasny Bor and heard at Beloweshskaya Pushcha NP.

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus* Heard at Krasny Bor and Marsh/Willow Tits seen at several other sites.

Eurasian Blue Tit (European B T) *Cyanistes caeruleus* Small numbers noted.

Azure Tit ♦ *Cyanistes cyanus* Noted at Kremnoe, Alshany and 3 sites in Pripyatsky NP including a pair building a nest.

Great Tit *Parus major* Small numbers throughout.

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* Great views of two at Alshany.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* Three pairs seen by the roadside en route in the south.

Woodlark *Lullula arborea* Two song flighting by the Black Grouse at Krasny Bor and another heard at Pripyatsky NP.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* Small numbers noted throughout.

Sand Martin (Bank Swallow) *Riparia riparia* Maximum c.30 at Pripyatsky NP.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Small numbers noted throughout.

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum* Small numbers noted throughout.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* Noted at Krasny Bor, Alshany and Doroshevichy.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* Small numbers noted throughout.



Aquatic Warbler, Sporovo Reserve - if you have not seen one yet do not delay! Time is running out fast for them.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* Small numbers noted throughout.

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* A very common sound in the forests with around 25 noted on a single walk.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* Heard at Krasny Bor and seen at Beloe and Alshany.

Aquatic Warbler ♦ *Acrocephalus paludicola* Two seen very well at Sporovo Reserve. **VU**

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* Common throughout, particularly at Sporovo.

Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* Two seen at Sporovo plus another two heard there.

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* One watched singing at Bechanskaya Buda was the only one noted.

Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina* Three seen at Kremnoe, then another five heard.

Common Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* Seen at Krasny Bor and heard at Kremnoe and Sporovo.

River Warbler ♦ *Locustella fluviatilis* Two seen at Alshany and one at Doroshevichy with another ten heard.

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides* Singles seen well at Krasny Bor and Alshany.

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* A couple seen at Turov and several more heard.

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin* Seen at Krasny Bor and Alshany plus small numbers singing throughout.

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* A couple seen in Pripyatsky NP was a low outcome.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* Four at Kremnoe were followed by a small scatter.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* Scattered sightings throughout.

Common Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla* One seen in Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP by Pete M only. (NL)

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* Noted in Krasny Bor and Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* Seen in Pripyatsky NP and Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* Three seen Krasny Bor, nine Pripyatsky NP and heard Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* One seen at Pripyatsky NP and another at Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* Common.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* Small numbers noted throughout after the first at Krasny Bor. It is a forest bird here.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* Small numbers noted around habitation throughout.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* Noted at Krasny Bor, Vygonoshansky and Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* Common in the north, then a scatter of sightings. Strangely missed last time.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* Small numbers noted throughout, it was more often heard than seen.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica* A white-spotted male at Beloe Fishponds.



Citrine Wagtail (first summer male) at Sporovo Reserve.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* The first at Kremnoe was followed by many others in the Belarusian countryside.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* A handful noted around habitation throughout.

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* Noted at Krasny Bor, Sporovo and Belovezhskaya Pushcha NP.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* Small numbers noted throughout.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* Two at Doroshevichy and another en route in the south. (NL)

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* Small numbers noted throughout.

European Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* Five Krasny Bor and nine on the main tour inc. sev. grey-brown males.

Collared Flycatcher ♦ *Ficedula albicollis* Some nice views of singing males at Pripyatsky NP and Belovezhskaya.

Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva* Some nice views of singing males Pripyatsky NP and heard Belovezhskaya.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Common near habitation throughout.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Common throughout.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis* Heard at Krasny Bor and Pripyatsky NP. (H)

Blue-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] flava* One for Mike only at Doroshevichy. (LO)

Grey-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] dombrowski* Common all along the Pripyat, all appeared to be of this form.

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* One for Dima only at Krasny Bor then three (two males) at Sporovo Reserve.

White Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] alba* Common throughout.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* Singles at Turov Meadow and in a sedge fen at Sporovo.

Tree Pipit *Anthus campestris* Abundant at Krasny Bor and noted in small numbers thereafter.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* Common throughout.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* A total of fifteen in Pripyatsky NP around eight at Belovezhskaya Pushcha.

Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* A male seen at Belovezhskaya Pushcha NP plus four more heard throughout.

Common Rosefinch (Scarlet R) *Carpodacus erythrinus* One red bird singing at Kremnoe was followed by another three.

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris* Small numbers seen throughout.

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina* First seen at Krasny Bor then a scatter of sightings.

Red Crossbill (Common C) *Loxia curvirostra* Around 20 at Krasny Bor then five for Pete M only near Turov.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* Common throughout.

European Serin *Serinus serinus* First seen nest building at Kremnoe and heard in several other places.

Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* A couple seen and two more heard only at Krasny Bor. (E)



The lengths that our guides will go to! Dima checks a Ural Owl nest hole at Krasny Bor. Can you spot him?

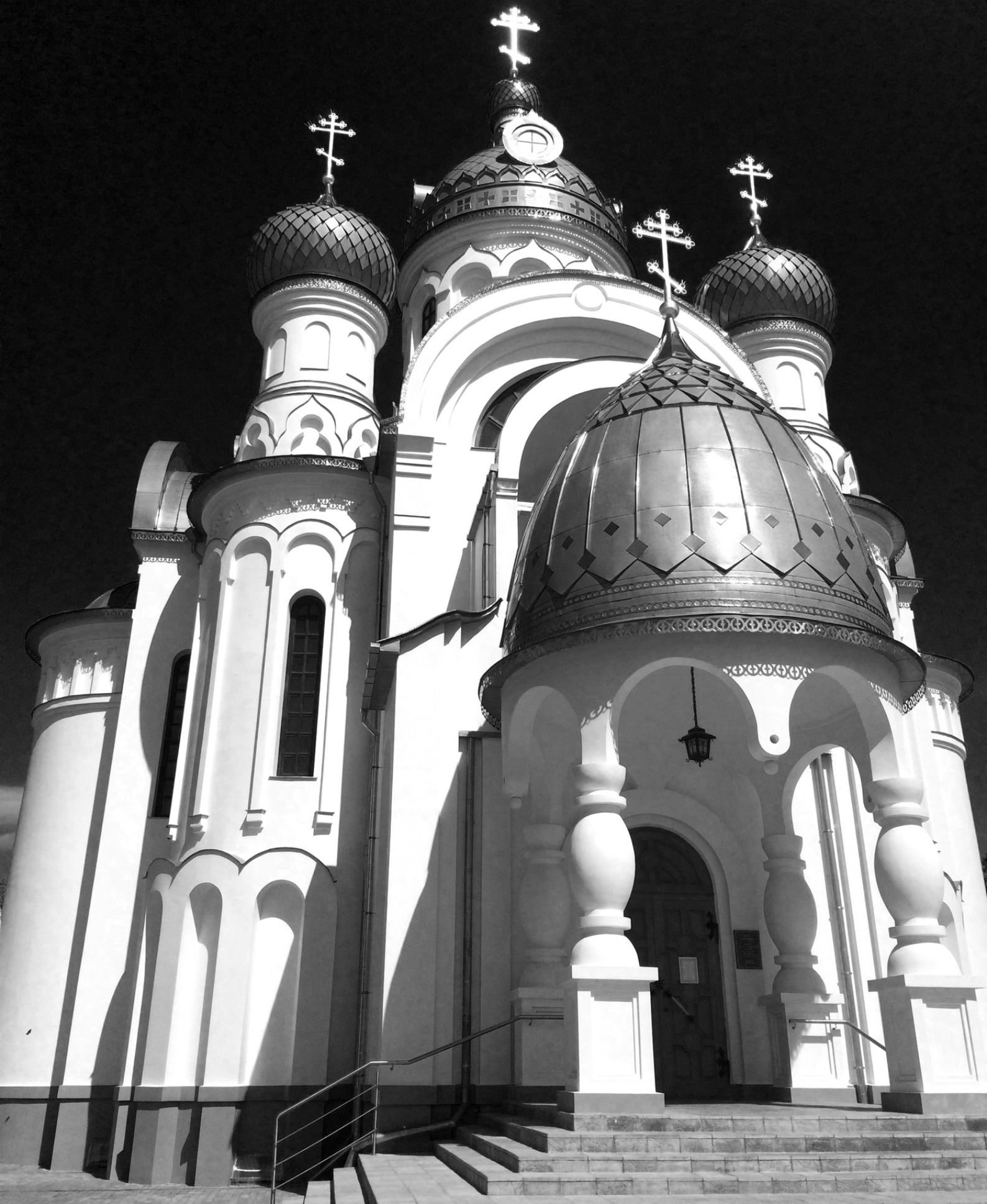
Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* One at Bechy was the only sighting.
Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* A scatter of sightings from Krasny Bor onwards.
Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* Common throughout.

MAMMALS

European Hare (Brown H) *Lepus europaeus* A scatter of sightings in the south.
Mountain Hare *Lepus timidus* Four seen in the north plus another dead. (E)
Eurasian Red Squirrel (Red S) *Sciurus vulgaris* Nice views of one in Beloweshskaya Pushcha NP.
Eurasian Beaver *Castor fiber* A couple of sightings at Dima's place and two after dark in Pripyatsky NP.
Eurasian Lynx *Felis lynx* A fabulous night time encounter in Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.
Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* Two in Pripyatsky NP, one en route and another in Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.
Pine Marten *Martes martes* Two at Beloweshskaya Pushcha NP.
Eurasian Badger *Meles meles* Great daylight views of one at Krasny Bor. (E)
Eastern Hedgehog (E European H) *Erinaceus concolor* A couple of roadside casualties in the south.
Eurasian Wild Boar (Wild B) *Sus scrofa* Around 10 at Pripyatsky NP and 20 in Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.
Red Deer (Elk) *Cervus elaphus* Around 10 at Belowezhskaya Pushcha NP.
Western Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus* A scatter of sightings throughout the tour.
Moose (Elk) *Alces alces* A young animal surprised us at Alshany.
European Bison *Bison bonasus* Two lone bulls in Beloweshskaya Pushcha NP.



Birdquesting in Belarus builds up an appetite for picnics!



Belarus has some very impressive buildings like this orthodox church at Bereza.