



Great Grey Owl – one of the big stars of the magnificent avifauna in Belarus. (all photos by D.Farrow)

BELARUS

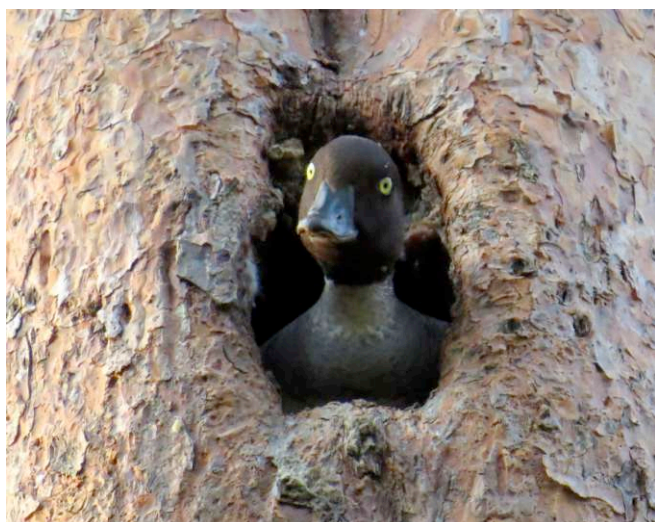
11 – 22 MAY 2016

LEADER: DAVE FARROW

This was the third Birdquest tour to Belarus, a wonderful tour that has so many good birds, and we had them all to ourselves. Of the many highlights, the big favourite were the magnificent Great Grey Owls, and we enjoyed prolonged looks at these awesome creatures. We also found Ural Owl with chicks, Long-eared Owls at two nests, three Eurasian Pygmy Owls including a pair making a food exchange by a nest, and four Tawny Owls including one at roost. The other family that features strongly on this tour are the Woodpeckers, and we had multiple sightings of Eurasian Three-toed, White-backed, Middle Spotted, Lesser Spotted, Grey-headed, Black, Syrian and Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Eurasian Wryneck. We saw Smew at a breeding site, a hen Hazel Grouse sat tightly on her nest, and found male Capercaillie in the endless pine

forests of the north. We saw both Lesser and Greater Spotted Eagles on breeding territory, while a Booted Eagle was an unusual find. In the grassy meadows of the Pripyat River we watched a lek of Great Snipe, while Corncrakes peeked out of the herbage and Terek Sandpipers sang from the banks. Of course May is the best time for migrant songsters and we had great looks at Aquatic Warbler, plus Greenish, River, Savi's and Barred Warblers, Collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers singing in the ancient woodlands and Citrine Wagtails in the marshes. There was no shortage of mammals as indicated by tracks everywhere, and we managed to see Eurasian Beaver, Moose and European Bison.

We began our tour at Minsk airport where our trusty guide Dima met us, clad in camouflage (which soon became clear was actually the national dress) and set off on what was a three-day extension to the main tour. We drove on good highways towards his house in the far north of the country near the Russian border, a four hour journey through seemingly endless forest interspersed with a few small rustic villages along the way. We settled into his homestay, surrounded by apple trees in a clearing, with a tame Wolf in a pen and a couple of Beavers visible from his porch, swimming in the pond. After some dinner we promptly headed out into the nearby woods to where a Pygmy Owl had a nest. We waited a while until the male came, called the female from the nest and then presented her with half a mouse, before she returned to her nest duties. After this pleasing episode, we headed deeper into the woods, where we saw Eurasian Woodcock roding over the treetops and European Nightjars sitting on the dirt roads. We were able to spotlight a large white-legged Moose in a clearing, before it was time to head back to base.



Goldeneye and Pied Flycatcher – both using old Black Woodpecker holes in Scots Pine

The early morning echoed with the songs of the many spring arrivals, and our first stop was a patch of forest re-engineered by Beavers that had dammed a stream, resulting in a flood that killed the trees and created the perfect habitat for White-backed Woodpecker to nest. Sure enough, a female appeared by its nest hole and gave great views. Also here were Green Sandpipers singing from the tops of tall dead trees, Lesser Whitethroat showed well, and a female Goldeneye popped her head out of a hole 10m up a pine tree. At a nearby village where we saw a Long-eared Owl on a nest, Eurasian Wrynecks in the trees, Common Rosefinch, Garden Warbler, Whinchats, Spotted Flycatchers, a Redwing singing from a treetop, numerous Fieldfares, a male Montagu's Harrier and a pair of skydancing Lesser Spotted Eagles. Not bad for a pre-breakfast stroll!

Later we headed to a nearby huge raised bog (measuring four kilometres by six!) just a short distance from the Russian border. We walked through woods where we saw Wood Warbler, then out across the bog on a rather dilapidated 'boardwalk', where your leader soon found a hole in the path and wedged his leg into a tight hole! Luckily, no harm was done apart from some bruises and a boot full of water, and we continued carefully to a watch point. We could see Whimbrels sitting in the tops of dead trees, and vigorously chasing Ravens as they flew across the bog, on territory here at the far south-west of their breeding range. Also

breeding here were Black-tailed Godwits and Golden Plovers, plus we saw Black Kite, Hobby, and a Great Grey Shrike (possibly of the eastern *homeyri* race) In the afternoon we went in search of Capercaillie, armed with an antenna to locate birds that Dima had radio-tagged. We picked up a signal of a male and crept towards it, but he saw us first and went shooting out of a tree and out of sight, despite us knowing roughly where it had been sitting. Soon after this we nearly stepped on a male that gave us a shock as he exploded out of the ground cover, an un-tagged bird that we were not expecting! It was a great view despite the fact it was trying to get away as fast as it could.

In the evening we drove to a nest site of Ural Owl, where there was a large hole in an old tree. The chicks had already left the nest, but the female sat in an Alder at the edge of a meadow. Further searching located two fluffy chicks in nearby trees, and yet despite our close approach the female behaved quite benignly. Just before it got dark, it seemed that the male sneaked in and gave food her, and then she came and fed one of the chicks with a mouse. Some more Woodcocks were seen roding low overhead, before we retired for the night.



Corncrake.

The next morning we were chasing after a Black Grouse that could be heard lekking, but it was very shy and only glimpsed as it flew from a treetop. Nevertheless we enjoyed singing Whinchats and Red-backed Shrike, a flyby Black Woodpecker, and a first-summer male Red-breasted Flycatcher singing at the forest edge. At a section of flooded forest we had a brief view of a White-backed Woodpecker, and at another Ural Owl nest we could hear the chicks inside the nesthole, however Dima's tree-climbing did not provoke any adults to come into view. Later we saw a Honey Buzzard over Dima's house, then we visited several small lakes

nearby where we saw a White-tailed Eagle, 100+ Black Terns and a single White-winged Black Tern, and a Savi's Warbler singing in the reeds, while the pinewoods provided Tree Pipits and Pied Flycatcher.

We explored the area around our lodgings, and had stunning views of a Corncrake that peeked out and gave its loud rasping call, before emerging into a newly-mown area. For the afternoon's entertainment we checked numerous holes where Tengmalm's Owl had been present earlier in the season, but without success. Dima would don his tree-climbing gear and climb up to the holes, reaching in to check who or what was present! A twilight attempt also failed to find any Owl, but Woodcock and some Nightjars on the road en route home were a nice finish. Never mind, it's Friday the 13th! (whatever that means...)

For some last birding before leaving this area we made a foray into some nearby forest in search of Three-toed Woodpeckers, no luck once again but we found a fine Greenish Warbler in good voice, a new arrival no doubt. Around Dima's house we had a close look at a Thrush Nightingale that hopped past us on the ground and gave exceptional views, and the Corncrake was still calling loudly from a nearby thicket. We set off on the long drive to the south, and paused at the international airport to pick up a new addition to our group, and began the main part of the tour. Dima had some new information about a Hazel Hen sitting on a nest not far from here, and following some detailed instructions into a stand of forest we found the bird in a most cryptic place, sitting tight on her eggs, so unobtrusive one could have nearly stepped on it without knowing it was ever there! This made a nice break in our journey, and following this we headed for Turov on the Pripyat River, an uneventful ride except for the sight of the world's second largest salt mine en route. We arrived in the evening just in time for a tasty dinner.



Hazel Grouse hen on nest.

Our birding here in Turov centred on the Pripyat River and its flood plain dotted with oxbow ponds, shallow marshes and water meadows. We began on the edge of a small village outside of town where we watched a

delightful pair of Azure Tits at their nest hole, the male bringing food to the incubating female. Also here were noisy Golden Orioles, Icterine Warbler and Thrush Nightingale, and along a bank overlooking the marshes we saw a smart Penduline Tit gathering nest material, Sedge Warbler, white-spotted Bluethroat singing from bushes, Garganey, Northern Shoveler, Whiskered, White-winged and Black Terns, the latter paired up and beginning to put together nests of aquatic vegetation. After breakfast we birded the water meadows around the town, dodging rain showers and finding Terek Sandpipers, (here breeding along the Pripyat River at the very south-western edge of their breeding range) numerous vocal Common Redshank and Black-tailed Godwits, Blue-headed and Grey-headed Wagtails, and a female Syrian Woodpecker. Returning to this habitat in the afternoon we added Black Stork, Caspian Terns, and a surprise Booted Eagle that was a Belarus lifer for Dima, although he didn't have his binoculars with him at the time - he had loaned them to the National Park trainee that was temporarily accompanying us! Oops!

On a beautiful clear and warm evening we walked out along the banks of the Pripyat through lush meadows, to a patch of grass that was the lekking place for Great Snipe. We waited as the sun dropped, and the birds began to gather in the grass, peering at us as they waited for the party to start. They started to liven up and commence their display as the sun slipped below the horizon, puffing and popping as they made their strange clicking calls, one or two sparring and bouncing up in the air. Corncrakes, River Warbler and Thrush Nightingales provided a backdrop of sound as we strolled back in the gathering darkness, content with yet another wonderful spectacle.



Bluethroat



White Wagtail.

Further explorations in this fascinating area took us to another spot where the water meets the land, with the added advantage of a raised bank to walk along where we found Hawfinch, Great Reed Warbler, Savi's Warbler, a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker drumming on a dead branch, more Azure Tits, and several Red-backed Shrikes. We crossed the river to visit some large fishponds, which remarkably are a breeding outpost of Smew, well to the south of their normal breeding range. We saw several of these dapper ducks, plus many Black-necked Grebes, a single Red-necked Grebe, White-tailed Eagles, a Montagu's Harrier, Caspian Gulls, a showy Barred Warbler and more Great Reed Warblers. We returned to the Turov area to some interesting flooded oak forest where Collared Flycatchers were singing from the dead snags, a Black Woodpecker flew by, and we found a nest of Grey-headed Woodpecker, and then one of Middle-spotted Woodpecker with both adults attending. Also here we found Wood Warbler, a Marsh Warbler singing from willow bushes, plus a hidden River Warbler.

Our first birding site today was a wonderful deciduous woodland, with dry islands interspersed with swampy strips. Where the wood was flooded and the trees had died, we saw a very polite Black Woodpecker that came right in to Dima's whistling, and finally we managed to see Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker – a pair appeared in front of us and showed really well on the dead snags, the male drumming with gusto. Also here we saw a fine male Grey-headed Woodpecker and a drumming male White-backed Woodpecker. Exploring

further we saw Collared and another first-summer Red-breasted Flycatcher, Wood Warblers, 'Northern' Treecreeper and Eurasian Nuthatch attending a nest. The ground flora was lovely, with swathes of sweet-smelling Lily-of-the-Valley, and many other flowers beyond the ken of the entry-level botanist! Later in the morning, as it warmed up a bit, we spent a couple of hours scanning over the extensive woods nearby where we saw Lesser-spotted Eagles, White-tailed Eagle and Black Stork, plus a Northern Goshawk. We returned to our hotel and checked out, then drove the short distance into the Pripyatski National Park. On the way we took a walk through some gorgeous oak forest, seasonally inundated with tidemarks on the trunks marked by lichen growth. We found Grey-headed, Middle-spotted (at a nest again) and White-backed Woodpecker, Hawfinch, a pair of Terek Sandpipers displaying on a branch over a pond, numerous Red-backed Shrikes and another hidden River Warbler. We continued onwards to the river, and crossed on a ferry to our lodge on the far side, a charming rustic affair overlooking the Pripyat, constructed completely of varnished wood with a large stag's head on the wall.

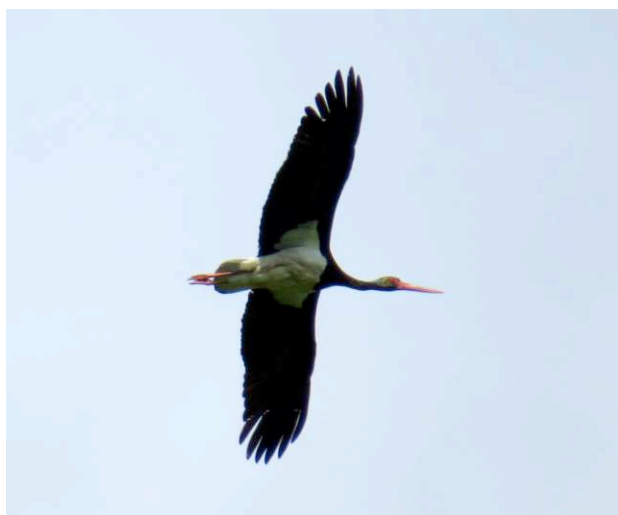


Icterine Warbler.

After a pause for some refreshment, we set off on a night drive, which nearly didn't happen when we encountered a locked gate blocking the forest road we wanted to drive down. After a little sleuthing we located the key hidden nearby, and were able to continue on our way. Our first stop was for a couple of young Moose that stood by the road, a little confused and not at all shy. At dusk we heard the call of a Pygmy Owl, which then flew back and forwards over our heads and perched for some excellent views. Continuing onwards we saw numerous Woodcocks, several stood on the sandy track in front of our van. A

superb example of a grey morph Tawny Owl showed really well (looking not unlike a smaller version of Ural Owl) and on our way out of the forest we saw a Beaver swimming in a dyke. Another great day.

The following morning we walked around a picturesque village at the edge of the marshes, where we saw Azure Tit, a vocal and showy Wryneck, Marsh Warbler, bright male Common Rosefinches, and eventually a River Warbler that sat up singing in the sunshine. After breakfast we returned to the same area of forest that we visited the previous night, and had a splendid walk through woods and meadows. We followed the fresh tracks of some large Wolves that had walked the same muddy path, had a great look at a singing Icterine Warbler, plus Lesser Spotted Eagle, Black Kite, Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, Great Grey Shrike and Garden Warbler, before the midday lull took over and we returned to our digs. In the afternoon we explored around nearby cattle farms where a Barred Warbler played hard to get, and a Marsh Tit family were being raised in an apple tree. We paused our birding for an enjoyable look around the new National Park museum, which had some impressive natural history dioramas of all the local mammals and birds. Then it was time to head onto the waters of the great river itself. In three small boats we glided along the side channels of the Pripyat River, where Whiskered and Black Terns fed in the shallows, Black Storks lurked and Wood Sandpipers and Black-tailed Godwits were feeding on exposed mud. Some more Terek Sandpipers flew by, Azure Tits lurked in the willows and a Great Grey Shrike sat up on a snag. It was a great way to see this amazing landscape of seasonally flooded woodland and meadows, on this the so-called 'Amazon of Europe' that meanders freely along its course from west to east.



Black Stork



Green Sandpiper.

Some early birding around our lodge produced a vocal Barred Warbler, Hoopoe and Black Redstart, then it was time to pack up and head westwards to the forests of the Vygonoshansky Reserve. Our first stop was to pick up our local guide Sasha who is a forest ranger here and spends his time monitoring the Great Grey Owl population that lives in the surrounding forests. Close to the village he showed us a fine example of a Long-eared Owl, perched on the edge of its nest platform that was occupied by two large chicks. We were then taken deeper into the woods of Scots Pine, to where a fabulous female Great Grey Owl sat growling at us from a high perch, clearly not far from her nest. We enjoyed a long look at this awesome creature, as she gazed back with her wide facial disc banded with concentric rings. This population of Owls specialises on feeding on hydrophilus Voles, and apparently this year there were fewer Voles so all thirteen nests being monitored had just one chick apiece. A hard act to follow, we also saw a flyby Black Woodpecker, Common Redstart singing cheerily and a songflighting Woodlark. We ate a picnic lunch at a picnic table where we saw Willow Tit and Wood Warbler, before being taken to another Great Grey Owl nest, which was actually an old car tyre wedged between two trees, where the female sat tightly on its chick as it began to rain. We needed to be dragged away from this wonderful sight, and very gratefully returned our local guide back to his house (adorned with Bible verses in Cyrillic!), before heading on to the next place. It was just an hour drive from here to Sporovo reserve, and after the rain it turned into a lovely sunny late afternoon. This reserve protects

a wide expanse of fen mire, a rare habitat that supports an estimated 10% of the world's population of Aquatic Warbler. We sat on the roadside scanning the marsh, and after a while the wind dropped, and we were treated to exceptional views of a singing male Aquatic Warbler that sang and fed actively in a small willow bush just a few metres in front of us. Wow! This completed our day very nicely, and we headed for our hotel in the nearby town of Byaroza, which in fact was the only town visited on this entire tour!

In the morning we returned to Sporovo marsh, to another part that was dominated more by bushes and reeds. We found a splendid Citrine Wagtail singing its simple song out on the sedge fen, plus Bluethroat, Sedge Warbler and Common Cuckoo, while Savi's Warbler sung from hidden positions. Later in the morning we visited some more fishponds, where on the muddy bed of a dried out pond we saw Spotted Redshank, Wood Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover and a few Caspian Gulls, while in the air and on the mud we counted a remarkable concentration of 35 White-tailed Eagles, with reports from other observers of 78 being present! In a reedy dyke we had close views of a Savi's Warbler creeping around like a mouse, and Great Grey Shrikes sat on the wires. We returned to town to check out of our hotel, take photos of the Lenin statue and inspect this tidy little town, before it was time to head westwards once again, to the border with Poland and the Belavezhskaya National Park. On the fringes of the Park, we waited at a roadside marsh surrounded by forest where we saw Whooper Swan, Citrine Wagtail and Garganey, and eventually our target of Greater Spotted Eagle came flying in low over the road and perched in a large pine, one of a pair nesting nearby. Pressing on to our hotel deep within the National Park, after dinner we headed out on a 'game drive' along the forest roads in search of European Bison. We eventually found 36 of these huge beasts, emerging from the forest into wide meadows as the sun dropped behind the trees. We also had a flight view of Corncrake, and once it got dark we drove around spotlighting, finding a Beaver in a ditch, and had a good view of a Tawny Owl.



Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker
Woodpecker.



White-backed

Our hotel was situated on the edge of a small village within the forest that rang with birdsong in the early morning, with both Black and Common Redstarts, Serin, Spotted Flycatchers and Thrush Nightingales, and White Storks sat on nests perched on tall chimneys. We were joined by a local ornithologist guide, and spent a wonderful morning walking in what was probably the finest bit of forest here, old growth stands of oak and hornbeam some 30m high with little or no understorey, littered with dead trees both standing and fallen creating a paradise for Woodpeckers. We saw Black, White-backed, Middle and Lesser Spotted, most of them at or near nests, and also a male Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker showing his yellow crown as he peeked out of his nest hole. The whole forest rang with the songs of Wood Warblers, and we saw Pied, Collared and a fine Red-breasted Flycatcher male sporting an orange throat (finally!) A Tawny Owl called, and we were able to find it sat in a huge oak tree, soaking up some morning sun. In the afternoon we tried in vain at yet another possible Tengmalm's Owl nesthole, but saw Spotted Nutcracker, Crested Tit and

Eurasian Siskin, then we headed out to the meadows where we had seen Bison the previous evening. We saw a splendid pair of Lesser Spotted Eagles, flying around in a synchronised nuptial display, a Corncrake peeking out of the grass, many cheery Whinchats and a Marsh Warbler singing from a ditch, to finish off our birding in this wonderful place.

The last day was one of travelling, and we sped along the highways of Belarus to the airport, en route seeing several Montagu's Harriers, and many White Storks feeding in the fields that lined the highways. Then it was time to say farewell to our stalwart guide Dima, and begin the chore of waiting in airports to get home, having enjoyed an absolutely splendid trip in what must be the last pristine landscape for wildlife remaining in Europe. The biggest surprise that we seemed to be the only foreign visitors in a country that by rights should be thronged with birders sampling the best of the European spring. I hope that I can return soon, it truly is a wonderful place.



Dima and the Wolf.



Tawny Owl.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF 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 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).

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* A few scattered sightings, most seen at Turov.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* A pair on a marsh on the edge of Belavezhskaya National Park.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* Regular encountered on wetlands along our route.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* Two on a lake near Krasny Bor were the only ones.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Seen daily, in small numbers throughout.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* In reasonable number around the Turov wetlands.

Garganey *Anas querquedula* Some handsome males seen at Turov, along the Pripyat River, and Belavezhskaya.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* A few seen on lakes near Krasny Bor.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* Quite a few seen in the Turov area.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* A nest with female at Krasny Bor, others seen at scattered localities.

Smew *Mergellus albellus* At least seven of both sexes seen at Beloe fishponds, where they breed.

Hazel Grouse ♦ *Tetrastes bonasia* A nice bonus to be shown a female sat on its nest near Minsk.

Western Capercaillie ♦ *Tetrao urogallus* A good view of a male, flushed from close range, at Krasny Bor.

Black Grouse ♦ *Lyrurus tetrix* (H) A lekking male heard in the north proved shy and elusive.

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix* A few seen in flight in the Turov area.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* A single at Beloe fishponds.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena* A single at Beloe fishponds, in full breeding colours.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* Many at Beloe fishponds, also seen in the north.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* At least 18 at Beloe fishponds, in pairs and small groups.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* Regular sightings, perhaps best on our boat ride on the Pripyat.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* Seen daily, often as part of a classic traditional village scene!

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* (H) Heard a few times in the Turov area.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Seen frequently, with many along the Pripyat and also at Byaroza fishponds.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* Seen frequently, in good numbers at Beloe and Byaroza fishponds.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Quite a few at Beloe fishponds, odd sightings elsewhere.

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* At least three seen in the Krasny Bor area.

European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* Singles seen at Dima's house and Turov water meadows.

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Clanga pomarina* Great views at Krasny Bor and Belavezhskaya, also near Turov.

Greater Spotted Eagle *Clanga clanga* Two birds seen at Belavezhskaya, one showed very well, and sat in a tree.

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus* A pale morph bird circled over us at Turov, a Belarus lifer for Dima!

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* A single seen distantly at Dima's house.

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* Airborne birds seen near Turov and Pripyatski N.P. by the new museum.



Montagu's Harrier



Western Marsh Harrier.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* Common throughout open country and wetlands.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* Several males seen at scattered locations, most seen en route to Minsk airport.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans* Singles seen at Krasny Bor, Turov and Pripyatski N.P.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* Scattered singles, plus several at Beloe fishponds, 35+ at Byaroza fishponds.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* Seen regularly, commonest in the west.

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* (H) Heard in the north, also at Kremnoye near Turov.

Corn Crane ♦ *Crex crex* Superb views of one at Dima's house, another seen on our last evening at Belavezhskaya.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* A single at Turov was the only sighting.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* A few noted on various wetlands.

Common Crane *Grus grus* Regularly seen, usually airborne and in pairs, five together at Vygonoshansky.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* Some singles seen along the Pripyat river at Turov and elsewhere.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* Seen in good number throughout the country, which was pleasing.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* A couple of single birds seen at Turov.

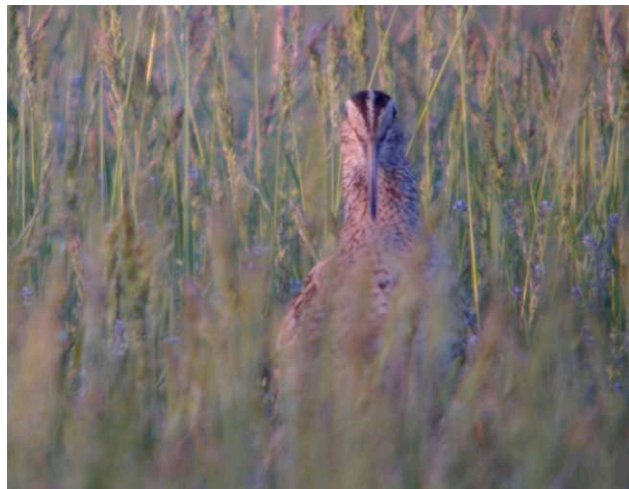
Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* A few seen along the Pripyat valley, also several at Byaroza fishponds.

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* Great views on night drives at Pripyatski N.P. and Krasny Bor.

Great Snipe ♦ *Gallinago media* A lovely evening spent with eight or more lekking males at Turov.



Eurasian Woodcock



Great Snipe.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* Drumming birds seen regularly along our route.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* Good numbers around the Turov water meadows, also on the bog at Krasny Bor.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* Amazing to see these sitting in trees & chasing off Ravens, on the bog at Krasny Bor.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* Two on Turov water meadows, one at Byaroza fishponds.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* Numerous and vocal along the Pripyat River valley.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* One seen sat high on a dead tree by the bog at Krasny Bor.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* Seen widely, singing both from dead trees and in flight in the north.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* Small migrant flocks at Turov, Pripyatski N.P. and Byaroza fishponds.

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* Present along the banks of the Pripyat River in small numbers, singing at Turov.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* A few singles noted along our route.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* A few small flocks along the Pripyat River valley.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* Some nice examples at Turov water meadows, also in one or two other wetlands.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Common around suitable wetlands and arable land.

Mew Gull (Common G) *Larus [canus] canus* A handful over the bog at Krasny Bor, a couple at Byaroza fishponds.

Caspian Gull (Steppe G) *Larus cachinnans* Quite a few at Beloe and Byaroza fishponds, odd birds elsewhere.

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* Two or three seen at Turov water meadows.

Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* A small number along the Pripyat River, a score at Byaroza fishponds.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* Seen frequently around the wetlands visited.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* In good number at Turov and on our boat ride on the Pripyat River.

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* Many at Turov along the Pripyat, odd birds elsewhere.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* Numerous on small lakes in the north, nest-building at Turov, feeding over the Pripyat.

Rock Dove *Columba livia* Probably seen commonly.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas* Seen on arable land in the west.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* Not uncommon.

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* Heard near Turov, two seen at Pripyatski N.P.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* A few sightings in the Turov area.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* Frequently seen and heard throughout.

Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* Three seen on night drives including a lovely grey one, one in daytime at Belavezhskaya N.P.

Ural Owl ♦ *Strix uralensis* Great looks at a female plus her two chicks near Krasny Bor. Not aggressive luckily!

Great Grey Owl ♦ *Strix nebulosa* Utterly superb. See note.

Eurasian Pygmy Owl ♦ *Glaucidium passerinum* Great looks at a pair at Krasny Bor, one showed well at Pripyat N.P.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* One on a nest at Krasny Bor, another at nest plus two chicks in a box at Vygonoshansky.

European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* Some good looks at birds on dirt roads around Krasny Bor, just arrived.

Common Swift *Apus apus* Seen quite commonly, amazingly they also nest in tree holes in the forests here!

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* A couple seen along the Pripyat, also one at Sporovo.
Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* A few seen along the way, quite active around the Pripyat villages.
Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* Nice views of vocal birds at Krasny Bor, also in villages along the Pripyat.



Long-eared Owl



Pygmy Owl.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor* A female seen at Alshany, a male at a nest at Belavezhskaya.
Middle Spotted Woodpecker ♦ *Dendrocopos medius* Not uncommon, at least 11 individuals seen, plus three nests.
White-backed Woodpecker ♦ *Dendrocopos leucotos* At least five seen, including a female at nest. Often heard.
Syrian Woodpecker ♦ *Dendrocopos syriacus* Two examples seen at Turov, both females.
Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* Four individuals seen, more often heard.
Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus* After some effort... See note.
Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* Some great views of males near Turov and in Belavezhskaya forest.
Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus* A female seen at a nest, plus two males, in forests near Turov.
Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* A single near Turov.
Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* A couple in the north, a couple at Turov and a single at Sporovo.
Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* Quite numerous and rather showy in the Pripyat River valley, also in the west.



Red-backed Shrike



Black Woodpecker.

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* One on the bog near Dima's house, more in the Pripyat River valley. See note.
Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* Heard more often, but seen well at Turov and Kremnoye.
Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* Odd birds noted throughout most of the country.
Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* Seen fairly commonly.

Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes* A single vocal bird seen at Belavezhskaya.

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula* Not uncommon in places.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus* Locally numerous, with a small rookery near our Turov hotel.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* Present in the north and around the Pripyat valley, though never common.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax* Frequently encountered, more numerous in the north.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater* One seen at Vygonoshansky, one heard at Krasny Bor.

European Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus* Good close views acquired around Krasny Bor and Belavezhskaya.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris* A nest seen in Pripyatski N.P., also seen in the north.

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus* A single seen at Vygonoshansky.

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* A few noted in oak forest.

Azure Tit ♦ *Cyanistes cyanus* Several birds seen in the Pripyat valley, a nest observed at Kremnoye.

Great Tit *Parus major* A few noted along the way, mainly in the north.

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* Great views at a few places around Turov.

Woodlark *Lullula arborea* A single songflighting bird at Vygonoshansky.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* Regular sightings in arable country.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* A single bird at the roadside not far from Turov.

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* Quite common along the sandy valley of the Pripyat.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Common throughout.

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum* Frequent sightings, often seen nesting under bridges.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* A few of the nominate white-headed form seen in the Pripyat valley.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* Heard fairly widely, a couple seen.



Barred Warbler



Aquatic Warbler.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* Like the above, quite widespread and seen one or twice.

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* Common in places, especially at Belavezhskaya.

Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* A good look at a newly-arrived songster at Krasny Bor.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* Seen well in the Turov area and at Sporovo, heard more widely.

Aquatic Warbler ♦ *Acrocephalus paludicola* Excellent views at Sporovo. See note.

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* Not uncommon in bushy reedbed habitats.

Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* A few singles seen in reedbed habitat.

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* Singles seen at Belavezhskaya, Vyshelov and near Turov.

Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina* A few seen and heard, plus an indefatigable songster at our Turov hotel.

Common Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* (H) Heard reeling near Turov and at Sporovo.

River Warbler ♦ *Locustella fluviatilis* Several heard, one seen well at Vyshelov village.

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides* One seen well at Byaroza fishponds, also near Turov and up north.

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* Only seen on a couple of days, a nest found at Kremnoye.

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin* A few sightings, heard quite widely, often very similar to the following sp!

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* Four singing males seen, songflighting and being generally boisterous.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* Several songsters seen at widely scattered sites.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* Possibly the most common and obvious warbler, seen almost daily.

Common Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla* Good views of a couple of songsters at Belavezhskaya.



Thrush Nightingale



Crested Tit.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* (H) Heard in the northern forests and at Belavezhskaya.

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* Seen in forest near Turov and at Belavezhskaya at a nest.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* Seen at Belavezhskaya, also near Turov with nest, and up north.

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* A good view of one in forest near Turov. Nominate race a.k.a. 'Northern'.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* The commonest bird, rather pleasingly.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* Regularly seen in forest throughout the tour.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* Rather common, with many seen plus a couple of nests noted.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus* A songster seen near Dima's house, another heard in oak forest along the Pripyat River.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* A few sightings in the north, more obvious at Belavezhskaya.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* Few seen, often along roadsides.



Collared Flycatcher



Red-breasted Flycatcher.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* Seen regularly, often in towns and villages.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* A few singles in forest near Turov and Belavezhskaya.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica* A couple of songsters at Turov, another two at Sporovo. All white-spotted.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* Heard commonly and daily, seen well at Dima's house, and around Turov.

European Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* Several seen well in the north, also seen at Belavezhskaya.

Collared Flycatcher ♦ *Ficedula albicollis* Not uncommon around Turov, also in good number at Belavezhskaya.

Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva* Four singing 1st yr males seen, then a red breasted one at Belavezhskaya.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* Often seen around villages, on our hotel at Belavezhskaya.

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* A songster at Vygonoshansky, also seen at our Belavezhskaya hotel.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* Often seen around meadows and field edges, usually in pairs.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* Odd singles seen along our route.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Seen around towns and villages, so not too often!

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* More common than the above in the countryside.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis* (H) Heard singing around Krasny Bor.

Western Yellow Wagtail (Blue-headed W) *Motacilla [flava] flava* Commonly seen in the Pripjat meadows.

Western Yellow Wagtail (Grey-headed W) *Motacilla [flava] thunbergi* A couple of migrants seen at Turov.

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* Some nice examples at Sporovo, also one near Belavezhskaya.

White Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] alba* Seen daily, often where there were buildings.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* A few seen at Sporovo in Aquatic Warbler habitat.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* Seen fairly regularly in more open forest.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* Very common in places, seen daily.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* Regular sightings, often in flight, more in the west.

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus* Seen on several occasions though never common.

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris* Seen regularly in small numbers.

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina* Seen often in open areas, numerous in some places.

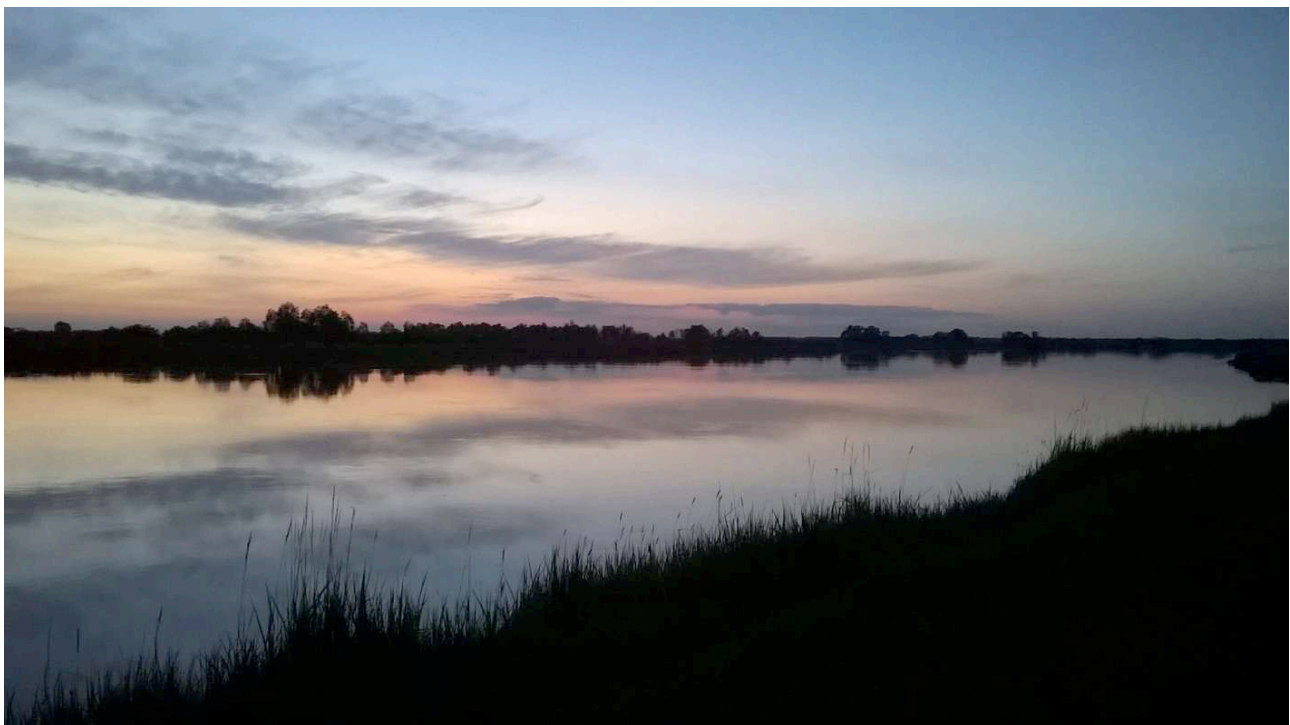
European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* Seen often in suitable habitat.

European Serin *Serinus serinus* A few sightings around villages, at Turov and Belavezhskaya.

Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* A few singles seen, at Dima's house and at Belavezhskaya.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* Scattered sightings, numerous at Belavezhskaya

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* Seen frequently in suitable habitats.



Pripjat River at Turov.

MAMMALS

European Hare (Brown H) *Lepus europaeus* Several sightings, including one that ran right into us at Turov.

Eurasian Red Squirrel (Red S) *Sciurus vulgaris* One skipped across the road at Belavezhskaya.

Eurasian Beaver *Castor fiber* A couple seen well by spotlight, good daylight views of two at Dima's House.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* A couple seen in open country.

[Grey Wolf *Canis lupus* Very fresh and clear tracks for a few 100m in Pripyatski N.P., also at Belavezhskaya]

[Pine Marten *Martes martes* Fresh droppings at Belavezhskaya.]

Eastern Hedgehog *Erinaceus concolor* Singles seen on night drives at Pripyatski N.P. and at Belavezhskaya.

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus* Some in the north, many at Belavezhskaya in the meadows with the Bison.

Western Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus* Two at Belavezhskaya, a couple elsewhere

Moose (Elk) *Alces alces* One seen on our first night near Dima's house, better views in Pripyatski N.P.

European Bison *Bison bison* Thirty-six animals seen on one evening at Belavezhskaya.



European Bison and Red Deer.

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Grass Snake *Natrix natrix* A couple seen near Turov and Belavezhskaya.

Slow Worm *Anguis fragilis* A nice example in the hand near Dima's house.

Fire-bellied Toad *Bombina bombina* Great sounds and in-the-hand views at Turov.

Green Toad *Bufo viridis* One seen on the river bank at Turov.

Common Spadefoot *Pelobates fuscus* An example manhandled at Pripyatski, and smelling of garlic!

Marsh Frog *Rana ridibunda* Often heard, one or two seen.

NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

Great Grey Owl ◇ *Strix nebulosa* Probably 'Bird-of-the-trip' for the leader, it was great to see these so well and so easily. We also heard the female making guttural growls and snapping her bill at us. A big thanks to Sasha who spends his time monitoring the GGO population here. We learned that they specialise in hunting hydrophilus Voles, so require marshy areas adjacent to forest. An all round great experience.

Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus* After much searching around dead trees in the north, we had a great view of a pair near Turov, posing and drumming in a fascinating landscape of wet and dry forest. A male was seen peeking out of his nest hole at Belavezhskaya – the males apparently do all the excavation, and also incubation.

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* Several seen, in the north and south both, that showed a large amount of white in the wing, also with rather pale crowns, perhaps indicating the eastern *homeyri* race? This concurs with birds that I saw in Latvia in March, so perhaps it is quite standard to find this race in Belarus? In the west, birds looked more typical for the nominate race. More studies required!

Aquatic Warbler ◇ *Acrocephalus paludicola* Exceptional views of a bird singing and feeding alternately in a willow bush, lit by a warm afternoon sun. Its clear that this species has such a specialised habitat, it's got to be in some trouble! The Sporovo Reserve claims to hold 10 or 20% of the world population, and is an impressive expanse of fen landscapes.



Ural Owl.