

TRIP REPORT – POLAND: MAY 2007

Day 1 - Sunday May 27th (Day spent travelling)

11.25 flight from Stanstead to Lodz, arriving at around 15.30 (1 hour late). After collecting the hire car we were then greeted by the most horrendous thunderstorm that flooded the city within half an hour. This resulted in us taking 2 hours to get out of Lodz and on the road to GUGNY via Warsaw. The journey was long and hazardous and after an arduous eight hours we arrived at the home of Jan Kowalaski at around 12 midnight. We birded from the car during the journey, but the only bird of note was a possible **red-rumped swallow**.

Day 2 - Monday May 28th

We were up a six to spend a few hours on the marshes at the back of Mr Kowalaski's house. His garden produced a **white stork, spotted flycatcher, red-backed shrike and middle-spotted and great spotted woodpecker**. The short walk through the fields gave us **yellowhammer, skylark, woodlark, starlings and a single black redstart**. The wood was alive with birdsong and we quickly added **chiffchaff, blackcap, whitethroat, and a very obliging icterine warbler**. On the short walk to the marshes we encountered two birders who had told us that a **river warbler** was singing from a bush to the right on exiting the woods, and sure enough it was in full song. In the same area there were also several **lesser whitethroats**. We made our way across the marshes to the tower and were immediately greeted with exceptional views of **barred warbler** sitting on the top of a bush just to our right, and this was quickly followed by a reeling **grasshopper warbler** which Wayne attempted to photograph. Two **common cranes** trumpeted from behind us and we were able to observe them dancing at the back of the marshes. Over the next two hours we had good views of **Marsh and Montagu's harrier, black stork, white-winged terns, common buzzard, and sparrow hawk**, whilst below and quite near to us a **corncrake and a quail** continually called. Wayne was lucky enough to get a brief view of the **corncrake** when it undertook a very short flight. (I missed it). Golden orioles also called continuously from the nearby woods, and just before nine a **honey buzzard** got up over the woods behind us. Elk and red deer were also showing on the marshes. Shortly afterwards I picked up a distant eagle which as it drifted nearer was identified as a **lesser spotted eagle** by its lighter head colour and the amount of white it showed. At the same time a second eagle carrying prey was up quite near just behind us but we were looking directly into the sun and were unable to identify it. Very pleased with ourselves we walked back to the house looking

forward to breakfast. The **river warbler** was again in full song, and this time we spent a little more time in trying to see it, eventually getting good but brief views.

We spent an hour or so chatting to Jan Kowalaski seeking his advice and he offered to go with us the next day. The early part of the afternoon was spent at the reservoir near Knyszyn as mentioned in Dave Gosney's book. To get to the reservoir we turned off the main road and observed a few **lapwings** around a small pool, before the road passed through a small wood. For some reason we stopped and were treated to quality views of **golden oriole and wood warbler** and a single **black woodpecker** on a tree. (Wayne again got a good view but I only managed to see it flying off to the back of the wood.) Around the reservoir we had **yellow, blue-headed and white wagtails** and numerous **swallows, house martins and swifts**, and also good views of **great reed warbler, reed warbler and reed buntings**. I again picked out a large raptor which was unmistakably a **juvenile white tailed eagle** which drifted over the reservoir and showed on and off for the next half hour. We drove down a small track to the left of the reservoir and picked up **northern grey shrike**, and a small group of **black-tailed godwit** in a field and also a very **light coloured buzzard** and a strangely marked **marsh harrier**. We drove back to the small town of Monki where we had a coffee and snack and decided on our next move.

Late afternoon was spent in the southern edge of the marshes. Near the village of Strekowa Gora we saw numerous **white-winged terns** hawking over the wet meadows and small pools and this site also produced drumming **snipe, redshank, greenshank and a single garganey**. We then moved onto the pools near the bridge over the River Narew which produced more **white-winged terns and also a couple of black terns and white storks**. Using Gosney's guide we then explored the road south just before the bridge and found the track to the left leading to a collapsed observation tower (although if this was the place, the tower was now upright.) Down this track we had outstanding views of **thrush nightingale, river warbler, and marsh warblers** and also good views of **marsh and montagu's harriers and common buzzard** over the fields to the south. **Corncrakes** were heard in the fields but the bonus bird was a **black woodpecker** on one of the trees lining the track. (Again Wayne had good views and I missed it flying off!!). It was now late evening and we headed for the causeway to the aquatic warbler site. We endured the 4km walk through the woods (not pleasant – we got bit to death by insects) and as we reached the tower the light was starting to fade. We heard several **aquatic warblers** singing but only managed a couple of "short flight" sightings. We decided to call it a day and headed back down the causeway to the car and the short drive back to Gugny where we enjoyed a late meal of roast pork to end an excellent day.

Day 3 – Tuesday 28th May

We were up at 4 o'clock to go with Jan Kowalaski to nesting sights of spotted and lesser spotted eagles. The 45 minute journey to the north-east of Goniadz produced **marsh and montagu's harrier, common cranes and white storks**. After crossing the River Biebrza and entering farm land I spotted a large bird sat on the top of a bush. On scoping the bird it turned out to be an adult **greater spotted eagle**, and this made Jan happy as it was not one of his tagged birds. While observing this bird a **hobby** flew by and **corncrake and quail** could be heard quite close by in the meadows. A few minutes drive through farms followed before we reached the woods which were the nest site of both spotted eagle and honey buzzard. There had been very little activity apart from regular views of **northern grey shrike, hooded crow and fieldfare**, constant calling of **golden orioles** and flyover **common crane and grey heron**, and we were about to leave when a **honey buzzard** got up over the woods giving decent views. However the eagles failed to show. We then drove back to Goniadz and after going through the village crossed the river heading north-west. A single **black stork** circled near the bridge and after a mile or so we heard **ortolan bunting** calling. We stopped and searched in vain but returning to the car I spotted two large birds in the distance. On scoping these they turned out to be an **adult white-tailed eagle** being mobbed by a **common buzzard** and this was then joined by a **lesser-spotted eagle**. It was interesting comparing size. We drove further along the road in the hope of closer views but they had drifted off. We reached the spot where Jan knew there was a lesser-spotted eagle nest and the next half hour spent scanning over the woods produced **common and honey buzzard, greater and lesser-spotted eagle and an adult white-tailed eagle** (presumably the same bird). Finally a **lesser spotted eagle** drifted across the meadows and we were able to get good views. Very pleased with the (long) morning's work we returned for a late breakfast to Jan's home.

In the afternoon Jan decided to come with us again and we paid a second visit to the southern part of the marshes. Our first sighting having gone about half a mile was of an adult elk which appeared from one side of the forest, stopped and looked at us in the middle of the road (50m away), and then galloped off into the other side of the woods. Jan also showed us an active beaver lodge but there was no beaver activity. Good numbers of **white-winged terns** hawked over the wet meadows around the village of Zajki but the birding was cut short by a thunderstorm so we retired to a bar just over the river Narew until the storm blew over. We set off up the west side of the Biebrza river and encountered good numbers of **white-winged terns and black-headed gulls** plus numerous **white storks and**

lapwings in the fields all along the road. **Ortolan bunting** was again heard at several places but the only sighting was a brief fly out of a tree. We stopped at the observation tower overlooking the marshes at Brzostowo and a party of british birders pull up behind us in a mini-bus. Jan got really excited when a single **little egret** was spotted on the far side of a pool. (Apparently they are really rare in Poland). Lots of **white-winged terns** were in evidence but amongst them were a few **whiskered terns, two common terns and a single little tern**. Waders were in the form of a few **black-tailed godwits, a turnstone** and other than **mallards, a single shoveller** was present. During our time there nine **garganey** flew in and we were also greeted to the sight of four **black storks** which circled the area before dropping in to feed. Jan phoned several of his colleagues regarding the egret but before we left it flew off north (Never to be seen again?). We continued north and added **northern wheatear** to our list and Jan took us to a site near the village of Mycenin (??) which is another site for aquatic warbler. The surrounding scrubby area produced sightings of **thrush nightingale; river and marsh warbler** and the reed beds produced **sedge warbler and reed bunting**. We listened for **aquatic warbler** and were rewarded with three singing males but again only the briefest of views. **Golden Orioles** sang constantly from the nearby woods, **marsh harrier** hunted over the reed bed and a single **bittern** was heard booming quite close by. Here we also had both **yellow wagtail** and the blue-headed form of yellow wagtail.

We decided to head back to Jan's for our evening meal and a beer. However the best was yet to come on the way home. The light was just starting to fade as we turned towards Gugny opposite the sign for the village of Goniadz when I spotted what I thought was a woodcock flying in front of us. We stopped the car and to my delight at least, when observed, the bird turned out to be a **great snipe**. Magic - what an end to the day.

Day 4 – Wednesday 29th May

We spent two hours before breakfast walking through the woods in the Budy area and added a couple of new birds to our list – **nuthatch, treecreeper** (three-toed, I presume) **and a male redstart**. We also saw our first **hoopoe** of the trip. Most annoying were a couple of brief sightings of a small warbler which we failed to identify (Greenish??). After breakfast we said our goodbyes to Jan and his wife and set off for the Bialowieza forest area, arriving at our hotel (Pension Garwa) at about 1.30 in the afternoon. We spent an hour or so in the park where we had good views of **great reed warbler, great spotted woodpecker, red-backed shrike, serin, fieldfare and good numbers of hawfinches** feeding on the ground. We were also amazed by the number of **song thrushes** showing in the park. On our way

back out of the park we bumped into a “birder” who was using a video camera and this turned out to be no other than Dave Gosney, who was on a ten day trip.

At 3.00 pm we met our guide Arek, who took us to the protected area of the forest. On the approach walk we heard numerous **corncrakes** in the meadows either side of us and had good views of a **male and female common rosefinch**. Just before the gates to the forest we had **marsh warbler and thrush nightingale** and **yellowhammers** feeding at our feet. Arek soon spotted a male **collard flycatcher** near the entrance and took us to territories for both **white-backed** (two different birds) and **three toed woodpecker** (male at the nest site). On the way back while Wayne was photographing a male and female **great spotted woodpeckers** at the nest site, a **collard flycatcher** attacked the male from a nearby tree. On the way back out Wayne spotted a female **three-toed woodpecker**, and got some good photographs and just before leaving we picked up our one and only **red-breasted flycatcher** of the trip.

We arranged to meet Arek again at 7.00pm to go to the site of breeding Pygmy owls and we spent the next hour around the parking area looking for wryneck which had been seen earlier in the day and trying to entice **concrakes** from the vegetation by using the Collin’s electronic fieldguide and Wayne’s palmtop. At one time we had four birds responding and gradually they were moving closer and closer to our artificial calls. We got extremely lucky after about 30 minutes when one of these birds decided to take a quick look at the artificial intruder and made a short “inspection” flight of about 3 seconds (This short view was one of my best moments of the trip.) Really pleased with ourselves we made our way back to the pension to meet Arek again.

We set off for the short drive to the owl sight accompanied by an additional English birder, who had visited two years earlier. On parking the car and a following a very short walk into the woods Arek called the bird and almost immediately the male **Pygmy Owl** appeared above us. It sat there unconcerned and on closer observation it had a mouse in its mouth which including the tail was almost as big as the bird. We returned to Bialowieza for our evening meal.

Day 5 – Thursday 30th May

It was raining heavily when we woke up and spent the next few hours enjoying a leisurely breakfast until it eventually cleared. We spent the morning in the park, where we added **common rosefinch, river warbler, collard flycatcher and a common tern** to the birds we observed yesterday. We met Arek again at 2.00 pm and he took us to nest sites of lesser spotted and middle spotted woodpecker, both giving excellent views. He told us he knew the nest site of roller and black woodpecker but this

involved a thirty minutes journey. We headed south but the thirty minutes was actually an hour as we travelled through many small villages. The male **roller** gave exceptional views and the surrounding area had **wood and skylarks, yellow wagtail and calling quail**. However his information regarding the black woodpecker nest was incorrect as the young had fledged and no birds were present. The journey back was also longer than Arek thought and he was running late as he had another group to meet. Just after passing through the town of Hajnowka he told us to take a shortcut through a wood, and this proved to be the biggest bonus of the trip as a **hazel grouse** was feeding by the side of the track. We almost ran it over as it flew in front of the car. Back at Bialowieza we spent an hour or so trying to call out corncrakes again, but with no success. In fact we met arek and his group who had the same aim. At around 8.00 pm we retired to the restaurant in the park for an excellent evening meal.

Day 6 – Friday June 1st

We set off around 6.30 am on the long journey back to Lodz and arrived at around 1.00 pm just in time for lunch and afterwards our flight home.

An excellent and highly recommendable trip - the only downside was the long time spent travelling from the airport at Lodz (there are very few dual carriageways in Poland.) In all we had around 130 species of birds. We would like to express my thanks to Jan Kowalski and his wife, Arek (a most knowledgeable man) and Artur Wiatr who made arrangements for us at Bialowieza.

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