

BELARUS

discovering Europe's forgotten treasures



Belarus kept many ornithological secrets locked away during the Cold War years. A generation of western birders were deprived of one of Europe's greatest treasures. While travellers admired the ancient forests and vast expanses of marshes in neighbouring Poland, even greater delights were tantalizingly off limits just next door.

Imagine roads that take you through scenic rural countryside dotted with painted wooden houses; flower-rich meadows that echo to the sound of the Corncrake; hundreds of meandering rivers and expanses of marshes and fens greater than anywhere else on the continent; ancient forests that

have never seen the axe, alive with owls and woodpeckers. Belarus is both welcoming and safe, yet you can experience the taste of an era now largely gone from many parts of Europe. Places where you hardly meet any traffic or people are almost unknown in Europe so Belarus is very special in this respect.

Great Grey Owl and Terek Sandpipers are absent further south, but breed in Belarus. Although the sight of these would undoubtedly be a highlight, the real prize must go to the beautiful Azure Tit. This sprite remains almost mythical as it has been unavailable to birders for so long. It can be found nesting beside the rivers here and we will make a special effort to track them down.

Our journey takes us to the wetlands of Lake Sporovo and Prip'yatsky National Park in search of Aquatic Warbler, Terek Sandpiper, Little Crake, Bluethroat and Great Snipe, while the UNESCO designated ancient forest of Belovezhskaya holds good numbers of owls, woodpeckers and herds of European Bison. Red-breasted Flycatchers and Hazel Hen hug the shadows of the forest to provide a magical experience that few places in Europe still retain.

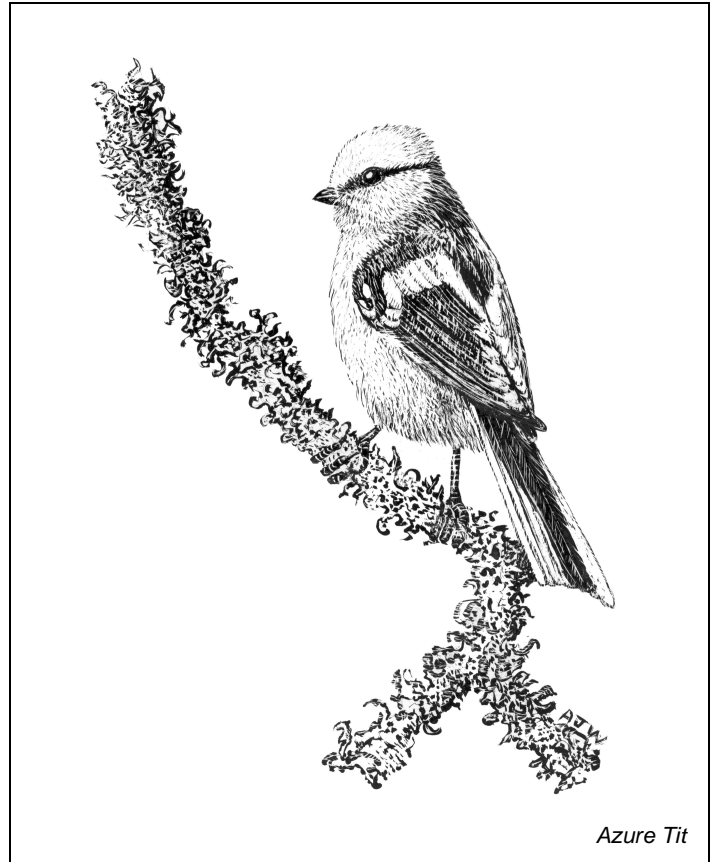
Belarus is truly an unbeatable European paradise remaining intact and wild. As well as superb birding, we have a reasonable chance to encounter several mammal species. These include Bison, Elk, Beaver, Otter, Red Deer, Wild Boar, Eastern Hedgehog, Pine Marten and Raccoon Dog.

ITINERARY

BELOWEZHSKAYA PUSHCHA

After landing at Minsk Airport we head to the famous Belovezhskaya Pushcha ancient forest for two nights. Situated in the National Park, our hotel offers birding on the doorstep. Hawfinch, Wryneck and Black Redstart are garden birds and our first woodpeckers may include White-backed, Lesser and Middle Spotted.

These fairy tale woods hold Great Grey, Ural, Eagle, Pygmy and Tengmalm's Owls as well as all the European



Azure Tit

woodpeckers, Crested Tit, Common Crossbill, Red-breasted and Collared Flycatcher. Local help will aid us in finding many of these. Along the shore of Lake Liadskoye, there is the chance to see Whooper Swan, Wood Sandpiper, Savi's and River Warbler as they all breed here. All birds are watchful for the mighty White-tailed Eagle that rules the skies here. Other raptors include Short-toed and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Goshawk and Hen and Montagu's Harriers with a good possibility of seeing the strange wing quivering display of the Honey Buzzard. Due to high population densities, there is a reasonable chance to see a Hazelhen, while Capercaillie is much harder but possible.

LAKE SPOROVO

On the afternoon of our third day, we travel to Sporovo Reserve, where we will stay for two nights. Lake Sporovo and the surrounding marshes are productive birding areas. Little Crakes, Spotted Crakes and Corncrake are vocal at this time of year, giving us the chance to spot these skulkers. We will visit the main breeding area of Europe's rarest songbird, the Aquatic Warbler, where 70% of the world's population lives. Reedbeds are alive with the sound of *pinging* Bearded Tits, booming Bitterns, *teezee*-ing Penduline Tits and the scratchy-rattle of the gaudy Bluethroat.

Common birds include Northern Grey Shrike and Common Rosefinch, and the fluty call of the Golden Oriole echoes from stands of poplar and alder.

More raptors can be found here and with luck, we may spot the rare Greater Spotted Eagle. This bird is becoming increasingly hard to find in Europe, but the large number of frogs in the region provides its main prey in abundance. As a result, it remains a major stronghold for them. Separating them from the numerous and similar Lesser Spotted Eagles will keep raptor fans occupied here.

The forest close to our accommodation holds a few breeding pairs of Great Grey Owl and in good vole years they can be easy to find. Few owls can be as impressive as this and any encounter with the 'Ghost of the forest' is always a highlight. If we fail to find it here then we will try another reserve on the way to Pripyatsky.

PRIPYATSKY NATIONAL PARK

Our final base will be near the famous Pripyatsky National Park, spending four nights in Turov. Our hotel is close to the action, and several sought-after shorebirds such as Great Snipe and Terek and Marsh Sandpipers breed on the banks of the untamed Pripyat River. Vast areas of meadows and forests flood here in spring. During migration the evenings often produce spectacular gatherings of Black-tailed Godwit and Ruff. The flamboyant male Ruffs are always fun to watch as they manically run around impressing the ladies. Elegant, coal-black Spotted Redshanks pass through in good numbers and the various terns searching for food include Little, Whiskered, White-winged and Black Terns.

Every visit to a Great Snipe lek is special. On one evening we shall listen to their *pop, pop, popping* and hopefully see their acrobatic jumps! Each visit brings surprises as dusk brings out the songster in many birds. Other waders such as Wood Sandpiper or Black-tailed Godwit give a final show before retiring and a rasping Corncrake or sweet-sounding Thrush Nightingale may just be about to start the concertos. Of course, this is the best time to see mammals and the last glimmers of daylight may bring our best sightings of Wild Boar and Elk before the darkness itself increases the chance of Lynx or Raccoon Dog.

A strong candidate for bird of the trip is found along the Pripyat River. The Azure Tit breeds in riparian willow forests here. Belarus is the only place in Europe where we have good chance to find this stunning bird. The pretty Penduline Tit shares this habitat too.

Although we will concentrate on seeing the Azure Tit, we will also have time to discover the ancient oak, spruce and birch forests too. Easy walks can produce several Wrynecks as they are common and quite vocal at this time. Other

woodpeckers include Europe's most-wanted: White-backed, Black, Lesser, Middle Spotted, Grey-headed and even Three-toed Woodpecker.

We will listen for calls that may lead us to Short-toed Treecreeper and Collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers. The scrubby riverside vegetation holds Barred Warbler, complete with the bold stripes of summer plumage. That accomplished songster, the Marsh Warblers, will be mimicking their close neighbours, Thrush Nightingale, Bluethroat, Common Rosefinch and Golden Oriole. These nest here too, together with small but increasing numbers of the stunning Citrine Wagtail and Black Stork.

On day nine, we head for the airport, perhaps spotting a Smew, Red-necked Grebe or Ferruginous Duck en route.

PACE

Breakfast will be taken at about 7am most mornings. Basic fitness is all that is required. Full days will be spent in the field and medium length walks on the flat will be undertaken regularly. There will not be any uphill walking of significant distance. The walk to the Great Snipe lek is on wet, uneven ground.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full-board accommodation is provided, with two nights at the Belovezhskaya Pushcha, two night at the Sporovo Reserve and four nights at Pripyatsky National Park. All rooms have en suite bathrooms. Packed lunches will be taken every day.

PRICE INCLUDES

All birdwatching excursions with expert leader and local guide, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 9th, ending with breakfast on 17th), soft drinks at meal times, local transport by mini-coach, international flights and airport taxes.

WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Return flight with LOT Airlines from London Heathrow to Minsk (via Warsaw). Outbound flight departs mid-morning, return flight arrives back mid-evening. **Domestic flights from Manchester and other UK airports are available on this tour. Due to flight times it may be necessary to stay overnight at Heathrow. See booking form for details.**

8 nights:	9th to 17th May 2012
Principal leader:	Phil Palmer
Local guide:	Gabor Orban
Maximum group size:	12 clients with one leader and a local guide
Cost with discount (if you book before 24th January 2012):	£1870 per person sharing
Full Cost:	£1970 per person sharing
Single supplement:	£160
Deposit:	£300