

Woodpeckers, Waders and Warblers: North-eastern Poland, 12-17th May

Participants: Ian Reid and Tom Bedford

North-eastern Poland had been on my list of places to go ever since Bill Oddie's second series went there and he was guided around by Marek Borkowski to see goodies such as Aquatic Warbler and Great Snipe. Finally in '11 I decided it was high time I went and I was delighted when Tom showed enthusiasm for joining me. In fact having set the ball rolling, choosing the dates, sorting out guides, and pricing flights, I then ended up in a very busy period at work and it was Tom took care of most of the remaining logistics.

It is possible to do such a trip rather cheaper than we did, but we opted for the convenience of Heathrow and took BA to Warsaw at a cost of approx. £150 each. Car hire, booked through carhire3000.com was a Toyota Yaris with Thrifty, and once we had added a second driver came to about £200 for 6 days. We booked guides through Lukasz Masurek's site wildpoland.com for the evening of 12th (for Pygmy Owl), 8 hours on 13th (Woodpeckers and the Strict Reserve), and the evening of 13th (Great Snipe). Arek Szmyura, mentioned in many trip reports was our guide for the first two, and his son Mateusz took us to the Great Snipe lek. Prices have gone up a lot since the reports I read from '09. The Pygmy Owl trip cost 90euros, Arek's services for 8 hours on 13th was 150euros, and the Great Snipe trip was also 90euros. Though quite a bit more than previously, the first two still represented decent value comparable to guide prices elsewhere. More on the GS lek trip later. We opted for middle-of-the-road accommodation: cheapest was the Ortolan in Wizna at 90PLN (about £25) per night, and most expensive for one night at the end was Zagroda Kuwasy, at double that. Two very comfortable nights at Wejmutka in Bialowieza came to 440PLN including evening meals (exchange rate when we were there was around 4.5PLN per pound).

We used Lukasz Mazurek's excellent site guides for both places. The Biebrza guide came out in 2008 and has an excellent format with accurate maps, likely species, and an entertaining and occasionally quirky conversational style, as well as a list of species in English, Polish and German (and Latin), and other useful touches such as phonetic spellings of the Polish place names. The Bialowieza guide was released only the month before, April 2011. We bought both as PDFs downloaded directly from wildpoland.com. Tom took a copy on his iPhone while I made hardcopies.

Summary: a superb trip yielding 15 lifers for me (plus two heard-only lifers), many champagne moments such as lekking Ruff and Great Snipe, surprise views of Corncrake and Black Woodpecker, three lifer woodpecker species, Aquatic Warbler showing brilliantly in the middle of the day, gorgeous White-winged Black Terns like butterflies everywhere in Biebrza, seeing wild Bison, Beaver and Elk, along with some great photographic opportunities.

May 12th

After a very early start from Oxford (4.30 coach to LHR) we arrived in Warsaw airport, collected our bags, picked up our hired car and were on our way by 12.30. Traffic out of Warsaw was slow but pretty soon we were bombing along the birdless E67. We reached Zambrow without undue delay, taking the corvid count to 5 (but little else), but then made the mistake of carrying on the main road to Bialystok instead of turning off onto the minor roads. Traffic was virtually stationary for an hour through Bialystok, a combination of road-works and a stuck lorry, and we lost all the time we had

gained in an early arrival and slick transfer. Nevertheless we arrived at Bialowieza village around 5pm.

The very comfortable and highly recommended Wejmutka Inn was our base for the next two nights. We settled into our rooms then took a stroll through the palace gardens immediately opposite the hotel. Various common warblers were singing away in the late afternoon, the least “British” of which was a **Great Reed Warbler**. We added various other common species but were keen to see at least one of our targets before our dinner back at the hotel, which we had booked for 6pm. Fortunately in a more wooded area we found a cracking male **Collared Flycatcher** which obliged for our first photographs of the trip. Another posed on the fence near the main entrance to the park as we departed.



Collared Flycatcher (DSLR)

Dinner was very tasty and around 7.15 we were met by Arek, whom we had booked to go looking for Pygmy Owl this evening. We drove a short distance out of the village then south onto a track (Sinicka Droga) before pulling up in a parking spot near the old railway line. Walking deeper into the forest (and encountering our first of the mosquitos that were to make life uncomfortable for the next few days) we immediately heard the



Pygmy Owl (digiscoped)

high-pitched hoot of a **Pygmy Owl**, not unlike Scop's but a purer note. Then another called from much closer -- but no, this one was Arek's phone going off! The first one was genuine though so we hurried down the track and immediately Arek located the tiny owl on the very top of a spruce. Its distant silhouetted form was not ideal for photography, but it gave great views in the scope as it twisted its head around calling away. After only a minute or so it flew, but we were able to

relocate it, this time a bit closer, and over the next hour we had great views of the little stonker, lifer number one of the trip for both of us. As we were about to leave a tour group arrived and we helped them all to get onto it before walking back to the car.

Getting greedy for more success, we asked Arek about Tengmalm's, and he said there was a site not far from here. He was tired and had guests that evening, so we'd be on our own, but he described how to find the site and we resolved to return after dark.

Back at the hotel, I treated myself to a beer, then armed with my new 170 lumen head torch, Tom's iPhone, and buckets of Jungle Formula mosquito spray, we headed back to the site Arek had described. Some patience was required here as we stood in the dark feeling somewhat hopeless. Once or twice we gave a burst of song from Tom's iPhone, and then incredibly about 30min after we'd arrived we heard a Tengmalm's answer. It gradually came closer but at no point could we get

the torch onto it, and half an hour after first hearing it, it moved further away to a spot where it seemed settled and called continuously for the next 45 mins or more. Wandering 100m or so into the forest we were able to locate the tree it was in, but no amount of manoeuvring could get us even a glimpse. It would have to go down as heard only. Though just hearing Tenglmalm's was a bonus since it had not been on my radar, it was gripping to return to Wejmutka where Marek Borkowski was taking a meal with his client and to discover they'd had excellent views of presumably the same bird the previous night.

May 13th

Arek suggested a 4.45 start, and eager to take advantage of the dawn we made sure we were ready when he arrived on his bike at sparrow-fart. We began with a quick drive around the village and then through Teremiski hoping that some Bison were out in the fields, but there was no sign so we carried on to our first main site, just south off the main road to Hajnowka (Zielony Tryb). A short walk into the forest with **Wood Warblers** singing every which way included some great views of this lovely *Phyllosc*, but we could hear a woodpecker calling and didn't pause for photos. Arek pointed out a hole high up in a dead tree and within a few minutes the protruding head of an almost fully grown male chick was filling our scopes, and soon after a female **White-backed Woodpecker** visited



White-backed Woodpeckers (digiscoped)

all too briefly as she delivered food and then disappeared again within a few seconds. While we stayed hoping for the next nest visit Arek wandered off into the forest to check out another potential target site. The female White-backed visited a few more times and also spent some time calling from an invisible spot nearby, presumably trying to attract the chick out of the hole. We had been lucky with our timing because surely this chick would be gone within days. Arek

returned with the good news that another of our main targets had arrived the previous

day not far away, and was still present.

We followed him south along the broad track until we had almost reached the railway line when we too heard the lovely flutey song of a **Red-breasted Flycatcher**. Initially it gave us the run-around but eventually settled to yield some cracking views, photos and video. A real stunner and one of the birds of the day.

We now headed back to Bialowieza, again taking the back route via Budy and Teremiski. We stopped briefly at Budy Bridge and the

Dead Forest (site 26) and Arek suggested this



Red-breasted Flycatcher (digiscoped)

as a place to check out later. Just as we pulled the car away I spotted a woodpecker land at the base of a tree. We reversed and immediately Tom picked up a **Grey-headed Woodpecker**, another lifer for both of us, and all the sweeter for it being a "self find". Arek said he heard a Middle-spotted here as well, but we didn't stay. Having got a few pics of the Grey-headed we wanted to get to our main destination for the morning, the Strict Reserve, before it got too late in the day.

We parked at the end of the palace gardens and walked across the fields to the sound of a Thrush Nightingale singing, Arek's first of the spring. A constant refrain we heard over the next few days was that spring was late this year and many migrants were only just arriving. Indeed, somewhat amazingly we did not have a single Red-backed Shrike or Icterine Warbler during our stay.

Also heard as we walked to the reserve entrance were Wryneck, Corncrake and a number of **Winchat** conspicuously chased each other around the open fields.

We were met at the entrance to the reserve by another group led by Mateusz Szmyura (Arek's son) and news that a Three-toed Woodpecker was at its nest hole hastened us on our way. The reserve holds some of the only primeval forest remaining in Europe, with 25% dead biomass, very many old trees, fantastic fungi, etc, and it is only possible to enter with a licensed guide.

At the end of a long path through gorgeous forest we loitered until some other people had walked past out of sight; guarding the gen is understandably an important part of the business model. While we waited a Black Woodpecker gave its *piu* call, but could not be located. Once the others were out of sight we followed Arek further along the track until we heard drumming and excitedly Arek indicated he was confident this was Three-toed. Diving along a small path we emerged to a view of a large dead tree, and in the top a small black and white woodpecker, undoubtedly **Three-toed** was moving about, unfortunately mostly on the invisible side of the branches. It poked out enough for an id, but I was disappointed when it flew just as I was setting up my scope.

We adjourned to a spot with a view of its nest hole and spent the next hour waiting fruitlessly for it to show. The wait was enlivened when a large black and white woodpecker landed at the bottom of a tree beyond the nest hole and I got good views of its "ladder" back, and then subsequently its bright red crown as it flew towards us before disappearing into the forest, these features enough to identify it as a male **White-backed Woodpecker**. Our vigil was terminated when another group was seen walking up the track and, keen to protect his valuable gen, Arek led us away through the forest to a Black Woodpecker hole, which again proved empty. It was now nearly 9, the time we had arranged with Olympia to have breakfast so we adjourned to Wejmutka, via the fields between the reserve and the palace, which again yielded good views of **Winchat** and also **Wryneck**.

Arek departed for some domestic duties and we arranged to meet again in an hour. After breakfast, as we loitered in the car park at the front of the hotel, a Corncrake called in the field next door. We peered without confidence as we waited and suddenly a voice behind us said "if you want my advice, you are wasting your time -- you have no chance of seeing it". It was Marek B, and we explained that we were just waiting for Arek. As it transpired, Arek and Marek had in mind the same destination, so we joined forces for another "assault" on the Three-toed nest hole. This time we were successful, with a male **Three-toed Woodpecker** repeatedly poking its head out of the hole to eject wood chippings. Smart! Sadly once again we dipped on Black Woodpecker before heading to Wysokie Bagno (site 7) for another key target, Hazel Grouse.

En route we made a brief diversion to Arek's house where he showed us the nest hole of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, and explained that nearby was also the territory of a Green Woodpecker, surprisingly scarce in these parts. We didn't linger even to hear either sp., instead going to a small parking space at the northern edge of the walk where Marek and his client Mervin were already waiting.



Male Three-toed Woodpecker, Strict Reserve (digiscoped)

Unfortunately by now cloud had drifted over and what had started as a sunny, still day, was morphing into a grey windy one. We walked about 300m into the pine forest where Marek played a recording of the grouse's thin, high pitched call and waited. In spite of the time of day and fairly poor conditions, after only 10min or so, I heard a thin, high pitched call drift back to us through the pines. Immediately I perked up and noticed that Tom, too, had heard it. We turned to the others, who much to my surprise had not heard a thing. We spent a few moments convincing them that there was indeed a Hazel Grouse somewhere not too distant, and after it called again a few times over the course of 30mins everyone agreed there was a bird somewhere not too far from the right-hand edge of the track, but frustratingly invisible. A **Great Spotted Woodpecker** came and went with some regularity until the wind got to a point where we were giving up hope, then to compound our woes it started to rain.

Luckily the rain didn't last long and as it cleared we tried again, but to no avail. Eventually Tom and I conferred, mindful we did not have much more time with Arek, and decided it was time to suggest to our guides to move on. They persuaded us we should have one more shot. Remarkably, within a few minutes we heard a bird call, this time from the left side of the track. As we all raised bins, Mervin exclaimed he had it, and almost simultaneously Tom said, "it's on the ground, there's its head, sticking above the grass". I clocked where they were looking and peered into the dark undergrowth of the pines but saw nothing, and began to experience that somewhat irrational but



Hazel Grouse at Wysoki Bago (photo by Tom Bedford)

rising feeling of panic that I would dip out after such a long vigil. It was now out of view and Tom used this moment to give clear directions: a small grassy ridge in a pool of light, a few metres into the pines from the edge of the track. I trained bins on the area but still the panic rose as a started to worry I was looking at the wrong spot. Then fantastically, brilliantly, I saw a head above the grass moving to the right. I kept watching and realised it was going to cross the track in front of us. Not

daring (or even thinking) to drop my gaze I followed it in the bins at 20m range as a beautifully

patterned, gorgeous male **Hazel Grouse** hopped out onto the track and walked calmly across, before disappearing into the conifers on the right hand side. From behind me I heard the shutter on Tom's 7D clack several times and was thankful that he had had the presence of mind to ready himself with camera.

This was the last main target for Mervin who'd spent the last week birding both Biebrza and Bialowieza, so we congratulated him, said goodbye and Tom, Arek and I walked deeper into the forest where Lukasz had reported a responsive Black Woodpecker a few days previously. This bogey bird eluded us again – not a snifter – and by now it really was time to bid adieu to Arek. We dropped him at the hotel and took lunch in the local pizza bar.

We had a slightly aimless next couple of hours. A brief sortie back to the area near Arek's house at Dyrekcyjny Park (site 5) yielded some nice views of a couple of **Wryneck**, a drumming but invisible Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, **Spotted Flycatcher**, (and Collared for Tom) and several **Fieldfare**. We both found it strange to hear the distinctive winter chack-chack of Fieldfare in the spring. Final stop of the afternoon was the bottom of the Palace Gardens where we located a female **Grey-headed Woodpecker** at her nest hole. We adjourned to the hotel for dinner at 6, awaiting a rendezvous with Mateusz Szmyura and – we hoped – some Great Snipe.

Mateusz himself seemed remarkably laid-back about the apparently late meet time of 7.15. By the time he arrived other groups had departed half an hour previously, but he was confident that there was no point in getting there (there being Narew, some 45 min drive away) before dusk, and we'd be saved standing around being eaten alive by the mosquitoes for which this site is infamous. Somewhat to my irritation he arrived with his wife and friend he had decided to bring along; to me this was rather unprofessional considering we were paying him some 90euros for his services.

With Mateusz driving ahead (with his unexpected passengers) we followed in our own car. We'd barely left the village when suddenly his car came to an abrupt halt and we feared some new hitch. No, in fact he was clawing back some credit: he'd spied a pair of **Bison** feeding in the fields. Though



we had little time up our sleeves, we still raced down to as close as we dared with cameras and scopes. Excited by the find of these fantastic beasts, but sweating on the time I kept checking with Mateusz whether we were still ok. He said yes, providing we drove a bit faster than normal. Back in the cars the journey now seemed interminable, a race against the setting sun,

with our gutless Yaris hard-pressed to keep pace with Mateusz' Skoda Octavia. Finally we reached Narew and turned off past a tractor yard and cemetery where we parked up and walked through a stand of conifers before emerging to a grassy, boggy meadow with the light still just about holding its own.

Grateful for the wellies we had brought, Corncrake calling and Gropers reeling around us, we now strode some 400m to where a surprisingly large group was already gathered. We arrived grateful for the news we had not yet missed anything; Mateusz clawed back a bit more credit. We stood to one side of a bush with about 4-5 others, with perhaps another 40 or more people on the other side and scanned to a low ridge about 300m ahead. The strong breeze behind our backs would hamper hearing the lek, but at least meant mozzies were no problem tonight. Only minutes after arriving we began to hear faintly the curious accelerating popping, clicking and whistling of Great Snipe, and then a distant body zipped up and down. Peering carefully into scopes we were now able to make out a few shapes on the ground, and see the striped buff and brown backs of a snipe sp. Every now and then one would get excited and fan its tail showing the diagnostic broad white outer-tail feathers, and we witnessed a few short display flights.

At one point, in response to some chap's recording a Corncrake was seen by a few to fly across the field, but only cottoned on too late and saw an untickable shape drop into the grass. We also heard a Spotted Crake calling.

In all we observed around 3-4 **Great Snipe**, and while one chap moaned about the number of people and how much better it was in Estonia, I was thinking that this was a pretty satisfactory way to finish a cracking day. Gradually each of the groups drifted off until we were the only ones left and I decided here was a chance to get a decent view of Corncrake. I whipped out my cheap and cheerful mobile and ran a short burst of a xeno-canto mp3, but nothing happened. Mateusz decided to prove that his Samsung was up to the job and sure enough, he elicited a response. In fact within seconds it called again so loudly that it must have been at the base of the bush only about 5m from where we stood. I swept the area with my head-torch and was amazed to see a very small shape picking its way through the grass directly towards us: a **Corncrake!**

The view through bins in my torchlight as it approached to within two metres was stunning, but as I tried to get a photo I found (and much to Tom's frustration as he was videoing it) that every time I raised the viewfinder to my eye the flash-gun covered the torch! I resorted to pointing the camera and hoping, and I was not too disappointed with the results. This



Corncrake (DSLR)

was the icing on the cake of a great day, and being in such a

good mood I was willing to acknowledge the fact that Mateusz had had no complaints about waiting around in the dark long after everyone else had left, and grant him back a bit more credit. I could not be resentful after such a great experience.

I showered on arrival back at the inn, and then adjourned to the lunge to chew the fat and drink a Zubra (the aptly named local beer) with Tom and Mervin.

May 14th

We began the day at 5.15 with a recce of the fields around the village and our short diversion was well worth it. Four massive **Bison** were feeding quietly in the same spot as we'd seen the previous evening. The morning light had been beautiful, but as we arrived the Bison were just making their way towards the forest edge and slipped from being bathed in sunshine to shadow as we set our optics up.

We would spend the rest of the day concentrating on the missing woodpecker species, particularly Black and Middle-spotted. We began at Wysokie Bagno at the location Arek had taken us to the previous day, but after enduring an almost completely birdless hour at 6.30 we headed to Browska Droga (site 10) for a pleasant but similarly birdless forest walk. After an hour here we made our way back to the Palace Park for a stroll. As we parked on the western edge we immediately heard a calling Grey-headed Woodpecker, and highlights of our walk were both **Collared** and **Spotted Flycatchers**, and the ubiquitous but still delightful **Wood Warbler**. All the while we kept eyes and ears peeled for Greenish Warbler that Mateusz said had been reported yesterday. We ended at the NW corner at the **Grey-headed Woodpecker** nest site, and this time we observed the female tossing leaves out of the hole. Our best guess was that she did not approve of her mate's taste in décor! While Tom took some nice video footage I wandered about a bit and had the bonus of a **Golden Oriole** that perched briefly nearby.

Back at the inn for breakfast we met up again with Marek and Merv who were about to depart for the Palace Gardens where the Greenish had been relocated. We promised to join them when finished. They had gone by the time we arrived but the news via text from Merv was good: Greenish was showing well near the main park entrance. We had been seeing birders at most places we went, especially at the Great Snipe lek, but this now felt a lot like the sort of twitch where the bird has gone missing, as various individuals, small groups and tour parties were swarming around trying to relocate it. We ended up with a couple of other guys just north of the main entrance when we heard its wren-like trill. Scoping trees on the other side of the clearing we were unable to find it initially, though a bonus was a great view of a few **Hawfinch** feeding unobtrusively in the hornbeams. After trying various spots, Tom and I had ended up at our original stake-out when it sang from close by and Tom excitedly announced he was now on the **Greenish Warbler**. Soon after I had locked onto a fairly non-descript, willow-warbler-like *phyllosc.* that showed the right field marks and importantly was observed trilling its diagnostic song. The thrill of the chase made this unexpected bonus (and lifer number 8) the bird of the day. After



Greenish Warbler, Palace Gardens (Tom Bedford)

spending a full three hours in the park we drove around in search of lunch. A nice looking café served only cake, while the pizza bar was closed, and the Carska Restaurant looked too upmarket and expensive for our modest tastes (though did harbour a cracking **Black Redstart** that we stopped to photograph), so we found ourselves in a small grocery shop buying bread, cheese, fruit, etc, for a picnic taken by the railway line as we scanned for raptors.



Black Redstart (Tom Bedford)

Around 2pm we returned to Wejmutka to pick up our luggage. Inside I met Lukas and got chatting to him about our targets, and especially if he knew a decent spot for Black Woodpecker that was still eluding us. Armed with some decent gen I found Tom outside by the car where he warned me not to look at the back of his 7D. While I had been talking to Lukasz inside, a Lesser Spotted Eagle had come in low directly over his head and circled

around. I couldn't resist a peek and the pictures were indeed gripping.

We now returned to the bridge near Budy to stake out a fresh-looking nest hole we'd seen that Lukasz confirmed was occupied by a pair of Middle-spotted Woodpeckers. We stationed ourselves quietly with a decent view of the hole and waited. Soon after we saw some movement in the hole,



Middle-spotted Woodpecker (videograb)

giving us the confidence to stick it out much longer. After 10mins a curious **Nuthatch** made its way to the hole and it was sent packing as a woodpecker's head pecked it away, but we then waited another 45min until the male and female **Middle-Spotted Woodpecker** changed over their incubation duties giving us good if brief views of both. As we left we got chatting to another birder with impressive looking video equipment on the bridge who turned out to be none other than Paul Doherty, here taking video for a new series "Spring in Europe".

He gave us some interesting gen about a lake good

for White-tailed Eagle between here and Biebrza which I filed away for future reference.

Our final destination in Bialowieza was at a bridge north of Budy that Lukasz had recommended as another site where Black Woodpecker had been recently responsive. Traffic is not allowed beyond Budy on the Zwierzyniecka Droga, so we walked about a kilometre before turning off onto a track that led to some promising looking woodland. Once again, however we left empty-handed, mindful that there probably are Black Woodpecker here, but we had insufficient time to devote and were there at a bad time of day. By 4pm we realised we needed to make a move or we would not arrive in Wizna before dark.

The drive along back-roads was swift and pleasant, yielding **Montagu's Harrier** as an avian highlight, and although our route was not the most direct, we deliberately avoided Bialystok and its roadworks. A small detour to the village of Tykocin seemed in order since Syrian Woodpecker had been reported from there in some trip reports I had read. Sadly the bridge and the road immediately north were undergoing road-works, the noise and dust were horrible, and there was massive disturbance all along this stretch mentioned in the trip reports (and in Lukasz' Biebrza guide,

site 55). We were not hopeful and pressed on to our resting place for the night, the village of Wizna at the SW edge of the southern basin of the Biebrza marshes.

The Ortolan, a small B&B in Wizna, was our resting place for the next two nights. It took some finding since there was no sign outside, and was completely deserted and rather unhomey on our arrival. Fortunately we found Zenon's girlfriend/wife who explained we were not expected until tomorrow. We decided to take dinner and return once they'd prepared our rooms, and so drove back a mile or so to the Dany U Bar overlooking the Biebrza, where the food and beer were very cheap and very tasty. With some dread we returned to the Ortolan but the place had been transformed by a roaring fire, and after looking over some maps and getting some gen from Zenon (who is something of a birder), we retired to reasonably comfortable rooms.

May 15th

Another dawn rise and we were heading for a spot south of Grady Woniecki where according to the guide a Ruff lek regularly takes place in "April and early May". We thought we might be pushing it, but Marek had given us cause for optimism that some birds might still be around, if not the large numbers one might get earlier in the season. Though there were a lot of cars around, we were the only birders – the locals were using the weekend for fishing.

With bins we could see a number waders including a few Ruff, but our progress in the car which we had hoped to use as a hide was blocked by flooding across the track. We decided to try and approach carefully on foot. As water rushed into my boots I suppressed a gasp and the cursing that accompanied the realisation that my repair job with silicon sealant had been totally unsuccessful, and that a perfectly suited pair of wellies were in the boot of the car. Too late now. Unsurprisingly we could not approach very closely on foot, but crouching and squatting on the water-logged ground we settled uncomfortably to enjoy the spectacle. 5-6 superb summer plumage male **Ruff** and several **Reeve** were wandering about feeding, along with **Dunlin**, **Grey Plover**, **Spotted Redshank** (all in smart summer plumage), **Wood Sandpiper**, and marsh terns -- hundreds of **White-winged Black Terns**, along with smaller numbers of **Whiskered** and **Black**. Occasionally one or more of the male Ruff would get excited, puff out their ruff and wings and strut about. Wicked!



Blue-headed Wagtail (DSLR)



Common Rosefinch

A Bittern boomed from somewhere nearby and other birds noted here were **Garganey**, dozens of **Mute Swan**, **Great White Egret**, **Crane** and a single neck-ringed **Whooper Swan**.

It was now around 7.15 and we stopped at the sand dunes (site 35) for 45 minutes. A few **Blue-headed Wagtails** posed beautifully, with a support cast of

Cormorant, Winchat, Skylark, marsh terns, Common Tern, and Montagu's Harrier. A final stop en route back to breakfast was at a Beaver Lodge Zenon had told us about. Tom posed for a pic next to the lodge as a Savi's Warbler sang in the background, **Great Reed Warbler** posed for a digiscoped pic, then another lifer perched up, **Common Rosefinch**.

Zenon's breakfast at the Ortolan was substantial, and he even provided sandwich bags so we could stock up before heading off for the rest of the day. A great touch.

The remainder of the day we did a circuit of the southern basin, starting with a stop at Zajki Meadows (site 44). We drove as far as a tour group, parked and then walked beyond the group to connect with the nature without the chatter of a dozen dudes. **Whitethroats** and **Sedge Warblers** were common, and again we were surrounded by **White-winged Black Terns**, common but stunningly beautiful. **Marsh** and **Montagu's Harriers** added to the cast, and at the end of the track a bigger raptor got the pulse racing as I got my first ever **Lesser Spotted Eagle**. Occasionally a **Bittern** boomed from close enough that we could hear the inhalation, and on the walk back to the car we both got a glimpse of one in flight.

The drive up the Czar's Rd took us through the bog alder forest. We stopped once or twice but observed few birds here, and no new ones, eventually reaching the famous Długa Luka boardwalk at about 12.30. Our plan was to be back here for late evening for the Aquatic Warblers for which this site is famous, but we decided on a midday recce. Half way along snatches of song peaked our interest and amazingly a scan across the grass yielded superb, if slightly distant views of a beautiful **Aquatic Warbler**. It sang from the tallest reed about a foot above the grass for several minutes allowing study in the scope, pictures and videos. Bloody beauty. Though we now had this in the bag we wandered to the end of the boardwalk where we saw at least two more birds, allowing comparison with the Sedge Warblers that were also present in some numbers. Also present were drumming **Snipe**, singing **Curlew** (heard only), **Reed Bunting**, and a very distant Elk on the edge of the forest some 2km away.



Aquatic Warbler (digiscoped)

Success with the Aquatic convinced us to take it fairly easy and celebrate with a meal at the Dobarz Restaurant, just up the road. Our timing was good because it rained while we enjoyed lunch (and a celebratory beer) and had cleared by the time we headed north again.

Next stop, between 3 and 5pm was Msichy, another well-known Aquatic site, but with that in the bag a quarry here were Bluethroat and Citrine Wagtail. Though fairly sure we heard the former, we saw none, but in contrast two **Citrine Wagtails** performed beautifully, ably supported by a cast of



Citrine Wagtail (digiscoped)

Snipe and **Black-tailed Godwits** in smart summer plumage. Making our way back towards our accommodation, with the weather deteriorating, we stopped at Brzostowo (Site 25). On a cobbled section of road near the village we walked along listening carefully until I spotted an **Ortolan Bunting** in a roadside tree. Tom had wandered off up into the field following the song of another, but the bird stayed put until he could get back. We had nice views, though the cloud and threatening rain meant the light was too poor for photographs.

By the time we arrived back in Wizna the rain had set in for good so we headed for another decent cheap meal at Dany U Bar thankful that we were not standing on the boardwalk at Długa Luka with lots of other punters. By the time we finished it was still light, but birding opportunities would be limited so we decided on some mammal watching. A few km from the restaurant we parked up over an east-west channel hosting the beaver lodge seen this morning. To stay dry we scanned from the car, me looking west, Tom east. Around about 8.30 a shout went up from Tom that he had a Beaver: suppressing obvious jokes I landed my bins down the channel and clocked a head poking above the water line, ripples fanning out behind it. As it turned left and dived into another smaller channel we glimpsed its chunky body breaking the waterline before it disappeared for good.

Though we were back at the Ortolan relatively early, I set myself up in the living room in front of the fire and backed up my photos as well as checked email using the free wireless network. It was after 11 before I finished.

16th May

Another day, another dawn start. We hadn't intended this to be an intense trip, but once here we were both loath to waste the best birding hours lying in bed. Our plan was to go back to the Ruff site, this time wearing wellies, and hoping that there would be fewer fishermen, though we were nervous of the state of track given last night's rain. The dirt track was indeed much softer and our tyres made occasionally worryingly deep imprints but we pressed on. A pair of female Elk in a field made for the woods as they spied the car approaching, an added bonus but sadly they did not hang around for photographs.

We reached the point we'd stopped the day before, grateful that we were now the only people for miles around. Donning wellingtons, I walked directly through the larger pool and realised the base was actually fairly firm, and depth just about the floor level of the car. Perhaps it was worth the risk to drive through! It was a rental after all. I looked at Tom and with a nod from him, jumped back in the car. Keeping the revs up, I drove slowly but steadily through the two deep pools and slowed to

collect Tom en route to a better vantage point. With the car we were able to approach much closer than yesterday, our progress limited by the ground getting increasingly soft under-wheel.

Positioning the car broadside across the track I slipped into the back seat and we now enjoyed great views as the clouds parted, and sun came out illuminating the scene perfectly from behind us. Over the course of the hour a dozen or more male **Ruff**, in a great variety of garbs from black, to chestnut through to pure white, variously fed and occasionally displayed to each other and the several females also in attendance. All the while **White-winged Black Terns** hovered, courted each other, and we added **Tufted Duck** and **Black-necked Grebe** to the trip list, while a flock of **Cranes** few over adding further variety.

We retreated soon after 7am. We flushed a Lesser Spotted Eagle from near the track on our way back, and were able to track it to where it perched in view to eat a recent catch. Another close dark raptor close by the track had us excited again though less so when we realised it was a female Marsh Harrier, not another eagle.

En route back for breakfast we stopped at the Beaver lodge. I wandered north about 50m to scan the more open area of water and a huge splash told me I had narrowly missed seeing a beaver sat below me on the bank. Another new trip bird, a pair of **Black Stork**, was a bonus for the stop.

After another hearty breakfast we packed up, settled with Zenon and headed north along the west bank, retracing our steps from the previous evening. Thrush Nightingales were surprisingly thin on the ground throughout the trip, only just arriving back, so when we heard one singing close to the road as we drove through Mocarze I pulled over and we spent some time trying to locate it in some



White-winged Black Tern (DSLR)

undergrowth over a small stream, to bemused looks from an old chap in his garden next door. Sadly it slipped away unseen, and we were not to have such a close encounter with this species again. We hoped for better conditions for photographing Ortolan Bunting at Brzostowo but one bird seen briefly by Tom that flew before he could get a pic, was poor reward. Another crack at Bluethroat in the willows at the start of the track at Msichy yielded a singing bird that was seen for barely tickable views of no more than a second (still,

trip tick, **Bluethroat**), but it was not panning out as a bird-filled morning. We decided to explore further down the track as Msichy, with a pair of **Cranes** and again lots of **W-W Black Terns** the highlights.

Around 12.30 we made a move further north to a new site for some raptor watching. The drive was enlivened by a group of **Hawfinch** flushed from feeding on the roadside as we drove past, and around 1pm we rolled up at a spot just beyond the village of Kapice that both Lukasz' book, and privately Marek had indicated as good for (Greater) Spotted Eagle. Within minutes of arrival as we

walked west towards a promising looking viewing spot Tom picked up a large dark raptor above the pines. A rapid wrestle with tripods and we were both scoping it lazily cruising to the north over several minutes, noting the all-dark uppers and square hand that are key distinguishing features of **Spotted Eagle** from its smaller relative. We took a picnic here, also noting **Crane** flying over, a **Common Buzzard**, and further great views of Spotted Eagle including a second bird and a short display flight.



Hawfinch (DSLR)



Black Woodpecker (DSLR)

The last few km of the side road from the village to the main road of the 65 to Grajewo passes through nice looking pine forest. As we entered the forest we noticed another roadside bird and realised we had just passed another **Hawfinch**. We reversed and I managed a poor record shot before it flew, but we now drove on more circumspectly and found another few **Hawfinch** and well as at least one **Siskin** and then a larger bird that we realised was, unusually, a **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, and another on the other side of the road. Peering through the grubby windscreen I was irritated when a crow flew down to obscure my view of the woodpecker when Tom took a second look – shit, it's a **Black Woodpecker**! Finally laying to rest this bogey in unusual circumstances was a highlight of the afternoon. I managed only a couple of poor pics of this impressive bird on the deck and in flight. We tracked it through the forest and Tom got an angle to take a quick picture on a tree trunk (obscured for me) before it disappeared into the forest and could not be coaxed back by Tom's iphone.

This success persuaded us to spend a bit more time in the pine forest, both here and on the west side of the 65 and the railway line, but we were unable to repeat.

Our destination for the late afternoon was the Zagroda Kuwasy hotel, a large but very nice hotel on the edge of the National Park and very well situated for some interesting sites at the northern edge of the Middle Basin. After settling in to the hotel we walked the length of the Dobra Droga Dike down as far as Jegrznia Bridge. The mosquitoes down here were as bad as we had experienced anywhere so in spite of the warmth we covered up completely. Key target was Barred Warbler, one of five *Sylvia* sp. possible. One bird sang and seemed good for Barred, especially when it responded to our recording, but were back to our morning form and failed to get a look at it. Rumour was that the mozzies in the Grzedzy forest were even worse so in spite of the potential riches in store (great for woodpeckers, RB Fly, etc) we did not venture in.

Eventually we found ourselves down at the bridge overlooking a lovely looking reedbed. A Savi's Warbler sang and I heard the only Reed Warbler of the trip (Great Reed here also of course) and the star of the show, a **Bluethroat** bringing grubs to a nest clearly right next to the bridge. We settled in for some great photo opportunities enjoying another diamond moment of the trip as this beautiful and desirable chat performed no more than 5-6m away.



Bluethroat (DSLR)

We walked fairly briskly back to the hotel, hoping for Elk on edges of the surrounding woods, with the highlight being a pair of roosting **Crane**. A welcome shower, and tasty buffet meal (and beer for me!) was followed by a very comfortable night including a sleep in to a rather late 5.30.

Our main target this morning was Barred Warbler. Tom had seen autumn immature birds in Norfolk but never an adult, and I had only ever had one brief encounter with this species in Austria in 2006. Sadly, after a short drive down into the best areas from last night and we were still unbarred by the time we reached the bridge again, though we had clocked up the other four local *Sylvia* sp., **Whitethroat**, **Lesser Whitethroat**, **Blackcap** and a **Garden Warbler**. At the bridge again we located the singing Savi's which perched prominently giving excellent views. With Tom seemingly having given up on the Barred and concentrating on getting good pics and video of the Savi's, I decided to have another shot the Barred Warbler. After all, I had cracking vid of Savi's from Spain in '09.

I walked back as far as the entrance to the forest without much joy, but as I walked slowly back a now familiar warbling caught my attention. I was fairly confident that this was my quarry but it skulked low in dense cover by the side of the road, so even though it carried on singing close by I could not get a view. Once or twice a shape moved but I had decided I needed a visual before I alerted Tom. Fortunately a chunky shape then flitted to a more open bush and I heard the song again. Now scanning with renewed vigour I caught the various diagnostic bits of it: grey and grey/brown colouring, and brief views of barring and an even briefer view of its yellow eye, though at no point did I get a full view of the whole bird. I could see Tom about 200m down the road, but decided I should stay with it and resorted to calling him on his mobile. He immediately packed up and jogged down to where it was now silent. Fortunately it seemed to have a fairly settled territory and soon it was singing again from the original place I heard it and it was just case of patience until we both got decent views. A photo never seemed on the cards, though Tom aimed his 7D in hope once or twice, but at least **Barred Warbler** was now on the list.

Well chuffed we returned to the hotel for a breakfast with a bonus of a very decorative waitress, and made a plan for our return journey to Warsaw for our 18.20 flight back to Heathrow. White-tailed Eagle had eluded us so far and the previous evening it had seemed I might need to leave this apparently common species for another day. Now with our main targets under the belt we decided on a slight detour on the return journey to the spot Paul Doherty had told us about, which I worked

out was Czechwizna, site 58 in Lukasz' guide. It was well worth the trip. We enjoyed views of up to 10 **White-tailed Eagles**, soaring, fishing and at one point 4 birds perched in a tree that proved remarkably approachable. Most were immature, presumably non-breeding birds, but at least 2 adults were present.

Our route back to the E67 took us through Tykocin. While Tom parked the car over the bridge I had one more recce of the spot where we Syrian Woodpecker had been reported. Sadly there was still massive disruption and noise from the roadworks. A walk down by the river to a viewing tower would have been quite pleasant without the noise and dust of the angle-grinder. Even so **White-winged Black Terns** swooped along the river and A **Savi's** sat up singing in the reedbed. In other circumstances, with less noise and more time, the site might have been worth lingering at, but I promised Tom no more than 10mins, and was good to my word, almost. We hit the E67 by 1.30pm and most unusually for me, rolled into the airport in a relaxed fashion with plenty of time to spare.