

Poland

26th-30th May 2007
by Simon Woolley and Julia Casson



Saturday 26th May

We were up at 0415, and away for the familiar run up to Heathrow - all pretty painless and straightforward, at least apart from some unseemly shoving in the BA "fast bag drop" (huh!) area. We boarded our flight along with a slightly tipsy rugby team, complete with Polish moustaches, Bob the Builder hats and in one case an afro wig, and took off at shortly after 0815, on a cold and rainy morning.

Just over two hours later, new landed in a rather hot and sultry Warsaw - 34°C! We took the world's most spectacularly short airport bus ride (all of 10m!) to the terminal, got into the country with no problems, picked up our Renault rent-a-car (thankfully with AC), and headed off into the urban horror of the capital. It was slow work getting through all the traffic lights and traffic, but we eventually got out, via a Tesco stop, and hit the E67 north-east towards Bialystok.

The road was busy and tough driving, and it was pretty slow progress, but we finally escaped the main road and headed off northwards into the Narew valley, towards Wizna. And the birds promptly started!

A sequence of short stops at familiar places produced the expected "common" species - White-winged Black and Black Terns, Crane, Savi's and Icterine Warbler, Red-backed Shrike, drumming Snipe and displaying Redshank, singing Marsh Warbler and a so far invisible Thrush Nightingale or two.



White-winged Black Tern

But it was time to get on to Zenek's pension, and to our delight, there were Tomek and Gabriela (with 2 year old Lidia in tow) to meet us - what a welcoming party! We caught up and chatted over a "light" meal (fat!), and then Marek Borkowski arrived, as arranged by a combination of mobile phone calls and fragmentary emails. Soon afterwards, we drove off with him into the gathering evening shade.

It was a long drive in his big American van, first to Bialystok, and then beyond towards the Belarus border. Close to the site, as dusk was gathering, forks of lightning began to shatter the blackening skies - it was looking a bit dodgy! But we persisted (of course), and followed Marek down through a wet meadow and out onto the floodplain. Thrush, Nightingales, Grasshopper Warblers and Corncrakes welcomed us into the habitat of our big target species. We set ourselves up, and waited, the thunder and lightning growing all the time. It was still and quiet.

Suddenly, a blast of air from behind us, and the rain began - huge, warm raindrops, and within minutes we were soaked. "I don't know how a thunderstorm affects their behaviour" said Marek, not very encouragingly.... But suddenly, a silhouette broke the skyline - could it be? Oh yes - GREAT SNIPE displaying! Very shortly, we had good views of perhaps 10+ birds, almost all in flight, hopping about and flying very short distances, fighting and chasing around the lek site. The birds were really big, heavy and dark, virtually like a Woodcock in jizz, with very white tail corners, and an occasionally visible (slight) white trailing edge to the inner wing. This was just mythical - FINALLY, lekking Great Snipe doing their thing in the primeval swamps of Poland!

The rain stopped, and we enjoyed the sight and sound of these amazing birds popping, crackling and whistling away in the tussocky bog, until it was fully dark. Now exhausted, we sat damply in the van for the 60km drive back to Wizna, said our goodbyes to Marek, and simply crashed out - absolutely shattered, but very happy.

Sunday 27th May

Let's admit it, this is a holiday, not a paramilitary exercise! So we treated ourselves to what we promised would be our only lie-in - although we did get woken at about 0400 anyway by a combination of mosquitoes, birdsong and the dawn!

Still, we took it easy until after breakfast, and then hit the road to explore the area either side of the River Narew, to the east of Wizna. We started off at a small oxbow lake, which held a good variety of species - Barred Warbler, Red-backed Shrike, Golden Oriole, a distant Penduline Tit, Whinchat, a Hoopoe (heard only) and so on. Next stop was a major White-winged Black Tern colony, where perhaps 200 of these little beauties entertained us over a flooded water-meadow. Further brief halts turned up Willow Tit, a singing Thrush Nightingale which even deigned to show itself to us, a stunning male Montagu's Harrier and lots of Red-backed Shrikes and Blue-headed Wagtails. Just to be in such fantastic "ordinary countryside", full of birds, is a real treat.

We had a picnic lunch beside yet another oxbow, in the shade of an Alder tree, accompanied by Hooded Crows, Fieldfares, a Whinchat and a Sedge Warbler which didn't stop singing for over an hour! It was now very hot - 33°C - making Poland apparently the hottest place in Europe today! These temperatures aren't normally reached until July....so with bird activity slow, we drove home for a siesta, and after gasping in the heat for a while, even had a few minutes of sleep. An hour before dinner down by the river turned up a Sand Martin colony, both marsh terns and our first Grey Partridges, plus a couple of brief Marsh Warblers.



Aquatic Warbler

After a simply excellent mushroom goulash dinner, we drove back into the field, this time to the new boardwalk south of Gugny. Very quickly, we located our target species - singing Aquatic Warbler! Three showed well, but briefly, and we also had Grasshopper Warbler, Whinchat and Crane here. Slightly further north, we took a sandy track off to the west, which disappointingly failed to emerge in wet meadows, but the scrubby alder carr did have some nice species - several River Warblers, Thrush Nightingale, a few Common Rosefinches, roding Woodcock and some distant, unseen Cranes. The insects were something of a nightmare, however, so we eventually retreated to the car, and had one final stop at a large wooden observation tower overlooking the swamps - our major target here was Elk, and we were not disappointed, with about 7 or 8 lumbering about distantly in the sedge fens. Also here were singing Grasshopper and Savi's Warblers and yet more Thrush Nightingales, plus drumming Snipe and another Woodcock. In darkness, we made the quick drive home - it is still SO HOT!

Monday 28th May

We were planning a reasonably early start, but we got going a little earlier than planned thanks to Julia mis-setting the alarm, so it went off at 0330! A further hour of doze later, and we were really up, and straight down for an excellent breakfast, before hitting the road for our favourite little spot at Mscichy, up the west side of the lower basin. It only took us half an hour on deserted roads, and we were soon in great habitat.

We checked the willow scrub by the village first, and sure enough, soon turned up a singing male Bluethroat, along with Penduline Tit and cacophonous warblers of various species. Strangely, we found no Aquatic Warblers in the sedge beds, just lots of (appropriately) Sedge Warblers, but out towards the river, we were rewarded with clouds of White-winged Black Terns, three or so Whiskered Terns, Greylag Geese, Marsh Harriers, nest-building Swallows and so on. A wonderful little spot.

Onwards we sped as the day started to get hot again, towards Czerwono Bagno, via lovely country lanes and the rather unlovely town of Grajewo. We finally followed our noses and the rather impressively accurate map (when we were on it!), and found the visitors' centre at Grzedy. The famous "red marsh" was actually (rather to our surprise) almost completely a forest site, at least in the area we had time to explore, and thus had nasty insects throughout the day, not just at dawn and dusk! So, "sakihttu-ed" and repellent laden, we braved the lovely old bog forest - stunning habitat, not a million miles from parts of Bialowieza. And the birds almost matched up too - singing Red-breasted Flycatcher, Pied Flycatcher, a rather scruffy White-backed Woodpecker, tons of Wood Warblers, and some trip ticks like Robin, Hoopoe and Goldcrest.

It did get very hot and not particularly comfortable, so we moved off at 1200 or so, found a place to picnic under some trees with a friendly Icterine Warbler, and dozed for half an hour. A quick drive got us home (via a stop near Tykocin for distant but reasonable views of Bee-eaters, and an ice-cream), and we took an hour or so out to rest up ahead of tonight's expedition on the river.

At 1600, we joined up with a group of four German visitors ("sort of" birders in a couple of cases) and their Polish guide, a bloke called Piotr, with whom we were not impressed - inappropriate, unfunny, and not very pleasant. We were all due to go for an outing in Zenek's pride and joy, his home-made 18 foot boat. The drift/paddle downstream (we ended up doing 25km!) was largely pleasant, although our co-boaters did not all seem to understand the value of keeping quiet!



European beaver

Finally, after some nice birds, such as Great Reed and Reed Warblers, Quail, Corncrake (heard only!), Black Stork, Black-tailed Godwit and even Great White Egret overhead, plus close views of Black and White-winged Black Terns and hundreds of Sand Martins breeding in the banks, the sun set, and we started scanning the slow-flowing river for...Beavers! And we succeeded! Not one but FIFTEEN in total, loafing about warily, and sometimes submerging explosively with a slap of the tail. We even saw a couple out of the water - brilliant stuff. Now eaten alive, and having a sense of humour failure with Piotr, we paddled, risking our very lives in the face of mosquitoes and midges, into the darkness, until finally we saw Zenek's van waiting for us in the distance - phew! We hauled the boat onto his trailer, and drove home for another later than planned finish...

Tuesday 29th May

Julia got the alarm right this time, and we woke at 0430 for an early Aquatic Warbler watch at the boardwalk. We had good success, with cracking views of one drying itself off in the early morning sun, accompanied by the now "usual" marshland birds - Crane, Grasshopper Warbler, Whinchat, Common Rosefinch and so on. Three Red Deer and an Elk were also out in the swamp, plus a pair of Cranes with a tiny juvenile - cute factor very high.

We stopped off at our favourite oxbow (sorry, "paleomeander") on the way back, with nice views of Barred Warbler, Hoopoe, Serin and Fieldfare, but we did do breakfast full justice at 0800! Super stuff. We took our time getting away mid-morning, but started off with a productive stop just south of Wizna, where Zenek's gen came up trumps, with instant views of a roadside Ortolan Bunting, bathing with Linnets and Yellowhammers - this lovely little sot also had Thrush Nightingales, Golden Orioles and even a brief Wryneck.

We stopped in Drozdowo for a quick visit to the ecological museum - slightly depressing and full of stuffed things, but good to see a couple of big school parties visiting. The house also had a small section on the Lutoslawski family (famous composer and all that) - that's it for culture on this trip!

After Lomza, we passed Nowogoród and in a sandy area with large pine forests and open meadows, we found our target bird surprisingly easily - Roller! This is a very rare bird in Poland (only about 40 pairs), and while we had seen one near Bialystok last time, we didn't really expect to connect again. There was a pair apparently nesting at the first spot we saw one, and later, we had another on distant wires. A result!

We took a gentle cross country route to Brzostowo by the Biebrza river, and had our picnic in a favourite spot by the river - four Black Storks, Common Rosefinch (a nice red male), Tree Sparrow, Little and Common Terns, a distant Lesser Spotted Eagle, and as hoped-for, a massive White-tailed Eagle (a young bird) causing total panic and flushing everything, including a Shoveler and a pair of Garganey.

But then the promised change in the weather arrived - a massive derecho blast of air, blackening skies, and then a brief but intense spell of rain - white-horses on the river, and bits of tree bowing everywhere! So we packed it in, and retreated to basecamp at about 1530 for an hour or two of rest.

Post yet another massive dinner and some more genning up with Zenek, we headed out into the wet meadows around the former collective farm to the south of Wizna - we had one target in mind, and after stopping to enjoy all our "common" friends en route, we finally found a field apparently full of calling Corncrakes, and gave them a blast of Zenek's tape. They came closer, and closer, and finally two broke cover and flew right past us, giving prolonged flight views. But to see them on the ground, even in just a few inches of hay crop, was impossible. A brilliant way to finish a very good day indeed - and a relatively early finish too!

Wednesday 30th May

A much cooler night, and much more rested with "only" an 0630 start. Breakfast as vast as ever, this time with pierogi (sweet ravioli with cream cheese....). We settled up with Zenek, promised to visit again (which I'm sure we will, maybe in winter/spring?), and hit the road. We gave ourselves a good long session at the Zajki White-winged Black Tern colony - they really are astonishing birds. Also a flyover Black Stork here, plus Grass Snake. Then southwards once more, to the Grady Woniecko collective farm fields once again - more Corncrakes singing, Common Rosefinch, Marsh and Savi's Warblers showing well, and Reed and Great Reed Warblers and Thrush Nightingales singing but unseen in the reeds and scrub.

Savi's Warbler



We followed the bumpy track all the way round to the village of Koty, and then tracked quickly across to the main highway at Zambrow. From here, it was lorries and annoyance all the way back to Warsaw, where the airport proved rather more elusive than one would want.....very tricky in heavy Russian lorry traffic!

But we finally got there at 1600, and checked ourselves in. A one hour delay was annoying but not insuperable, and we finally got back to Heathrow by about 2100, and home by 2300. An action-packed, bird-filled half-term break - excellent value!

Simon Woolley
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