

Poland 2005 April Bo Beolens

Forest, Fields & Fishponds...

Poland – 23rd to 30th April 2005 – with (the late) Felix Felgar's Wildlife Tours

After lots of long-haul trips to Australasia, Asia and North America I thought it was time to try and plug a few gaps in my European list and use the opportunity to study species which may turn up in the UK but are not every day birds. Two weeks spent in Hungary and Poland were part gap filling and part “familiarisation” trips to see just how two of my “Anytime Tour” partners conducted their businesses. Not only was I gratified that they really know their stuff and organise well, but very impressed with the Eastern European spring... the spectacle of thousands of lekking Ruff and hundreds of marshy terns would of themselves justified the trip. I found Hungary to be a pretty country with neat cottages and tidy small towns. The countryside was less agribusiness, more farming – although change is obvious too...

Our Timing wasn't perfect, as we were too early for some summer visitors such as River and Aquatic Warblers, but it was prime time to see woodland species before the canopy becomes too closed in. The weather was very changeable but this did not spoil our trip. What is more no one could have worked harder than Felix and Bogash to get us the birds we most wanted to see without me having to suffer the arthritic pain long hikes induce...

Day by Day

Saturday 23rd April

Arrival in Katowice at 2200 on a WizzAir flight from Budapest to be met at the airport by Felix [driven by his father] and Lasy Lublaniackie and the 50-minute transfer to our overnight accommodation the [Dworek Mysliwski](#) Hunting Lodge, in the village of Byrnek.

Sunday 24th April

The day started with a breakfast meeting at the Lodge with Felix and a drive to the forest to view Tengmalm's Owl. This forest had a viewable Black Woodpecker nest right alongside the road, with the incumbent at home. Terrific views of the bird peering out of the nesthole, flying and working its way up the trees. Without Black Woodpecker there would be few nesting holes for larger hole-nesting birds such as the Tengmalm's Owl that Lasy took us to see.

We gathered around the tree just a few meters from the road and focussed our scopes on the nesthole. When we were all set Lasy scratched the tree trunk, imitating a Pine Martin – this led to the owl popping into view to see what was going on. We had excellent views, but did not disturb the bird further. We were pleased to hear that the guides had found a number of such nests in the forest. So that visiting groups do not disturb birds over much, these nests are visited on a strict rota meaning that they have no contact for several weeks at a time. During the drive through the forest we also saw some common woodland species such as Jays and Thrushes as well as Siskin and Common Crossbill.

We returned to the Lodge to meet our guide for the rest of the trip Boguseaw Dulian [Bogash as we came to know him] and talked over hot chocolate before driving to the fish ponds along the Auschwitz River, having stopped nearby for a typical Polish lunch of Borsch, or for those not fond of beetroot soup, the more international Fritki [chips].

The rest of the day was spent watching birds on the fishponds and surrounding paths and reedbeds. The unexpected tick of the trip had arrived there a few days earlier. White Pelican which had flown in with returning White Storks. Other highlights included Red-crested Pochard, nesting Penduline Tit, terrific views of singing Savi's Warbler and a supporting cast of wildfowl and waders with warblers singing around us and bittern booming.

The late afternoon and early evening was taken up with the drive to our overnight accommodation in view of the snow clad mountains. We stayed over night at the [Jawor Penjonat](#) in Zawoja. We had a decent meal and my first taste of a local beer – rywec.

Monday 25th April

After breakfast we met again with Felix to discuss our next destination. It had been planned to see the Tatra Mountains and take the cable car to look for Alpine Accentor but the weather had closed in and predicted visibility was poor. In light of this it was decided to drive towards the Bia³owieYa Forrest stopping en route at several birding places and staying overnight in Zwierzyniec. The disappointment of missing the mountains was compensated for to an extent by Maggie spotting a pair of Ring Ouzel as we drove along and we had excellent views of these in their pristine breeding plumage. another unexpected trip tick. We were unlucky to have poor weather with drizzle from time to time and an overcast day. We searched the peat moss of the Podhale area but did not connect with the hoped-for Black grouse.

It was still poor weather when we arrived at our accommodation for the night – Mill [Karczma M³yn] at Zwierzyniec village. This hotel has a pond opposite it, where there is an easily viewable beaver lodge and reputedly, beaver are often seen. We weren't so lucky.

Tuesday 26th April

The next morning the rain poured and no beaver could be found but the trip tally was added to from a brief viewing of the parkland around the Lodge, Treecreeper, Nuthatch, Long-tailed Tit (Northern race), Hawfinch, Blackcap etc.

We then decided to drive towards the Bia³owieYa Forrest stopping en route at several birding places.

Our first stop was the nearby Roztocze National Park where lagoons afford the opportunity of waders and wildfowl etc. as well as raptors and wild horses. However, we arrived to find two bulldozers working on the lagoons in the persistent fine rain that kept most birds at bay. Nevertheless, we did see our only Black Stork of the trip and more common species.

We made a stop at a known site hoping to see a Black Grouse sub-species not available in the UK, but despite searching around the area we did not connect.

We arrived at the village of Bia³owieYa in time for a late lunch before taking our first look at the forest – driving the trails in search of Hazel Hen [unsuccessfully] which sometimes fly across the many tracks

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That night and the following one, was spent at Unikat Pension in the village.

Wednesday 27th April

We had been given a spot in the forest [which is part of the Bia³owieYa National Park], close to the main road, for Three-toed Woodpecker [top target species for the trip to complete our list of European Woodpeckers] by local guide Arek Szymula who had worked for the locally based Academy of Science Mammal Research Centre. The morning was spent looking for the woodpecker and seeing Short-toed Treecreeper, Middle-spotted Woodpecker and Great-spotted Woodpecker as well as Chiff-chaffs and Collared Flycatcher. Fortunately, our patience was rewarded and we all got good views of a male Three-toed Woodpecker that called and flew around us and up tree trunks before disappearing again into the forest.

The afternoon was spent looking for Hazel Hen again and then for Pygmy Owl with Arek. We did not get any daytime views but did see a lot of passerines who came to the recorded Pygmy Owl calls looking for a bird to mob. These included Marsh Tit, Chiff-chaffs, and common finches etc.

The Hazel Hen hunt may have been successful – some of us saw a bird fly off the road into the trees and Bogash re-located the bird to positively identify it as a male Hazel Hen. The bird took flight again to be seen again by one member of the party when it flew over the heads of the other two. To tick or not to tick remained a dilemma. I did not ID the bird myself, and whilst unlikely, it is possible that the bird seen by Bogash was a coincidence. The second bird I saw might also have not been the Hazel Hen either. a difficult call.

In the evening we again went out into the forest with Arek to another couple of spots good for the owl. In the dying light at the last of these he successfully called in a Pygmy Owl (without a tape) and we all got excellent views. I was particularly grateful for his efforts in calling the bird into a tree top I could view by leaning back on the car bonnet – the only way an A.S. sufferer can look straight up in the air! We celebrated with the local Beer – *ubr* – the Polish word for the European Bison which inhabit the forest. Whilst we did not see Bison we did see Red Squirrels, Fox and several Roe Deer.

Thursday 28th April

We left Bia³owieYa en route for Biebrza Marshes but stopped in the village to take a couple of photographs. This enabled us to get views of a Wryneck feeding on the ground in the church yard.

We also tried to gain entry to Belarus – just for the passport stamp – but, whilst the Polish border guards would have let us cross, the Belarusians would not let us step over the white line painted across the road.

The rest of the day was taken up by a very long drive to our overnight accommodation and we had poor weather for most of the trip with conditions varying from sunny intervals to driving rain. Before the drive we made one stop at a viewing tower over the Siemianówka Reservoir. Here we had strong sunshine and much better weather allowed us to view across the lake as far as Belarus allowing us to create a Belarus list of one – Common Buzzard. On the lake [which is mostly shallow and reed clogged] we saw a pair of Whooper Swan and 5 Common Cranes as well as many waterfowl, with several pairs of Garganey, and a few distant Great Cormorants and marsh terns. Whilst on the tower a Common Cuckoo came and sat in birches allowing very close views. Another stop, at another tower view point, this time over the Narew River gave views of thousands of swallows roosting in reedbeds, but it was hard to see much else apart from Yellow Wagtails and a distant reeling Savi's Warbler.

Overnight we stayed at the Alumnat Hotel in the small town of Tykocin, which is owned by the local Parish and was a hospital for soldiers in the seventeenth century

Friday 29th April

Biebrza National Park covers a vast area of eastern Poland but the marshes are twice the size of the park proper. The day was spent exploring roads alongside marshes with excellent views of flooded fields that dry in summer but during April are ablaze with marsh marigolds. Many had large Ruff flocks, attendant Yellow [blue-headed] Wagtails, and in some places snipe. All those we saw well enough were Common Snipe. Every field seemed to have a Marsh Harrier and we also saw Montague's Harriers as well as a distant view of a perched White-tailed Eagle and a fly-by ring-tailed Hen Harrier. We saw and heard many Skylarks and a few other passerines such as Meadow Pipits, Linnet, finches and Reed Buntings.

At lunch we took a break and ate an excellent meal at the Bartlowizna Restaurant with its strange White Poplar carvings. From the restaurant window we could see a summer plumaged pair of Brambling hopping about a willow with other finches etc. The outlook from this complex is glorious, with the river winding around, creating many temporary channels and floods with wild flowers and birds galore.

In the afternoon we drove further out into the marshes and at one high tower watch point had great views of our first Elk. During the day we had Hoopoe and all three marsh terns with the majority being White-winged Black Terns and a lot of Black Terns with an occasional Whiskered Tern.

In the evening we visited a nearby Great Snipe lek. Fortunately, we connected with one individual in flight as we approached the area, but the lek proper did not commence until it was too dark to see any more than distant movement. Whilst waiting

we had at least three cuckoos calling and the constant boom of a bittern. Many Common Snipe were drumming all the while.

Overnight we stayed at the Bartlowizna Hotel.

Saturday 30th April

We had deliberately set aside a further day in the North of Poland in the hope that Aquatic Warblers and River warblers would have returned. As there had been none reported by any of Felix's 'spies' we spent half the day driving on the other side of the marshes and then driving down to Warsaw where we stayed at the Gromada Hotel which is almost within sight of the airport.

Accommodation

Our accommodation requirements were set out in advance – we wanted clean, accommodation with en suite showers but did not want to pay over the odds. Simplicity would be fine. Moreover, we preferred accommodation with a restaurant available so that if we wanted to we could eat at different times to each other and we did not have to go out to eat.

The accommodation all had these facilities – although the Bartlowizna restaurant was a couple of hundred yards away. What struck us most was that the cost varied greatly, with the most expensive being nearly three times the cost of the cheapest. What is more, price did not reflect quality, with one of the cheapest being better than the most expensive. No facilities fell below an acceptable standard but all had some shortcomings.

Jawor Penjonat This looked like a typical Alpine chalet but proved to fall short of the standards one would expect in Austria or Switzerland. Whilst the rooms were clean and ostensibly well-appointed the lack of maintenance was a let-down with a leaky sink and a toilet bowl that not only lost its seat but also the whole pedestal rocked! Our evening meal was given without choice [although advance warning did mean they gave me a meat free meal]. The quality was probably the poorest of the trip. We saw no evidence of accessible rooms. Andy's room was fine, but his meal was served some time before he arrived for dinner! He also experienced a limited range of whiskies!

Karczma M³yn We chose to stay here in the hope of early morning beavers which did not materialise in the rain. However, it was a very comfortable stay despite the odd shaped room and strange but comfortable beds. The evening meal was good as was the beer! Breakfast was pre-ordered but was still plentiful and very palatable. It was easy to bird from the window in the rain and the outlook was interesting and scenic. We saw no evidence of an accessible room and the first-floor accommodation was up a steep stair. Far and away the second-best place for a pre-breakfast birding stroll.

Unikat Pension This for me was the best choice of accommodation – it was simple, well maintained, clean and had a reasonable restaurant too. Moreover, it was reasonably priced despite being located in a very popular area. The only criticism I had was that the room designs were plain daft. more thought at the outset would have

enabled twin beds to be alongside one another instead of at 90 degrees and the other side of the room. They say they had accessible rooms and the rooms seemed accessible although our room would not afford access to the toilet for transfer from a wheelchair. It would have been impossible to attend the restaurant with wheelchairs as there was a flight of steps down to it

Alumnat Hotel This is a community owned hotel created from a converted sixteenth century building which once held a hospital. The staff are friendly and the food plain but wholesome. The one drawback was the lack of heating – all of us found it to be a cold place to sleep! This had no accessible rooms and a locked fire escape! Andy liked this place a lot, and, although not as warm as the other places, he wasn't uncomfortably cold.

Bartlowizna Hotel This is part of a complex with a very good restaurant and the hotel has conference facilities, which is how it is mostly used. We had a great meal in the restaurant and a terrible night at the hotel which one has to say had very good facilities but is badly managed. Local management is not really interested in trade from birdwatchers and other nature lovers relying instead on conference trade. Our well-appointed room had a very noisy neighbour and they kept us away ALL night partying until 4.30am. What is more they even tried to climb on to our balcony and, when we went for help we found there are no night staff. Had the situation got further out of hand I hate to think of the consequences! There was ground floor accommodation but I could not check out the accessibility of bathrooms. Andy reported no problems here at all. Moreover, he had a wonderful early morning birding walk, spoilt slightly by noisy dogs. The restaurant was very interesting, and served Zupy to die for!

Gromada Hotel This hotel is very handy for the airport in Warsaw being less than 10 minutes by car. It is reasonably well-appointed but rooms suffer from poor maintenance with frayed carpets, cracked wash basins etc. The restaurant is, however, very good and breakfast was generous and had great choice. It is slightly awkward that one has to pay for meals in the restaurant and drinks in the bar rather than being able to put them on your room bill. This was the most expensive hotel which is to be expected being so handy for the airport. They advertise accessible rooms.

Guiding etc.

Felix has an organisation whereby he could not only supply local guides at specific sites and information from field birders but he also had the excellent Bogash driving us. He turned out to be very knowledgeable about Poland and its history as well as being a good all-round naturalist. Constantly in touch with Felix he was able to leave plans flexible day on day so as to respond to what was available for us to see.

We were less impressed with Felix's overall organisational skills and personal guiding leaving us with the impression he was trying to do too much with limited, and therefore stretched, resources. His estimate of timings, especially for travel times, was off, sometimes by a number of hours. Poland is not a small country and to find a range of species means a fair amount of travel. In our week we covered around 2,000 kms and many roads are slow by virtue of their size or the state of repair which is particularly poor after the harsh winters.

It is as well to look out of the side windows as Polish overtaking seems very hazardous to an English driver but we completed all our journeys intact.

If it had been possible leaving the trip for another couple of weeks would have given us more species but unpredictable weather also paid its part in keeping the final tally at a collective 130 species for the trip.

The spectacle of Leking Ruff or swirling clouds of Marsh Terns is exciting for British Birders where what would be a rarity at home is abundant abroad. Plenty of good sightings of unfamiliar birds and a sprinkling of lifers made the whole trip an undoubted success.