Birding Trip report Latvia 11th to 16th April 2013 by café birder Howard Taffs

Being a great fan of overhead migration (or viz mig for the hard of writing) I decided to forsake my meagre Bristol patch (annual totals of 1 yellowhammer, and a few finches) and spend 4 days at Cape Kolka in Latvia. This was a site I had been to before at other times of the year and I deliberately aimed for early April to catch up with crane migration and hopefully some rough-legged buzzards.

Travel was with wonderful Ryanair (didn’t we mention the extra tax you have to pay to leave Latvia? and don’t worry about being a few ounces overweight as our trained baggage thrashers will simply rip the wheel assemblies off your suitcase to compensate) Yes that Ryanair.

I stayed at the terrific Usi guesthouse at Kolka as I know from experience that migrants pass right over the garden and I could fit in an hour’s light skywatching from the door to work up an appetite for breakfast. I would wholeheartedly recommend this and booked easily via booking.com.

The food was typically Latvian and having read that it is impolite to leave any I had to beg the owner to give me smaller portions. Now I enjoy a pancake as much as the next slightly portly middle aged birder but 14 for pudding stretched me beyond the bounds of decency.

I hired a vw polo from Add Car via the internet which was the ideal vehicle for the snow and ice covered side roads apart from any other type of vehicle at all.

This was supposed to be the sea

It was cold….surprisingly cold for this late in the year….no really cold. Even the sea was frozen solid for the first day or two though by the last day it had warmed up considerably
and I was able to get about wearing only 4 layers. Still the local simian welding industry was having a boom time of it.

**Anyway on with a brief review of the birds.**

Migrants poured over for the whole 4 days though largest numbers (up to a few thousand an hour) were in the mornings.

I wisely decided not to try and do accurate counts as A) I was on my own. B) that would entail constantly writing and thus missing unusual birds, and C) I would have to take my gloves off.

I tend to bird by ear as much as by sight and the commonest calls were yellowhammers, siskins, skylarks and mistle thrushes.

After the first hour of each day in the garden I then drove to the point itself (a journey of approx 45 seconds) and settled down out of the wind to enjoy the spectacle.

Birds of prey were counted because they are big and easy as were a few less common species but by and large I just made an estimate at the end of the day.

For me the highlights were good numbers of species I rarely see such as bramblings, woodlarks, waxwings and snow buntings plus the steady trickle of BOPs (11 species in all though I did not confirm golden eagle until I checked my photos more thoroughly). Where the sea was beginning to thaw goldeneye displayed and goosanders were always present. Long tailed ducks stayed farther out but a smew came by at point blank range one morning. On day 4, many hundreds of velvet scoter started moving along with smaller numbers of common scoter.

And then of course there were the cranes with small groups going over regularly and circling. Presumably they call so much to decide on which route to take but it was common for one or two to break off from a flock and head back to land.

Each afternoon I drove about 40km to the nearest open café in homage to our patch watching habits which often involve a four coffee break from slogging round a birdless piece of coast at Clevedon.

Suitably refreshed I spent a few hours driving the side roads looking up rides, across clearings and playing tapes of hazel hen as this was a bird I have only heard once in my life and had never seen. This practice produced lots more cranes, about 8 wild boar and birds such as capercaillie and great grey shrike plus flyover eagles, harriers and rough legged buzzard amongst others. (naturally no hazel hen though).

The evenings after dinner were mostly spent looking for beavers and once I had worked out how late they emerge, watching beavers. I also was lucky enough to see a pine martin running across the frozen lake.

One night I bumped into a group of students learning about owl ringing and joined them for a few hours. The one net round that I walked with them produced two Tengmalm's, 2 long eared and a short eared owl. I am grateful to their tutor Anders for accommodating me in this way.
These were the only people I saw in 6 days who were looking for birds. Most of the time I had the whole area to myself.

A Tengmalm’s in the hand is worth 200 that don’t respond to tapes!

One of the 400 or so cranes
Not a bird but I have always wanted to see wild boar.

Great grey shrike; I bumped into 6 of these including 3 together in the garden.

Having given up on Hazel hen, I then stumbled across 3 at the point on my last afternoon there.

Here’s a better idea of numbers of migrants….all hideously underestimated I suspect;
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<td>Kolka Latvia 12th to 15th April 2013 café birder</td>
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This was my third time in Latvia so I was happy enough just seeing a few Black woodpeckers rather than trying to get all the specialities of the country. Anyone spending a little longer there could easily combine Kolka with Kemeri only a couple of hours down the road and see all of the woodpecker species and other owls.

Kolka is disturbingly under recorded and I would highly recommend it to anyone wanting to experience great migration.
Like me you may get to be the first person ever to see grey partridges in a pine wood… whether you want to or not.

Almost an adult white-tailed eagle.

Black woodpecker from the car window.

All pictures taken with my coolpix “point and shoot”. At least it has a decent zoom.

Kolka is a great place for finding your own birds and also has some good butterflies such as yellow legged tortoiseshell and Camberwell beauty once the weather warms up. Wolf prints were found by a researcher during my stay and bear is a very slight possibility.

So all in all I recommend it as a simple to get to site if you want to experience a wide range of migration and contribute something to the countries bird knowledge. There is a new tower hide under construction at the point which would, without doubt increase the numbers of birds seen.

Many thanks are due to Andris Avotins, Ugis Piterans and Dzeneta Marinska who each helped make my stay a great success.