

## Belarus, 29th April–2nd May 2017

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*Azure Tit © Sergey Yeliseev / Creative Commons licence/by-nc-nd/2.0/*

This was a short visit with the primary aims of seeing Azure Tit and Great Grey Owl: both were achieved, and plenty of other good species were recorded too during a most enjoyable long weekend. A visit later in May or June could easily include a site to see Aquatic Warblers on their breeding grounds as well as more of the later arriving migrants to the country.



*Great Grey Owl on nest*

## **Itinerary and logistics**

*Flights:* These were booked through Expedia.co.uk for around GBP180 per person return. The outward flight was with Lufthansa and left Heathrow 25 minutes late at 06.55. The scheduled transfer time in Frankfurt was a ridiculously short 45 minutes and although we made some time up on the flight, it was only thanks to some really helpful desk counter staff and a lot of pleading from Sarah that the onward flight to Minsk was held long enough for all of us to get through security to catch it. This was the only stressful part of the trip. The return flight was with Austrian Airlines and included a rather more realistic two hour transfer time in Vienna.

*Visas:* In early 2017, Belarus relaxed its visa restrictions for many nationalities, including UK citizens, making it possible to visit Belarus for a maximum of five days without a visa provided the following conditions are met: entry and exit must be via Minsk International airport; you must have with you a minimum of EUR25 cash per person per day; you need evidence of medical insurance for a minimum cover of EUR10,000.

Note that many insurance policies (e.g. via bank accounts) do not specify the name of the person covered: we contacted our respective insurance companies to get a personalized letter with confirmation of medical cover. In the end, the immigration at Minsk airport was very straightforward and we simply had our passports stamped with no checking we had met the non-visa requirements noted above. Note that you will be given an arrival and departure card on the flight to fill in before passing immigration. This is very straightforward: in the section asking for details of the sponsoring person or company, simply fill in the name of your first booked hotel.

*Logistics:* These are very easily sorted out in advance through APB, the BirdLife Partner organization in Belarus—**booking through APB means you are helping support APB's important conservation work**—looking after the birds you are going to see! The main contact is **Valeryia Sashko** [birdingbelarus@gmail.com](mailto:birdingbelarus@gmail.com) who was excellent—always very prompt with helpful responses. Obviously the cost of your trip will depend on the length, places visited, itinerary etc. We paid an all-inclusive price in Euros, which we thought was good value for money.

For transport, Valeryia booked a minibus plus Pavel, an English-speaking driver who understood birders' needs and had a great sense of humour. Valeryia also booked our lodging as follows:

*Accommodation:* we stayed in hotel "Turov" in Turau and Dom ohotnika "Vygonovskij" at Lake Vyhanaschankaje. Both were very comfortable and clean.

*Food:* Eastern Europe is never going to be a gourmet tour! Nevertheless, unlike our experiences in Poland, Sarah and I were pleased a genuine attempt was made to cater for us as vegetarians: on only one occasion were we given the meat eaters dish without the meat. Generally, meals were potato-based and rather stodgy. Nevertheless, they were perfectly acceptable for a short trip. Lunches were taken late on both days: you might consider packing some snacks to get you through from breakfast to lunch.

*Weather:* Spring in Belarus in 2017 was both wet and cold. We experienced both conditions—rain all day in Turau and chilly all day (though dry) in the Lake Vyhanaschankaje area.

### **Daily log**

*Saturday 29th April:* early morning flight Heathrow to Frankfurt where we transferred and arrived Minsk just after 13.00. After immigration, we were met by Pavel, our driver, who took us upstairs to the currency exchange, where we changed some money (Euro20 each) for beer etc, which was fast and efficient. While Pavel went to pick up the minibus, we stood outside and watched a passing Rough-legged Buzzard. The journey to Turau took about four hours plus a short stop for lunch at a roadside café. Birds en route included plenty of White Storks. We also stopped by the bridge over the Prypyat River for some birding before checking in to the hotel "Turov". After dinner we visited the wader ringing station where we met Natalia and her colleagues and saw a Reeve in the hand. Apparently the wader roost there had recently peaked at 120,000 Ruffs(!).

*Sunday 30th April:* awoke to pouring rain, which, although it slackened on occasions, carried on all day. A pre-breakfast return to the wader ringing station (and several male Ruffs in the hand), where we picked up Natalia who led us to a nearby site where three Azure Tits had been present the previous day. After about 20 minutes, we located a pair in riverside trees, which approached reasonably close but looked decidedly bedraggled and not at their best. Lots of other good birds were in this location, including several Thrush Nightingales, Hawfinches, Wood Warblers and a Spotted Crake called a couple of times. Returned to hotel for breakfast and checked out before Natalia took us to the old pumping station near Alsany where a pair of Azure Tits was soon located in trees immediately to the east of the station and showed well for a short period. Utter corkers! Other good birds in the area included a ringtail Montagu's Harrier, Wryneck and Hoopoe. Afterwards, we visited some oak woodland on the edge of a national park near Bechanskaya Buda village. The rain was particularly heavy at this point, but we still managed to find about half a dozen male and one female Collared Flycatchers, as well as a Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Afterwards, we drove back to the bridge over the Prypyat River and whilst enjoying a picnic lunch as we sheltered under the rear door of the van, a Terek

Sandpiper obligingly landed close by. Following lunch, we drove to Bielaje Fish Farm, a BirdLife designated Important Bird Area. Plenty of good birds here included a dozen Black Storks, a pair of white-spotted Bluethroats, several Smew, a White-tailed Eagle, a White-backed Woodpecker and some Waxwings. Around 18.00 we said goodbye to Natalia and headed east to Lake Vyhanaschankaje, a drive that took around three hours including a petrol station stop where Woodlark and Redstart were added to the trip list. Once at Lake Vyhanaschankaje, we were met by Valeryia, Victoria and Pavel from APB, then checked into the Dom ohotnika "Vygonovskij" (a hunters' lodge) and after dinner turned in for the night.

*Monday 1st May:* A rather chilly early (06.00) start to reach a close by lekking site for Black Grouse. There we also met the APB contingent who had picked up our local guide, forest ranger Alexandre. He only spoke Russian, so Valeryia helpfully translated for us, which included his account of being attacked by a male Capercaillie (for the video of this incident, visit: <https://wildlife.by/art/photostories/pro-glukharya-kotoryy-lyubil-i-revnoval-sashu-ivanova/>). Although only one male Black Grouse was lekking, in the surrounding area we found White-tailed Eagles, Black Storks, Grey-faced and White-backed Woodpeckers before returning to the hotel for breakfast.



*White-backed Woodpecker*

After breakfast, Alexandre led us through some beautiful, mature pine and birch forest to a Great Grey Owl nest. We watched the female on the nest for more than an hour and searched, unsuccessfully, nearby trees for her mate. Numerous Wood Warblers were singing in the area and Alexandre saw a Three-toed Woodpecker. We returned to our vehicles, stopping to look at a Wryneck before driving to another part of the forest for our picnic lunch. En route we stopped for a Crested Lark and a male Red-footed Falcon sat on wires. Following lunch, we

walked through an area Alexandre said was good for Hazel Grouse. He used a whistle lure and after a short time we were rewarded with the sight of a pair of Hazel Grouse crossing the track ahead of us. Alexandre then took us to a nest platform where a Long-eared Owl was brooding her six chicks. We also visited a piece of woodland where Pygmy Owl had been heard recently, but failed to find one. We returned to the hotel and after a relatively early dinner, set out just before dusk to the Black Grouse lekking site. This time, however, the birds lekking at the site were some 30 Great Snipe. As darkness fell we were rewarded with close-range views of these remarkable birds as they fanned their tails to display the white outer feathers and uttered their curious display call. A fitting end to our final evening in Belarus.



*Great Snipe at lek*

*Tuesday 2nd May:* Following a reasonably early breakfast, we set off about 07.00 and reached Minsk International airport with plenty of time for an early lunch (or as Valeryia called it “second breakfast” – did she think we were hobbits?). After saying goodbye to our driver Pavel, we went through Customs with no problems whatsoever before catching the 13.30 Austrian Airlines flight to Vienna, where we transferred to a flight back to Heathrow.

*Annotated checklist of species recorded:*

Nomenclature and taxonomy follow BirdLife International 2017. Site abbreviations: Turau (T), Alsany (A), Oak woodland (OW), Bielaje Fish Farm (B), Lake Vyhanaschankaje (V).

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*

Hazel Grouse *Bonasa bonasia*: a pair attracted to a whistle lure by Alexandre at V

Black Grouse *Lyrurus tetrix*: one male lekking V, 3 males same site that evening

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: 5 B  
 Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*: 1 T  
 Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*  
 Smew *Mergellus albellus*: ca. 20 B  
 Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*  
 Garganey *Spatula querquedula*  
 Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*  
 Gadwall *Mareca strepera*  
 Eurasian Wigeon *Mareca penelope*  
 Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*  
 Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*  
 Common Teal *Anas crecca*  
 Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*  
 Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*  
 Rock Dove *Columba livia*  
 Stock Dove *Columba oenas*  
 Common Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*  
 Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*  
 Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana*: 1 heard T  
 Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*  
 Common Coot *Fulica atra*  
 Common Crane *Grus grus*: several seen V  
 Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*: a dozen B, a pair V  
 White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*  
 Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*: heard B  
 Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*  
 Great White Egret *Ardea alba*  
 Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*  
 Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*  
 Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*  
 Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*  
 Ruff *Calidris pugnax*  
 Great Snipe *Gallinago media*: ca. 30 birds lekking V  
 Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*  
 Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*: 1 Prypyat River bridge  
 Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*  
 Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*  
 Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*  
 Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*  
 Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*  
 Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*: 2 adults V  
 Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*  
 Mew Gull *Larus canus*: several B  
 Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*: 1 adult *fuscus* "Baltic Gull" en route Minsk to Turau  
 "European Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*": several large white-headed gulls seen, particularly  
 on the drives to/from Minsk. Although they ought to have been Caspian Gulls based on range,  
 the one individual close enough to be photographed showed mixed characters of *cachinnans*  
 and *argentatus*  
 Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*: 2+ T  
 Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*  
 White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*  
 Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*  
 Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*: female brooding 6 chicks V  
 Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*: 1 A  
 Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa*: female on nest V  
 Western Marsh-harrier *Circus aeruginosus*  
 Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*: 1 ringtail A  
 White-tailed Sea-eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*: 1 B, 3+ V  
 Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*: singles Minsk airport and close by  
 Eurasian Buzzard *Buteo buteo*  
 Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops*: singles A and V  
 Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*: singles A and V  
 Grey-faced Woodpecker *Picus canus*: 1 V  
 Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Leiopicus medius*: 1 OW  
 Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dryobates minor*: 1 A, 1 V  
 White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos*: 1 B, 1 V  
 Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*  
 Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*  
 Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*: single male V  
 Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*: 1 A  
 Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*: 1 OW  
 Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*  
 Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*  
 Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*  
 Rook *Corvus frugilegus*  
 Common Raven *Corvus corax*  
 Carrion (Hooded) Crow *Corvus corone*  
 Coal Tit *Parus ater*  
 Willow Tit *Poecile montanus*  
 Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*  
 Azure Tit *Cyanistes cyanus*: pairs T and A  
 Great Tit *Parus major*  
 Woodlark *Lullula arborea*  
 Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*  
 Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*: 1 V  
 Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*  
 Common Reed-warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*  
 Great Reed-warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*: heard B  
 Northern House Martin *Delichon urbicum*  
 Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*  
 Collared Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*  
 Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*  
 Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*  
 Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*  
 Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*  
 Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*  
 Greater Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*  
 Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*  
 Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*  
 Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*  
 Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*  
 Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*  
 Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*  
 Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*: several A  
 European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*  
 Bluethroat *Cyanecula svecica*: pair white-spotted form B  
 Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*: several seen and heard T  
 European Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*: 1 V  
 Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis*: ca. 7 OW  
 Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*  
 Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*  
 Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*  
 Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*  
 Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*  
 Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulous*: 10+ B, flocks of ca. 30 and ca. 200 V  
 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*  
 Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*  
 Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*: pair in dense forest V  
 Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*  
 Western Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*: seen both T and V – rather blue-grey headed with whitish supercilia: *superciliaris*?  
 White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*  
 Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*  
 Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: pair T, 8+ OW  
 Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*  
 European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*  
 Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina*  
 European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*  
 Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus*  
 Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*  
 Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*