Dates: May 14-20, 2011

Participants: Benoit Verbruggen, Benoit Willocx, David van Ypersele, François Nef

Travel and accommodation: we flew from Brussels to Warsaw with Lot Airlines, very convenient and affordable when booked in advance. We rented a car (Skoda Fabia Estate/Wagon) with Atlaschoice, cheapest we could find. In Biebrza we stayed at hotel Zbyszko in Goniadz: simple but very well located for morning walks, and providing practical lunch packets for the day. Dwor Dobarz was full for our dates (6 months in advance...), but we had dinner systematically there, nice food, atmosphere, and birdwatchers. In Bialowieza we stayed at NP (National Park) Guest House, modern building, beautifully located in the middle of Palace Park, another great location for birding before breakfast...

Tips and guides: the website of Lukasz Mazurek, www.wildpoland.com, is a gold mine, just like his 2 site guides “Where to watch birds and large mammals” respectively for Biebrza marshes and Bialowieza forest. We bought the pdf versions (fresh from the oven for Bialowieza). The German mp3’s of Andreas Schulze to replay the songs on an i-phone was a good purchase, too. The old 4 CD’s of Roche remains otherwise a valid reference. In Bialowieza, we used the services of Arek (the father) and Mateusz (the son) Szymura, see hereunder.

Program and species highlights (numbers refer to the site guides numbers):

14/05 - Biebrza:
We landed at 09:50 in Warsaw, and after heavy traffic in Warsaw, had a nice drive to the south of Biebrza marches. Our first stop early afternoon along Zajki Road (45) was an enchantment: a ballet of hundreds of White-Winged Terns, and for some of us, a first lifer already... Dluga Luka Boardwalk (47) delivered a singing Aquatic Warbler (second time it displayed very well), and our first elks. Evening walk in Barwik (52) rewarded us, as daily on this trip, with thirsty (or hungry?) mosquitoes, calling Corn Crake and Spotted Crake, drumming Snipe, the song of the River Warbler, to name a few.

15/05 – Biebrza:
In the morning we concentrated on the middle basin. Bridge and surroundings at Goniadz are magical: the 3 “marsh” Terns together, a landing Black Stork, an elegant Garganey, and a breathtaking landscape. Osowiec Fort (7) was a good spot for Bluthroat, Penduline Tit at its nest, and Scarlet Rosefinch. In the afternoon, we had a nice walk in Mscichy (18), to the tower on the flooded track (no problems thanks to our wellingtons...). David saw the Citrine Wagtail near the car; the bastard didn’t want to walk. He had male singing just above his head as we were sweating to get to the high tower. Luckily, the view was really beautiful there and the next morning we all saw the wagtail as well.

16/05 – Biebrza:
Long day to the Souther Bassin: Mscichy again, Brzostowo (25) with lots of waders and ducks; wonderful pic-pic and nice little nap under the sun, overlooking the marshes in Burzyn (28); Ortolan Bunting heard and chased in Rus (32); Black-Necked and Red-Necked Grebes in Pulwy (34); a nearly certain Golden Eagle (not Lesser or Greater Spotted) in the meadows of Grady Woniecko, and nice
atmosphere for the sunset at the watchtower of Gugny, only place where we heard the Grasshopper Warbler. (Savi's Warbler and River Warbler were present on many places).

(50)

17/05 – Road to Bialowieza

4 or 5 White-Tailed Eagles were flying on Zygmunta Augusta Lake (58 in Biebrza guide), one of them caught a fish, but not as big as the one another White-Tailed Eagle caught at Siemianowka Reservoir (54 in Bialowieza site guide): 5 stars observation. Citrine Wagtail was there as well, Little Tern, waders and ducks again. Great White Egret present as everywhere before. After having arrived in our hotel at Palace Park 2), we enjoyed already 3 Flycatchers, Red-Breasted only heard. In the evening, Narewka Bridge (6) and Wysokie Bagno (7) offered nothing new beside Woodcocks.

18/05 – Bialowieza

At 04h30 we met our guide, Mateusz Szymura, to take us in the Strict Reserve (3). Guide is compulsory, but very useful anyway since he brought us to the nesting holes of several Woodpeckers: Three-toed (we saw the head of the female popping up), Middle and Lesser Spotted. Primeval forest is impressive indeed, lots of dead trees of course, tree species all mixed together, nice green vegetation on the ground. Mateusz also showed us the nesting hole of Grey-headed Woodpecker at the NW corner of Palace Park, but it seems this was not occupied: we did not see the bird despite regular long observations (I had a possible candidate nearby, but too fast). After breakfast, we had a long walk (too long) on Zebra Zubra (8) combined with Yellow trail (13), all in all a bit disappointing, since no new species and especially no Hazel Grouse. After lunch (and a short nap...) Teremiski Bridge (25) did not help with Hazel Grouse, but Budy Bridge (26) allowed us to admire Middle Spotted Woodpecker much longer. Dutch birdwatchers gave us a fresh spot for Barred Warbler near Pogorzelce: we saw very well a few of them, singing. Corn Crake was calling so close we were pretty sure it would show up, but in vain... At 19h45, we had an appointment with Arek and Matteuz: Pygmy Owl was the target. We were 3 groups in total at the right place in the forest where they brought us. Arek stimulated perfectly the Pygmy with his whistles: after a moment, the bird answered, approached in a nearby spruce, still hidden, but we saw it flying away, and perching a top of another faraway spruce. Perfect in the scope anyway, even if we saw its back, but from times to times the 2 eyes of the head turned at 180°... Very exciting moment, thanks Arek.

19/05 – Bialowieza

Next morning we tried again Wysokie Bagno (7) for Hazel Grouse: no way. The night before a Danish Birdwatcher gave us a precise tip for White-Backed Woodpecker at Budy Bridge (26), from a different angle. Superb observation of the pair feeding the young’s, mostly we saw the female many times and very well, in the surroundings of the hole itself which was hidden to our view. In the afternoon near Teremiski, Bondowka (30) we saw very well a singing Red-breasted Flycatcher, and another White-backed woodpecker flew by. We did several stops en route to Narewka, and a nice walk to Gruszki Oaks (46) and Gruszki Bridge (45). Red-backed Shrike and a few new species.
Before breakfast we scanned the Palace Park again: no Grey-headed Woodpecker, no Greenish Warbler where indicated, but a nice River Warbler in the binoculars, as well as Trush Nightingale, which we had only heard until then. We climbed afterwards the watch tower of the museum, offering a wide panorama but no raptor except a Common Buzzard. Time to leave already: we picked-nicked on the side of a vast wet plain SW of Hanjka, where we finally saw a splendid Lesser-Spotted Eagle.

**Conclusion:** we discovered a nice and preserved part of Europe, with endless marshes and a primeval forest full of variety. We saw nearly all the birds we wanted to see: in total 144 species, including 10 to 15 lifers depending on the participants. We missed the hazel grouse which is easy to see in early spring, but nearly impossible in late may. We also mostly missed a few other specialties: Greater spotted eagle, greenish warbler, Grey-headed and Syrian Woodpeckers. Great Snipe was reported in one site only, between Bierbza and Bialowieza, which we did not visit. We missed as well a lot of common birds, but they were not the purpose of the trip; we were surprised by the few raptors we saw (not a single falcon!), even though the general level of biodiversity was great. And if we did not see the famous bison, at least we enjoyed its “Zubr” beer!

**Full list of species:**

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32 poule d'eau  Moorhen
33 foulque macroule  Common Coot
34 vanneau huppé  Northern Lapwing
35 bécassine des marais  Eurasian Woodcock
36 bécasse des bois  Eurasian Curlew
38 barge à queue noire  Black-tailed Godwit
39 chevalier gambette  Common Redshank
40 chevalier aboyeur  Common Greenshank
41 chevalier culblanc  Green Sandpiper
42 chevalier sylvain  Wood Sandpiper
43 chevalier guignette  Common Sandpiper
44 bécasseau variable  Dunlin
45 combattant  Ruff
46 mouette rieuse  Black-headed Gull
47 guifette noire  Black Tern
48 guifette leucoptère  White-winged Tern  xxx
49 guifette moustac  Whiskered Tern
50 sterne pierregarin  Common Tern
51 sterne naine  Little Tern
52 pigeon biset  Rock Pigeon
53 pigeon ramier  Wood Pigeon
54 tourterelle turque  Eurasian Collared Dove
55 coucou gris  Common Cuckoo
56 chouette chevêchette Pygmy Owl  1 heard and seen…
57 chouette hulotte  Tawny Owl
58 martinet noir  Common Swift
59 huppe fasciée  Hoopoe
60 pic noir  Black Woodpecker  several heard
61 pic épeiche  Middle Spotted Woodpecker
62 pic mar  Woodpecker  3
63 pic à dos blanc  White-backed Woodpecker  3
65 pic tridactyle  Three-toed Woodpecker  1
66 torcol  Wryneck  x
67 alouette lulu  Wood Lark  2
68 alouette des champs  Sky Lark
69 hirondelle de rivage  Sand Martin
70 hirondelle de cheminée  Barn Swallow
71 hirondelle de fenêtre  House Martin
72 pipit des arbres  Tree Pipit
73 pipit farlouse  Meadow Pipit
74 bergeronette printanière  Blue-headed Wagtail
75 bergeronette citrine  Citine Wagtail  2
76 bergeronette grise  White Wagtail
77 pie-grièche écorcheur  Red-backed Shrike
78 pie-grièche grise  Great Grey Shrike
79 troglodyte mignon  Wren
80 accenteur mouchet  Hedge Accentor
81 traquet tarier  Whinchat
82 traquet pâtre Common Stonechat
83 traquet motteux Northern Wheatear
84 rougequeue noir Black Redstart
85 rougequeue à front blanc Common Redstart
86 rouge gorge European Robin
87 rossignol progré Thrush Nightingale xx
88 gorgebleue à miroir Bluethroat
89 grive litorne Fieldfare
90 merle noir Blackbird
91 grive musicienne Song Thrush
92 grive daine Mistle Thrush
93 locustelle luscinoide Savi’s Warbler x
94 locustelle fluviatilis River Warbler x
95 locustelle tachetée Grasshopper Warbler 2
96 phragmite des joncs Sedge Warbler
97 phragmite aquatique Aquatic Warbler 3
98 rousserolle verderolle Marsh Warbler
99 rousserolle effarvatted Reed Warbler
100 rousserolle turdilàe Great Reed Warbler
101 hypolaïs ictérine Icterine Warbler
102 fauvette épervière Barred Warbler 3
103 fauvette des jardins Garden Warbler
104 fauvette à tête noire Blackcap
105 fauvette babillarde Lesser Whitethroated
106 fauvette grisette Common Whitethroated
107 pouillot filis Willow Warbler
108 pouillot véloce Common Chiffchaff
109 pouillot siffleur Wood Warbler
110 roitelet huppé Goldcrest
111 roitelet à triple bandeau Firecrest
112 gobemouche noir Pied Flycatcher 2
113 gobemouche à collier Collared Flycatcher xx
114 gobemouche nain Red-breasted Flycatcher x
115 gobemouche gris Spotted Flycatcher x
116 rémiz penduline Penduline-Tit 1
117 mésange nonnette Marsh Tit
118 mésange boréale Willow Tit
119 mésange bleue Blue Tit
120 mésange charbonnière Great Tit
121 sittelle torche-pot Wood Nuthatch
122 grimpereau des jardins Short-toed Treecreeper
123 bruant proyer Corn Bunting
124 bruant jaune Yellowhammer
125 bruant ortolan Ortolan Bunting 1 heard
126 bruant des roseaux Reed Bunting
127 pinson des arbres Chaffinch
128 verdier d’Europe Greenfinch
129 chardonneret élégant Goldfinch
130 linotte mélodieuse Linnet
131 serin cini European Serin
132 roselin cramoisi Common Rosefinch 3
133 grosbec casse-noyaux Hawfinch x
134 moineau domestique House Sparrow
135 moineau friquet Eurasian Tree Sparrow
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