

# Poland

12-22 May 1996

## Participants:

**Dave Helliar**

**Nick & Jackie Hull**

**Bill & Jean Kendall**

**Beryl Knapton**

**Barry Mathews**

**Bob & Enid Mercer**

**Ken Palmer**

**Keith & Ann Powrie**

**Barrie Widden**

**Hugo & Caroline Wood Homer**



**Lesser Spotted Eagle**

## Leaders:

**Vaughan Ashby, Przemysław Kunysz (Przemysl), Tomek Jeziarczyk (Białowieża)**

**Michał Maniakowski (Biebrza), Andrzej Basta (Driver)**

**Day 1:** Following a scheduled BA flight at a very civilised time, we arrived punctually at Warsaw mid-afternoon to be met by Przemysław our first local guide & Andrzej our driver for the whole tour. The 42 seater coach gave us plenty of room to spread for the long journey south. As we headed south the scenery at first was typical European farmland & at our first stop we had good views of Red-backed Shrikes, White & Blue-headed Wagtails & Black Redstarts. Gradually the scenery became far more rural & wooded & at another stop we had superb views of Hawfinch. Arriving at our hotel mid evening, we checked in for a 2 night stay & after dinner, turned in early with the prospect of a good days birding ahead.

**Day 2:** A pre-breakfast walk highlighted the magnificence of our surrounding as we were staying in the old stable block of a hunting palace which itself was being renovated to its former glory. The birding around the castle grounds was equally impressive with Serin, Fieldfare (a common garden bird), Golden Oriole & Icterine Warbler all seen before breakfast. Our first destination of the day was the River San close to the Ukraine border where we discovered that the bus was only 2" shorter than the bridge! In this marvellous riverine habitat we had good views of Garganey, Marsh Harrier, Hoopoe, Wryneck, Grasshopper, Marsh & Great Reed Warblers & Penduline Tit at the nest. Next we headed south into the hill country full of quaint old villages & farming methods that had survived for hundreds of years. It didn't take us long to see our first Lesser Spotted Eagle & we subsequently found them quite common with several giving outstanding views. Our next stop was an area of woodland where we had excellent views of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker & River Warbler followed by a superb male Collared Flycatcher & brief views of a Red-breasted Flycatcher. It was now becoming extremely warm & so we decided to picnic at a viewpoint overlooking Slovakia where Corncrakes called all around us but none would show. At this time, the leader decided to contract a stomach bug! After lunch we explored further parts of the hill country seeing plenty more raptors including Hobby, Honey Buzzard & Peregrine & 2 flyover Nutcrackers meant that we saw 7 species of Corvid during the day. Arriving back at our hotel late afternoon we had an early dinner (except the leader!) before making the short drive in to Przemysl to the city park where the highlight of the day awaited us. Following a rather steep walk up a path through the wooded park, we were treated to excellent views of an adult & 2 young Ural Owls. It was amazing to see these birds so well bearing in mind the amount of human activity including a religious ceremony complete with choir close by! Eventually the adult flew off further into the trees further up the hill. When we followed the path into the area it had flown right next to the religious ceremony, we were astounded to find it staring at us at eye level only 20 feet away in good light, a perfect end to our first full day & even the leader felt a little better!

**Day 3:** Another pre-breakfast walk was even more productive with Marsh & River Warblers, Thrush Nightingale & superb male Common Rosefinches seen in addition to those of yesterday. On our way north again, it was very pleasing to see the number of White Storks in the villages & note how they were encouraged. Our first stop was at a series of lakes near the village of Tarnawatka, where breeding Black-necked & Red-necked Grebes could be seen side by side whilst Whiskered Terns hawked overhead with 2 Black Terns for company. Not far away was an area of remnant steppe where we spent some time looking for Spotted Soursouls as we ate our packed lunch. Spotted Crake, Whinchat, a female Goshawk & more Lesser Spotted Eagle however, caused us to drop our food at various times. Moving on to the city of Zamosc, we were treated to incredible views of a pair of Syrian Woodpeckers at their nest, here at the northern edge of their range. Continuing north, we arrived at Chelm, our base for the next 2 nights. Instead of eating at the hotel however, we visited a local restaurant, which was a most enjoyable experience, repeated twice next day.

**Day 4:** An early breakfast before driving east almost to the Ukraine border again, this time to a series of lakes. Unfortunately, because of high water levels, Crakes were harder to find than usual but with perseverance, we all had good views of Little Crake whilst more Black Terns & 2 Common Terns were accompanied by superb White-winged Black Terns. Great Reed Warblers were everywhere around the lake & today was the day for Thrush Nightingale, with at least 30 being heard or seen. Close by we worked an area of pasture land right by the River Bug, the other side of which was the Ukraine. The area was somewhat wet however and we had to abandon some of the walk. Returning to Chelm for lunch, unfortunately, we had a problem with the bus & it started to rain so we spent an enjoyable couple of hours looking around the town. In the late afternoon, we visited a nearby area of reedbeds, which has been protected for Aquatic Warblers. We were not disappointed, with good views of up to 5 birds, whilst overhead, in addition to the ever present Marsh Harriers, we were treated to a display by a pair of Montagu's Harrier. Savi's Warblers were added to our ever increasing list of warblers and then the surprise of the day, a Great Snipe was accidentally flushed from the path. What an end to the day!

**Day 5:** Heading north again, our first stop of the day was at a large lake where once again Great Reed Warblers were common. In addition however, we were treated to good views of Bluethroat and after carefully scanning the trees around the lake one was found to contain an adult White-tailed Eagle! Whilst watching it, a couple of Common Cranes obliged with a flypast then landed in the fields next to us. A Bittern was heard, but not seen and a flock of 14 Greylag Geese contained 1 Bean Goose. Several Hobbies were seen in the area and a single Black Stork flew over, not bad for the first stop of the day! Our next stop was at the River Bug where we took lunch sitting in the dunes overlooking the river watching Little & Common Terns. Waders were in evidence on the islands in the river & in the course of 2 hours we saw Ringed & Little Ringed Plovers, Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Common Sandpiper, Ruff & unexpectedly, 2 Temminck's Stints. It took us some time however, to see one of the target birds here, Tawny Pipit, so by the time we left it was mid afternoon & we arrived at our hotel for the next three nights in early evening. After the evening meal we said goodbye to Przemyslaw our first guide and welcomed Tomek, our second guide.

**Day 6:** Early mornings were the feature of the next 3 days and today, everyone was happy to be up by 04.00! Dawn breaking over the hamlet of Teramiski was simply beautiful with the sun rising through the mist, White Storks on their nests, wood smoke coming from woodcutters cottages and an amazing dawn chorus of Marsh Warblers, Thrush Nightingales, Corncrakes & Common Rosefinches. Our 'stroll' through the woods in search of Hazelhen resulted in 2 brief sightings, the views of a female Three-toed Woodpecker at her nest hole however, was much more satisfactory. Several of the group also had brief sightings of a White-backed Woodpecker & Wryneck. Returning through the forest we saw good numbers of Wood Warblers & Collared Flycatchers and plenty of other common woodland birds. We then drove north to Lake Siemianowka, to the hotel where the Polish Bird Festival was being held. From here we worked the agricultural land to the north first seeing Great Grey Shrike, then, after some effort, a superb Lesser Grey Shrike. Then on to the border with Belarus where, in an incredibly scenic setting, we eventually found Roller. Back to the lake, we worked a small area of marsh, seeing breeding Citrine Wagtails alongside Blue-headed & White Wagtails & Northern Wheatears. A herd of somewhat fearsome looking cattle caused us to make an unscheduled diversion but eventually we returned to the bus & then to the hotel for a late lunch. In the afternoon, we visited a marsh on the other side of the lake, seeing a large flock of Black Stork & a pair of Barred Warblers. On the return journey to Hajnowka, we saw 2 fine male Ortolan Buntings and a Lesser Spotted Eagle on a kill (picture above, Hamster?). In the evening we visited a bridge by the old hunting palace in the park to look for Beaver, there was so much disturbance from children & fishermen however, that we were unsuccessful.

**Day 7:** Once again an early start for most of the group and, frustration with Hazelhen, hearing them, but no sightings. We returned to the hotel to pick up those who needed their beauty sleep, then, back to the forest where we had prolonged views of a male White-backed Woodpecker at its nest hole. As some of the group had different priorities, we then split into 2 groups, with half waiting for the return of the Black Woodpecker at its nest hole while the others tried again for Hazelhen. Those waiting for the Black Woodpecker were more successful, but the other group saw the female Three-toed Woodpecker again and had superb views of a Corncrake stood on a log calling, mid-morning. Meeting up again for lunch, we all had prolonged views of a Middle Spotted Woodpecker & on our way back to the bus, 2 more Barred Warblers. It was then that we were accosted by some irate participants in the Polish Bird Festival whose transport had failed to arrive & they had been stranded. We eventually persuaded them that ours was a private group and they would have to wait! In the afternoon we visited another site in the forest to look for Grey-headed Woodpecker but unfortunately there was no sign although we were treated to excellent views of a Hawfinch & a group of locals out for a picnic in horses & traps. Unfortunately, we were also unable to find any Elk or Bison, but I am not sure whether I would have appreciated eyeballing a Bison round a bend in a forest trail! Compensation was paid

however, with a Honey Buzzard drifting over our heads on its way to roost, at exceptionally close range, even allowing the yellow eyes to be seen! A good finale to the day. This evening we met our final local leader, Michat.

**Day 8:** Another early start for Hazelhen, but the numbers attending are thinning out! Again, Hazelhen were elusive but Wood Warblers were abundant & at least 12 Collared Flycatchers were seen. Returning to the hotel to meet the rest of the group, we said goodbye to Tomek before setting off north-west to Bialystok where we stopped at the fishponds which are now used for a combination of watersports & a nature reserve. There were certainly plenty of birds here, the highlight being all 5 species of European grebe breeding, including a pair of Slavonian, here at the very southern edge of their range. Once again, Bittern was heard but not seen, although we were luckier with Little Bittern with at least 3 birds seen. Another Penduline Tit nest was found & Great Reed Warblers were extremely common. Whilst eating our lunch, we were surprised to watch a pair of Grey Partridge feeding in adjacent allotments. With the Biebrza Marshes calling, we continued our journey to our excellent modern hotel at Goniadz. From a nearby viewpoint we were able to scan over large areas of the marsh & the first sight that greeted us was 1,000s of White-winged Black Terns hawking for insects over them. Whilst taking in this spectacle, large numbers of gulls & waders started taking off in panic as an adult White-tailed Eagle flew through them. As the birds settled, it was apparent that there were good numbers of Ruff present together with Black-tailed Godwit. We then went for a walk into part off the marsh but because of high water levels, it was too deep for some. As some of the group had briefly seen a Black Grouse taking flight, the leader bravely 'slopped' around the marsh trying to re-find it whilst the rest of the group waited in eager anticipation of him falling flat on his face in it! The only additional benefit of this exertion was another White-tailed Eagle. We returned to our hotel again for the evening meal before setting off for the Great Snipe lek. It was at this stage that the previously troublesome Mosquitoes became a real problem, the result of high water levels & an early spring hot spell. Nevertheless, the site of up to 26 Great Snipe at the lek more than compensated. Woodcock were also roding & Savi's Warbler was seen again. Returning to the hotel, the leader had a brief view of a probable Pygmy Owl sat on top of a conifer but it could not be relocated.

**Day 9:** Today we visited another area of the Biebrza Marshes where the sight of large numbers of White-winged Black Terns once again greeted us. Spotted Crakes were also present & 'singing' but showed only to a lucky few. The sight of 5 Honey Buzzards rising from a wood attracted our attention & whilst scanning the area we found our only Spotted Eagle of the tour. The walk towards the wood for closer views was aborted however, because of some particularly mean looking Horse Flies! Having heard Bittern 'booming' again, we moved to another part of the marsh & it was here that we had a mechanical problem with the bus which took 3 hours to fix. This gave everyone a chance to wander around and some of the group attracted the attention of an elderly lady who though that we were German tourists and apparently from her gesticulations, she hated Germans! When she finally understood that we were English her attitude changed & it was all smiles but, for a while, it provided much amusement for those of us at sufficient distance not to have to worry about her stick! Back on the road again, we returned to our hotel for the evening meal.

**Day 10:** Some of the group decided to have a leisurely final full day & just take walks around the general area of the hotel while the rest of us went for another walk in the marshes. Once again, a Black Grouse was flushed, this time a Greyhen. We then stumbled upon a bull Elk which eyeballed us for a while before trotting off into the woods. Our next surprise was to flush a couple of Great Snipe. Lesser Spotted Eagle were seen at very close range & a Grasshopper Warbler sang from impenetrable scrub but was eventually seen. As we arrived at the tower hide, we were surprised to see a Black-tailed Godwit calling from the top of a telephone pole & a pair of Goldeneye. Following our evening meal we once again visited a Great Snipe lek although, unfortunately, this one had been deserted because of high water levels.

**Day 11:** Our final day & because of concern about the bus, we left early for Warsaw. This proved to be fortuitous as it was obvious that without a clutch it would be unable to cope with the traffic of Warsaw. We were therefore met by a brand new luxury coach on the outskirts of Warsaw & transferred everything to it saying farewell to our excellent driver Andrzej. Whilst of course, it would have been nice to have had the new coach for the whole of our tour, it would have been completely impractical as it would never have made it to many of the places we visited. Our bus may have been old, but it was built to last (well, except for the clutch!) . We were then treated to a welcome tour of the old city before returning to the airport for our flight home at the end of the tour with a total of 184 species seen during it.