

# Poland

15–25 May 2005

**Participants:**

**Mike Brown**

**John Casswell**

**Barry and Dawn Cooper**

**Ted and Polly Doughty**

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**Helen Heyes**



**Collared Flycatcher**

**Leader: Peter Basterfield**

**A personal account by group member Helen Heyes**

**Question:** Where would you rather spend 11 days in May – sitting at home watching the Blackbirds, or being driven around some of the prettiest, most unspoilt landscapes left in Europe, where the commonest thrush is the Fieldfare? Having now tried both, I know where my vote goes every time (sorry Blackbirds)! If the thought of counting White Storks' nests from the van, or being surrounded by White-winged Terns, or watching woodpeckers at nest holes, or walking through stunningly beautiful ancient forest appeals to you, then this really is a trip you should think about doing. Here's our story...

**Day 1:** With some time to kill before meeting Przemek (our leader for the trip), Grzegorz (our driver) took us into Warsaw, where we whiled away a really enjoyable and casual couple of hours in the city park. With Peregrines flying over our heads and the trees full of such treasures as Red-backed Shrikes, Icterine and Wood Warblers, Common Whitethroats, Blackcaps and Spotted Flycatchers, it was a lovely gentle introduction to Polish birding. After taking our fill of the birds for a while, we decided to try and find something to eat and drink – not easy on a Sunday, and even less so when none of us spoke any Polish! On discovering that the local M&S (yes, there really is one) was closed, we opted for a street café, where we managed to rustle up several cappuccinos and some very lavishly topped pizzas between us. Suitably refreshed, we set off to the airport to meet Przemek (pronounced Shemek). However, a road closure in the area due to a European summit taking place in the city meant that he was having trouble reaching us. Undeterred, we decamped from the van and decided to try our birding luck in a tiny patch of trees right next to the airport. Here we had several families of Fieldfares, with some young being fed by the parents, and the most incredibly obliging Eurasian Wryneck that fluttered down to the ground, looking for all the world the size of a sparrow. It was quite incredible to see the size difference between this bird and the Fieldfare next to it. Finally, just as the skies became very gloomy and the rain started to fall, Przemek arrived and we set off on our long journey to the south of the country. As we drove through the outskirts of Warsaw, passing the massive police contingent in place for the summit, the heavens opened and the rain came down in torrents. The roads quickly became rivers and two unfortunate girls waiting to cross got soaked to the skin as the van sent up a massive wave of water! According to Przemek, this had been the wettest and worst spring he could remember – let's hope they've now had their share for a few years! Luckily, the rain had eased by the time we had our coffee/toilet stop. This was a really lovely little break and definitely showed the advantage of having a Polish speaker with us! It was here also, on our way out, that we had our first Tree Sparrows of the trip on a scrubby patch of land just outside the building. At the end of a very enjoyable day, we finally arrived at

our hotel in Przemysl (Przemek's home town), where we checked in and came down to a very hearty Polish meal served on beautiful white china.

**Day 2:** After a 7.30 breakfast (very civilised birding on this trip!), we set off up a track through some allotments to look for Syrian Woodpecker. On the way up the track, we had wonderful views of a Hawfinch sitting in the top of a bush, but we failed on our quest for the woodpecker. Coming back to the van, however, we heard and then managed to see our first River Warbler of the trip. Our next stop today was Eagle valley. Here we did a long leisurely walk through very pretty scenery, stopping along the way to watch the spectacle of Lesser Spotted Eagles displaying over the woods, and European Honey-buzzards and Common Buzzards soaring across the path behind us. We watched a Eurasian Wryneck creeping along a tree branch and saw a Black Redstart disappear into a newly built house through an open window, only to discover that there was another open window on the other side through which he'd probably flown out! There were Yellowhammers sitting on the rooftops, Red-backed Shrikes all over the place and a Tree Pipit parachuting. Further along the valley, we heard Corn Crakes everywhere and finally saw one flying away as Przemek charged into the grass in the hope of flushing one. We also had a baby adder here, and the most amazing views of a Barred Warbler as it flew back and forth from one perch to another just in front of us. On the way to our next stop, Przemek stopped the van on hearing the song of a Red-breasted Flycatcher; we all piled out and looked. To our slight disappointment, the first bird we saw was a juvenile, who, while very obliging, had no red breast! However, our patience was rewarded when the second bird was a beautiful adult. We also had brief views of a Collared Flycatcher, but more of those later! At our designated stop, we tramped in single file through the undergrowth and down to the edge of a little stream. Pete and Mike stayed on the road and, as it turned out, had the best views of two Grey-headed Woodpeckers! We did all catch up in the end though! Our last target for the day was the fabled Ural Owl. With the weather still chilly and somewhat wet, we did not hold out much hope, but we were determined to try anyway. After a description from Przemek of the habits of the bird and where to look, we tracked through a wood, trying desperately hard not to snap twigs under our feet, but I fear we failed on that front! Pete did see a glimpse of a shadow that matched the description of the bird, but we never did manage to track it down.

**Day 3:** Our first stop this morning was a local palace, whose impressive manicured grounds we walked around. Our first bird was a Green Woodpecker, seen on the ground briefly before flying off into the trees. Nesting all around the palace were Tree Sparrows, and we watched them hopping along the window ledges and up onto the roof. After a brief toilet stop inside, where we had to figure out the novel signs – circle for women and triangle for men, we were back out in the rain watching a Collared Flycatcher fairly high up in a tree. Although we only saw this bird through a scope or binoculars, and we had better views later in the trip, as the first cooperative bird we'd seen this was a highlight of the day so far. Walking through the trees and keeping our eyes open for the mythical Syrian Woodpecker, alas to no avail, we did, however, find one new bird for the trip – Short-toed Treecreeper, which showed well. Next stop today was some local fishponds. While the rain pelted down as we stepped from the van and looked like it was set for the day, the birding more than made up for it. I think we were all agreed that this place was magical. We had our first views of stunning Common Rosefinches on the path in front of us as we walked along. These were followed by several beautiful Red-necked Grebes bobbing near to the reeds, and, as we rounded the bottom corner of the track, we saw White-winged, Black and Whiskered Terns over the water. A Savi's Warbler sat up in some reeds, and some of the group were lucky enough to see a Great Bittern in flight, although all of us heard one booming. We also had Little Bittern, lovely views of a pair of Garganey, a flyover by a Black Stork, Western Marsh-harriers seemingly all over the place, and a mixture of Sedge, Reed and Great Reed Warblers. And best of all, half way around the track, the rain stopped! After such glorious birding, the rest of the agenda for today had a lot to live up to, but the next stop built on it! No sooner had we stepped from the van than Przemek said he heard a Eurasian Penduline-tit calling. As we walked a little way up a dirt track, low and behold, the bird flew into the bush ahead and sat facing us and singing his little heart out for several minutes. This was a lifer for many in the group and they don't come much better than that! Sadly, the afternoon was not quite so productive as the morning. After a stop at some more fishponds looking for Black-necked Grebe and failing, we headed off to the local European Bee-eater colony. Przemek was not hopeful here, as there had been no sign of the birds the week before – with such a wet and cold spring, the birds simply had not yet returned. Our luck was no better than the previous week, but we did see Black Redstart on a large brick chimney and had good views of Common Cuckoo sitting on a telephone wire. After a day of contrasts, we made our way to our little Pension for our overnight stay. This was a lovely little chalet-style building with very modern rooms and satellite TV, showing, amongst all the Polish, a BBC world channel.

**Day 4:** The weather at our first stop of the day, Tyszowce to try for Suslik, was still fairly overcast and chilly. With the conditions against us, we were out of luck for both the Suslik and the butterflies – for which this place looked ideal. And so to Zamosc – our ‘tourist’ bit. Zamosc is a beautiful old Polish town with exquisite old buildings, a lovely town square with horse-drawn carriages, and centuries’ old fortifications. We stopped to have coffee and take photographs, but again, we were out of luck with the weather – it rained! Not to be beaten, we carried on regardless, and it still looks beautiful even when it’s wet. After a bit of a drive, we arrived in Chelm, our overnight base. In complete contrast to our previous hotel, this place was very definitely a throwback to the Communist era. It was fascinating to see the different styles present within the country. We had fun going up and down in the lift a couple of times until we got the hang of when to push the door open, and one participant, who shall remain nameless, got a good ribbing for pushing the tile with ‘alarm’ written on it! Presumably, said alarm had long since gone. Once we’d eaten, we wrapped up and headed out to a nearby reedbed to look for Aquatic Warbler. We stood on an old railway track, listening and looking in every direction, but despite hearing several snatches of song and seeing brief glimpses of flying birds, our luck was just not really in today. Several hardy souls in wellies (myself included) waded out to a spot where one had been heard singing, but we failed to even hear it again.

**Day 5:** After a bit of a washout yesterday, we were hopeful that today our luck would change. Things did not start well, as our pre-breakfast walk to the local park was again chilly and wet. Worse still, this was our last hope for Syrian Woodpecker on the trip, and we failed. However, on a more positive note, we did have great views of a Thrush Nightingale sitting right out in the open, watched Red Squirrels scampering up the trees and had further lovely views of Icterine Warbler. Our first mini-stop after breakfast was in the middle of a poplar-lined road. Przemek had heard an Ortolan Bunting singing and, sure enough, as we decamped from the van we had excellent scope views of one bird sitting at the very top of one of the trees. Next stop was a site for Little Crake. We huddled on a corner, peering into the reeds and listening. Several snatches of song were heard but alas we did not manage to see the bird. Steve did, however, spot our first Common Crane of the trip, which obligingly circled quite close over our heads – a lovely sight. Suitably fortified after lunch on a picnic bench in a little wooden shelter alongside the River Bug, we set off to walk around the area. In complete contrast to everything we had seen so far, this was an area of rolling sand dunes bordered on one side by a large pine wood and on the other by the river. Our target bird here was Tawny Pipit, which we missed, but we did see a couple of Wood Larks and pick up some Polish shells as souvenirs. Our last birding stop of the day was on a corner in Swinoroje, where we set up the scopes on a nest hole and watched, in the hope that an adult bird would return. Sure enough, in hardly any time at all, first one, then two Middle-spotted Woodpeckers flew in and gave stunning views. We didn’t know it at the time, but this was just a little foretaste of what was to come tomorrow. With images of the woodpeckers still fresh in our minds and the weather finally looking up, we drove past the white tower that gives the Biaowieza area its name and arrived at our beautiful modern hotel in Hajnowka on the edge of the Biaowieza forest.

**Day 6:** Our woodpecker day! And it started before breakfast. An early morning walk by some of the group along the lanes near the hotel produced views of a very obliging singing River Warbler, House Martins gathering mud for nests, a Hawfinch high in the treetops and, best of all, a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker at the side of the road. Ted had the bird virtually at his feet and the picture in the Poland gallery on the Birdfinders website was taken as it fed in some low saplings just a few yards from the road. This was a magical start to the day, only spoiled a little by the fact that some group members were not there to see it. After a delicious buffet breakfast with as much choice as anyone could possibly want, we set off to Teremiski for Black Woodpecker. We stood for a while, bemused and frustrated by other people’s directions, until we finally found the right nest hole. In the meantime, we found our own Willow Tit, which showed well, and had brief sightings of Great Spotted Woodpecker. After a reasonable wait, our patience was rewarded and we were lucky enough to see five birds – two adults and three chicks sticking their heads out of the hole to be fed. You couldn’t help feeling that it was definitely going to be a good day! Next stop today was our first attempt at Hazel Grouse. Pete played the tape in the van so that we all knew what we were listening for – Mike decided that it sounded “like Sweep on Helium.” Przemek took out a little whistle that replicated the call and we walked along as quietly as we could. Unfortunately, on this occasion we heard and saw nothing at all. However, it was here, during a bush stop that I stumbled across our first Bullfinch of the trip! Back to the woodpecker quest, and next on the list was European Three-toed. We were supposed to meet a local guide here to show us the nest hole, but due to a problem with his car he did not arrive. Luckily, Przemek knew the rough area so we had to find it for ourselves. We followed the trampled grass and scanned all the nearby trees for holes, but with no luck. Just as we were on the point of giving up and walking back, someone found the nest hole – we had been standing virtually right underneath it! As we retreated to get a better view and to give the birds some space, we had wonderful views of an adult at the nest. Our next stop was a

possible site for Spotted Nutcracker. We walked along a track through a tall avenue of pine trees, craning our necks to look at the treetops. Sadly, we didn't find any nutcrackers, but we did get good views of three Crested Tits. Late in the afternoon, we headed into the forest again with a van from the Polish Bird Festival to look for Eurasian Pygmy-owl. We were stopped en route by a policeman, who spent several minutes chatting to the first van driver. As it turned out, this was possibly the luckiest break of the entire trip, as it was here that we peered out of the van windows and saw a group of Bison (numbers claimed varied from 7 up to 11!) moving slowly through the forest some distance from us. These mammals, although large, are very secretive and are seen on only a handful of trips, so we were pretty pleased with ourselves. On the walk to the owl site, we split into two groups to try again for Hazel Grouse. Again we had no luck, but we did see Eurasian Woodcock flying away from us. We moved on to the owl site and stood around, bemused by our local guide's apparent unwillingness to show us the nest hole we were supposed to be watching. Eventually, it turned out that this was a distraction and, as the light faded, we saw two separate birds sitting in the trees around us – one virtually directly above our heads!

**Day 7:** Have you ever seen a Eurasian Wryneck in a nestbox? Neither had I until today! He sat calling, with his head sticking out of the hole, as we waited at the front of the hotel for Grzegorz to bring the van. First on the official agenda for this morning was our guided walk through the old part of Białowieża forest. As we strolled towards the gate to wait for Matteusz (our local guide), we had our first sightings of White-backed Woodpecker some way ahead of us on a tree. I would have been happy with this, but on entering the forest, Matteusz showed us a nest hole with two adults in regular attendance. The nest was high in a tree and reasonably distant, but through a scope the views were fantastic. Words cannot do justice to the sheer beauty of this part of the forest. It is completely unmanaged (except for the removal of trees that fall across the footpaths) and as a consequence, is the most incredibly picturesque area of woodland I have ever visited, with a serenity that simply takes your breath away. As we walked, Matteusz gave us a running commentary about specific trees, the history of the forest and the flora and fauna found within it. We came across many Collared Flycatchers as we ambled along, some no higher than eye level, and some so close as to be photographable. But for once, the birds almost took second place. It was so peaceful and there were so many exquisite views around every turn that I felt I could have spent days in there. Sadly saying goodbye to Matteusz and leaving the forest, we headed to a lake at Siemieniakowszczyzna. After very distant and indistinct views of a White-tailed Eagle perched in a tree on the other side of the lake, we settled down to see what else we could find. There were a couple of distant Great Egrets, two Common Goldeneye and a variety of other ducks, the ubiquitous White Wagtails, two nice Blue-headed Wagtails and then our prize – a beautiful male Citrine Wagtail. This bird sat atop a spindly twig and showed off as we made our way closer and closer. What a star! We had our lunch in sunshine overlooking the other side of the lake. While we didn't manage to relocate the eagle, we did find a nice colony of Little Gulls and had three Ospreys flying over. Next, we took a trip up the valley looking for European Roller. On this occasion we had no joy, but we did see fantastic views of several Montagu's Harriers, both male and female, including one perched on a telegraph pole. Last stop today was another abortive walk through some pines for Spotted Nutcracker. The mosquitoes on this walk were worse than on most of the trip so far and we battled our way bravely along the track to a bridge. Here we managed to record the only Common Kingfisher of the trip and had further sightings of Barred Warbler and River Warbler before the insects won and we headed back for our last night at Hajnowka.

**Day 8:** Before setting off, we assembled outside the hotel on another bright, sunny morning to have our group photo taken. There was no wryneck to greet us today, but the photos were duly taken and as we watched the Polish Bird Festival group set off on their way home, it was nice to think that we were just moving on. The first addition to the list today was European Roller, which we saw perched on the top of a telegraph pole. Having missed it yesterday, it was nice to catch up with this one. Next stop was Dojlidy fishponds, where we saw a beautiful Eurasian Penduline-tits' nest complete with its resident couple. It was while we were admiring this that a local fisherman sauntered in our direction, and proceeded to show us his 'catch' – a Tree Frog sitting halfway along his rod! On the way back to the van we met what has to be the biggest guided group of tourists (they were Belgians apparently) I've ever come across. I certainly didn't envy the leader trying to get all of them lined up on something! We lunched today at a huge wooden grandstand looking out over what is usually a great location for waders. Alas, with water levels so high our luck was out – we just got very chilly thanks to the wind. I think Grzegorz had the best plan – as it was Sunday, he disappeared into the local church! Perhaps he said a few suitable prayers, I don't know, but certainly God was very kind to us in the immediate aftermath. We strolled a few hundred yards behind the grandstand, through some ploughed fields filled with Blue-headed Wagtails and others filled with the ubiquitous drifts of dandelions, to an open area of tallish grass. This was our second site for Aquatic Warbler and this time we were treated to views that were quite astounding. After hearing several snatches of song, one bird finally came out into the open and sat about halfway up a tallish blade of grass. We

all watched mesmerised as this ‘difficult’ bird gave itself up. Just as we thought he might disappear, he climbed even higher up and began to turn this way and that – giving front views, side views, back views and the song! It was undoubtedly one of the birds of the trip and everything you could ever hope for in a lifer. With our spirits soaring, we headed off to another site to try for an even more spectacular bird – Bluethroat (the unspotted *magna* race is found here). Within seconds of getting out of the van, Przemek had heard one and quickly located a stunning male sitting in a bush with the full electric blue bib pointed in our direction. Unfortunately, the bird did not hang around and many in the group missed it. We hunted for quite some time around the local area but failed to relocate him. A little disheartened after the glories of the Aquatic Warbler, we decided to press on with the schedule and return tomorrow to try again. And the schedule did not disappoint. We stood on the banks of a big lake, scanning the far shore and, sure enough, after a little wait, we picked up not one, but five White-tailed Eagles (three juveniles, one young adult and one full adult with a glorious white tail)! The birds were distant and it was not really until we watched one being mobbed, and realised that the bird doing the mobbing was a Hooded Crow, that the sheer size of the eagles became apparent. After the evening meal in our next hotel, this time in Goniadz on the edge of the Biebrza Marshes, some of us decided to do a stroll around the back of the village. Clad in long sleeves and gallons of insect repellent (the rain had certainly been good for the local insect population), we set off up to a concrete platform that we felt was probably a relic of the war. Looking out over the marshes in the twilight and watching hundreds of White-winged Terns dropping down to roost was a magical spectacle, and with distant scope views of Elk (what the Americans call Moose) to cap it all off, it was a lovely relaxing way to end another good day.

**Day 9:** Today we finally caught up with Spotted Nutcracker! Typically, after leaving the more likely forest habitat behind and moving to wetter and more open country, in the end, we saw one from a viewing tower as it flew across a field ahead of a large group of Eurasian Jays! The experience that followed must surely have ranked as one of the most incredible wildlife spectacles, certainly of this trip, and probably also in a much wider sense. They say that every cloud has a silver lining, well ours was black and white. While the wet spring and consequent high water levels had reduced our chances of seeing waders, some species were positively revelling in it; none more so than the White-winged Terns. While in a normal spring you might hope to see a few hundred, at Zajki, we walked along a dirt track bordered on both sides by marsh that was literally teeming with more than 5,000 of these magnificent birds. They hovered over the track ahead of us, perched obligingly on fence posts, dived down into the marsh and even gathered for a feeding frenzy at one point. It was mesmerising to watch, and you didn’t even need a hard hat to protect your head! After an abrupt stop to watch a Short-toed Eagle displaying, we arrived at Brzostowo – pretty much our last hope for catching up with any waders. We walked down to the edge of a little river and set up the scopes, at which point we were approached by a couple who were producing a short film about the area and Pete and Przemek were asked for interviews. In between being filmed, we managed to track down distant views of Dunlin and pretty poor views of Ruff, and some hardy souls made use of the outdoor toilet hut – discovering a White Wagtail’s nest inside! The interviews over, we headed back to our Bluethroat site to try again for those who missed out yesterday. This time our luck was in and we had stunning views of three different birds – a pair chasing each other and another dazzling male. This was definitely another bird in contention for bird of the trip for most people. Our last stop before dinner today was a tower at Wolka Piaseczna, which is used as a wolf-watching tower in the winter. Alas, we didn’t see any, but we did have much better views of a family of Elk, a distant possible Spotted Eagle over the far trees and a small pond full of Pool Frogs. After dinner was our Great Snipe hunt! And boy did we go prepared – not so much for the snipe as for the mosquitoes! By the amount of layers of clothing we had on, you would think we were going on an Arctic expedition! We had the last laugh though, as we walked along the track on a still, hot evening, the insects were terrible. Finally arriving at the viewing platform, on which there was barely room to squeeze our group and several others, we watched in hopeful anticipation. We managed to see distant scope views of two or three different birds, which would puff up their chests and do a bit of wing flapping, but we didn’t see any jumping and none were ever close enough to merit a ‘Wow!’ With the light fading fast and what little action there was dying down, we decided to get back to the van a.s.a.p. before being eaten alive!

**Day 10:** First stop this morning was our mini ‘booze cruise’ to a little shop in Goniadz to buy some local vodka as souvenirs and gifts. The shopkeeper must have been delighted with his day’s takings as we came out loaded up with vodka, bananas, soft drinks, chocolate – in short about half the shop between us! Today was mainly spent on a long drive to our final hotel of the trip. We stopped off en route to admire beaver lodges (although, sadly no beavers) and to try again for Spotted Eagle – with no luck. We arrived at our beautiful modern hotel in Woznawies quite early in the afternoon and, after checking in, we decided to stroll around the area. No sooner had we begun to gather, than someone picked up an eagle flying straight towards us – finally, our quest for the elusive Spotted Eagle had ended with one finding us! It was glorious to watch this bird come closer and closer, flying almost directly over the hotel roof before

circling back and heading towards the trees. He proceeded to swoop in display (our third displaying eagle species of the trip!) and then land in a tree temporarily before disappearing from sight. With the rain again starting to fall and the knowledge of our impending departure tomorrow looming large, we decided to head back to the hotel to do some packing and wind down. Our last evening meal was thoroughly enjoyed by all – including the complimentary cranberry vodka and special ‘cake’ that accompanied it. We had a good giggle over a Scrabble box sitting in the corner of the room. Intrigued by the desire to know how many zs, ws and ks are in the Polish version, I set off to investigate – only to discover to my disappointment that it was an English version for tourists!

**Day 11:** Sadly, after a delicious breakfast, we had to pack up the van, say our goodbyes to our hosts and their friendly dogs and set off on our journey to Warsaw airport. Typically, just as we were on our way home, the sun was blazing down and we experienced the hottest, sunniest day of the whole trip! Our morning in the van, weaving in and out of the construction work on the main highway was probably not the ideal way to spend it! However, it did raise eyebrows and a good laugh when we drove past one of the workers walking along in just a fluorescent vest and his underpants! We stopped to have our lunch at the River Bug, where we wandered leisurely along the bank. We heard a Marsh Warbler that refused to come out into the open, and saw some beautiful Common Rosefinches, a Eurasian Penduline-tit and a Marsh/Willow Tit that didn’t hang around long enough to be positively ID’d. Arriving at the airport we said our farewells to Przemek and Grzegorz, who had worked so hard for us for eleven days and had been great fun and tremendous help, and headed inside to check in for our flight. All those thoughts about not wanting to go home almost came true as a bomb scare at the airport nearly prevented us from boarding our plane! However, some time after our scheduled departure time, we were packed on to a shuttle bus and whizzed across the tarmac to take our places.

I shall always remember Poland as a country of contrasts – from the pouring rain we encountered in the south to the beautiful sunshine further north; from the old shapeless, grey Communist blocks in Chelm to the ultra-modern glass buildings going up in Warsaw; and from the small-scale agriculture with horse-drawn ploughs, haphazardly planted orchards and tiny strip fields to the massive European-style fields and crop-sprayers nearer to the capital. It is undoubtedly a beautiful country, with fields full of vivid yellow dandelions, roads lined with poplars, pretty old wooden villages, breathtaking forests and enough beautiful birds to keep even the fussiest birder happy. To have experienced all of this was wonderful enough; to have experienced it with such a fantastic bunch of people made it extra special.