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TOUR INFO

BELARUS

SOUTH BELARUS SPRING BIRDWATCHING TOUR

DATES: 12 -19 3 May 2019

Suitable period: May – June



Azure Tit © Pavel Simeonov

This extraordinary birdwatching tour to the Southern Taiga region provides a big diversity of species and habitats in the most exciting natural complex combined by boreal forests and wetlands. Belarus is characterised by the largest tracts of raised pine bogs in Europe. This extensive tundra-like ecosystem is the favourite habitat for many waders. Terek, Marsh and Green Sandpipers, Whimbrel, Curlew, Golden and Ringed Plovers, Black-tailed Godwit, Greenshank, Redshank, Snipe, Great Snipe, Redshank, Spotted Redshank and Ruff are some of the species to be seen there, and we may just turn Three-toed Woodpecker, Hazel Grouse, Marsh Sandpiper and Temminck's Stint. In addition, the area provides good opportunities to see Great Grey Shrike, Meadow Pipit, Citrine and Yellow Wagtails, whilst the edges surrounding the pine bogs are typical breeding place for Osprey, Greater Spotted Eagle, Short-toed Eagles and Hobby.

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Day by day itinerary

Day 1: FLIGHT OUT TO MINSK. AFTERNOON, TRANSFER TO PRIPJATSKY NATIONAL PARK

Flight out to Minsk with a late afternoon arrival. Transfer (4 hours) by minibus to Pripjatsky National Park, in the extreme south of Belarus close to the Ukrainian border. Appetising welcoming meal accompanied with several toasts of vodka awaits us at our first base at Hlupinskaja Buda Lodge where we'll spend three nights. Stop off on route to see Montague's, Hen and Marsh Harriers. Overnight at Hlupinskaja Buda Lodge in Pripjatsky National Park.

Day 2: THE PRIPJAT RIVER FLOODPLAIN

The Pripyat River that floods vast areas of meadows and forests in spring is no doubt the Amazon of Europe. The endless water-covered areas of the Pripyat floodplain hold thousands of waterbirds, among them several highly sought-after breeding waders.

Breakfast precedes departure in a comfortable outboard-powered boat, for an introductory excursion across the Pripjat River floodplain. Exposed grassy bars, slowly emerging from the receding river waters, provide us with unique opportunity to taste of wader activity - many already settling to nest, including Terek Sandpipers, our target species for today. Numerous Black-tailed Godwits, Oystercatchers, Redshanks, Ringed Plovers together with displaying bands of showy Ruffs characterise this magnificent wetland ecosystem. Slowly cruising between "grassy islands" we can turn one of the rarest European waders – Great Snipe that breeds in large numbers in the Park. Numerous passerines also feature including Thrush Nightingale, Sedge Warbler, Golden Oriole, Wood and Willow Warblers, Bluethroat, Collared and Pied Flycatchers, Second night at Hlupinskaja Buda Lodge in the heart of Pripjatsky National Park.

Day 3: PRIPJAT RIVER CRUISE – WHITE-TAILED AND GREAT SPOTTED EAGLES, AZURE TIT

A leisurely breakfast will be followed by boarding our boat that will transfer us downstream of Pripjat River via a half day cruise. Slow speed facilitates comfortable birdwatching and we will enjoy this outstanding riparian biotopes characterised by endless thickets of riverside willows, flooded pastures and ancient stands of flooded oak forests – all these covered by waters of the great river during spring flood. Extensive grassy marshes surrounding water flow create favourable conditions for the Great Spotted Eagle that is quite common here despite its vulnerable status in the rest of Europe and we'll keep an eye in the sky to see this majestic raptor.

We reach our riverside picnic spot by midday where the cook prepares lunch over an open fire. Being disembarked we explore water meadows and groves of old-age willows looking for Azure Tit frequently inhabited the area. Lesser Spotted Eagle, Penduline Tit, Marsh Harrier, Gadwall, Green Sandpiper, Great Grey Shrike, Hoopoe and Fieldfare are also on the menu.

We depart mid afternoon from our picnic place and continue our way down the river. Flooded oak forest is an integral part of Pripjat river ecosystem. The region still holds extensive oak forests with huge trees. Here we will explore one of them looking for woodland species. Easy walks can produce all European species of woodpeckers including Black, Eurasian Three-toed, Grey-headed, Middle Spotted, Syrian and White-backed ones and Eurasian Wryneck. Our target species will be Collared, Red-breasted and Pied Flycatchers, Wood and River Warblers. Adjacent open fields are excellent spots to see Short-toed, Lesser, Greater Spotted and White-tailed Eagles, Black Stork, Honey Buzzard and Marsh Harrier. Other birds may include Common Cranes, Golden Oriole, Thrush

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Nightingale, Penduline Tit and Hawfinch. But the tour isn't just about birds. If we are lucky, we may also see some typical representatives of riparian mammals, among them European Beaver, American and European Mink and Otter. Small predators such as Pine Marten and Raccoon Dog are well represented too. European Bison and Elk are quite common in the whole area, although they are incredibly shy and there is only an outside chance of seeing them, mainly just before dusk. Our journey concludes on reaching the wonderful part of ancient flooded oak forest. The bus will bring us back to our base at Hlupinskaja Buda. On the way back we'll visit several dry habitats where Barred Warbler and Thrush Nightingale will be of main interest.

After dinner we are going to make a short journey to a broad forest-ride to listen for owls. Using a recorder we'll try for Eagle, Pygmy and Tawny Owls. Spotted Crake, Woodcock and Thrush Nightingale will create pleasant background of spring sounds. Third night at Hlupinskaja Buda in Pripjatsky National Park.

Day 4: TUROV MEADOW – WADER'S AND WATERFOWL'S PARADISE; LEKKING GREAT SNIPE

After breakfast we pack our luggage and set off to visit one of the most famous places in the Pripjat River floodplain – water meadow in the close vicinity of ancient Turov township.

The width of Pripjat river floodplain near Turov is about 5-7 km. This is a complex system of numerous river beds, water meadows, small islands, willow scrubs, flooded oak forests, pastures and dikes. In most places water meadows are covered by dense willow beds. We'll spend the day walking along water meadows and dikes. The bird species of these habitats are too numerous to list. Ruffs stop off on Turov meadows in their thousands during spring migration and a few pairs even breed annually. Terek Sandpiper is a well known symbol of the area. Other Waders include Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Wood and Marsh Sandpipers, Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Turnstone and others. Several species of terns also feature including:

Black, White-winged, Little, Common and Whiskered all breeding in huge colonies on meadow islands and floating vegetation. Caspian Tern could be spotted on migration. The most representative raptor species is the White-tailed Eagle. The area holds numerous small passerines such as Sedge and River Warbler, Bluethroat and Yellow Wagtail.

We'll cross a scenic local village situated just on the edge of floodplain meadows looking for one of the rarest European birds – Azure Tit. This elusive resident bird breeds every year in wooden buildings and natural holes in trees.

In the evening we plan to watch one of the most exciting events of Pripjat marshes – displaying Great Snipes. More than thirty males gather on the lekking place at dusk that is situated two km downstream from Turov at dry meadow and we use a boat to reach their displaying ground. We'll observe an impressive evening/night show that includes jumping, calling, running and fighting. Territorial calls of Corn and Spotted Crakes are common sounds of the area.

Overnight at Turov hotel.

Day 5: TUROV MEADOW – JOINT TERNS AND WADERS COLONY

Birdwatchers will benefit an early pre-breakfast from our Riverside accommodation, just at the bank of Pripjat River. Great White Egret, all species of marsh Terns, White Stork, Garganey, Teal, Tufted Duck, Shoveler, Little Gull, Marsh Harrier, Skylark, Black Redstart, Greenfinch and Goldfinch, Syrian Woodpecker and Wryneck can be easily observed just from the close range around the hotel

In spring the Turov Meadow becomes a system of islands surrounded by flood water, that provides a unique nesting and stopover site for numerous and diverse waders and other water bird species

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during their seasonal migrations. The site also holds the entire collection of breeding terns found in Belarus and supports one of the largest populations of Terek Sandpiper and Common Ringed Plover in country. In May water level is still high in the meadow so we'll use boats to reach numerous grassy bars already occupied by breeding birds. Today we are going to observe the large joint colony of Little, Black, White-winged and Whiskered Terns, Black-tailed Godwits, Marsh and Terek Sandpipers. We'll devote our evening time to night sounds - Little Crane territorial calls, evening croaking of Tree Frogs and Fire-bellied Toads. Second night at Turov hotel.

Day 6: BELOE FISHPONDS – SMEW; SPOROVO RESERVE - AQUATIC WARBLER

After breakfast we leave Turov town and Pripjat floodplain area and continue our trip westward.

On our way we visit large Beloe fishponds. This IBA area is one of the region's largest breeding centres for many fish-eating and water birds. It is also the sole Belarusian breeding ground of the very rare Smew – about 20 pairs, and Ferruginous Duck. Bird list include Cormorants, White Egret, Black Stork, Great Bittern, Great Reed Warbler, Little Grebe, Goldeneye and Tufted Duck.

Our next destination will be Sporovo Reserve, in the south-western corner of Belarus (100 miles drive) where we will stay for 2 nights till the end of the tour.

The evenings will be spent admiring the characteristic song flight of Europe's rarest songbird, the Aquatic Warbler, which is the best-known symbol of unspoiled Belarussian nature, which is especially depending on worldwide rare open grassy marshes. Around 50% of the world population breeds in the reserve and this is the easiest place to see them. Great Grey Shrike, Northern Goshawk, Hen and Montague's Harriers, Golden Oriole, Eurasian Penduline and Bearded Tits and Common Rosefinch are all common here whilst Black, Whiskered & White-winged Terns hawk insects over the marshes. Overnight in Sporovo reserve.

Day 7: VYGONOSCHANSKY RESERVE – GREAT GREY OWL

Today we are going to visit extensive forest area where Vygonoschansky reserve was created. Large parts of wet Black Alder carrs intersperse with open patches of marshes and meadows creating favourable conditions for hygrophilous voles including Water Vole. The forest holds several breeding pairs of Great Grey Owl that specialises on catching large voles and we hope we can admire this magnificent, very confident owl. We also explore the open fen mires, which unique ecosystem is limited to only several areas in the world. Belarus has retained some of the largest open fen mires in Europe. Sedges dominate vegetation of these wetlands. The mire is home to many rare bird species, including Crane and Short-eared Owl. Little, Spotted and Corn Crakes are all very vocal at this time of the year, which gives us the chance to see these elusive birds. Other specialties may include Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Barred Warbler, Great Grey Shrike and, with luck, the elusive Citrine Wagtail. We'll use an opportunity to explore the central lake of the reserve embarking on a large comfortable boat. Sporovo Lake and its surrounding produce numerous bird species including Little Gull, Marsh Terns, Savi's and Grasshopper Warblers and Great Bittern – a good choice to achieve our exciting venture to Belarus – the Europe's last great wilderness. Last night in Sporovo reserve.

Day 8: TRANSFER TO THE AEROPORT

We drive back to the airport (3 h), to catch our return flight.

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Price: 1 490 EUR for minimum 4 persons

€1,245, Base: 8-12+ people.

Deposit: 200 EUR

Single room supplement: 70 EUR

Price includes: all transport within Belarus including transportation by motor boats, accommodation in twin-bedded rooms, all meals, mineral water, coffee and tea during meals, entrance fees to National Parks and reserves and guiding services throughout (Pavel Simeonov – co-leader and local guides).

The price does not include: visa, airfares, travel insurance, alcohol drinks and cigarettes, room service, telephone calls.