TOUR DESCRIPTION: We first visited Poland in 1996 and have returned with tour groups seven times since then; such is the excellence of the birding in this east European country. Of course much has changed in that time, foremost being the vastly improved standard of the accommodation, which now rates squarely alongside that found in the west. We will stay in modern hotels with nice restaurants, ensuring we have comfortable bases from which to explore the ‘bird-rich’ countryside.

Our tour is centred in two areas of the north-east of the country where agricultural practices are less developed than in the west, providing habitat that is extremely bird-rich, and a glimpse back in time to what our own countryside may have looked like one hundred years ago. Firstly we visit the Biebrza Valley where the marshes boast an abundance of wildlife. As water levels drop through the spring, migratory and breeding birds abound and Marsh Marigolds bloom en masse in the slowly receding flood waters. Breeding species include storks, raptors, three marsh tern species and of course the rare Aquatic Warbler. We then move south-east to the Białowieża Forest, sections of which are regarded as holding some of Europe’s last stands of virgin forest. Characteristic are huge Oak, Lime, Hornbeam, Ash and Spruce with much fallen wood left to decay naturally, enhancing the richness of the forest ecosystem. This rich habitat holds abundant flycatchers, woodpeckers, raptors and warblers. Being spring, all the birds will be in their best plumages and many will be singing and displaying, adding to the amazing avian experience on show.

For those with an interest in mammals, we should see Elk as well as several deer species, but we would need a lot of luck to get a glimpse of a Wolf. This enigmatic animal inhabits these parts, but we have only managed to see one as it ambled past our observation platform, but it was watched for over five minutes! The forest at Białowieża is the centre for a re-introduction programme for the European Bison, and we will visit the conservation reserve to take a look at these animals (we may even see some of these massive beasts in the wild as we drive through the more remote parts of the forest!). The spring days are long and we will have plenty of time to pace ourselves and enjoy good looks at the birds and wildlife.
PHOTOGRPAHIC OPPORTUNITIES: Excellent, including some time spent observing from viewing platforms with panoramic views across the marshes. We take time on this trip to really look at (and listen to) the birds, giving those with cameras ample time to take their shots.


MAMMALS: Well represented and we may see Raccoon Dog, European Polecot, Pine Marten, European Beaver, Elk and Bison. We would need some luck to spot a Wolf, and even more to come across Brown Bear or Lynx (though both have been seen by birders at this time of year in the areas we visit). There are some nice butterflies too for those with an interest in the Lepidoptera, such as Camberwell Beauty and Swallowtail, and we usually connect with both of these on our tours to Poland.
EASE AND PACE: This is a leisurely trip, with no requirement to be doing any 'pre-breakfast' birding (of course those wanting to take an early morning stroll near the hotels will be richly rewarded and our trip leaders will be available to accompany anyone so keen). Breakfast will usually be taken at 07.00. We will make the most of the long spring days, but try to be back to our hotels in time for a rest and freshen up before our evening meal get together. Depending upon what local knowledge is made known to us, we will offer an evening foray to try and see one of the rarer owls. The longest drives are from Warsaw to Biebrza on our first day and from Białowieża back to Warsaw on the last full day. Both journeys are of about three hours, but at least one comfort/snack stop along the way will break the drives. Our walks are usually short, less than one kilometre, though a longer walk of around four km is taken at a saunter out into the middle of the marshes whilst at Biebrza. Insects should not be a big problem at this time of year, but some mosquitoes are likely in the evening, so those who are susceptible to bites should bring insect repellent.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD: This is a two centre trip with three nights in Biebrza Marshes and three in the Białowieża Forest, utilising accommodation in hotels of a 4 star standard. We will take a packed lunch each day into the field, but also stop for coffee and snacks when needed to ensure that we make this a relaxing and bird rich tour. Our final night will be spent in Warsaw near to the airport for our flight home.

WEATHER: In this part of Poland, May is usually warm and dry. Sometimes conditions become more changeable to include the occasional shower, but nothing too persistent to spoil our bird watching. Clothing therefore should reflect the variations likely to be encountered. Early morning walks in the depths of the forest can be quite cool, so a warm jacket and even a waterproof is required. Day time temperatures can easily reach mid 20C meaning a tee shirt is all that is required during the midday period. Being able to ‘layer up’ and ‘layer down’ is key to keeping comfortable.

PASSPORT AND TRAVEL INSURANCE: Participants will be expected to ensure they have a valid passport at the time of travel as well as adequate personal travel insurance.
PRICE: The cost of the trip is £1200 per person, to include return flights to Warsaw (using Doncaster Robin-Hood airport for local convenience), all travel in Poland by people carriers driven by your Birding Abroad tour leaders, hotel accommodation in twin-bed en-suite rooms of a good standard, with breakfast, packed lunch and evening meal included, guided visit to ‘strict reserve’ in Białowieża and entry fees to other nature reserves requiring a fee. Not included are drinks bought during the day or with the evening meal and any souvenirs you require. We estimate that £10 per person per day should be more than adequate to cover drinks (depending of course upon what and how much you may wish drink). Single rooms are available at a supplement.

GROUP SIZE: the tour will be considered viable with a minimum of 5 participants plus a leader. We will have a maximum of 7 persons per vehicle. The maximum group size is therefore 12 plus 2 leaders.

ITINERARY

Day 1 - Friday 11 May: Leaving from Doncaster Robin Hood airport at 08.20 we arrive in Warsaw, the capital city of Poland, at 11.50; excellent times we hope you’ll agree for the start a birding trip. There may be a short delay as we collect our two people carriers, before we proceed towards the Biebrza Marshes, a journey of two and half hours. Our hotel for three nights is newly constructed in the style of an old manor house, and is located within the Biebrza National Park itself allowing easy access to all the key sites.

On arrival our first real Polish birding begins right outside the hotel door! Surrounded by optimum habitat we have collected a very impressive list of bird sightings from the hotel grounds including sought after species such as Wryneck, Black and Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Montagu’s Harrier, Common Crane, White-tailed Eagle, Icterine Warbler, Black Redstart and Serin.
Days 2 & 3 - Saturday 12 – Sunday 13 May: The marshes stretch for many kilometres and host an abundance of birds most notably an internationally important population of Aquatic Warblers, plus both Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles, all of which breed here. Other interesting species include Great Bittern, Garganey, Corncrake, Spotted Crake, Common Crane, Great Egret, Ruff, Black-tailed Godwit, Little Gull, Black, White-winged and Whiskered Terns, Penduline Tit and Savi’s Warblers. Elk roam the marshes and European Beavers build their lodges in the flooded woodlands. If water levels are right, White-winged Terns may be in their thousands and great photographic opportunities are available.

Whilst we are in the marshes, we may take a short drive to the village of Tykocin, where an early morning visit should produce singing White-spotted Bluethroats, as well as Syrian Woodpecker and breeding Bee-eaters, both species at their northern limits of distribution in this part of Poland.
Day 4 - Monday 14 May: After breakfast on 14th we begin a two hour journey to the famous Bialowieza Forest, with excellent birding en route. First we visit a nearby lake which is known for its White-tailed Eagles before pressing on to the Siemianowka Reservoir where we will spend several hours during the middle of the day. Breeding Citrine Wagtails are found here together with migratory waders, terns and raptors including Lesser Spotted Eagles. Unlike many reservoirs this one is mainly shallow; greatly increasing its value to wildlife, so there will be a large number of water birds present including Garganey, Great Bittern and many more. The farmland surrounding the reservoir holds Ortolan Buntings, Montagu's Harriers and Blue-headed Wagtails.

The majestic Montagu’s Harrier can be expected most days

On arrival in Bialowieza, we will have a chance to visit the adjacent Palace Park where songsters include Thrush Nightingale, Common Rosefinch, Marsh, River, Icterine and Great Reed Warblers as well as a profusion of commoner birds such as Common Redstart, Black Redstart and Serin, all garden birds in these parts.

River Warbler in song.
Day 5 & 6 - Tuesday 15 – Wednesday 16 May: Our second and third full days in the forest will allow us to further explore the various woodland trails. The Bialowieza Forest is wild and ancient, straddling the border with Belarus. We will explore several different types of woodland, each having its own rich birdlife. Typical species include both species of stork, Honey Buzzard and Lesser Spotted Eagle whilst no fewer than nine species of woodpecker include Wryneck, Three-toed, White-backed, Middle Spotted, Grey-headed and Black. The woodland margins hold River, Icterine, Barred and Marsh Warblers together with Red-backed Shrike, Common Rosefinch and Thrush Nightingale. We may encounter Nutcracker and Pygmy or Tengmalm’s Owls, all seen on previous tours and with luck some of the Bison which inhabit the forest or perhaps a Pine Marten.

A guided walk in the ancient “strict reserve” will produce many Collared Flycatchers, the males newly arrived and displaying, together with Pied and lovely Red-breasted Flycatchers in full song. The 20th century history of this area is very interesting and, indeed, sobering. Not even the vast forests here escaped the ravages of the world wars, as our guide will explain.
Day 6 - Thursday 17 May: Today we will spend most of the day in Bialowieza, consolidating views and photographs on any remaining key species, before reluctantly taking the three and half hour drive back to Warsaw. There will of course be time for brief birding stops on the way to explore any interesting habitats. After a final meal together at our airport hotel, we retire early to prepare for the next day’s flight home.

A stunning male Barred Warbler

Day 7 - Friday 18 May: On the plus side our flight home arrives at our local airport of Doncaster Robin Hood. On the down side, there is only one flight available which means an early start to catch the flight out of Warsaw at 06.15.

But we will surely be reflecting on a fantastic trip having seen some excellent east European birds.