

Southern and Eastern Poland - Spring 2008

By Steve Barnes

This is a sort of eclectic account of our tour with Sandwich Bird Tours from 10th to 21st of May to Poland.

There were 14 of us plus 2 tour leaders namely John and Eustace. Poland being, as yet, still more naturally diverse, the idea was for all of us, in greater or lesser degrees to fill the gaps in our European bird list. That was certainly done but the Corncrake still eludes all of us – heard but not seen

There was a fair degree of travel needed to attain this objective.

We landed in Krakow, then to Zakopane, next to Bieszczadzki and then on to Zamosc. Next the mighty Bialowieza Forest and finally to Biebrza marshes. These places are a fair “nutcracker” (excuse the pun) to pronounce. So having now got them out of the way I won't (or can't) mention them again.

Our local guides were very good – mainly in the shape of Martin (or something near that) a university student. I suspect a great degree of quiet research was going on to check recent information and sightings.

Their hospitality and that of nearly all those we came into contact with could not be faulted. That brings me to food. Ooh! Those dumplings. Do not intend to go on a trip like this even with all the sometimes strenuous hill climbing and expect to lose weight. The beer was cheap, something like 4 zlotis a pint when the exchange rate was £0.22 to the zloti.

Now the reason we went – the birding.

As always certain memories stick in the mind and some are not always logical but the White tailed eagle gave a wonderful view, White Winged and Whiskered Terns were in profusion (in the marshland that is), that Ural Owl that we only just glimpsed in flight over the trees but literally spent half the night in the forest, only guided in the dark by a railway line, trying to see it. I feel sure it was watching us but had no reason for us to watch it. The Pygmy Owl was a real showstopper though and a further treat for those of us who had telephoto lenses on their cameras. The Wryneck as well gave a fantastic view for those who remembered their cameras that day. Also the Bluethroat found breeding along a riverbank next to a road in the village where we were staying. Great views and certainly not difficult to find. The Barred Warbler (did not look like a warbler to me) was another that made an unexpected but excellent showing as did the Short-toed Treecreeper as well as superb views of some of Poland's specialities, the Aquatic and River Warblers. Thrush Nightingales competed in song with Icterine Warblers. Along with Grey-headed, Black, Middle Spotted, Lesser Spotted and Three Toed Woodpeckers (All ten European Woodpeckers in fact). For me though my first ever sighting of a Crested Tit (even though it was early dusk) was favourite.

The animals? Let's put it this way- a bison may be a big animal but it has plenty of space in which to conceal itself from us clumsy humanoid creatures and does so very well. The beavers too – plenty of secondary evidence but it was obviously not their day out. Incidentally it was new to me that they do not all need to build dams. It depends on their location.

However the Red Squirrels and the very quick glimpse of the Pine Marten were pretty high on the list.

My interest in butterflies has been revived as well. One of my childhood ambitions was to see a Camberwell Beauty. It took a long time to achieve, but was worth it.

To finalise.

Good company. Some old and some new faces. I have been on a number of John's trips now and the attention to detail in terms of organisation, people employed and accommodation chosen lived up to his usual high standard. I would certainly recommend his tours and I for one will be on the Kazakhstan trip next spring.

May be see you there. It's a hell of a lot better than sitting on beaches.