Outline itinerary

Day 1  Fly Minsk and transfer to Liaskavichi
Day 2/4 Pripiatsky Reserve
Day 5/6 Belowezhskaya Pushcha National Park
Day 7  Sporovo Reserve
Day 8  Transfer Minsk and fly London

Departs
May

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code BLR01) or brochure

Grading
A. Day walks only

Focus
Birds, mammals and general natural history

Highlights
- Vast tracts of un-spoilt ancient forest
- A large mammal population including Beaver & European Bison
- Over 800 plant species recorded in Pripiatsky
- Varied birdlife including such hard-to-see European species as Azure Tit
- Possibility of seeing ten species of woodpecker
- Large population of raptors & owls
- A rare glimpse of a fast-disappearing rural landscape
NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

As more and more of the outstanding areas for wildlife in Europe are threatened by the insatiable demands of our modern society, it is increasingly the case that many of the best remaining habitats are now to be found in the former Soviet republics. A prime example of this is the wonderful Pripiastry National Park, close to the Ukraine border in southern Belarus, where a remarkable range of wetland and primeval oak forest habitats are protected. Founded in 1969 to preserve the unique natural complexes of marshland draining into the Pripia River, the reserve has been subsequently enlarged by the incorporation of adjacent areas and now embraces over 64,000 hectares of floodplain, raised bog and mixed forests, including 7,000 hectares of wetland oak forest, the largest primeval oak forest in Europe. Thanks to the lack of human interference, strict protection and the inaccessibility of the region for many months of the year due to flooding, Pripiastry is a haven for wildlife. Outside the reserve the birdlife along the Pripia River is equally impressive, with species including Azure Tit, Thrush Nightingale and Hoopoe in the vicinity of our comfortable hotel in Liaskavichi. The Pripia floodplain hosts Terek Sandpiper, Great Snipe, Ruff and many others in its accommodating marshy habitat.

A stunning variety of birdlife awaits visitors to this watery paradise; both Black and White Storks occur here along with large numbers of White-winged Black Terns, Great Egrets, Common Crane, Garganey, Black-tailed Godwits, Green and Wood Sandpipers. In the forests, ten species of woodpecker and 12 species of owl have been recorded whilst other attractions include Azure Tit, at the western limit of its European range, Hazel Grouse and a diverse mixture of summer visitors including Thrush Nightingale, Collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers. In contrast to many European bird sites, Pripiastry also supports a very impressive population of mammals, including Wolf, Wild Boar, Beaver and the reintroduced Bison, although it is invariably much harder to see most of these than the more visible feathered inhabitants.

Belowezhkaya Pusha National Park adjoining its smaller counterpart in Poland harbours the last and largest remaining parts of the immense primeval forest that once stretched across Europe. Being a World Heritage site, the ancient forest is a stronghold for larger mammals, meaning European Bison, Red Deer and Wild Boar are easier to spot, and there is even a heightened possibility of a rare sighting of Elk and Wolf. It is also home to a good mixture of raptors, owls and woodpeckers. Lesser Spotted, Greater Spotted and White-tailed Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Goshawk are all breeding at this time of the year and the forest holds several pairs of Great Grey Owl which we often see, as well as Pygmy Owl. Hazel Grouse is possible to see with a bit of luck, while White-backed, Grey-headed, Black and Middle Spotted Woodpecker are all found in the woodlands. Collared and Red-breasted Flycatcher, Icterine Warbler, Crested and Willow Tit and Hawfinch form the supporting cast.

Sporovo Reserve protects an important part of the world's Aquatic Warbler population; the rarest songbird of Europe. Other avian highlights include Citrine Wagtail, Bluethroat, Corncrake and Montagu's Harrier.
Day 1

Lyaskovichi

We fly from London to Minsk where we will be welcomed by our Belarus hosts and then transfer by road to accommodation in Liaskavichi, close to Pripiatsky Reserve, a journey of about four hours from the capital.

Day 2 - 4

Pripiatsky National Park

We devote the next three days to a thorough exploration of the varied habitats comprising the National Park as well as flooded meadows, marshes and patches of forest around the Pripiatsky Reserve and floodplain.

Alongside the Pripiat River, numerous marshy meadows and shallow pools are scenes of great activity. Breeding waders establish their nesting territories, pausing to feed for a few days, whilst other family members bound for more distant Arctic tundra. Lapwing are a familiar sight, tumbling through the air, Black-tailed Godwits perform their 'wicking' song-flights over the fields, and flocks of Ruff, resplendent in summer finery, congregate on traditional 'leks' to dazzle the attendant females with the magnificence of their head adornments. Green and Wood Sandpipers may seem at first glance to belong to the category of passage migrants, as this is how we know them best in Britain, but finding the originator of an unfamiliar musical song uttered from the branches of dead trees in the marsh to be one of these birds will be a reminder that these waders also nest beside the Pripiat River, as do the rarer Terek Sandpipers bobbing like Common Sandpipers along the water's edge. Larger birds will be evident stalking through the aquatic vegetation; White and Black Storks exact a harvest from the huge numbers of Marsh Frogs and Fire-bellied Toads which create a spring chorus of croaking from the marshes of even greater volume than the dawn bird song. Many pairs of Black Storks nest locally and these handsome black and white birds are often to be seen soaring over the park, frequently sharing the thermals with raptors such as Marsh Harriers, White-tailed, Short-toed, Spotted and Lesser Spotted Eagles. Back on terra firma, one of the loudest songsters at this time of the year demonstrates the richness and fluency of a Nightingale and yet there are subtle differences, for this is the Thrush Nightingale or Sprosser, which in these northern climes replaces its better known relative in damp thickets and forest edges. As we walk amid the towering ancient oak woodlands, many other voices will demand our attention. These dark and dank forests are home to European Bison, Wild Boar, Beavers and many other creatures but it is the birds, and in particular the woodpeckers, that are most likely to be encountered. The chance of spotting ten species, including Wryneck, Black, White-backed, Grey-headed and Middle Spotted is likely, although Green Woodpecker is the most covert in Belarus. However, with youngsters demanding food from tree-hole nests, the adults can be more conspicuous than usual in their relentless search for grubs and insects to feed their offspring. Hawfinches, Collared, Pied and Red-breasted Flycatchers also love these broad-leaved woods, but Pripiatsky tailors to a variety of habitat requirements, boasting many types of forest.

Acres of swaying reeds around the fringes of the waterways offer cover for newly arrived Great Reed Warblers rasping out their distinctive songs from perches high on the stems. The loud reeling of Savi's Warblers can also be heard from such locations, along with chattering contributions from Sedge and Reed Warblers. Bitterns occur in the reed-beds, more usually heard booming than seen but at this time of year not infrequently flying around in courtship chases. Rather unexpectedly, another scarce resident here is the Smew, a duck perhaps more usually associated with more northerly regions. Several pairs inhabit an excellent area of fish ponds near the reserve, which are also frequented by nesting Black-necked Grebes.
What of other birding highlights in this wonderful region? One of the most sought after of small birds is the beautiful little Azure Tit, nesting here at the western-most extremity of its limited European range. Several pairs may be found in the damp willows and scrub near the Pripiat River, a frosty looking jewel of a bird which always causes excitement when it appears. This is the best area in Europe to see Azure Tit and it is one of our main targets. Out on the marshes, flocks of terns swooping over the water include numbers of White-winged Black, Whiskered, Black, Common, and rather surprisingly, Little Terns. Further interest is provided by stately Common Cranes and several species of snipe can be found nesting in their respective habitats; the forest loving Woodcock 'roding' at dusk over the woodlands whilst Common, and the rare Great Snipe, inhabit the wetter areas, each performing distinctive spring displays. Reference has already been made to some of the raptors regularly to be seen in the skies over Pripiatsky but other possibilities include Osprey, Montagu’s and Marsh Harrier, Black Kite, Hobby and Goshawk. Keeping wary eyes on these potential threats from the safety of waterside cover, handsome Bluethroats are among the most attractive of the smaller passerines and in contrast to their usual skulking habits, become positively showy when rival males deliver bursts of melodic song at each other, sometimes uttering the challenge from a short display flight. Another secretive bird which draws attention to itself in a less musical fashion is the Corncrake, and many of these fast-declining summer visitors can still be heard in the evenings, rasping away from flower filled meadows.

Pripiatsky is however much more than a bird reserve and whilst our main focus will be on the avifauna there are butterflies, reptiles and mammals to look for as well as the colourful and diverse spring flora. Native European Beavers are a privileged sighting, most likely to be spotted at dusk in the vicinity of their huge lodges.

**Days 5 & 6**

**Thursday & Friday**

**Belowezhskaya Pushcha National Park**

Our next base will be in the middle of the famous World Heritage Site, Belowezhskaya Pushcha ancient forest situated along the border adjoining its smaller sister site in Poland. This fantastic place is the westernmost breeding site for Great Grey Owl, home to all European woodpeckers and a stronghold for the majestic European Bison.

We will walk amidst ancient trees and focus on woodland species. The fairytale woods hold Hazel Grouse, Great Grey and Pygmy Owls, although we need a bit of luck to see them. Woodpeckers should be very much in evidence. Great Spotted is the most common, but Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted, Grey-headed, Black, White-backed and Three-toed are also here in numbers. Crested Tit, Firecrest, Common Crossbill, Hawfinch, Collared and Red-breasted Flycatcher will all be breeding in the woodlands. Where the forest meets marshy ground we will listen for the distinctive reeling of River Warbler and watch out for displaying Green Sandpiper. Raptors are well represented with good chances for White-tailed, Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Hen and Montagu’s Harrier.

We always stay alert for the presence of mammals in these woodlands where Elk, Red Deer and Wild Boar are numerous and there are even some packs of Wolves and a few Eurasian Lynx as well. The huge European Bison still dwell amidst the trees, and although they are fairly shy, we usually get clear sightings of them grazing on the edge of the woodland at the end of the day.
Day 7  
Sporovo Reserve

Our last base will be close to Sporovo Reserve, home of a very important population of Aquatic Warbler, the rarest songbird of Europe.

The marshes and fishponds are home to many exciting birds. White-winged and Whiskered Terns, Bittern, Montagu’s Harrier, Bluethroat, Savi’s Warbler, Citrine Wagtail, Corncrake, and Penduline Tit are all found here. We will spend the evening searching for Aquatic Warbler - a Globally Endangered species - at one of its most important breeding sites.

Day 8  
London

We drive back to Minsk airport, birding en route, in time for the return flight to London.

Grading

This tour is graded A, consisting of easy day walks only, and is suitable for those of all ages and degrees of fitness.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the holiday cost. Accommodation will be in comfortable hotels in Lyaskovichi (Gomel), Belowezhskaya Pushcha and Beloazersk, and all rooms are equipped with private facilities.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Belarus. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/belarus or telephone 0870 6060290 regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.