

Lithuania in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 8th October 2021

Report written by tour participant Clive Watts



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Tour participants: Albertas Skirpstas (leader), with four Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Friday 1st October

The four of us met for the first time at the gate as we prepared to board our flight from Stansted to Vilnius. We took off on time at about 5.30pm for a two-and-a-half hour flight which got us to our destination late in the evening as local time is two hours ahead of BST. Having successfully presented passports, Covid passes and passenger locator forms, we met our guide, Albertas, and boarded the minibus for the drive to our hotel, near Alytus, about 90 minutes away. It had already been decided to reverse the planned itinerary because of the flight timings. So we found our rooms, did a bit of unpacking and turned in for the night.

Day 2

Saturday 2nd October

There was a Black Redstart singing outside my window next morning, and after an excellent breakfast we set off for a day in the woods. Our first destination was Punia Wood, an ancient hunting preserve of the dukes of Lithuania set in a bend of the river Nemunas. On the way we saw our first White-tailed Eagle, which caused quite a bit of excitement, but these birds were so common here that it wasn't long before we were merely saying "Another eagle over there". The woods were densely forested, trees tall and straight, conifer and broadleaved. We identified Scots Pine, Norway Spruce, Norway Maple, now beginning to take on autumn colours, Oak, Aspen, Hornbeam and Elm. There was an impressive understorey of seedling trees and herbaceous plants which suggested that there was no over-grazing by deer and not many squirrels, so the tree seeds survived to germinate. Indeed, I don't think we saw a squirrel during the entire trip. We did see a lot of Jays though, gathering their acorns, and that brings us to the birds we saw in the woods: of special interest to us were Crested Tits and Hawfinches, among the Blue and Great Tits, Chaffinches, Treecreeper and Wrens. Albertas remarked that the Wren appeared on our coin, the farthing, but we had to point out to him the importance of not pronouncing the "th" in farthing as a "t". There were also woodpeckers, Great-spotted in plenty were seen, but Black and Lesser-Spotted were only heard, and alas Lesser-spotted were never seen this trip. We were, however, surprised to see a White-tailed Eagle fly over, down a woodland ride.

We visited a memorial to Lithuanian partisans, killed by the Russians after WWII. They had lived in an underground bunker in the forest, and a replica had been created to commemorate them. So we walked on, along the river and through a tree-based historical trail telling the stories of the dukes and the only king of Lithuania and their many battles. We had been warned that the walk was 10 kilometres long, but it was all new to us, so we had lingered and dawdled, with the result that we still a long way from lunch, so Albertas curtailed the walk by leading us up a steep slope and bringing us gratefully back to the minibus.

And so we had lunch, which was provided by the hotel, was delicious, and huge. It would easily have fed us for two days. This trip was notable for the amount of food we were offered, generally of a very high quality. We ate as much as we could and packed up the remains, saying they'd do for tomorrow. Albertas shook his head saying, "There will be more!"

We visited two more woodland sites in the afternoon, hoping to find more woodpeckers and maybe owls, but nothing new turned up. We did see a lot of shiny green dung beetles, which I think were simply a version of the common Dor beetle, or Spring Dumble-dor we have in Britain; we found a moth, an Epirrita of one species or another, sitting on the trunk of a tree; and there were many delightful fungi to photograph.

We had our first dinner together that evening, most enjoyable, and indeed bounteous, and then retired.

Day 3

Sunday 3rd October

Next morning, after another fine breakfast, we packed and checked out. Our first stop was at the Zuvinto Biosphere Reserve, a large, reed-fringed lake, where we saw numbers of ducks, Marsh and Hen Harrier and a Great Grey Shrike. The visitor centre was opened for us by the director, and as we walked towards it we were surprised to see a Swift fly over us. From the observation platform on the roof we saw Crossbills tearing into pine cones and spotted a couple of Chiffchaffs on the overhead wires.

We then had to start the long drive to Klaipeda where we would cross to the Curonian spit. We stopped to look some geese on the way: Greylags and a few Bean Geese noticed by Michael. Albertas identified both species - Taiga and Tundra. Soon it was time for another meal, and we stopped at a fish farm where our table was booked and we had fish soup. After lunch we had a quick look at the fish ponds without finding anything of interest, so we carried on to Klaipeda.

There's a very short ferry crossing to the spit, and once on the other side we went to the head of the spit to see the sights. These included the only black (Carrion) crows in Lithuania (all the rest are Hooded) and some White Pelicans which live at the dolphinarium, and have a distinctly pink tinge.

We drove on down the spit to the attractive resort of Nida with its brightly painted houses, many of which were thatched. Our rooms weren't ready when we arrived at the hotel, so we had another meal. Not perhaps our favourite meal of the trip - a pleasant soup followed by four potato pancakes dressed with salad and some relishes. Two pancakes defeated me, but the meal passed cheerfully enough. Back at the hotel our rooms were ready, so we were able to unpack and prepare to see migration taking place tomorrow.

Day 4

Monday 4th October

After breakfast we headed for the dunes protecting the spit from the Baltic Sea. When we arrived, under a grey sky, we found there were thousands of finches streaming south overhead. The movement went on for hours. From their calls we identified Chaffinches and Siskins, which made up the majority of the birds, but with them were large flocks of Wood Pigeons and Starlings. Occasionally there were Song Thrushes and Blackbirds, one or two Sparrowhawks and Marsh Harriers.

Looking out to sea from the top of the dune, we saw large rafts of Velvet Scoter, with a few Common Scoter. There were also Great-crested and Black-necked Grebes, Black- and Red-throated Divers and, remarkably, a summer-plumaged Red-necked Grebe (a life tick for me!). A few flocks of Bean Geese and Teal flew past and large numbers of Cormorants.

We walked along the beach to the border with the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, and on the way back, none of us feeling any urge to defect, Richard and Michael found the footprints of a Moose coming down from the dunes. Unfortunately this was the closest we came to actually seeing the animal.

Walking back to the minibus we heard Bramblings and saw Great-spotted Woodpeckers in the trees, and Michael found a Great-Grey Shrike perching on an exposed twig back on the dunes.

After a very welcome cup of coffee, we drove to the Grey Dunes at the Nagliu nature reserve and the site of the

sand-buried villages. In the 19th century, villages had been built on the dunes and the protective vegetation, trees and grasses, removed. As a result, the sand had started moving again, driven by the wind, and the villages were eventually buried, so they were abandoned and the vegetation re-established.

It was a long uphill walk along boardwalks to the view point at the top of the dunes, overlooking the lagoon; we were now on the inland side of the spit. So before setting out we had another generous picnic lunch, supplied by the hotel in Nida. Pieces of chicken with apple and large pickled gherkins were popular. This is a regular spot for educational visits, and while we were at lunch, a coach load of school children walked past on their way to view the site of the buried villages.

Having returned from the highest point in the dunes, we drove to the site of a Cormorant colony near Juodkrante. Lots of dead trees, killed by the birds' excrement. Steps are now taken to keep the numbers down and stop the colony spreading. Most of the Cormorants had now left the breeding site, and it was here, among the dead trees, that we had our best views of a Black Woodpecker, and Michael spotted a bat, probably a Noctule, roosting in the roof timbers of a shelter. The site is called Heron Hill, because there was a heronry here before the Cormorants took it over in the mid-19th century. There was a ringing site nearby, on the shore of the lagoon, but it was inactive at the time.

As we drove away toward Juodkrante, we saw a small group of young boars, still in their spotty coats, rooting beside the road. There was a lot of evidence of boar activity in the area: roadside verges were churned up and the football pitch was protected by a steel fence.

Further on, we visited the Juodkrante ringing station: a large heligoland trap set between the dune and the woods. It wasn't being operated at the time, but we saw several dragonflies caught in it, which Elisabeth and Michael released. They were Migrant Hawkers (*Aeshna mixta*), the same species that occurs in Britain in the autumn. The director of the Ventes Ragas ringing station identified them for us from a photograph.

Back at Nida it was soon time for another meal; same restaurant but a much nicer dinner of pork cutlets this time, after which we walked back to the hotel while looking at the statues with which Nida is particularly well supplied. Very striking was one of the musician and poet Vytautas Kernagis, in the film character of Ben (Benas), sitting on a bench playing his guitar.

Day 5

Tuesday 5th October

This morning we made an early start to visit the Parnidis dune before sunrise. There's an impressive view from the lookout platform, all the way along the spit to Kaliningrad. Migration was going on overhead though not as intensely as yesterday. We saw Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff and Common Redstart in the nearby bushes and a Swallow and House Martin flew overhead. There is a huge sundial here and a characterful statue of J-P Sartre on a windy visit. From the viewpoint we saw White-tailed Eagles in the distance and Sparrowhawks passing, and far away, Roe Deer and a group of Wild Boars, an adult and three juveniles trotting briskly along with their tails held high. Sadly, no Moose. As we headed back to the car park we found they were setting up stalls selling souvenirs; I bought a pair of what I hope are Baltic amber owls, with silly eyes! It's a good job we came early: this is obviously a popular spot.

Back at the hotel we had a very welcome late breakfast and then set off for the woods at Juodkrante. On the way we found a roadside fox, who must have been used to being fed because he came right up to the minibus with a very expectant expression. Our destination was a woodland walk called the Old Promenades. Once again, fine

old tall mixed woodland with a rich understorey. We heard Lesser-spotted and both heard and saw Black Woodpecker. Many of the trees here were American Red Oaks. We walked back past Amber Bay, site of a 19th century amber industry, where we had good views of Great White Egrets. These are relatively recent colonists, now very common, but, in the reverse of the situation in the UK, Little Egrets are rarely seen.

Back at the bus, we drove to a lagoon-side viewpoint for another picnic lunch and watched some fishermen carrying out a fish-sampling survey. One of them, a little tipsy it seemed, spent a long time haranguing the unfortunate Albertas, insisting that the Cormorants needed to be removed because they eat all the fish in the lagoon. There was a cute little toilet by the roadside, very handy, like a wooden pod, which we all admired.

After this it was off to Horses' Cape for more lagoon-watching, and Richard found a pleasant diversion for us watching kite-surfers performing aerobatics. The site got its name because Teutonic knights used to graze their horses here on their way to the Crusades.

Back in Nida that evening, we strolled to the harbour, viewing the thatch and the statuary and some nicely planted gardens. As today had been so windy there was some doubt as to whether our boat trip to Vente would be possible tomorrow. So we returned to the hotel to do some preliminary packing and prepare for dinner.

Day 6

Wednesday 6th October

The boat trip was still hanging in the balance, so after breakfast we walked by the lagoon to wait for news. A solitary Tundra Bean Goose provided an opportunity for photography and there were gulls to examine on the breakwater. News arrived that the boat trip was on, so we set off for the harbour as our tiny vessel battled its way towards us across the water. Albertas saw us off, he was bringing the minibus and our luggage around by road, while we headed bravely out across the wind-grieved lagoon. The boatman invited us to sit in the cabin, but we preferred to brave the elements, and the occasional splashes, outside.

After about an hour and a half we arrived at the water-side resort of Miniija in the Nemunas estuary, where we went ashore for some fish soup and coffee. Then we took to the boat again to meet Albertas on Rusne island, and he arrived just as we were coming alongside. We went up the lighthouse to look at the view, and then toured the island in search of birds; Richard had proposed this because there seemed to be some danger that we would be taken off for yet another meal! We saw Bean Geese and a Peregrine put in a couple of appearances.

We moved on to the Kintai fish ponds, where on a drained pool we found Ruff, Dunlin, Ringed Plover and Teal. Michael found a strange alien species of cucumber sprawling over the banks, probably Prickly Cucumber (*Echinocystis lobata*, native to N. America), with odd egg-shaped bristly fruit.

The biggest surprise of the day happened as we were driving away when a juvenile Red-footed Falcon appeared on the wires and flew to a nearby tree, enabling us to snatch a few photos. The pictures showed that it was ringed.

We then drove to our next hotel, the Ventaine on Vente Cape, and checked ourselves in: during the whole of our two night stay we didn't see a single member of staff, though the rooms were ready for us, comfortable, with lovely heated bathroom floors and a good view of the lagoon. That evening we drove to the ringing station at the end of the cape where there was a splendid restaurant and had a most enjoyable evening meal. When asked if we would like to have breakfast there next morning we unanimously agreed.

Day 7

Thursday 7th October

We were up early this morning to be at the Ventes Ragas ringing station as the sun came up. We were introduced to the director, a very energetic and welcoming personality, bursting with information and tirelessly addressing parties of school children. As well as ringing birds he marked dragonflies with felt-tipped pen. Unfortunately it was too windy for the big heligoland to be operating, but other traps were open and ringing was going ahead: Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs, Great Tits, Wrens, Chaffinches, Goldcrests and the attractive white-headed form of Long-tailed Tit. We had an excellent breakfast at the restaurant, smoked salmon crepes, and admired the wallpaper in the cloakrooms.

Then it was off to another wood, again mature and mixed with a lot of American oak and a good understorey. There was a fine old Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*) beside the forestry office. As we drove away, Albertas heard a Middle-spotted Woodpecker, and we managed to get good views of it.

Next we went to Dreverna, a waterside holiday development with a fine restaurant, where we were booked for lunch, for me rather too soon after our late and excellent breakfast. Afterwards we climbed the observation tower and Michael found some frogs in the creek, most likely Edible or Pool Frogs.

That night, after filling in our passenger locator forms with some trepidation, we dined again at the ringing station after first enjoying a splendid sunset from the hotel. We decided to walk back from the restaurant in the dark, in the hope of finding owls, but all we heard was a distant Tawny.

Day 8

Friday 8th October

This was our last day, so it was up early to pack and load our luggage into the minibus. It was cold, the first frost of the year, as we checked ourselves out and headed back to the ringing station. Now it got even colder as the wind got up, and the big trap was again out of action. There were a lot of birds passing overhead, finches and thrushes with pigeons and starlings as before. We spotted two tiny Merlins dashing among the finches, and when one succeeded in making a catch the other tussled with it, trying to take its kill. We also had good views of a Goshawk flying with the migrants, though not appearing to be hunting.

Then we heard news that an owl had been caught and we were allowed to go and see it: a Tengmalm's Owl, a new bird for me, which was posed for photographs, ringed, and taken off so more data could be recorded.

After another fine breakfast we had to set off on the drive to Vilnius for our evening flight. We did some birdwatching on the way without adding anything new to our list, and then, though still full from breakfast, stopped for lunch. The restaurant was in a converted German school at Bardinai, and there was still a heavy German influence on the food. First a nice soup, that would have been enough, but next came a bowl of sauerkraut and fried potatoes with two very plump sausages on top. No-one could finish that, even Albertas struggled, and I managed less than half, but there was more: a 45 degree wedge of apple cake and ice cream. Irresistible but unfinishable. After coffee we staggered back to the minibus after viewing a collection of rustic byegones displayed on the side of a barn.

So the return drive continued. We were hoping for a guided tour of Vilnius old quarter, but a traffic hold-up in Kaunas put paid to that, so all we could do was visit another restaurant for a *light* dinner: Lithuanian salad in my case. There was time for a quick walk round the old quarter under Albertas' guidance and then it was off to the

airport, farewell to our guide and time to check in.

Personally, I enjoyed the trip a lot. I saw two new birds and found the migration and the ringing station thrilling. I'd love to go back in the spring, and hope to do so in a year or two.

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Checklists

Birds

1	Taiga Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>
2	Tundra Bean Goose	<i>Anser serrirostris</i>
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
4	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
5	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
6	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
7	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
8	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>
9	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
11	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
12	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
14	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
16	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
17	Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>
18	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>

19	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
20	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
21	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
22	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
23	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>
24	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
25	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
26	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
27	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
28	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
30	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
31	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
32	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
33	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
34	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
35	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
36	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>
37	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
38	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
39	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
40	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
41	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
42	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
43	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
44	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
45	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
46	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>
47	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
48	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
49	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>
50	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
51	Lesser Black-backed (Baltic) Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
52	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
53	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
54	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>
55	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
56	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
57	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>
58	Tengmalm's Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</i>
59	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
60	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
61	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
62	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
63	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>

64	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
65	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
66	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
67	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
68	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
69	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
70	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>
71	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
72	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
73	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
74	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>
75	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
76	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
77	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>
78	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
79	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
80	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>
81	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>
82	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
83	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
84	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
85	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
86	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
87	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
88	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
89	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
90	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
91	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
92	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
93	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
94	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
95	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
96	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
97	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
98	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
99	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
100	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
101	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
102	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
103	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
104	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
105	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
106	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
107	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
108	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>

109	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
110	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
111	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
112	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
113	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>
114	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
115	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>