Poland in Autumn

Tour Report

16 – 24 September 2018



Crested Tit



Cranes landing



Cranes



Grey-headed Woodpecker



Greater Spotted Eagle



Spotted Nutcracker

Report and images by trip participants



Tour leader: Oliwier Myka

Participants: Peter Spillett

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Introduction

This was RSPB Reading Local Group's first venture on a trip organised by Naturetrek. The leading wildlife tour operator started offering private group tours a couple of years ago, and the Reading group is one of its first clients.

The trip was thoroughly enjoyed by all 14 participants and its success sets a high standard for future trips. The group is very grateful to Peter Spillett for promoting the idea within the group and engaging with Naturetrek to bring it about, and to Peter Scudamore for arranging it.

Day 1

Sunday 16th September

The group participants and our tour leader Oliwier met on Sunday morning at Warsaw airport. We boarded a minibus and set off for eastern Poland. Witek, our main driver for the trip, was not due to join us until the third day, so we had different drivers for each of the first two days. We broke our journey for a set lunch at a roadside restaurant which gave us a taster of the excellent meals we would enjoy throughout the trip, mostly traditional Polish cuisine.

We arrived about 5pm at Pension Unikat, our hotel for the first three nights, on the outskirts of the village of Bialowieża. We met again an hour later for a pre-dinner walk. There is a long garden at the back of the hotel, with a gate at the end which opens onto meadowland, beyond which lies the southern fringe of the Białowieża Forest. Red Deer stags could be heard rutting and a Great Grey Shrike was clearly visible in a tree.

Day 2

Monday 17th September

Most of the group returned to the spot behind the hotel where we had been the previous evening, for some pre-breakfast birding. The majority of birds seen were clearly flying in a southerly direction, indicating that they were migrating to warmer climes.

We spent the morning exploring wooded areas around Budy and Czerlonka, to the west of Białowieża. A forest trail meanders into the pine woods starting just beyond Budy village. It leads to a clearing with a swamp and some dead trees, where we saw evidence of Beaver activity. We also had good views of several species of woodpecker.

After lunch back at the hotel, we returned to the vicinity of Czerlonka, where we explored a trail by a disused railway line. The thicker nature of the woodland here makes it a perfect habitat for the elusive Hazel Grouse. We had brief views of two as they crossed the path ahead of us, and also glimpsed a Spotted Nutcracker high in a tree and then in flight. We also walked along the Żebra Żubra (bison's ribs) boardwalk, just outside Białowieża.

We returned to the hotel for an early evening meal at 5:15pm. We then drove northwest of Białowieża for a walk along the Royal Oaks Boardwalk (Szlak Dębów Królewskich). The walk passes 40 metre high oaks, the oldest of which are more than 400 years old. The trees are all named after Polish kings and Lithuanian

grand dukes, a reminder that the forest lies along the historical boundary between these two realms. Our aim in walking the trail as dusk approached was to search for Pygmy Owls. We were rewarded with a brief sighting of one, and heard its distinctive autumn scale-song.

Day 3

Tuesday 18th September

We started the day at 5:45 with a pre-breakfast walk from the back of the hotel searching for Bison. We came across some fresh dung near where there was visible evidence that a Bison had lain down to rest after eating. Although we did not see it, we knew it must still be in the woods nearby.

A visit to the Strictly Protected Area of the Bialowieża National Park had been pre-arranged for the morning. Our two forest guides, Arek (Arkadiusz) Szymura and his colleague, met us near the imposing gates at the entrance to the Strictly Protected Area for an hour's exploration of the reserve, where nature is allowed to take its course with minimal human intervention.

We were told that there are 22 species of tree in the forest including Norway Maple, Pedunculate Oak, Hornbeam, Wych Elm, Small-leaved Lime, Norway Spruce, Rowan and Aspen. Many are strikingly tall. The walk proved fruitful for woodpecker sightings and the many varieties of plants and mushrooms added interest.

We returned to the hotel for lunch. In the afternoon we visited Siemianówka Reservoir and the bird-ringing station on its shore, one of 10 such stations in Poland. Nearby is the village of Siemieniakowszczyzna, which boasts the longest single-word name in Poland. Birds we saw being measured and ringed included Chaffinch, Chiffchaff, Dunnock, feisty Blue Tit and diminutive Wren. Looking out across the Reservoir was also productive, with good views of three species of eagle.

Just before returning to the hotel, we stopped by the road to look again for Bison, and were rewarded with the sight of one less than 50 metres away. It was lying down in undergrowth but its head and horns were clearly visible.

Our evening meal included a complimentary shot of bison grass vodka. Then, as an early celebration of his 22nd birthday, Oliwier opened a bottle of 'Duch Puszczy' (spirit of the forest). It was enjoyed by a few stalwarts but sadly, photographic evidence of the laughter and tears that ensued was accidentally deleted.

Day 4

Wednesday 19th September

Having had breakfast, it was time to leave Bialowieża and set off on a journey towards the Biebrza National Park.

We stopped briefly for a walk in the woods near Budy, where we were rewarded with good views of a Crested Tit and two Marsh Tits as well as a young Grass Snake.

We continued in a northwesterly direction until we reached the village of Pasynki, where we walked around the churchyard of a wooden Eastern Orthodox church built in 1891. Our next visit was to Ploski, with its

Ruthenian-style houses. Birds of interest included Tree Sparrows. Wall butterflies were seen which are now rare in Berkshire.

After breaking our journey for lunch in Zabłudów, we drove through Oliwier's home city of Białystok and made stops for birdwatching at the Dojlidy Fish Ponds and then by a lake at Czechowizna.

We arrived late afternoon at our base for the next two nights, the Hotel Bartlowizna in the small town of Goniądz which is situated on the south bank of the Biebrza River, just outside the boundary of the Biebrza National Park. The Park was established in 1993 to preserve the peatlands along the Biebrza River and is the largest in Poland.

In the evening before dinner, we met on a jetty by the hotel for good views of a Marsh Harrier, Roe Deer and small flocks of Starlings.

Day 5

Thursday 20th September

The weather had been dry and mostly sunny during our trip, with the temperature becoming gradually warmer and reaching 26° centigrade today.

After breakfast we set off in the minibus, crossing a bridge over the Biebrza River and parking by a tower hide just to the north of the river. From the road, we looked for birdlife in an adjacent field.

We then spent the rest of the day exploring the western part of the southern basin of the Biebrza National Park. Some of the group caught a glimpse from the minibus of a Pine Marten by the roadside and we stopped for particularly good views of a Lesser Spotted Eagle and later a Tawny Owl, but the highlight of the day for the group was undoubtedly seeing large flocks of Common Cranes, both in flight and on the ground.

Our lunch stop was at Ruś, at the southwestern corner of the National Park, where we sat on benches outside a café drinking coffee, tea or beer with our packed lunches. After lunch we visited Ławki Swamp and the area around Barwik, looking unsuccessfully for Elk but spotting much other wildlife of interest including a young Adder.

Day 6

Friday 21st September

Today's wildlife watching started at 5:50 as we set off along the Tsar Road in search of Elk. This would be our last chance of spotting the largest member of the Deer family before leaving the Biebrza marshes for the Baltic coast. We were in luck, spotting four Elk between us, one from a viewing platform and the other three from a tower hide. Before getting back in the minibus, we were rewarded with good views of a Black Woodpecker in flight and a pair of Spotted Nutcrackers in a tree and then in flight.

We had breakfast at 9am and set off at 9:30 on the long drive to the Baltic coast, which would take us through the Masurian Lake District. We broke our journey to do some birdwatching at Łuknajno Lake and then at a lake outside Mragowo.

We stopped for lunch at a restaurant where, in a change from the usual Polish cuisine, we went Italian with a wholesome pasta dish.

At 5:30pm we reached the village of Krynica Morksa on the Vistula Spit, and checked into Hotel Krynica where we would stay for the last three nights of the trip.

The meal came with complimentary shots of vodka.

Day 7

Saturday 22nd September

The temperature was about 10° cooler than on Friday. It was a windy day of sunny intervals and occasional light showers.

Some members of the group walked to the back of the hotel before breakfast to watch the bird migration from the shoreline. There was wave after wave of flocks of small birds flying westwards along the spit in defiance of the brisk southerly winds. Identifying the species in flight was challenging. Among those that could be identified with confidence were Chaffinch and Teal.

Our first visit of the day was to the long-established ringing station in woods just to the west of Krynica. Among the species of birds that we saw the volunteers remove from small sacks for measuring and ringing were Reed Warbler, Robin, Blue Tit and, so much closer than we had seen them high up in the canopy, a Crested Tit.

Next we drove to a nearby raptor viewing platform to feast on close sightings of White-tailed Eagle, Peregrine and Hobby as well as numerous passerines. Dipping into our packed lunches was definitely lower priority!

That afternoon we went to the beach just to the east of the Vistula mouth. Some chose to search for fragments of amber on the sandy beach while others focused on scanning the sea and beach for birds, seals and jellyfish. Whilst some members of the group had seen Mute Swans in the sea before, it was a particular surprise for many to see Coots in the Baltic rather than inland.

We walked east through the village after dinner in search of nocturnal wildlife. Wild Boar forage in the immediate vicinity of our hotel so we weren't too surprised to see a family of about 15 Wild Boar cross the road and disappear into the thick forest on the north side of the road.

Day 8

Sunday 23rd September

Most of the group joined Oliwier before breakfast to enjoy watching bird migration from a vantage point on the shoreline behind the hotel. The majority of migrating birds were passerines but we also saw Snipe and Dunlin.

Four members of the group spent the morning back at the raptor viewing platform and were fortunate to see a Honey Buzzard, Merlin and Peregrine. The rest continued in the minibus to Gdańsk and spent the best part of an hour admiring the city's architecture.

In the afternoon, we visited the Baltic coast at Piaski, within sight of the Russian border. We had good views of Grey Plover. There was also a problematic gull, perhaps a cross between Caspian and Herring, or perhaps Yellow-legged.

Next we went for a walk just to the east of Krynica, near the shoreline of the southern coast of the Vistula Spit, adding Pheasant and Whinchat to our bird sightings.

Finally, we looked for birds by the shore at the back of the hotel. We heard and caught a glimpse of Bearded Tit, followed by a good view of a Penduline Tit. There could hardly be a more fitting end to a week of excellent birding. Not one to rest on his laurels, though, Peter Scudamore stayed out longer than the rest of the group and had the good luck to spot a Beaver swimming.

At our final meal together as a full group, Peter Spillett gave a short speech, thanking Oliwier and Witek for making the trip such a success. Oliwier replied with a few words, followed by Witek who had a little more to say. He told us that his brother is a pilot for Ryanair living in Dublin, and that his mother always says that while his brother flies fast and high, Witek travels low and slow. We might not agree entirely with the latter observation but were of course far too polite to comment!

We all enjoyed the meal, but especially Oliwier, as he combined jovial conversation with glancing from time to time at his smartphone to see his team Białystok win 3-1 and go to the top of Poland's first division.

Day 9

Monday 24th September

The group had a final breakfast together and then it was time to say our first goodbyes, as Dave and Pat were off to Gdansk to start their long train journey home.

The rest of the group boarded the minibus for a drive south to Warsaw, stopping for lunch in the Zlota Rybka (goldfish) restaurant at Górka, just north of Plońsk. Although far from the sea, it has a nautical theme.

The group said our goodbyes to Oliwier and Witek at the airport. The flight arrived on time at Heathrow and all too soon we were saying yet more goodbyes as we dispersed to all parts of Reading and points further north and west, after a most enjoyable and memorable trip.

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted, H = heard only, D = dead)

			September								
	Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
1	Hazel Grouse	Tetrastes bonasia		✓							
2	Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus							✓		
3	Greylag Goose	Anser anser			✓	✓		✓	✓		
4	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus				✓					
6	Black Swan	Cygnus atratus						?			
7	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna							✓		
8	Gadwall	Mareca strepera			✓				✓		
9	Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca Penelope				✓			✓	✓	
10	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata			✓	✓					
12	Northern Pintail	Anas acuta				✓					
13	Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca				✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina				✓					
15	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula				✓			✓	✓	
16	Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula							✓		
17	Goosander	Mergus merganser							✓		
18	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis				✓					
19	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus				√		✓	✓	✓	
20	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	?								
21	Little Bittern	Ixobrychus minutus					Н				
22	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
24	Great Egret	Ardea alba			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
25	Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus			✓						
26	European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus								✓	
27	White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
28	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
30	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Lesser Spotted Eagle	Aquila pomarina		✓	✓		✓				
32	Greater Spotted Eagle	Aquila clanga			✓						
33	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus				✓			✓	✓	
34	Merlin	Falco columbarius								✓	
35	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	✓			✓				✓	✓
36	Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo					✓		✓	✓	
37	Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus				Н				Н	
38	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra			✓	✓		✓	✓		
39	Common Crane	Grus grus		✓	✓		200	300	✓		
40	Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta							✓		
41	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus			✓	✓	✓	✓			
42	Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola							✓	✓	
43	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius							✓		
44	Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago			✓			✓	✓	✓	
45	Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus			✓						

		September										
	Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
46	Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia			✓							
47	Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola			✓							
48	Sanderling	Calidris alba							✓	✓		
49	Dunlin	Calidris alpine						✓	✓	✓		
50	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus			✓			✓	✓	✓		
51	Common Gull	Larus canus							✓	✓		
52	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus							✓	✓		
53	European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus			✓				✓	✓		
54	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus						✓	✓	✓		
55	Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia							✓			
56	Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis							✓			
57	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Columba livia	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
58	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto				✓	✓	✓		✓		
60	Tawny Owl	Strix aluco	Н				✓					
61	Eurasian Pygmy Owl	Glaucidium passerinum		✓								
62	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor		Н	✓		✓		✓			
63	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocoptes medius		Н	✓	✓						
64	White-backed Woodpecker	Dendrocopos leucotos		✓								
65	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		Н	✓	✓	Н	✓		✓		
66	Three-toed Woodpecker	Picoides tridactylus		✓								
67	Black Woodpecker	Dryocopus martius		Н	✓			✓		✓		
68	European Green Woodpecker	Picus viridis			✓							
69	Grey-headed Woodpecker	Picus canus		✓								
70	Great Grey Shrike	Lanius excubitor	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				
71	Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
72	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
73	Spotted Nutcracker	Nucifraga caryocatactes		✓				✓				
74	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
76	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
77	Northern Raven	Corvus corax		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
78	Marsh Tit	Poecile palustris		Н		✓		✓	✓	✓		
79	Willow Tit	Poecile montanus		Н			✓					
80	Coal Tit	Periparus ater				Н			✓	✓		
81	European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus		✓	✓	✓	Н		✓	✓		
82	Great Tit	Parus major		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
83 84	Eurasian Blue Tit Eurasian Penduline	Cyanistes caeruleus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓		
	Tit	Remiz pendulinus										
85	Bearded Reedling	Panurus biarmicus								✓		

87	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia					✓				
88	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	-
89	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum			✓	✓	✓				
90	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus		✓							
91	Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
92	Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus			✓		✓				
93	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus			✓				✓	✓	
94	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla							✓		
95	Lesser Whitethroat	Sylvia curruca					✓				
96	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		✓	✓	✓	✓		Н	✓	
97	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		✓	✓	✓	✓		Н	✓	
98	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
99	Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		✓	✓					✓	
100	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
101	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		✓	✓	✓	✓		Н	✓	
102	Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris					✓			✓	✓
103	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	✓				✓			✓	✓
104	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus							Н	✓	
105	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
106	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
107	Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra								✓	
108	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe								✓	
109	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus				✓	✓			✓	✓
110	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus				✓		✓			
111	Dunnock	Prunella modularis			✓						
112	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
113	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis					✓	✓	✓	✓	
114	Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis	✓					✓			
115	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
116	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		✓			✓			✓	
117	Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus	✓	✓		Н	✓		Н	✓	
118	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓		✓		✓				
119	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	✓	✓	✓						
120	Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra							✓	✓	
121	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes		Н						✓	
122	Yellowhammer	Emberiza citronella	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
123	Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus				✓	✓			✓	

Mammals

1	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	✓	✓	✓						
2	Red Deer	Cervus elaphus	Н	Н	✓						
3	Elk	Alces alces						✓			
4	Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓
5	Wild Boar	Sus scrofa							✓		Н
6	European Bison	Bison bonasus			✓						
7	European Beaver	Castor fiber								✓	
8	Red Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris			✓	✓		D			

(Bank Vole	Clethrionomys glareolus			D	D		
10	Stone Marten	Martes foina	D					
11	Pine Marten	Martes martes				✓		
12	Atlantic Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus					✓	

Reptiles & Amphibians

Grass Snake, *Natrix natrix* Marsh Frog, *Pelophylax ridibundus* Adder, Vipera berus

Butterflies

Small White, Artogeia rapae Pale Clouded Yellow, Colias hyale Common Blue, Polyommatus icarus Red Admiral, Vanessa atalanta Wall Brown, Lasiommata megera Green-veined White, Artogeia napi Brimstone, Gonepteryx rhamni Peacock, Inachis io Meadow Brown, Maniola jurtina

Other taxa

Ruddy Darter dragonfly, Sympetrum sanguineum

Jellyfish sp. (dead), Scyphozoa

