

Poland in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 13 May 2006



Collared Flycatcher

Images and report compiled by Peter Dunn



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Day 1

Saturday 6th May

With the pandemonium of Terminal 1 most of the group met at the gate or on the plane. The plane left almost on time and we were soon winging our way over the North Sea, east towards Poland. We arrived at Warsaw airport after a comfortable flight where we regrouped and were met in arrivals by our smiling, waving guide Tomek. Once we had sorted our currency we loaded the bags onto the 24 seat bus and started the long haul out of Warsaw. Our first stop was a pleasant road side restaurant outside the city where we experienced our first polish lunch of pierogi or kielbasa, accompanied by Greek salads and french fries!!. Suitably refreshed we continued east onto less busy roads where the rural setting changed from large open fields to smaller strip cultivation and tractors were occasionally replaced by horse and cart. This was the polish experience we had come to see. Around 4.30pm we stopped at a café next to the Bug River, for refreshments and a spot of birding. Thrush Nightingales, just newly arrived from their winter quarters were competing for territory in full song, with similar activities amongst Whitethroat, Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff.

Continuing towards Bialowieza we started to see White Storks on their huge nests and both Marsh and Montagu's Harriers were quartering the fields. A large black bird undulating towards some trees forced a stop. It was our first Black Woodpecker, which conveniently flew back towards us, landing briefly in a nearer tree.

We finally arrived at our hotel in Bialowieza, Pension Unikat, at 7.30pm, where we settled into our comfortable rooms before enjoying a splendid local meal and drinks, and retiring to bed eager for the next morning.

Day 2

Sunday 7th May

Allowed a lie in, we had coffee and tea at 5.45 and were on the bus by 6am heading for the forest on the Belorussia border. As soon as we alighted from the bus we had good views of Wryneck, Black Redstart and Serin, with Woodlark singing from a high perch. We then took the circular tour through the forest where the dawn chorus included Wood and Willow Warblers, the strange haunting calls of Common Cranes and Northern Bullfinches with their loud trumpeting. Both Middle-spotted and Grey-headed Woodpeckers called but wouldn't show themselves but the atmosphere was one of expectation. As we rounded the bend for the straight track back to the road a Hazel Grouse called so we called back to it. It gave a great flight display in front of the whole group. A little further down the track we watch a superb male Collared Flycatcher sing from the sparsely leaved trees and a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker fed close to us, affording excellent views. After this excitement breakfast began to call and just before we re-boarded the bus a Lesser Spotted Eagle soared over the woodland.

Following a hearty breakfast we headed west to the 'dead forest', where the trees had been killed by the flooded river. Another male Collared Flycatcher was proclaiming its territory and we soon located a Black Woodpecker nest where the adults attended to feed newly hatched young. It soon became apparent that the bird life had a siesta with little being seen, although Glenn had brief views of the dainty white-headed northern Long-tailed Tit. Before lunch we tried the Zebra Zubra (bison ribs) which was also quiet.

After a pierogi lunch the group was given some free time to explore Bialowieza village, some going on a horse & trap ride, others birding and a few just relaxing.

We regrouped at 5pm to try the dead forest again and also to locate Pygmy Owl before dinner.

This plan worked well because no sooner had we alighted from the bus than a Grey-headed Woodpecker called and we were soon treated to some good extended views as it fed on an anthill then sat for a number of minutes in an open bush. Spurred on by our success we returned to the road where Andy, an additional guide, played Three-toed Woodpecker calls which attracted a very obliging pair for about 15 minutes of clear views. Add this to two views of Middle-spotted Woodpeckers and a pair of Collared Flycatchers, we were well satisfied with the evening. However it did not end there as Andy took us to a site only 5km from Bialowieza where some strategically played calls brought a smart Pygmy Owl from the forest to sit right above us.

This had been a tremendous day, together with the warm sunny weather and we returned to our hotel to enjoy 'chicken & chips', followed by blue ice cream and the daily log call, looking forward to our early morning visit to the strict reserve.

Day 3

Monday 8th May

Bleary eyed, we met for coffee and tea at 4.45am before boarding the coach at 5am to drive towards the strict reserve. This is a section of unmanaged forest where wildlife, plants and trees are allowed to survive without interference of man. As we walked towards the main gate we were joined by our local guide Arek, a man who had spent most of his working life studying the life within this section of forest which stretches way beyond the Russian border. Arek led us through the forest trails explaining the ecology of this important habitat and how the natural environment evolved. Hawfinches and Collared Flycatchers showed well throughout the walk and Great-spotted and Middle-spotted Woodpeckers showed briefly but White-backed was only heard drumming. As we returned to the gate an immature male Red-breasted Flycatcher led us a merry dance as it patrolled its territory singing loudly. Walking back to the bus for breakfast Whinchat and Montagu's Harrier showed well and a Lesser Spotted Eagle flew over the forest edge.

After enjoying a breakfast of cooked meats and pancakes most of the group gathered to visit the wildlife park as others opted for a walk around the outskirts of the village.

The wildlife park not only holds examples of the local wildlife but is a good place to see wild birds at close quarters. On this visit there had been an influx of Collared Flycatchers with males sparring for territory, oblivious to the camera shutters firing. Also seen here was an obliging Middle-spotted Woodpecker and a Raven was added to the list. Meanwhile back at Bialowieza, Maurice and Glenn retraced the first mornings walk adding Sedge Warbler, Corncrake and Garganey to the list.

Lunch was taken back at the hotel, followed by a siesta before we set off for a walk around Palace Park and the surrounding area. The clouds had started to build as we entered the park and as a shower of rain threatened we decided to visit the observation tower first. This proved to be a good move with the heavens opening, but as the sun came out birds began to sing. A Redwing sang from the top of a dead spruce and the raucous chants from Great Reed Warblers could be heard from the lake. The sound of a squeaky toy indicated the presence of the first returning Icterine Warbler, which was eventually located in nearby trees, proving to be one of three individuals found. The clouds cleared so we descended to walk through the park in warm sunshine rewarded with excellent views of the Great Reed Warblers and a Thrush Nightingale and most of the group got flight views of a male White-backed Woodpecker as it crossed the lake twice. A search of the area where it went gave

us six Waxwing and stunning views overhead of a male Montagu's Harrier. We ended the evening on the bridge near the park looking for Beaver where pale looking Marsh Tits and Hawfinches performed well. Around 6.30 pm we decided that the beaver would not show until dusk and we should head back to the hotel for dinner. As we were leaving Glenn ask what was in the water and surprisingly it was a beaver swimming downstream. After its' brief appearance it did not show again so wearily but satisfied with an excellent day, we made our way back for dinner and our daily log call.

Day 4

Tuesday 9th May

Only three ventured out on the pre-breakfast walk to the marsh opposite the hotel. The bird song was strong under clear blue skies with both Whinchat and Stonechat sparring for territory and Corncrake singing in the meadows. New for the trip were both Grasshopper and Savi's Warblers whilst Sedge Warblers had increased in number.

Following breakfast we headed north to Siemianówka Reservoir where we first checked the north bank. All three marsh terns were active and a single immature White-tailed Eagle was seen in the air. Surprisingly only four Blue-headed Wagtails were seen and the sort-after Citrine was missing, although we had flight views of a Golden Oriole. We added a number of duck species to the list and 15 or more Great White Egrets, with a single Hobby over head.

After our packed lunch and failing to find Citrine Wagtail on the south bank we made our way back to Bialowieza via a known Nutcracker site. We couldn't entice one out of the forest here but Tomek saw one from the coach later, which many of the group saw perched or in flight.

We had an early dinner in order to set out to a Great Snipe lek that evening. The site was near Narew and as we arrived in the bus the rain started. We walked through forest and scrub for 30 minutes reaching the wet river meadow with constant rain falling. However undeterred we checked the tussocks and soon heard the bill-clicking calls. Through rain soaked optics we saw at least three birds sat in the grass or jumping into the air which made the ride back to the hotel in wet clothes more bearable.

Day 5

Wednesday 10th May

We woke to clear blue skies and sun for our changeover day to Biebz Marshes. After breakfast we drove north and met Andrew for the last time at Budy village where we walked down through the forest to a White-backed Woodpecker nest. On route we enticed a Red-breasted Flycatcher out of the forest to give good views and as we arrived at the woodpecker nesting we could hear the bird calling. Within a few minutes it appeared with food in its bill and sat and watched us from a nearby tree. We all got good views of the bird before we left to allow it to feed its' young. We said our fond farewells to Andrew before heading off towards Bialystok. Home of the Dojlidy brewery, this town also has some large fish ponds which we visited. We added both Red-necked and Black-necked Grebe and also had unexpected great views of a 'red male' Common Rosefinch. The target species here is Penduline Tit and at the far end of the ponds we heard the distinctive 'sieu' call and located a superb male as it sang in display around a stand of willows. Time was passing quickly and we had to depart for Waniewo where we had a traditional Polish lunch followed by a gentle boat ride around the Narew marshes. The marshes

were 'alive' with Wood Sandpipers and Ruff and up to five Hobbies fed overhead. Driving out of the village we heard the distinctive song of an Ortolan Bunting and saw or heard up to three birds.

Continuing on we made a brief stop at the reservoir at Zygmunta Augusta looking for White-tailed Eagles but only saw an Osprey and a pair of Marsh Harriers.

We arrived at our new hotel, the Bartek at Goniadz at 6.15pm allowing the group time to unpack and shower before dinner.

Day 6

Thursday 11th May

We started early at 6am with some group members viewing the marsh near the hotel. From one of the landing stages we added Whooper Swan and two Bean Geese, and also saw Goshawk, Black-tailed Godwits and more Blue-headed Wagtails. The first Elk of the trip fed on the far side of the marsh and a Red Fox was suckling two cubs.

Following breakfast we headed into the National Park, calling first at the 'elk tower' at Bagno Lawki. It lived up to its' name with three of these long legged animals but two butterflies proved more interesting. A silver birch tree attracted a worn Camberwell Beauty and Large Tortoiseshell to warm up in the sun, joined later by a comma. After enjoying this elevated view we took the back roads to Tykocin, an historic Jewish village steeped in history and also containing a welcome bar and gift shop. Having taken refreshments we headed to the watch point at Burzyn. The raised elevation here gives excellent views of the flooded marsh, teeming with waders, geese and terns. Ruff in every colour variation fed in shorter grass with all three marsh terns dipping over the water. Amongst six Hobbies, two Red-footed Falcons were identified. After enjoying our packed lunches we were just preparing to leave when a Hoopoe, earlier seen by Stephen, did a fly-past giving everyone excellent views.

Mid afternoon with the warm sunshine saw us at Brzostowa where huge numbers of Ruff fed together. Bean Geese and marsh terns were present in good numbers and over 100 Common Cranes waded through the flooded meadows. This was a magical place with tea and coffee served from the local house making it a fitting way to end the day. On our journey home we called in at the National Park centre where souvenir wooden carvings, maps and t-shirts were purchased. We arrived at the Barwik at 6.10pm to prepare for dinner, and a brief look at the marsh produced a Black Stork, but only seen by a few.

Day 7

Friday 12th May

Following an early breakfast we set out for Mścichy Dam, one of the sites for Aquatic Warbler. The weather could not be better, warm sunshine and a gentle wind. Our first stop was just outside Mścichy village around some willows in wet ground. Here we enticed a nice male Penduline Tit from the trees and a search of the area produced its' skillfully woven hanging nest. We then tried for Bluethroat and found it difficult to hear anything above the Sedge Warblers and Thrush Nightingales. We were just considering leaving when a beautiful white-spotted male flew into a bare tree and watched us for at least five minutes.

Flushed with success we headed out on foot over the 'dam' to try our luck with the Aquatics. On the way we saw Icterine Warbler, plenty of Ruff, Cranes, Marsh Harriers but try as we might we could not find the Aquatic

amongst the many Sedges. By lunch time we had reached the viewing platform and we devoured our packed lunch watching ducks, geese, terns and two White-tailed Eagles. We walked back along the dam to where we thought we had heard a distant Aquatic but the heavens opened unexpectedly so the bus was summoned and we headed for the north basin of the national park.

We parked at Kopytkowo and used the viewing platform to check for raptors. There we had a number of Common Buzzards, the usual Marsh Harriers, maybe three Montagu's Harriers and a Goshawk, with a Grey-headed Woodpecker in a close by tree. However the wind became strong and rain was threatened so at 3.45 we headed back towards Goniadz and the hotel. Arriving back at 4.30 the group members either went birding around the hotel, packed or relaxed. The birders managed to add Spotted Eagle to the list and another Black Stork.

Day 8

Saturday 13th May

Our last day in Poland started with a brief shower of rain but this soon finished and the clouds clear to another warm and bright day. Early risers had seen a male Golden Oriole in the hotel grounds. As our flight from Warsaw was not until 17.45 who took advantage of the free morning and some members walked through the village where we were able to view the marsh from the height of a demolished restaurant. Up to seven Black Storks could be seen in the marsh, with elk and fox in the distance. An immature White-tailed Eagle flew overhead and Garganey and Black-tailed Godwits flitted around the pools. The bridge to the tower hide was closed to vehicles but open to foot passage so we headed that way with arrangements for the bus to meet us on the other side around 11am. The road walk was an excellent way to finish the trip because we got great views of a male Golden Oriole and a Red-backed Shrike, flocks of Greylag and Bean Geese moved west and a Common Rosefinch sang in the trees. Best of all was a pale phase Booted Eagle on a telegraph post, only ten pairs of which breed in Poland, and a Honey Buzzard mobbing a White-tailed Eagle.

The arrival of the coach meant the start of our journey to Warsaw airport where we said our fond farewells to Romek our safe and steady driver and Tomek our enthusiastic and knowledgeable bird guide. The final total of bird species was 156, with other wildlife highlights of Beaver, Elk, Camberwell Beauty and Large Tortoiseshell butterflies.

The flight back to the UK left promptly and we arrived in London at 7.15pm where we said our goodbyes in the baggage return room after a most satisfying and enjoyable trip.

Species lists

Birds

	Species	May 2006							
		6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Great Crested Grebe				8	6			
2	Red-necked Grebe					6			
3	Black-necked Grebe					5			
4	Cormorant				1	2	1	2	
5	Grey Heron				5	3	2	8	3
6	Great White Egret				15			4	
7	Bittern					H	H	H	
8	Black Stork						1	1	7
9	White Stork	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
10	Mute Swan	4			6	C	C	C	C
11	Whooper Swan						2		
12	Taiga Bean Goose						40	40	45
13	White-fronted Goose						1		
14	Greylag Goose				7	2	C	C	35
15	Wigeon						40	150	
16	Gadwall				10				
17	Teal							6	
18	Mallard	5	4	8	C	C	C	C	C
19	Garganey			1	4		15	C	4
20	Shoveler				2		6		1
21	Pochard					12		3	
22	Tufted Duck				C	12	8		
23	Honey Buzzard								1
24	White-tailed Eagle				1	1		2	1
25	Marsh Harrier	4		1	6	C	C	C	C
26	Montagu's Harrier	2	2	3			2	4	
27	Sparrowhawk		1	1	3	1		1	
28	Goshawk				1		2	1	
29	Common Buzzard	3	4	1		5	C	C	6
30	Lesser Spotted Eagle		4	2	6	3	1	1	1
31	Greater Spotted Eagle							1	
32	Booted Eagle								1
33	Osprey					1			
34	Kestrel	1							
35	Red-footed Falcon						2		
36	Hobby				1	5	6		
37	Hazel Grouse		1						
38	Grey Partridge						2		
39	Corn Crake		1	1	1	1			
40	Moorhen						1		1
41	Coot				C	C	C	1	1
42	Common Crane		2			C	115	C	20
43	Little Ringed Plover							1	
44	Lapwing	1	1	1	1	16	C	C	1
45	Woodcock		2						
46	Great Snipe				3				

	Species	May 2006							
		6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
47	Common Snipe		1	2		1	2	15	1
48	Black-tailed Godwit				1	6		C	2
49	Curlew							3	
50	Spotted Redshank				1				
51	Redshank				2	2	8	C	2
52	Greenshank					3	3		
53	Green Sandpiper		4		1		1		1
54	Wood Sandpiper					60	6	6	
55	Common Sandpiper					1	3	2	
56	Ruff				50	100	600	VC	C
57	Black-headed Gull	2		2	VC	C	C	VC	C
58	Common Tern			1		2	8		2
59	Little Tern						4	1	
60	Whiskered Tern				C	2	C	C	2
61	White-winged Black Tern				C		C	C	
62	Black Tern				C	1	C	C	2
63	Feral Pigeon	VC	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
64	Wood Pigeon	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
65	Collared Dove	C		C	C	C	C	C	C
66	Cuckoo	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
67	Eurasian Pygmy owl		1						
68	Common Swift					4	C	4	6
69	Kingfisher							1	
70	Hoopoe						1		
71	Wryneck		3	1	1	1	1	1	2
72	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker		1						
73	Middle Spotted Woodpecker		3	2		1			
74	White-backed Woodpecker			1		1			
75	Great Spotted Woodpecker		2	2	1	2		1	
76	Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker		2						
77	Black Woodpecker	1	2	2		1			
78	Grey-headed Woodpecker		1	1				1	
79	Wood Lark		3		1	1			
80	Skylark	1			2	4	6	C	
81	Sand Martin					1	C	1	
82	Swallow	C	C	C	C	C	VC	C	C
83	House Martin		C	C	C	C	C	C	C
84	Tree Pipit		2	3	2	2			
85	Meadow Pipit							C	
86	White Wagtail	1	6	C	5	C	C	C	1
87	Blue-headed Wagtail	1			4	6	30	C	C
88	Waxwing		1	6		1			
89	Wren		1	2	1	1			
90	Dunnock		1	1		1			
91	Robin		2	2		2			
92	Thrush Nightingale	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
93	White-spotted Bluethroat							1	
94	Black Redstart		3	4	4	4			
95	Redstart		1						1
96	Whinchat			3	2	5	C	C	3

		May 2006							
	Species	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
97	Stonechat				1	1			
98	Northern Wheatear						2	1	
99	Blackbird	8	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
100	Fieldfare	2	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
101	Redwing			2					
102	Song Thrush		2	C	1	1	C		
103	Mistle Thrush						3		
104	Grasshopper Warbler				2	1		2	
105	Savi's Warbler				1	H	H	H	
106	Sedge Warbler			1	5	3	3	C	C
107	Reed warbler					1			
108	Great Reed warbler		H	3	C	C			
109	Icterine Warbler			3				1	
110	Blackcap	1	C	C	1	C	C	1	3
111	Garden Warbler		2	2				1	
112	Whitethroat	2		2	1	2	8	2	6
113	Lesser Whitethroat		2	4	1	1	1	1	1
114	Northern Willow Warbler	3	5	C	5	C	C	C	C
115	Northern Chiffchaff	1	3	C	2	C	C	C	C
116	Wood Warbler		C	VC		C	2		
117	Goldcrest					2			
118	Spotted Flycatcher							1	
119	Pied Flycatcher		3	2					
120	Collared Flycatcher		5	C		3			
121	Red-breasted Flycatcher			1		2			
122	White-headed Long-tailed Tit		1						
123	Marsh Tit		2	4		3			
124	Coal Tit					1			
125	Crested Tit			2		1			
126	Great Tit	C	1	C	1	1	1	1	1
127	Blue Tit		1	C	1	1	1		1
128	Nuthatch		1	3		1			
129	Treecreeper		3	2					
130	Penduline Tit					1		1	
131	Golden Oriole			H	1			H	2
132	Red-backed Shrike				2			1	1
133	Great Grey Shrike		2				1		
134	Jay	1	2	2		3	1	2	1
135	Magpie	8	1		2	2	C		2
136	Spotted Nutcracker				1				
137	Jackdaw	C		3	C	C	C	C	C
138	Rook	C				C	C	1	
139	Hooded Crow	1				9	C	C	C
140	Raven			1	1	2		3	
141	Starling	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
142	House Sparrow	C	C	VC	C	C	C	C	C
143	Tree Sparrow		4	2	2	2	12	6	1
144	Chaffinch	4	4	C	C	C	C	C	C
145	Serín		2	1	1		2	1	1
146	Greenfinch	2	C	C	C	C	C	C	C

		May 2006							
	Species	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
147	Siskin		1	4	1	1			
148	Goldfinch		C	C	C	C	C	C	C
149	Linnet		4	2	2	2	1	1	1
150	Common Rosefinch					1			H
151	Northern Bullfinch		2						
152	Hawfinch		6	C	C	6	2		
153	Yellowhammer	3	2	C	C	C	C	1	C
154	Ortolan Bunting					3	1		
155	Reed Bunting			1	6	C	8	C	C

Mammals

Red Fox
 Weasel
 Red Deer
 Elk
 Roe Deer
 Red Squirrel
 Bank Vole
 European Beaver (4)
 Brown Hare

Butterflies

Peacock
 Small Tortoiseshell
 Orangetip
 Brimstone
 Comma
 Map
 Holly Blue
 Small White
 Speckled Wood
 Swallowtail
 Camberwell Beauty
 Large Tortoiseshell
 Latticed Heath

Amphibians/Reptiles etc

European Grass Snake
 Marsh Frog
 Fire-bellied Toad (heard)
 Green Toad