

# Belarus

22nd May – 1st June, 2014



*Terek Sandpiper*

*(Photography: Klaas de Jong)*

Organized by:



[www.birdingbreaks.nl](http://www.birdingbreaks.nl)

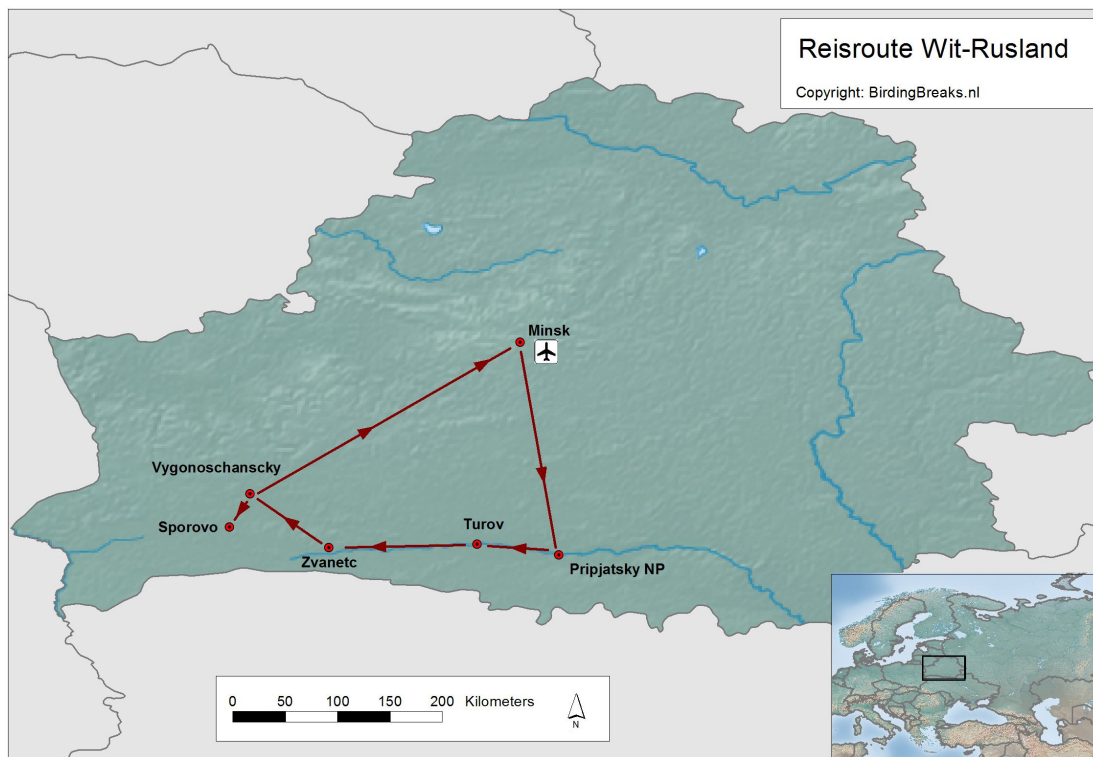


Diagram 1. The route. The sequence of the areas visited does not entirely match the above map but that is of minor importance.

### Day 1 – 22nd May Amsterdam – Minsk – Turov

The first member of the group that I met at Schiphol, Amsterdam International Airport, was Dick who after a brief introduction was soon followed by Aad. Shortly after his arrival came Tonny, Wil and Arie completing our travelling company in a very short space of time. Members of the airport terminal staff directed us to the check-in computers but our bookings, however, could not be traced. Not the start we had hoped for and hopefully not an omen of things to come. The check-in via a special desk proved more successful and before long we were on the other side of Customs, in plenty of time to do some shopping and to have a drink or a snack before departure. The plane took off at 12.00 hours, as scheduled, and the flight to Belarus took us two-and-a-half hours. Because of a one-hour time difference, we arrived at Minsk Airport at 15.30 hours. The first species that we spotted from the plane at the airport were Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*). Local customs officers, present in large numbers - perhaps too many considering the handful of travellers - instructed us to buy Health Insurance first before allowing us to pass through Customs. The costs of this insurance covering the duration of our stay (11 days) amounted to €5 only, which could be paid in Euros. At the arrival hall we were welcomed by Denis, our local bird guide, a young man with long, blond hair and a big beard. After obtaining local money, either via a cash dispenser or a bank, we walked towards our means of transportation, a large city bus, green in colour, on which we would travel the rest of the journey. At first, we had some doubts whether this huge vehicle could get us everywhere we planned to go to but in the course of our trip it became clear that our driver, Lenjit, controlled the bus very skilfully and carried us, with ease, along the smallest and bumpiest of roads. The journey from the airport, in the vicinity of the capital Minsk, to a little town called Turov, away from all civilization, lasted three-and-a-half hours. Turov is located in the south of Belarus, near the river Pripjat, the most unspoilt river of the country, if not Europe. En route, we tried to get a glimpse of the birds that were promised in the itinerary for this particular birding trip. A total of 33 species for the first day indicates that a decent attempt had been made to spot as many birds as possible but unfortunately this number did not include any striking species. Although, it must be said that a few of them that were seen that day are not very common in The Netherlands, such as White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*), Raven (*Corvus corax*)

and, perhaps the rarest of the lot, the East-European subspecies of the Jackdaw (*Coloeus monedula*), also known as the Russian Jackdaw (*Coloeus monedula soemmerringii*), which has a whitish area at the nape. On our arrival at the hotel at about 20.00 hours, the European Serin (*Serinus serinus*) and the Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) were singing in the garden.



European Serin, Azure Tit & Whinchat

(Photography: Azure Tit by Wil Makkinje, other two by Klaas de Jong)

## Day 2 – 23rd May Turov and the river Pripyat Valley and Meadows

Full of expectation, everyone was waiting outside well before the agreed time of departure at six o'clock in the morning, eager to go on the very first excursion that took place before breakfast. A short drive by bus took us to a nearby settlement along the river, where according to Denis a pair of breeding Azure Tits (*Cyanistes cyanus*) would be present, meaning that we would actually start with one of the highlights!! When we stepped out of the bus, a number of different birds could be recorded straight away, varying from a Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*) to a Garden Warbler (*Sylvia borin*) and from a Thrush Nightingale (*Luscinia luscinia*) to a Golden Oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*). During the course of our trip these species turned out to be some of the commonest birds locally, although the very first observation of each of them anywhere is always nice. One other peculiar bird we noted that morning was a shrike (*Lanius spec.*) which, on a closer examination, proved to be a Lesser Grey Shrike (*Lanius minor*). Denis, our local bird guide, stated that this species is an extreme rarity for Belarus and of course, he had to report this discovery to his friends and fellow-twitchers. It should be mentioned that Denis is actually ranked number 5 in the list of his country's leading twitchers and he had seen this particular species in Belarus only once before. Very close to this spot, Denis located the nesting place of the Azure Tit which appeared to be a hole in the side-facade of a house from where it was flying to and fro, presumably feeding its chicks. The other occupant of the house, an elderly lady, got very excited by all the attention from us and invited us inside her garden to have a better view of the nesting hole enabling us to take photos of the bird from close range. Reportedly, one of the twitchers notified by Denis had, apart from the Lesser Grey Shrike, also discovered this nesting place of the Azure Tit at which time it was ascertained that the tit was heroically defending itself and the chicks against a European Grass Snake (*Natrix natrix*) which was seen coming out of the nesting hole. Despite having missed out on this event, we were very pleased with the pictures that we were able to take albeit in an unnatural environment.

In a meadow close by, we soon spotted the next species of our wish-list, a Citrine Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*). In addition, Arie was finally treated to his long-expected Scarlet Rosefinch (*Carpodacus erythrinus* or, according to some authorities currently named *Erythrinius erythrinus*). This beautiful, adult male, scarlet red all over, let us hear his typical song, whilst perched in the top of a willow (many more of them would follow later on). Other species that we noted in this area were Terek Sandpiper (*Xenus cinereus*), White-winged Tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*), Grey Partridge (*Perdix perdix*), Grey-headed Wagtail (*Motacilla [flava] thunbergi*), Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*), Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax* or currently named *Calidris pugnax*), Garganey (*Anas querquedula*), Little Tern (*Sternula albifrons*) and Marsh Warbler (*Acrocephalus palustris*). A complete list of all species noted for each day can be found at the end of this report.

We visited other pastures along the Pripyat river after breakfast and added, among others, the following species to our growing list: Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*), Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*), Short-toed Eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*), Corn Crake (*Crex crex*), Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) and Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*). A Green Toad (*Pseudepidalea viridis*) was also seen. Next we went to a location where occasionally an Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo*) had been spotted - but not this time, alas. What we did find there, however, was a Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*). We drove to an old Oak forest (*Quercus spec.*) after lunch in anticipation of seeing some raptors, woodpeckers and flycatchers. There we came across our first Spotted Eagle (*Clanga clanga*), Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*), Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*), Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), River Warbler (*Locustella fluviatilis*) and a singing male Barred Warbler (*Sylvia nisoria*) which could be observed reasonably well. We also heard a

3

Collared Flycatcher (*Ficedula albicollis*), but sightings of this species proved unsatisfactory this time. On the way back, Aad focussed his attention to butterflies and dragonflies and after having shown a couple of beauties among these wonderful creatures, other people of our group, Denis in particular, became very enthusiastic about them as well. Amongst others, we saw the Ruby Whiteface (*Leucorrhinia rubicunda*), quite rare in Holland, the Yellow-spotted Whiteface (*Leucorrhinia pectoralis*) and the Spearhead Bluet (*Coenagrion hastulatum*).



Lesser Grey Shrike, Thrush Nightingale, Spearhead Bluet & Ruby Whiteface

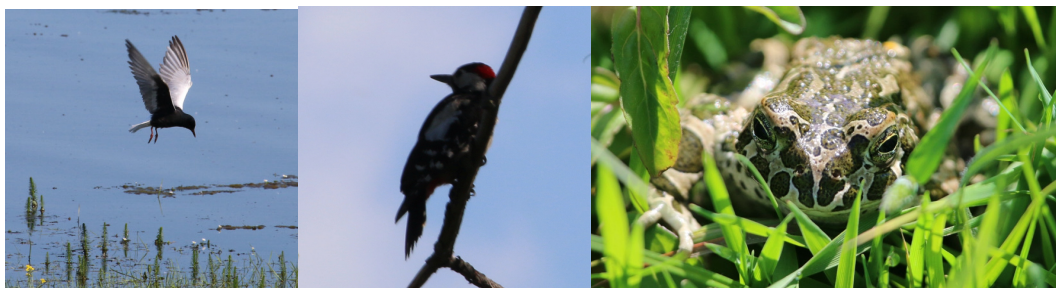
(Photography: Klaas de Jong)

As if the day had not been long enough, we re-visited the outer marches of the river Pripyat in the evening, this time in order to find a place known for displaying Great Snipes (*Gallinago media*). After wandering around for a while and seeing a Crane (*Grus grus*) flying past, we arrived at the area we had been searching for. A couple of Great Snipes could be seen jumping above the tall grass in the distance. One of them appeared to be standing quite close to us and in rather good view so that his special way of displaying could be seen (and heard!) very well. What he actually did was raising his breast as high as possible for a couple of seconds to be followed by a sudden collapse of his entire body, while uttering a flow of more or less sparkling and crackling sounds. Amazing! On the way up, we noticed Corn Crakes nearly everywhere, Great White Egrets (*Ardea alba*), Black-tailed Godwits (*Limosa limosa*), Common Redshanks (*Tringa totanus*) and a small colony of Sand Martins (*Riparia riparia*) in the steep bank of a stream. We concluded the day with a total of 104 species, 73 of which were new for the trip.

### Day 3 – 24th May Turov

The participants' excellent punctuality made the tour guide's job very easy and it also indicated their great experience in travelling in a group. At 6 o'clock, we set off for a trip to another settlement along the river and again we discovered an Azure Tit. At the same location, Great Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*) and Savi's Warbler (*Locustella luscinioides*) could be heard. In addition, we noticed an occupied nest of a Penduline Tit (*Remiz pendulinus*). We saw a Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*) fly by and noted the presence of a Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) as an addition to our list. Before having breakfast, we first visited a colony of about 700 pairs of Black-headed Gulls (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) but to our regret, a couple of Little Gulls (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*), which had reportedly been sighted there, could not be located. What we did find were our first Syrian Woodpeckers (*Dendrocopos syriacus*), a Terek Sandpiper again and another Marsh Sandpiper.

After breakfast, we proceeded to a different forest housing Wood Warblers (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*) and other 'ordinary' forest birds, such as Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), Songthrush (*Turdus philomelos*), Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), Common Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) and Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*). Again, we had an indistinct encounter with a Collared Flycatcher. A spectacular observation was the sound of a number of European Bee-eaters (*Merops apiaster*) flying over but due to the density of the forest we did not get to see them unfortunately. The song of the Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Ficedula parva*) could also be registered a few times but sadly enough we saw nothing but a glimpse of this magnificent species.



White-winged Tern, Syrian Woodpecker & Green Toad

(Photography: Klaas de Jong)

Both Beautiful Demoiselles (*Calopteryx virgo*) and Banded Demoiselles (*Calopteryx splendens*) were found to be present underneath a small bridge leading to the forest.

Then it was lunch-time and as customary, all meals were taken at the hotel. A varied selection of cheese and sausages, salads and rolls was laid out each time and every single meal was finished with coffee or tea. We were being spoilt immensely. Following our lunch-break, we visited another Oak forest where upon arrival we noticed a Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and two Hawfinches (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) flying by, the latter announcing their presence by their typical flight calls. Furthermore, located in the puddles of tracks left by a tractor was a Fire-bellied Toad (*Bombina bombina*), the first one of our journey. Its melancholic whistle would be heard many times after that. In this part of the forest, we finally succeeded in getting a good view of several, lovely male Collared Flycatchers. On leaving the forest we met with an adult male Honey Buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*) flying over us as well as a couple of Black Storks. One adult of the latter species was perched in a tree offering an outstanding view for a nice picture. The afternoon was concluded by a Black Woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*) which could be seen nicely albeit very briefly.

Over dinner, Denis suggested re-visiting the meadow of the day before with an opportunity to score one or more new species for the trip but we preferred to stay in the hotel after such a very long day. Shortly after that I heard a remarkable song coming from the garden outside the hotel. It took me a while, especially with almost every window closed, before I realized that it was the sound of a singing Greenish Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochiloides*)! We rushed outside and were able to locate the bird in question easily, offering us an unexpected opportunity to admire it for a long time. What made it very special was the fact that only this afternoon Denis had remarked that this particular species was non-existent here and could only be found in the north of Belarus. Once again, he had to call his friends from the local ringing station to report a rarity. Within half an hour, a number of local birdwatchers had gathered in the garden to twitch this scarce warbler. It sang and called repeatedly almost till midnight, also responding very well to Arie's mobile phone.



Hairy Hawker, Moor Frog, Chickweed Wintergreen & Fire-bellied Toad

(Photography: Klaas de Jong)

#### Day 4 – 25th May Turov – Darasjevitsje

The Greenish Warbler was still present when we left the hotel for our pre-breakfast excursion. It was singing loudly from the willows in front of the hotel. As before, the Black Redstart, the Serin and a few other species made their presence known too. We drove to another area of outstanding natural beauty along the river Pripyat and established a whole range of birds typical for this habitat, such as River Warbler (*Locustella fluviatilis*), Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*), Sedge Warbler (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*), Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*), Scarlet Rosefinch and a nice bunch of White-headed Long-tailed Tits (*Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*). Attached to the wet grass were numerous butterflies, damselflies and dragonflies awaiting the first sun-rays to warm up. An old bridge that we visited after breakfast was said to be a good spot for observing raptors. The extraordinary flat landscape presented us with a wide panorama and apart from a number of Kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*), our first Lesser Spotted Eagle (*Clanga pomarina*), a beautiful adult, turned up reasonably close to us after some time. In addition, we heard the distinctive 'wet my lips' call from a Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) and saw a Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) standing in the distance. Again, we drove by the colony of Black-headed Gulls and added a White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) to our list. Back at the hotel, not only did we have lunch but we had to pack our bags as well before heading off to our next destination. En route, a stop was made in a lovely forest in search of woodpeckers. Here, at last, we clearly saw a White-backed Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) which simultaneously completed Dick's list of observations of all European woodpeckers. Whilst relishing this observation, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos medius*) crossed our path.

After this stop, we went back on the road again but we were scarcely on our way when we had to stop abruptly following Denis' discovery of a Grey-headed Woodpecker clinging to a tree trunk. It was a pity that it flew up instantly, nevertheless we were all able to see it reasonably well. Moreover, it flew past us a couple of times in

response to Arie's mobile producing recordings of its calls. Now this bird proved to be Will's last one on his list of Western Palearctic woodpeckers. An excellent day to celebrate!

At the next hotel, we unpacked our bags first and then had dinner before going out again, nominating the Pygmy Owl (*Glaucidium passerinum*) as our target for the evening excursion. It took a while before it got dark enough and in the interim we had to content ourselves with the presence of a Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), a Songthrush (*Turdus philomelos*) and a Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*). Denis knew the Pygmy Owl's exact location and the bird finally reacted to our taped sounds when it was almost completely dark. Some of us saw it fly and land and an attempt was made to train the light of a torch on its present location. However, not all of us, unfortunately, were in a position to see it clearly. After that we did a spectacular night drive through the forest and in the shine of a strong lantern a Roe Deer, a Raccoon Dog (*Nyctereutes procyonoides*) and even a European Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) could be observed. While leaving the forest, numerous Corn Crakes were heard the sound of which, so to speak, became almost boring.



Purple-shot Copper, Scarlet Rosefinch, Great Reed Warbler & Banded Demoiselle (male) (Photography: Aad van der Ent [Damsel] & Klaas de Jong [other three])

### Day 5 – 26th May Darasjevičsje

Getting up early to make the pre-breakfast excursion starting at six o'clock became the practice. Except this time, Aad decided to skip it for once. As a result, he missed out on the Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) but other than that no species of any significance were noted. Failure to see a certain species by someone was labelled by the group as a so-called 'catch-up' one. As it turned out, at the end of the trip, most of these missed species were indeed caught up later by everyone as was the Turtle Dove. A local rarity, which is not very scarce in The Netherlands at all, turned out to be the Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*). It was further noticeable that Fieldfares (*Turdus pilaris*) are more common here than Blackbirds and they, more or less, seem to have taken over their role in villages as well.

We left the hotel for an open area after breakfast hoping to find some more raptors. Luckily we were not disappointed as we discovered various Lesser Spotted Eagles, a Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) and a White-tailed Eagle while in addition, several Black Storks were spotted. Present in this area as well were a number of dragonflies worth mentioning, viz.: Common Clubtail (*Gomphus vulgatissimus*) and Green-eyed Hawker (*Aeshna isoceles*). In the afternoon, we extensively searched other grasslands along the river Pripyat but failed to add new species to our list on this occasion. After dinner, we engaged in a boat-trip along the river. Two boats, each with a local man at the helm, carried us nicely through creeks and past beautiful nature reserves just before sunset. Everyone was very excited about this trip beforehand and although it appeared to be rather quiet at first, as far as the birds are concerned, - with the sole exception of a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), a new species for the trip -, it became very impressive later that evening. Not only did we hear countless Scarlet Rosefinches and River Warblers but more interestingly, we discovered an Azure Tit at the entrance of its nest inside an overhanging Willow (*Salix spec.*) and besides we noticed a few Eurasian Beavers (*Castor fiber*) plunging into the water right in front of us. Furthermore, several Kingfishers (*Alcedo atthis*) put in an appearance too and quite a few Terek Sandpipers were flying around the boats. From one boat, a Collared Flycatcher was seen on the shore, but Common Goldeneyes (*Bucephala clangula*) could be observed in flight around both boats. In particular, the enormous amount of birds singing, Corn Crakes, Great Reed Warblers, Yellowhammers (*Emberiza citrinella*), Thrush Nightingales to name but a few, made it an unforgettable trip. Later that evening, Denis arrived at the hotel clasping a Common Eurasian Spadefoot (*Pelobates fuscus*) in his hands. However, by this time everyone else was sound asleep and luckily, we would come across several more specimens of this toad afterwards.

### Day 6 – 27th May Darasjevičsje – Zvanetč

Because of last evening's excursion running late our next outing prior to breakfast started at 8 o'clock. We departed for a walk through an old Oak forest. While we were strolling on a forest-road, Lenjit, our driver, was following us in his bus at a suitable distance. A Wryneck, slightly hidden from view, was seen perched on a branch, Pied Flycatchers (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) as well as Collared Flycatchers were heard singing in places,

6

whereas Great Spotted and White-backed Woodpeckers were found in other spots. In addition, we caught a glimpse of a Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*), spotted first by Denis. This sighting meant that so far, we had seen 9 out of 10 European woodpecker species during this trip! The Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*), however, the only one missing from our list, is described as the rarest one by far in Belarus. Beside the birds, we found the Pearly Heath (*Coenonympha arcania*) and a fritillary the correct name of which, based on the evidence of photos and the butterfly guide, proved to be Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary (*Boloria selene*). At this point, we decided to return for breakfast and on the way back we saw a big and scary Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) in front of us on the forest road that we had covered before. The woods left a magical impression and Wil, at the end of the holiday, declared the walk through this particular stretch of the forest to be the most beautiful one of the entire trip. After breakfast, we paid a visit to another forest. In it were traces clearly indicating the presence of beavers, as evidenced by felled trees gnawed at at the bottom and by tracks of sliding. The temperature had meanwhile risen to well above normal, even to birds, and they consequently became inactive. It caused us to change our focus towards butterflies and dragonflies. We noted a Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*), a Small Copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*) and various Blue Featherlegs (*Platycnemis pennipes*). Despite the heat, however, a beautiful male Barred Warbler, in plain view regularly, was screaming for attention in the top of some bushes.

On the way back to the hotel, we stopped at a local museum in order to buy some postcards, if any. Some of us bought a splendid book with photos covering the entire Pripyatski National Park but postcards were nowhere to be found. Eventually, Denis arranged a beautiful set of large postcards of said park, for everybody, through the Visitors Centre. All we needed now was stamps! The afternoon was spent at leisure so that we could build up energy for another night drive. On that occasion, we recorded the following special features: Eurasian Elk (*Alces alces*), a couple of hedgehogs, which after studying literature and consulting the internet turned out to be Northern White-breasted Hedgehogs (*Erinaceus roumanicus*), a few Roe Deer and a number of amphibians like the Common Toad (*Bufo bufo*) and several specimens of the Common Eurasian Spadefoot.



Large Copper (male), Pearly Heath, Common Toad and a juvenile Common Eurasian Spadefoot (Photography: Aad van der Ent [Butterflies] & Klaas de Jong [Amphibians])

## Day 7 – 28th May Zvanets

We left after lunch and proceeded in the direction of Zvanets, our next destination, where we would finally see the Aquatic Warblers (*Acrocephalus paludicola*). This species, one of the birds that we aimed for during this trip, can usually be found only in a specific habitat and is therefore not easy to see elsewhere. On the way up, we saw a Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) and a European Pond Terrapin (*Emys orbicularis*) that was crossing the road right in front of the bus. Further, we had the opportunity to visit a few fish ponds where we noticed some Little Gulls (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) and some White-tailed Skimmers (*Orthethrum albistylum*).

It soon became apparent that we were heading for bad weather and when we arrived at the bed & breakfast place, hosted by Nicolai and Galina, the rain was coming down steadily. We would spend two nights here. Nicolai turned out to be an ex-hunter with a Clint Eastwood-appearance outwardly: a tall person with long hair and a beard, a very long coat, a leather hat and his inseparable cigarette. He knew this area very well and we set out for a walk, led by him, across the marshes to a place where an Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo*) had raised chicks in previous years. A big hole in a tree had been chosen as nesting place, but a fire had destroyed it for the greater part, unfortunately. This year, however, no effort to raise some more chicks had been made by the owls. Nevertheless, pellets originating from at least one of the adult Eagle Owls could be found in scattered places around trees standing nearby as an indication that the nest had not yet been abandoned entirely.

Two Cranes (*Grus grus*) emerged from the marsh, apparently disturbed by our presence. Butterflies were clinging to blades of grass because of the rain, allowing us to take pictures of them without any difficulty. With the help of these photos, we could identify the Chequered Skipper (*Carterocephalus palaemon*) and the rare Marsh Fritillary (*Euphydryas aurinia*). Nicolai pointed out to us the Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium calceolus*), which, much to our regret, had meanwhile finished flowering. This plant is an extremely rare orchid and the only representative of this subfamily (*Cypripedioideae*) in Europe.

## Day 8 – 29th May

## Zvanets – Sporovo

An early rise was on the program for this morning in order to explore the marsh a bit further under the guidance of Nicolai. Not all of us attended as some people preferred to have a sleep-in instead. We saw five male Black Grouse (*Lyrurus tetrix*) flying away from a place, where, according to Nicolai, they usually display. Furthermore, we noticed a Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), two Curlews (*Numenius arquata*) and a small partridge-like bird which, on viewing it from a closer range, proved to be a Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*), a species that you do not see very often. Except for a couple of Woodlarks (*Lullula arborea*), no other observations were made sadly enough owing to the poor weather (rain) conditions. When there was a short, bright interval, however, we discovered two Spotted Eagles and one Lesser Spotted Eagle passing by. The 'diehards' among us went for another walk after breakfast, completely dressed in rain clothes. Our hopes of finding a Hazel Grouse (*Tetrastes bonasia*) were placed in this environment, reportedly the only place during our trip where we stood a fair chance of spotting it. Despite our endeavours, it could neither be seen nor heard. Pity!

Other than a handful of Crested Tits (*Lophophanes cristatus*), we did not see a thing.

Because of the bad weather we extended our lunch break till 16.00 hours. We then left initially heading for an area covered in fish ponds for which we had to cross the river with the aid of a remarkable ferry, using manpower and special equipment to pull it to the other side. Upon arrival at the fish ponds, several nice species could be added to our list, such as Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*), Tundra Bean Goose (*Anser serrirostris*), Little Gull, Ruff and Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*). Our main goal that day, however, was lying on the other side of a stream that we crossed in a rowing-boat, and consisted of a marsh reportedly housing several Aquatic Warblers. The rainy weather resulted in us seeing just a limited number of this species but all of us had ample opportunity to look at them closely. Apart from the Aquatic Warblers, a substantial number of Citrine Wagtails appeared to be present, flying all around us. At the end of the walk, the weather slightly improved and a Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) could be added to our list on the way back. At 21.30 hours we returned to the guesthouse, awaited by Galina who served us a lovely hot meal and cold beer. Satisfied, after a very long day, we all fell asleep.

## Day 9 – 30th May

## Sporovo

The people that had a sleep-in yesterday regretted their decision to avoid the pre-breakfast excursion and expressed their desire to have an opportunity to see Black Grouse. Luckily, Nicolai was willing to take them along in his Jeep to the displaying area, as referred to on the previous day, whilst the others now had the opportunity to have a long lie-in. They, too, saw five Black Grouse but the rest of their



Ferry, Citrine Wagtail & Nicolai's boat



(Photography: Aad van der Ent, Klaas de Jong & Wil Makkinje resp.)

observations were rather poor and not worth mentioning. We said goodbye to Nicolai and Galina but not without them handing us a load of provisions for today's trip. We next had an appointment with Alexander (or Sacha for short) and his son, who would lead us to a place where we could ring a couple of juvenile Eagle Owls. At full throttle, we drove to the agreed place to make it in time. On the way up, we noticed a few Montagu's Harriers (*Circus pygargus*) hunting above the corn fields. At the side of a busy road, we met with our company and walked with them through the woods for approximately two kilometres until we reached an impressive nest on the bare ground with two juvenile Eagle Owls within a stone's throw. The owlets were looking at us in sheer amazement and caused no problems whatsoever when Denis provided each of them with a ring around one of their legs. Unfortunately, their parents were nowhere to be seen, but being so close to such astonishing birds was quite impressive. Back in the bus, we drove by Alexander's house that had a biblical text, in big capitals, painted on it. Later, he would hand each of us a flyer about his church but it being written in Cyrillic, any edifying message in it would probably be a lost cause.....

At the next point of major interest, we discovered all kinds of beautiful butterflies, such as Heath Fritillary (*Melitaea athalia*), Large Copper and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, but our main objective, of course, was the nesting place of the Great Grey Owl (*Strix nebulosa*) the exact location of which was known to Alexander. One rather big, fluffy juvenile was standing on the nest in a tree about 8 metres from the ground, while one of the

8



adults was sitting on a branch close by, clattering its beak as a warning sign. Alexander climbed up in the tree to fetch the youngster for ringing purposes, but he had to endure several attacks by the adult, forcing him to hold on to the tree with great care to prevent him from falling down. All in all, quite a show!



Juvenile & adult Great Grey Owl (Photography: Klaas de Jong, Wil Makkinje, Klaas de Jong resp.)

Subsequently, Alexander guided us to a site where we might expect a breeding Little Owl (*Athene noctua*) in a farm-house, but this time our venture was in vain as there were no signs of its presence. On the other hand, our next visit to another owl species, which Alexander still had in store for us, proved productive when we saw a breeding Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*) housed in an open nesting box. So, a day full of owls! Eventually the opportunity arose to have our well-deserved lunch (Denis had had to call twice to postpone our arrangement). Two hours later than originally planned, at 15:45 hours, we were enjoying a wonderfully laid out and very tasty meal despite the late hour. Following lunch, we drove on to our hotel and unloaded our bags before setting off straight away to a different marsh area to have another look at Aquatic Warblers. Here, again, we were very fortunate to see them in abundance with brilliant views. At the same time, numerous Citrine Wagtails were flying around us once more. Along the edges of the marsh we went in search of butterflies and dragonflies, there Dick discovered a Black-veined White (*Aporia crataegi*).



Aquatic Warbler, Raven & Reed Bunting (Photography: Aquatic Warbler by Wil Makkinje, other two by Klaas de Jong)

**Day 10 – 31st May Sporovo**

This morning we rose very late at about 8 o'clock because our last night, before flying back home, promised to be very short indeed. At our present location, we were still a couple of hours' drive away from Minsk Airport where we had to be present at 7:30 hours, which therefore involved a departure from our hotel at about three o'clock in the morning. We visited other locations in the Sporovo-marshes and occasionally saw one or two Aquatic Warblers, but the number of new species for our trip-total was now on a dramatic decline, giving us the impression that there was not much left to see, bird-wise, and that feeling, in turn, proved to be satisfactory. Notwithstanding all that, we scored a Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) and while exploring a range of fish ponds, a Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*) suddenly turned up. Beside that, we were enjoying a huge number of White-tailed Eagles, juveniles and adults presenting themselves in turns, some with fish, etc.



Marbled White Spot, White Stork with frog, Pyrausta aurata & Stag's-horn Clubmoss (Photography: Klaas de Jong)

**Day 11 – 1st June**

**Sporovo – Minsk – Amsterdam**

Getting up before three o'clock in the morning is hard but despite that, some over-enthusiasts among us were standing outside during a short stop, awaiting their breakfast (consisting of warm potato-pancakes) hoping to extend the trip total with one or two more species, especially since we had remarkably missed a couple of (thought to be) relatively easy ones during our stay in Belarus, for example: Corn Bunting (*Emberiza calandra*), Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*) and Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata*). However, this last opportunity provided none of them. Instead, we did score a new species when a Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) was seen flying over, which felt like a relief after having seen so many Caspian Gulls (*Larus cacchianans*).

All in all, everyone of us may look back at an impressive journey filled with countless beautiful species! Belarus is a magnificent country and the Pripyat River is a very lovely river indeed. The old oak forests appealed to us greatly and they house a huge quantity of woodpeckers and other birds. And it will surprise no one that 16% of the entire world population of Aquatic Warblers choose the marshes we visited as their breeding place. They are all a little paradise and we feel more than privileged to have been able to enter these areas. However, Belarus is not a country fully attuned to the requirements of tourists, let alone bird watching, but thanks to Denis, our local bird guide, who fired on all cylinders to make this journey as rich and as interesting as possible, it became a wonderful experience. His acute sense of hearing and eagle-eyes made it possible for us to observe an incredibly high number of species. Well done, Denis. And Lenjit, our driver, has done a terrific job as well by safely manoeuvring this gigantic bus, without any hesitation, along very small roads. Bravo!

In conclusion, I would like to express a word of thanks to all the participants, because without them this journey would not have taken place. Many thanks for their enthusiasm and excellent preparation! Everyone arrived on time whenever we had made an arrangement and they were all equipped with the proper gear to withstand the varying circumstances. This made my work as a tour guide extraordinarily simple and fun to do. Besides, all of them made the most of the moments when it mattered but left ample opportunity for a good time and moments of relaxation. Many thanks and till next time hopefully!

An extra word of gratitude goes out to Wil and Aad for making their pictures available for the benefit of this report.

Klaas de Jong - June, 2014



*Black Redstart, Blue-headed Wagtail & European Nightjar*

*(Photography: Klaas de Jong)*



*Caspian Gull, Yellowhammer & Little Gulls + Black-headed Gull*

*(Photography: Klaas de Jong)*



*Black Woodpecker, Greenish Warbler, Honey Buzzard & Tree Sparrow*

(Photography: Klaas de Jong)



*Myennis octopunctata, Silver Barred, Assmann's Fritillary & Wood-cow Wheat*

(Photography: Klaas de Jong)



*Gypsy Moth, Olethreutes arcuella & Northern White-breasted Hedgehog*

(Photography: Klaas de Jong)



*Common Clubtail, Yellow-spotted Whiteface & Large Skipper*

(Photography: Aad van der Ent)



*Drinker, Meccyna flavalis & Diasemia reticularis*

(Photography: Klaas de Jong)



*Cream Wave, Carpacoris purpureipennis, European Pond Terrapin & Blood-vein*

*(Photography: Klaas de Jong)*



*Boat-trip on the Pripjat River*

*(Photography: Klaas de Jong & Wil Makkinje resp.)*











123	Rotsduif	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
124	Holenduif	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		x			x	x	x					x
125	Houtduif	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
126	Turkse Tortel	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	x	x	x	x			x		x	x	x	x
127	Zomertortel	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>					x				x	x		x
128	Koekoek	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
129	Kerkuil	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>												
130	Oehoe	Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>									x			x
131	Steenuil	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>												
132	Bosuil	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>												
133	Ransuil	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>						x			x			x
134	Velduil	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>												
135	Ruigpootuil	Tengmalm's Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</i>												
136	Laplanduil	Great Grey Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>									x			x
137	Nachtzwaluw	European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>				x		x						x
138	Gierzwaluw	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
139	IJsvogel	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>												
140	Bijeneter	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>				x								x
141	Scharrelaar	Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>												
142	Hop	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x			x		x
143	Draaihals	Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x		x			x
144	Grijskopspecht	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>				x	x	x	x					x
145	Groene Specht	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>												
146	Zwarte Specht	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>				x			x					x
147	Witrugspecht	White-backed woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>				x	x	x	x			x		x
148	Syrische Bonte Specht	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>				x								x
149	Grote Bonte Specht	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				x		x	x	x	x			x
150	Middelste Bonte Specht	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>					x	x						x
151	Kleine Bonte Specht	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>				x	x	x	x	x				x
152	Drieteenspecht	Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>							x					x
153	Boomleeuwerik	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>							x		x	x		x
154	Veldleeuwerik	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

155	Oeverzwaluw	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x
156	Boerenzwaluw	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
157	Huiszwaluw	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
158	Duinpieper	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>												
159	Boompieper	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>			x	x		x		x	x	x		x
160	Graspieper	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		x		x	x			x	x	x		x
161	Roodkeelpieper	Red-throated Pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>												
162	Oeverpieper	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>												
163	Gele Kwikstaart	Blue-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
164	Noordse Gele Kwikstaart	Grey-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla thunbergi</i>		x										x
165	Citroenkwikstaart	Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>		x						x	x			x
166	Grote Gele Kwikstaart	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>												
167	Witte Kwikstaart	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
168	Waterspreeuw	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>												
169	Winterkoning	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			x	x		x	x					x
170	Heggenmus	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>												
171	Roodborst	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			x	x		x		x	x	x		x
172	Noordse Nachtegaal	Thrush Nightingale	<i>Luscinia luscinia</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
173	Blauwborst	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		x		x	x		x	x	x			x
174	Zwarte Roodstaart	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
175	Gekraagde Roodstaart	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>			x		x					x		x
176	Paapje	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
177	Roodborsttapuit	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>												
178	Tapuit	Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		x		x		x	x					x
179	Beflijster	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>												
180	Merel	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
181	Kramsvogel	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
182	Zanglijster	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
183	Koperwiek	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>												
184	Grote Lijster	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>										x		x
185	Cetti's Zanger	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>												
186	Sprinkhaanzanger	Grasshopper Warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>		x					x	x	x			x







24	Variabele Waterjuffer	Variable Bluet	<i>Coenagrion pulchellum</i>		x	x	x	x	x		x			x
25	Grote Roodoogjuffer	Large Redeye	<i>Erythromma najas</i>		x			x	x		x			x
26	Gewone Oeverlibel	Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthethrum cancellatum</i>			x				x			x	
27	Weidebeekjuffer	Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>			x	x	x	x					
28	Azuurwaterjuffer	Azure Bluet	<i>Coenagrion puella</i>				x	x			x	x	x	
29	Lantaarntje	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>				x	x		x	x	x	x	
30	Vroege Glazenmaker	Green-eyed Hawker	<i>Aeshna isocetes</i>					x		x	x		x	
31	Grote Keizerlibel	Blue Emperor	<i>Anax imperator</i>					x	x					
32	Beekrombout	Common Clubtail	<i>Gomphus vulgatissimus</i>					x	x					
33	Geelvlakheidlibel	Yellow-winged Darter	<i>Sympetrum flaveolum</i>						x					
34	Blauwe Breedscheenjuffer	Blue Featherleg	<i>Platycnemis pennipes</i>					x	x					
35	Bruine Korenbout	Blue Chaser	<i>Libellula fulva</i>								x			
36	Witpuntoeverlibel	White-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthethrum albistylum</i>								x			
	<b>Dagvlinders</b>	<b>Butterflies</b>												<b>27</b>
37	Dagpauwoog	Peacock	<i>Aglais io</i>		x									
38	Distelvlinder	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		x	x	x	x	x					
39	Citroenvlinder	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>		x									
40	Klein Geaderd Witje	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		x	x	x	x	x					
41	Hooibeestje	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		x	x	x	x	x			x	x	
42	Koninginnepage	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>		x									
43	Groot Koolwitje	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			x								
44	Zilveren Maan	Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	<i>Boloria selene</i>			x			x			x		
45	Violette Vuurvlinder	Purple-shot Copper	<i>Lycaena alciphron</i>				x							
46	Bruin Zandoogje	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>				x							
47	Kleine Vos	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>					x	x			x	x	
48	Tweekleurig Hooibeestje	Pearly Heath	<i>Coenonympha arcania</i>						x					
49	Icarusblauwtje	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>						x	x		x		
50	Bruine Vuurvlinder	Sooty Copper	<i>Lycaena tityrus</i>						x	x			x	
51	Kleine Vuurvlinder	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>						x	x		x		
52	Rode Vuurvlinder	Purple-edged Copper	<i>Lycaena hippothoe</i>						x					
53	Moerasparelmoervlinder	Marsh Fritillary	<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>							x				
54	Grote Vuurvlinder	Large Copper	<i>Lycaena dispar carueli</i>							x		x	x	



86	Geisha	<i>Olethreutes arcuella</i>	<i>Olethreutes arcuella</i>											x			x
87	Ratelaarspanner	Grass Rivulet	<i>Perizoma albulata</i>											x			x
88	Zwerfstreepmot	<i>Diasemia reticularis</i>	<i>Diasemia reticularis</i>											x			x
89	Dennenspinner	Pine-tree Lappet	<i>Dendrolimus pini</i>											x			x
	<b>Reptielen &amp; amfibieën</b>	<b>Reptiles &amp; amphibians</b>															<b>11</b>
90	Bruine Kikker	Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>	x	x	x	x			x	x	x					x
91	Heikikker	Moor Frog	<i>Rana arvalis</i>	x													x
92	Groene Kikker spec.	Green Frog spec.	<i>Pelophylax spec.</i>	x		x	x			x	x	x	x				x
93	Roodbuikvuurpad	Fire-bellied Toad	<i>Bombina bombina</i>	x	x	x				x	x		x				x
94	Groene Pad	Green Toad	<i>Pseudepidalea viridis</i>	x													x
95	Gewone Pad	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>		x			x			x						x
96	Ringslang	European Grass Snake	<i>Natrix natrix</i>		x		x			x	x						x
97	Hazelworm	Slow Worm	<i>Anguis fragilis</i>		x		x										x
98	Knoflookpad	Common Eurasian Spadefoot	<i>Pelobates fuscus</i>					x	x	x							x
99	Zandhagedis	Sand Lizard	<i>Lacerta agilis</i>						x								x
100	Europese Moerasschildpad	European Pond Terrapin	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>							x							x
	<b>Overige insecten</b>	<b>Other insects</b>															<b>8</b>
101	Hornaar	Hornet	<i>Vespa crabro</i>	x	x			x			x						x
102	<i>Myennis octopunctata</i>	<i>Myennis octopunctata</i>	<i>Myennis octopunctata</i>	x													x
103	Grote Dennenprachtkever	<i>Chalcophora mariana</i>	<i>Chalcophora mariana</i>				x										x
104	<i>Carpocorus purpureipennis</i>	<i>Carpocoris purpureipennis</i>	<i>Carpocoris purpureipennis</i>					x									x
105	Gewone Schorpioenvlieg	Scorpion Fly	<i>Panorpa communis</i>						x								x
106	Heldenbok	<i>Cerambyx cerdo</i>	<i>Cerambyx cerdo</i>						x								x
107	Onbekend spitskopje	<i>Conocephalus spec.</i>	<i>Conocephalus spec.</i>							x							x
108	Stipfopwesp	<i>Chrysotoxum festivum</i>	<i>Chrysotoxum festivum</i>							x							x
	<b>Planten</b>	<b>Plants</b>															<b>4</b>
109	Zevenster	Chickweed Wintergreen	<i>Trientalis europaea</i>	x				x									x
110	Vrouwenschoentje	Lady's Slipper	<i>Cypripedium calceolum</i>							x							x
111	Paarse Hengel	Wood-cow Wheat	<i>Melampyrum nemorosum</i>											x			x
112	Grote Wolfsklauw	Stag's-horn Clubmoss	<i>Lycopodiella clavatum</i>												x		x
	<b>Totaal aantal soorten</b> (alle soortgroepen)	<b>Total number of species</b> (all categories)															<b>292</b>





*A meadow along the Pripyat River bank*

*(Photography: Klaas de Jong)*