



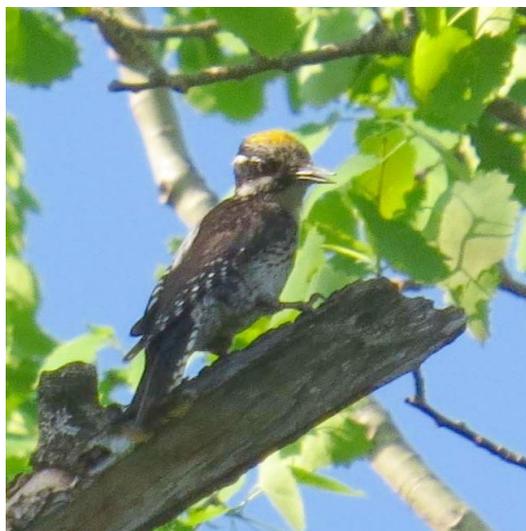
Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

36 Thunder Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich NR7 0PX

Telephone: 01603 300552

www.honeyguide.co.uk E-mail: chris@honeyguide.co.uk



Latvia
21 – 29 May 2014

Participants

Mary Laurie-Pile
Brian Austin
Julia Maynard
Gill Page
Helen Young
Pat Boon
Graham Harris

Leaders/guides

From Honeyguide: Rob Macklin, who also wrote the report.
From Baltic Wildlife: Karlis Millers, Fabio Vicentini. In Riga: Laura Žukovska
<http://www.balticwildlife.eu/>

The photos in this report were taken by Karlis (© K.Millers/www.latvijasputni.lv), Pat, Rob and Fabio.

Cover photos:

Top row, l to r: Bird's-eye primrose (RM); the International Radio Astronomy Centre at Ventspils (RM); red-backed shrike (KM).

Middle row: Red-footed falcon (KM), three-toed woodpecker (PB), honey buzzard (KM).

Bottom row: Blue-headed yellow wagtail (KM); brown hare (KM); globe flowers (RM).

Below: the group (RM).



As with all Honeyguide holidays, part of the price was put towards a local conservation project, in this case for the Latvian Owl Research Society. The conservation contribution of £40 per person was supplemented by gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust and rounded up, resulting in a donation of €500 (£424).

The total for conservation contributions from all Honeyguide holidays up to July 2014 is £96,017.

Introduction

The first ever Honeyguide trip to Latvia was a huge success and for the most part in excellent weather, with temperatures climbing into the high 20°s before cooling right down towards the end of the holiday. The first part of the trip was based at the Valguma Pasaule hotel on the edge of Kemeru National Park, west of Riga, with corncrakes, wrynecks, hawfinches, warblers and flycatchers in the hotel gardens – a great introduction to the birds of Latvia. Our first three days were centred on the Kemeru National Park taking in the Dunduri meadows and high observation towers around Lake Kanieris. The Dunduri meadows also boast an observation tower and from here we were fortunate enough to get fantastic views of an adult white-tailed eagle with overflying cranes and a high soaring lesser-spotted eagle. The woods in Kemeru hold eight species of woodpeckers and we were lucky enough to get superb views of a male three-toed woodpecker, one of the most difficult to find.

The second part of the week was based at the Hotel Zitari in Kolka making an ideal base for migration watches at Kolka Cape and for exploring the Slītere National Park. With south-easterly winds we were treated to a migration bonanza with hordes of honey buzzards moving through with sparrowhawks, cranes and thousands of dragonflies. The bushes here were alive with warblers including river, Blyth's reed, marsh and icterine warblers with many caught and ringed and allowing close observation in the hand. Slītere National Park turned up good numbers of greenish warblers and excellent views of lesser spotted eagles plus new butterflies including black-veined white and northern chequered skipper. Some of the meadows were floral delights with carpets of brilliant yellow globe flowers and early purple orchids. The trip ended with a fascinating guided tour of old Riga followed by watching rollers actually rolling and displaying over open heath – all in all a magical week.

Daily Diary

Wednesday 21 May – To Latvia

There was a 65 minute delay with our Air Baltic flight from Gatwick to Riga but then we were on our way to Latvia. We arrived at Riga in late afternoon to be greeted by Laura, Karlis and Fabio from Baltic Wildlife. We quickly loaded up the minibus and car, received a splendid welcome pack from Laura, and were soon heading to the Hotel Valguma Pasaule on the edge of Kemeru National Park. On the 40 minute drive we saw our first birds including common buzzard, mute swan, swifts, swallows and a splendid great white egret.

After unpacking at the hotel several of the group explored the grounds and large lake, coming up with several singing pied flycatchers and redstarts, icterine warbler, bullfinch, goldcrest, overflying great white egret and a soaring honey buzzard. Pat found three hawfinches and down by the lake Helen found a goosander with at least 24 young (probably the bird looking after a creche) while a corncrake burst into its characteristic song “*crex crex*” from nearby lush vegetation – an amazing hour around the hotel. An early night, but after a superb four course meal in the panoramic dining room, with everyone eagerly anticipating exploring Latvia over the next few days.

Thursday 22 May – Hotel Valguma Pasaule and Dunduri Meadows at Kemeru National Park

Another glorious day in prospect as Brian and Graham joined the leaders for a six o'clock start and a pre-breakfast walk around the hotel grounds. Two great white egrets were soon found high up in the trees along the river while our first garden warbler sang from the cover of dense scrub. Two nuthatches were seen making their way along branches in the trees and we were delighted to find four 'white-headed' long-tailed tits of the northern race *Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*. A wryneck began to call loudly from the trees across the river and we finally located it, perched along a branch and continuing to call. New birds just kept on coming as two hawfinches and a golden oriole flew over our heads, two great spotted woodpeckers squabbled on the woodland edge and we were fortunate enough to track down a much scarcer middle spotted woodpecker.

Many of the flowers on show were familiar to us in the UK and we quickly identified both oxlip and cowslip, bright yellow archangel, the striking star-flowered herb paris and white-flowered Solomon's seal. Feeling that we had managed a great morning walk we retraced our steps back to the hotel, turning up a treecreeper, two red-breasted flycatchers, and two common sandpipers on the river, one of the waders strangely climbing a set of steps up to the hotel. It was time for a well-earned breakfast.

After breakfast we explored the hotel grounds along the *Valguma ezero* – a large lake – through the woods and back along the river. As we were about to set out, six cranes flew right over the hotel, a great start. Fabio then showed us a scorpion fly before we set off along the trail. More plants were quickly found and identified including flowering wood cranesbill, both common and wood dog violets, cuckoo flower and masses of the delicate May lily. Occasional crested tits were singing from high in the canopy but our attention was soon taken by a great view of a stunning male pied flycatcher and a pair of bullfinches – both right out in the open and giving us all great views.

The hotel cat had decided to join us on our walk and he soon caught a slowworm, which Fabio immediately rescued. Songs from the woodland canopy were increasing and we heard wood warblers, red-breasted flycatchers and willow tits, but all very hard to pin down. As it warmed up several butterflies made their appearance including delightful orange-tips and speckled woods. Several beautiful demoiselle damselflies were also on the wing, the males looking particularly splendid and most of the group managed a good view of a perched hairy dragonfly.

As we climbed the steps out of the forest we came into an open area where the Latvian version of the red arrows air force display team were practising overhead – not wildlife but an impressive sight nonetheless. A pair of whinchats were out in full view in nearby scrub but our attention was quickly turned to a calling wryneck which showed itself extremely well allowing us all to see its remarkable camouflage plumage as it continued to call for several minutes – an amazing sight!

Time to walk back along the river, noting new butterflies in the shape of the delicate wood white and small heath. A thrush nightingale was singing loudly from dense cover, robins began to sing in the woods and we had a great view of our first coal tit. Two kingfishers were then found along the river with some of the group getting good views. Two more great spotted woodpeckers in the trees were then joined by the much scarcer male middle spotted woodpecker. Two common sandpipers were on the river, probably a breeding pair, and as we approached the hotel we encountered a female redstart in full view on the path and two hawfinches in the trees, bringing to an end our woodland exploration.

Temperatures were now climbing into the high 20°s as we boarded the vehicles for the short drive to Dunduri meadows in Kemer National Park. We headed straight for the viewpoint to have our picnics and on the way passed a reedbed where we briefly heard a Savi's warbler, making a mental note to explore this area on the way back. Right on cue, as we arrived at the viewpoint in the meadows, a huge adult white-tailed eagle launched itself into the air being mobbed by three ravens – an incredible sight. Five then overflew the open meadows and almost flew into a soaring lesser spotted eagle and common buzzard – a somewhat exhilarating five minutes!

We had our picnics by the tower and Karlis and Fabio then produced picnic chairs for all – a great idea. Whitethroats and reed warblers were singing nearby while a river warbler sang from deep cover with no intention of showing itself. Butterflies here included our first painted lady, a small heath and the fritillary-like map butterfly. Starlings, white wagtails and swallows were all nesting in boxes on the tower viewpoint and were continually bringing in food for their hungry broods. The views from the tower were amazing and we soon spotted eleven more cranes, two whooper swans and several lapwings in the meadows. A 156 hectare enclosure was being grazed by ostensibly wild Heck cattle and Konik ponies, while the nearby woods were reportedly where wolves lurked. As we about to move on, a corncrake called from the meadows and a roebuck in velvet darted across the meadows and into the forest.



Sedge warbler (PB).



Little ringed plover (KM).

Retracing our steps, we decided that Karlis would walk through the meadows to see what could be found while we moved the vehicles along the dirt road. Small groups of house martins were feeding over the river, a stunning male red-backed shrike and male whinchat were perched up together in the scrub and two sedge warblers sang from the reedy dykes. The meadows themselves were rather quiet although we did find a small group of five wood sandpipers and a green sandpiper around a small pool where two pairs of lapwings were nesting. A common snipe then flew up and over the nearby woods before two cranes flew in low, right over our heads, calling loudly and giving us all superb views. Karlis then briefly spotted a black woodpecker, then a large raptor darting across turned out to be female goshawk.

Our last stop of the day was back at the large reedbed where the Savi's warbler had been singing earlier. At least six marsh harriers were quartering the area – obviously a favoured breeding site – a sparrowhawk soared overhead but our attention was quickly taken by another huge white-tailed eagle. This flushed a group of ducks including single gadwall and teal before perching up in full view allowing us to get our telescopes onto it. While this was going on, two whooper swans were grazing on a nearby meadow, several reed buntings moved to and fro and our final highlight here was a singing Savi's warbler in full view at the top of a reed stem – a great view of one of Europe's most elusive warblers.

It was late afternoon and time to head back to the hotel. On the short drive back we came across two little ringed plovers in a muddy puddle, a soaring hobby and two brown hares in crops by the roadside. A great end to an exhilarating day.

Friday 23 May – Kemer National Park Administration Centre and Lake Kanieris

Another hot and sunny day with temperatures rising to 30°C and an early breakfast to get to the woodpecker sites as early as possible. At our first stop a black redstart was singing from derelict buildings and a wryneck called from within the forest. Both willow and wood warblers were in full song and we quickly spotted a red squirrel close to the trunk of one of the pines.

The undoubted highlight of the morning was a drumming three-toed woodpecker in full view for several minutes – a first time sighting for most of the group and seen extremely well. We searched for more woodpeckers and tantalisingly had a calling white-backed woodpecker in the forest which refused to show itself. A great spotted woodpecker called and we did get very good views of a feeding icterine warbler, a singing pied flycatcher and two delightful wood warblers. We stopped for coffee at the far end of the forest road in a sunny glade where several brimstone butterflies were on the wing and we added green hairstreak and holly blue to our ever-growing tally.

Suitably refreshed, we drove the short distance to the administration centre to look for more woodpeckers. By this time it was getting very warm and we knew it would be difficult to find them, and so it proved. We contented ourselves with several singing icterine and wood warblers plus identifying another dragonfly, a bright green brilliant emerald. Swifts and white wagtails were nesting on the derelict Soviet era accommodation blocks and we found a splendid patch of bugle on the forest edge.

It was time for lunch and we headed off to the observation tower overlooking the east side of Lake Kanieris. Fabio drove the car in to set out the lunch while the rest of us walked the short distance from the road. Yet more wood warblers and a willow warbler were singing along the line of trees and dragonflies began to appear in large numbers, mainly four-spotted chasers but also brilliant emeralds, ruby whitefaces and our only Norfolk hawk. Hordes of bright blue damselflies were closely examined and identified as common blues. Approaching the tower we came across a superb patch of pink bird's-eye primrose growing with trailing tormentil and milkwort. Our first look from the tower before settling down to lunch produced yet another white-tailed eagle which was being continually harassed by local breeding herring gulls. Marsh harriers and great white egrets seemed to be everywhere and our first bittern of the trip boomed from dense reed cover, alas never to appear.

We had lunch in the welcome shade of the tower with a backdrop of a chortling great reed warbler. Six cranes then flew over before a cry of osprey overhead took everyone's attention. After a lunch of cold Latvian beetroot and mint soup (extremely tasty and very refreshing), we all climbed back up the tower for more observation of this gigantic wetland. A pair of mute swans with six cygnets were in the pools below us and many common terns were fishing in the open water. Julia then spotted a striking male goldeneye before Karlis put us on to a male red-necked grebe on the reed edge, guarding his mate who was incubating a clutch of eggs. We all remarked on how many great white egrets we were seeing and Karlis explained that 96 pairs bred on this wetland in 2013.

A new observation tower had been completed on the far side of this wetland and we decided that this would make a perfect end to the day. Walking through the woods on the way in we found more flowering plants in the shape of a pink-flowered and round-leaved marsh violet plus a white flowering baneberry. This new tower proved to be an ideal spot to spend the late afternoon with the sun behind us and the trees sheltering us from an increasing onshore breeze. We immediately spotted a male garganey sat on a patch of weed and soon found two more males of this colourful little duck. More wildfowl then came into view, particularly pochard and tufted duck, before the white-tailed eagle re-appeared, causing the usual mayhem.

The tower gave us an excellent view of the enormous cormorant colony which numbered approximately 1700 nests in 2013, one of the biggest colonies in Europe. Another three cranes flew low over the lake. Below the tower two Savi's warblers were reeling from the reeds and a great reed warbler sat atop a reed stem giving us all fantastic views. A great end to a superb day, and in the evening another splendid meal at the hotel before preparing to leave for Kolka in the morning.

Saturday 24 May – to Kolka

Karlis reported that south-easterly winds were forecast for today and this could be extremely good for migration through Kolka Cape. We revised our itinerary and drove straight there, hoping to see visible migration in action. As we arrived a flurry of falcons were directly overhead, first a hobby then unbelievably at least eight red-footed falcons including two stunning adult males – a rare sight, even for Kolka. Birds just



River warbler (RM).

kept on coming as two hawfinches flew over, two marsh warblers were singing in the lilac bushes and two lesser whitethroats moved silently through the pine trees. Two Latvian bird-ringers had been at the Cape since first light and had erected mist nets. The catch had been good and we were shown two Blyth's reed warblers and a river warbler in the hand – fantastic to see such difficult birds at close quarters. A snatch of song from the pines alerted us to the presence of a rare greenish warbler, singing from cover, but then it came out into the open giving us all amazing views as it searched for insects. By now it was warming up and active migration began to take hold with honey buzzards beginning to move through the Cape – we counted 49 throughout the day. Four cranes then flew over and the first of 20 sparrowhawks put in an appearance – at any one time there could be four species of raptors in the skies.

We decided to walk across to the open meadows for a better view and immediately came across an immature male singing scarlet rosefinch and our first fieldfare of the trip, the latter apparently breeding in this area. Almost the first action in the meadow was the impressive sight of 56 cranes flying over in tight formation, while two female red-backed shrikes were making a small group of whinchats a little uneasy. Several more hobbies then put in an appearance, catching dragonflies on the wing, before a majestic immature white-tailed eagle drifted nonchalantly over. Scores of four-spotted chaser dragonflies were also moving through the Cape, a male siskin showed very well atop a Scots pine, three more hobbies moved through and, to cap an excellent morning, two more cranes drifted serenely over.

After a picnic lunch in the meadow, active migration was beginning to wane although a superb adult male red-footed falcon came so close to us so that we could even see his red feet and eyes. In the distance two harriers appeared over the tree line, the first a marsh harrier which drifted quickly away while the second came right at us and we could see it was a ringtail Montagu's harrier, probably a female. The last of the day's honey buzzards then drifted over before at least 60 yellow wagtails flew into the adjacent campsite, taking advantage of the short grass to search for insects. Most of these birds were grey-headed yellow wagtails *Motacilla flava thunbergi* but we did manage to pick out two blue-headed wagtails *Motacilla flava flava*.

Three kestrels hunted over the meadow throughout the afternoon and red-backed shrike numbers rose to the dizzy heights of seven females. On the edge of the meadow a wet ditch covered in willow scrub was proving irresistible to migrants and we quickly found two blackcaps, a singing marsh warbler, a river warbler and two female siskins. Gill then found the only two grey partridges of the trip, a black redstart began singing in the campsite and we found yet another new butterfly, a marsh fritillary. In the early evening, as we relaxed at the Hotel Zitari, a message came through from Karlis that a bee-eater had been spotted in the meadow at the Cape. Brian and Mary 'twitched' the bird for the group, bringing to an end an amazing day of active bird migration at Kolka Cape.

Sunday 25 May – Kolka Cape and Slītere National Park

Karlis had planned to carry out some early morning ringing and bird watching at the Cape and was joined by Brian and Graham as they set off at five o'clock in the morning. Migration was in full swing at this hour and our advance party logged five broad-billed sandpipers, several dunlins, common sandpiper, grey wagtail, wheatear, avocet, 50 crossbills and a minimum of 300 chaffinches moving through.

The main part of the group arrived just after eight o'clock to find 73 mute swans offshore but close in, as well as 15 common gulls, 10 Sandwich terns and a flock of 32 eider ducks. Migration was still in full swing with several hundred chaffinches pouring through with a solitary mistle thrush plus five sparrowhawks passing overhead. Insect migration had really got going with thousands of four-spotted chaser dragonflies buzzing through the woods and scores of butterflies also moving, mainly large whites, but also small whites, red admirals and a single painted lady. Most of the group then went over to check the mist nets and were treated to close-up views of Blyth's reed warbler, icterine warbler, garden warbler, lesser whitethroat and redstart, all in the hand – a brilliant experience.

Meanwhile, back on the beach, 20 yellow wagtails and two white wagtails were feeding along the shoreline, five ringed plovers landed briefly and two shelducks flew past. At 10 o'clock, a loose group of seven honey buzzards appeared, the first of 39 seen throughout the morning.

There was time for coffee and ice cream at the Kolka Cape café before moving on to the USI campsite in the village. Many more honey buzzards and sparrowhawks flew through as did three cranes, magnificent birds. Another hobby then appeared and we finally tracked down an adult male, and very red, singing scarlet rosefinch. The short grass on the campsite continued to attract yellow wagtails and numbers soon reached 40 birds. We decided to take another look at the willow-covered wet ditch finding sedge warbler, Blyth's reed warbler, marsh warbler and four siskins while a nearby garden hedge turned up four more marsh warblers. After the morning's excitement we had lunch at the campsite among the wagtails and Karlis produced a female scarlet rosefinch which had been caught in the mist nets.

Our first visit after lunch was to the Slītere lighthouse on the edge of the National Park. Two corncrakes were calling here and a singing golden oriole in the avenue of limes defeated our attempts to find it. The view from the lighthouse was spectacular, right across the roof of the forest and out to sea. This lighthouse is not in use as it has been superseded by a new lighthouse built on a man-made island 5kms offshore.

Our last stop of the day was at a roadside tower where a yellowhammer was in full song, though the main interest here was butterflies. We were delighted to have great views of a stunning black-veined white followed by a bright chequered skipper and small pearl-bordered fritillary, bringing the total seen up to 21 species. As we were about to depart a lesser spotted eagle soared up and over the forest, sealing a perfect end to another great day.

Monday 26 May – Kolka Cape, Slītere National Park & Ventspils International Radio Astronomy Centre

Another glorious day was in prospect as our usual advance crew went up to the Cape at 05:00. Birds moving through included a male red-footed falcon, golden oriole, 20 yellow wagtails plus small numbers of crossbills and chaffinches. The mist nets turned up icterine, sedge and garden warblers, lesser whitethroat and yellowhammer but the marsh and Blyth's reed warblers had moved on.

After breakfast, several of us removed hornets from our rooms before making our way back to the Cape to look for crested tits. Brian had seen a pair earlier in the day but on this occasion we were out of luck. However we did find a pair of bullfinches, a smart male pied flycatcher and an overflying hobby. On the beach a little ringed plover was feeding along the shoreline, two sand martins flew over and two Sandwich terns were fishing offshore. Returning to the vehicles we stopped to admire sheets of colourful wild pansies.

Our next stop was an open meadow on the edge of Slītere National Park where two corncrakes were calling, a scarlet rosefinch was in full song and six whinchats flitted across the meadow. More butterflies here included another green hairstreak plus orange-tip and red admiral.

Moving back into the National Park we stopped at a traditional greenish warbler breeding site. Almost immediately, Julia spotted one on the woodland edge and it came right out in the open, giving us all great views. As we walked down the hill we found at least eight birds including six singing males. We also had at least three singing wood warblers and singing male siskin right on the top of a tall Scots pine. In the continuing warm weather we found another black-veined white butterfly, more brimstones and yet another new species, a northern chequered skipper basking on a rock by a small boggy area. Graham then found a male banded demoiselle basking in the sunshine on a hazel leaf. Several plants in flower on the roadside included the vivid wood cranesbill, woodruff, ramsons and brooklime on the aforementioned boggy patch.



Greenish warbler (KM).

Our last part of call for the morning was an open area of grassland surrounded by forest. Two very large raptors immediately came into view and were quickly identified as lesser spotted eagles with one of the birds in full display – an astounding piece of luck. In the meadows a tree pipit was singing in full display flight, a wryneck called from the forest and a male red-backed shrike perched up in full view. The meadows themselves were home to swathes of glorious yellow globe flowers and many early purple orchids. We also found a pink orchid that at the time I thought was a military orchid but on closer examination of photographs was an unusually pale early purple orchid.

With time moving on it was back to the USI campground at Kolka for a lunch of mushroom and leek pancakes followed by a traditional Latvian pudding of 'bread soup' – both delicious. As we arrived at USI we almost ran over a migrant crested lark which gave us all great views on the short grass along with 22 yellow wagtails. While we were enjoying lunch, six more cranes circled the area before moving off south.



Watching (FV). Cranes (KM).

It was time to head towards Ventspils and our pre-booked tour of the International Radio Astronomy Centre. Our guide showed us around this Russian-built site which, in the Soviet era, was used as much for espionage as research. Most of us climbed to various points within the centre and Rob and Fabio managed the final 'hairy' climb into the dish itself. What an amazing view over the forest! Both black redstart and white wagtail appeared to be nesting on the apparatus, a single hobby flew over, we found Nottingham catchfly in flower and our first black-tailed skimmer dragonfly.

There was still time for one more stop, this time at a wet area of bog and forest on the main road to Kolka on which, happily, there was hardly any traffic. Several butterflies were on the wing including small pearl-bordered fritillary, small and common blues plus a stunning purple-edged copper – a new species for all the group and leaders. A dark damselfly was yet another new species, finally identified as variable damselfly, while new flowers included purple gromwell, bogbean, yellow water-lily and meadow saxifrage – a fine end to another fascinating day in northern Latvia.

Tuesday 27 May – Kolka Cape and Mersrags

There was a distinct change in the weather with a northerly breeze, cloudy conditions and temperatures struggling to reach double figures – quite a contrast to the previous week. Our advance party of Karlis, Graham and Brian duly went up to the Cape at dawn, found it distinctly cold and uncomfortable, but still turned up three black-throated divers, both velvet and common scoters, 15 whooper swans and a singing woodlark. Just marsh and sedge warblers were ringed from the nets while back at the hotel Helen had a great view of a singing redstart.

After breakfast we headed south on the 45 minute drive to a coastal wetland site at Mersrags. A willow warbler was singing in the pines as we arrived and both reed and sedge warblers could be heard in the extensive reedbeds, the latter showing well in its typical song flight. The meadows here held breeding yellow wagtails and, on close inspection, masses of the delicate adder's-tongue fern – a delightful find. Offshore, eight common scoters and two velvet scoters flew south, a ringed plover was on the shoreline and Graham briefly saw a bearded tit fly across the path and into the reeds, calling as it went.

We then decided to walk along the shoreline with the north wind at our backs; mute swans and shelducks were everywhere on this stretch of coast and a pair of the latter were closely guarding seven ducklings. On the rocks 350 cormorants scattered out to sea as we approached, while in the shallows we counted 20 great white egrets and 11 grey herons. Brian saw 16 goldeneyes offshore with another five in the shallows while a sand bar produced a single little ringed plover and 13 more yellow wagtails. As we were leaving this area we walked across a meadow full of pasque flowers which had unfortunately gone over – must have been an amazing sight in full flower. A male red-backed shrike perched up in full view in the meadow and as we boarded the vehicles yet another scarlet rosefinch burst into song.

After a late and leisurely lunch at the hotel there was a free afternoon with some of the group accepting a lift to the Cape then walking back while others explored the shoreline nearer the hotel. Rob popped down to the local beach for a quick look and was fortunate enough to see two Arctic skuas harassing fishing Sandwich terns. The group at the Cape saw two hooded crows mobbing an animal on the ground which turned out to be a pine marten and the group also had excellent views of a red-breasted flycatcher.

Wednesday 28 May – Kolka, Lake Engure, Berzciems and Riga

Bidding farewell to Hotel Zitari, we headed south for our first port of call at Lake Engure near Mersrags. At least 20 adult greylag geese were in the meadow bordering this huge wetland guarding well-grown chicks, while great white egrets and grey herons flew back and forth. Several lapwings were also in the meadow and a pair of marsh harriers quartered the reedbed. Gill then spotted another hunting raptor which revealed itself as a splendid male Montagu's harrier, low over the meadow, giving us all great views. Two cranes were also seen well on the edge of the reedbed while thrush nightingale, willow warbler, wood warbler and whitethroat sang from the adjacent scrubby vegetation. Graham and Julia were then lucky enough to catch sight of a grey-headed woodpecker as it flew past.



Montagu's harrier and greylag geese (KM).

Our next stop on the way to Hotel Valguma was at Berzciems, a small coastal site. We did not expect to see too much here but did encounter two little ringed plovers at very close quarters, looking as though they were trying to nest on the edge of a shingle car park. Reed warblers were singing in the small reedbed while grey herons and a single oystercatcher foraged along the shoreline.

There was time to book into our hotel at Valguma Pasaule before travelling into Riga for a guided tour of the old city led by Laura, Baltic Wildlife's director. It was fascinating to learn some of Riga's old secrets and history, a great way to spend the afternoon. A final super meal at the hotel and our last night in Latvia washed down with the local speciality Black Balsam, a traditional Latvian herbal liqueur.

Thursday 29 May – Garkalne and Home

A cloudy, cool and wet morning at Valguma Pasaule promised little so we decided on a 90 minute drive to a roller breeding site at Garkalne on the east side of Riga. We drove through the city to take in more of the sights and were pleasantly surprised to find the rain had not reached this far east.

As we pulled up at Garkalne we spotted a woodlark singing from overhead wires. Several more were heard and seen throughout the morning, including two on the sandy track, one of which was having a dust bath. Cuckoo, fieldfare and raven were all seen here and we were pleasantly surprised to find a pair of tawny pipits out on this area of Calluna heath with many invasive pine trees.

However we had come here particularly to see rollers and we were not disappointed. During the morning we saw a minimum of four birds: these included two probable males calling while displaying and actually rolling and diving through the air – an absolutely magnificent end to nine great days exploring western Latvia.

Many thanks to Laura for organising the trip, to Fabio for his unfailing good humour and assistance but particularly to Karlis (a.k.a. Arnie) for his local knowledge and tremendous birding skills.

WILDLIFE CHECKLISTS

BIRDS

Black-throated diver	4 offshore at Kolka Cape.
Great crested grebe	10+ on Lake Kanieris.
Red-necked grebe	Breeding pair on Lake Kanieris, male seen on reed edge.
Cormorant	c.1500 pairs at Lake Kanieris & 350 at Mersrags.
Bittern	Booming male at Lake Kanieris.
Great white egret	Peaks of 20+ at Lake Kanieris & 20 at Mersrags.
Grey heron	In small numbers at major wetlands, max.15 at Mersrags.
White stork	Widespread & common.
Mute swan	Peaks of 73 offshore at Kolka Cape & 88 at Mersrags.
Whooper swan	Four in Dunduri meadows & 15 at Kolka Cape.
Greylag goose	20 adults with young at Lake Engure.
Shelduck	Peak of 87 at Mersrags.
Wigeon	2 at Lake Kanieris.
Gadwall	One at Dunduri meadows.
Teal	One female at Dunduri meadows.
Mallard	Widespread & common at major wetlands.
Garganey	6 at Lake Kanieris.
Shoveler	3 at Lake Kanieris.
Pochard	15 at Lake Kanieris.
Tufted duck	10 at Lake Kanieris.
Eider duck	32 offshore at Kolka Cape.
Common scoter	Noted at Kolka Cape & 9 offshore at Mersrags.
Velvet scoter	4 offshore at Kolka Cape & 2 offshore at Mersrags.
Goldeneye	Peak of 21 at Mersrags.
Goosander	Breeding at Valguma Pasaule.
Honey buzzard	Peaks of 49 & 39 on migration at Kolka Cape.
White-tailed eagle	Two adults at Dunduri meadows, one at Lake Kanieris & immature at Kolka Cape.
Marsh harrier	Peaks of 20+ at Lake Kanieris & 8 at Dunduri meadows.
Montagu's harrier	Ringtail on migration at Kolka Cape and male at Lake Engure.
Goshawk	One at Dunduri meadows & one at Slītere.
Sparrowhawk	Migration peaks of 20 & 13 at Kolka Cape.
Buzzard	Widespread and common.
Lesser spotted eagle	Single birds at Dunduri meadows & Slītere but 2 at Slītere on 26 th .
Osprey	One at Lake Kanieris.
Kestrel	Peak of 3 at Kolka Cape.
Red-footed falcon	8 at Kolka Cape on 24 th & male on 26 th .
Hobby	Peak of six at Kolka Cape.
Grey partridge	2 at Kolka Cape.
Corncrake	Widespread in meadows.
Coot	Only at Lake Kanieris.
Crane	Peak of 62 at Kolka Cape.
Oystercatcher	One at Berzciems.
Avocet	One at Kolka Cape.
Little ringed plover	Peak of 2 at Dunduri meadows & Berzciems.
Ringed plover	Peak of 7 at Kolka Cape.
Lapwing	10 at Dunduri meadows & 6 at Lake Engure.
Sanderling	3 at Kolka Cape.
Dunlin	10 at Kolka Cape.
Broad-billed sandpiper	5 at Kolka Cape.
Common snipe	One at Dunduri meadows.
Black-tailed godwit	One at Mersrags.
Green sandpiper	One at Dunduri meadows.
Wood sandpiper	6 at Dunduri meadows.
Common sandpiper	Peak of 4 at Valguma Pasaule.
Arctic skua	Two offshore at Kolka village.
Black-headed gull	Widespread & common.
Common gull	Peak of 18 at Mersrags & 15 at Kolka Cape.
Herring gull	Widespread & common.
Great black-backed gull	Peak of 11 at Kolka village.
Sandwich tern	Peak of 20 at Kolka village.
Common tern	Minimum of 20 at Lake Kanieris & breeding there.

White-winged black tern	One at Lake Kanieris.
Stock dove	One at Kemeru National Park.
Feral pigeon	Common in Riga.
Woodpigeon	Occasional at most sites.
Collared dove	One at Kolka Cape.
Cuckoo	Recorded daily.
Swift	Widespread & common.
Kingfisher	Two at Valguma Pasaule.
Bee-eater	One at Kolka Cape.
Roller	Minimum of 4 at Garkalne.
Wryneck	Two at Valguma Pasaule.
Black woodpecker	One at Dunduri meadows.
Grey-headed woodpecker	One at Lake Engure.
Great spotted woodpecker	Noted at Valguma Pasaule & Kemeru National Park.
Middle spotted woodpecker	One at Valguma Pasaule.
White-backed woodpecker	One heard at Kemeru National Park.
Three-toed woodpecker	One seen well at Kemeru National Park.
Crested lark	One at Kolka Cape.
Woodlark	One at Kolka Cape & 6+ at Garkalne.
Skylark	Widespread but uncommon on grasslands.
Sand martin	Two at Kolka Cape.
Barn swallow	Widespread & common.
House martin	Widespread & common.
Tawny pipit	Two at Garkalne.
Tree pipit	One at Valguma Pasaule & Slitere National Park.
Meadow pipit	Noted at Dunduri meadows, Kolka Cape & Mersrags.
Yellow wagtail (<i>thunbergi</i>)	Peak of 65 at Kolka Cape.
Blue-headed wagtail	2 at Kolka Cape.
Grey wagtail	One at Kolka Cape.
White wagtail	Widespread & common.
Wren	Occasional in woodlands.
Robin	Only at Valguma Pasaule.
Thrush nightingale	Heard at Valguma Pasaule, Kemeru, Kolka Cape and Lake Engure.
Black redstart	Noted on four occasions at Kemeru & Slitere National Parks & Kolka Cape.
Redstart	Noted at Valguma Pasaule & Kolka Cape.
Whinchat	Peak of 9 at Kemeru National Park.
Wheatear	Noted at Kolka Cape.
Blackbird	Widespread & common.
Fieldfare	Singles at Kolka Cape and Garkalne.
Song thrush	Only at Valguma Pasaule.
Mistle thrush	On four occasions at Valguma Pasaule, Kolka Cape & Lake Kanieris.
River warbler	2 at Kolka Cape & heard at Kemeru National Park.
Savi's warbler	Singing males at Dunduri meadows & Lake Kanieris.
Sedge warbler	Peak of 3 at Kolka Cape & Mersrags.
Blyth's reed warbler	Four at Kolka Cape inc. 2 ringed.
Marsh warbler	Peak of 6 at Kolka Cape.
Reed warbler	Noted at Kemeru National Park & Mersrags.
Great reed warbler	Two at Lake Kanieris.
Icterine warbler	Peak of 7 at Kemeru National Park.
Lesser whitethroat	Peak of 3 at Kolka Cape.
Whitethroat	Peak of 4 at Kolka Cape.
Garden warbler	Small numbers at several sites.
Blackcap	Widespread & common.
Greenish warbler	One at Kolka Cape & 8 at Slitere National Park.
Wood warbler	Widespread and relatively common in forest areas.
Chiffchaff	Relatively common on forest edges.
Willow warbler	Peak of 3 at Kemeru National Park.
Goldcrest	Relatively common in forest areas.
Spotted flycatcher	Noted at Valguma Pasaule, Slitere National Park & Kolka Cape.
Red-breasted flycatcher	Uncommon at Valguma Pasaule, Kolka Cape & Slitere National Park.
Pied flycatcher	Widespread & common in forest areas.
Bearded tit	One at Mersrags.
Long-tailed tit	4 of the northern race at Valguma Pasaule.
Willow tit	Heard at Valguma Pasaule.

Crested tit	Noted at Valguma Pasaule & 2 at Kolka Cape.
Coal tit	Only at Valguma Pasaule.
Blue tit	Widespread & common.
Great tit	Widespread & common.
Nuthatch	Widespread in forest areas.
Treecreeper	Only at Valguma Pasaule.
Golden oriole	One at Valguma Pasaule, Slītere National Park & Kolka Cape.
Red-backed shrike	Peak of 7 at Kolka Cape.
Jay	Noted in all forest areas.
Magpie	Widespread and common in certain areas.
Jackdaw	Peak of 8 at Kolka Cape.
Hooded crow	Widespread & common.
Raven	3 at Dunduri meadows.
Starling	Widespread & common.
House sparrow	Common in Riga otherwise scarce.
Chaffinch	Peak of 870 at Kolka Cape.
Greenfinch	Relatively common in villages.
Goldfinch	Two at Valguma Pasaule & Lake Engure.
Siskin	Peak of 4 at Kolka Cape.
Linnet	Small numbers at Kolka Cape.
Crossbill	Peak of 50 at Kolka Cape.
Scarlet rosefinch	Singing birds at all major sites.
Bullfinch	Noted at Valguma Pasaule & Kolka Cape.
Hawfinch	Small numbers at Valguma Pasaule & Kolka Cape.
Yellowhammer	Singing males at Dunduri meadows & Slītere National Park.
Reed bunting	Recorded at all wetland sites.

TOTAL = 151 species

MAMMALS

Hedgehog – dead on roadside	Red squirrel	Raccoon dog – dead on roadside.
Common shrew – dead	Red fox	Red deer
Brown hare	Pine marten	Roe deer

BUTTERFLIES

Black-veined White	Green Hairstreak	Peacock	Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary
Large White	Small Copper	Red Admiral	Marsh Fritillary
Small White	Purple-edged Copper	Painted Lady	Speckled Wood
Green-veined White	Small Blue	Small Tortoiseshell	Small Heath
Orange Tip	Holly Blue	Comma	Chequered Skipper
Brimstone	Amanda's Blue	Map Butterfly	Northern Chequered Skipper
Wood White	Common Blue		

DRAGONFLIES & DAMSELFLIES

Norfolk Hawker	<i>Aeshna isoceles</i>
Hairy Dragonfly	<i>Brachytron pratense</i>
Brilliant Emerald	<i>Somatochlora metallica</i>
Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>
Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>
Ruby Whiteface	<i>Leucorrhinia rubicunda</i>
Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>
Beautiful Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx virgo</i>
Variable Damselfly	<i>Coenagrion pulchellum</i>
Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>
Large Red Damselfly	<i>Pyrrosoma nymphula</i>

REPTILE & AMPHIBIANS

Common frog	Marsh frog	Common toad	Grass snake	Slowworm
-------------	------------	-------------	-------------	----------

OTHER INVERTEBRATES

Scorpion fly sp.	Red wood ant	Hornet	Rose chafer
------------------	--------------	--------	-------------

PLANTS

Trees and shrubs

Norway spruce	<i>Picea abies</i>
Scots pine	<i>Pinus sylvestris</i>
Juniper	<i>Juniperus communis</i>
Sallow	<i>Salix</i> sp
Alder	<i>Alnus glutinosus</i>
Silver birch	<i>Betula pendula</i>
Hazel	<i>Corylus avellana</i>
Pedunculate oak	<i>Quercus robur</i>
Norway maple	<i>Acer platanoides</i>
Small-leaved lime	<i>Tilia cordata</i>
Bird cherry	<i>Prunus padus</i>
Aspen	<i>Populus tremula</i>
Horse Chestnut	<i>Aesculus hippocastanum</i>
Ash	<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>
Rowan	<i>Sorbus aucuparia</i>
Spindle	<i>Euonymus europaeus</i>

Ferns, Grasses & Sedges

Adderstongue fern	<i>Ophioglossum vulgatum</i>
Male fern	<i>Dryopteris filix-mas</i>
Bracken	<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>
Common reed	<i>Phragmites australis</i>
Yorkshire Fog	<i>Holcus lanatus</i>
Cocksfoot	<i>Dactylis glomerata</i>
Sea club-rush	<i>Bolboschoenus maritimus</i>
Lesser pond sedge	<i>Carex acutiformis</i>
Pendulous sedge	<i>Carex pendula</i>
Horsetails – Equisetaceae	
Water horsetail	<i>Equisetum fluviatile</i>
Field horsetail	<i>Equisetum arvense</i>

Wild flowers

Pink family – Caryophyllaceae	
Nottingham catchfly	<i>Silene nutans</i>
Greater stitchwort	<i>Stellaria holostea</i>
Wood stitchwort	<i>Stellaria nemorum</i>
Buttercup family – Ranunculaceae	
Meadow buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>
Marsh marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>
Globeflower	<i>Trollius europaeus</i>
Wood anemone	<i>Anemone nemorosa</i>
Eastern pasque flower	<i>Pulsatilla patens</i>
Baneberry	<i>Actaea spicata</i>
Hepatica	<i>Hepatica nobilis</i>
Greater celandine	<i>Chelidonium majus</i>
Common meadow-rue	<i>Thalictrum flavum</i>
Hemp family – Cannabaceae	
Wild hop	<i>Humulus lupulus</i>
Nettle family – Urticaceae	
Common nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>
Goosefoot family – Chenopodiaceae	
Common orache	<i>Atriplex patula</i>
Spear-leaved orache	<i>Atriplex prostrata</i>
Cabbage family – Cruciferae	
Early (or intermediate) wintercress	<i>Sisymbrium supinum</i>
Lady's smock (cuckoo flower)	<i>Barbarea intermedia</i>
Swedish cress (Swedish thale-cress)	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>
Shepherd's purse	<i>Arabidopsis suecica</i>
	<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>
Heath family – Ericaceae	
Ling	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>
Cowberry	<i>Vaccinium vitis-idaea</i>
Saxifrages – Saxifragaceae	
Meadow saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga granulata</i>

Rose family – Rosaceae

Bramble
Raspberry
Meadowsweet
Silverweed
Tormentil
Trailing tormentil
Wild strawberry
Water avens
Wood avens
Bird cherry
Hawthorn

Pea family – Leguminosae/Fabaceae

Spring vetch
Bush vetch
Birdsfoot trefoil
Black medick
Red clover
White clover

Wood-sorrel family – Oxalidaceae

Wood-sorrel

Spurge family – Euphorbiaceae

Dog's mercury

Milkwort family – Polygalaceae

Common milkwort

Geranium family – Geraniaceae

Wood cranesbill
Little Robin

Dock family – Polygonaceae

Common sorrel
Redshank

St.John's Wort family – Clusiaceae

Perforate St.John's wort

Violet family – Violaceae

Common dog violet
Wood dog violet
Marsh violet
Field pansy
Wild pansy

Carrot family – Apiaceae /Umbelliferae

Cow parsley
Ground elder
Pignut

Heath family – Ericaceae

Bilberry

Primrose family – Primulaceae

Cowslip
Birdseye primrose
Chickweed wintergreen

Bogbean family – Menyanthaceae

Bogbean
Fringed water-lily

Borage family – Boraginaceae

Early forget-me-not
Purple gromwell

Labiata family – Lamiaceae/Labiataeae

White dead-nettle
Yellow archangel
Ground ivy
Bugle
Water mint

Figwort family – Scrophulariaceae

Germander speedwell
Wood speedwell
Thyme-leaved speedwell

Rubus fruticosus
Rubus idaeus
Filipendula ulmaria
Potentilla anserina
Potentilla erecta
Potentilla anglica
Fragaria vesca
Geum rivale
Geum urbanum
Prunus padus (also in tree list)
Crataegus monogyna

Vicia lathyroides
Vicia sepium
Lotus corniculatus
Medicago lupulina
Trifolium pratense
Trifolium repens

Oxalis acetosella

Mercurialis perennis

Polygala vulgaris

Geranium sylvaticum
Geranium purpureum

Rumex acetosa
Persicaria maculosa

Hypericum perforatum

Viola riviniana
Viola reichenbachiana
Viola palustris
Viola arvensis
Viola tricolor

Anthriscus sylvestris
Aegopodium podagraria
Conopodium majus

Vaccinium myrtillus

Primula veris
Primula farinosa
Trientalis europaea

Menyanthes trifoliata
Nymphoides peltatus

Myosotis ramosissima
Lithospermum purpureocaeruleum

Lamium alba
Lamiastrum galeobdolon
Glechoma hederacea
Ajuga reptans
Mentha aquatica

Veronica chamaedrys
Veronica montana
Veronica serpyllifolia

Field speedwell

Brooklime

Plantain family – Plantaginaceae

Ribwort plantain

Greater plantain

Bedstraw family – Rubiaceae

Cleavers

Hedge bedstraw

Woodruff

Honeysuckle family – Caprifoliaceae

Fly honeysuckle

Guelder rose

Daisy family – Compositae

Daisy

Yarrow

Sea wormwood

Hemp agrimony

Dandelion

Lily family – Liliaceae

Lily of the valley

May lily

Star of Bethlehem

Solomon's seal

Herb paris

Ramsons

Iris family – Iridaceae

Yellow flag

Orchid family – Orchidaceae

Early purple orchid

Frogbit family – Hydrocharitaceae

Frogbit

Bulrush family – Typhaceae

Common reedmace

Veronica persica

Veronica beccabunga

Plantago lanceolata

Plantago major

Galium aparine

Galium mollugo

Galium odoratum

Lonicera xylosteum

Viburnum opulus

Bellis perennis

Achillea millefolium

Artemisia maritima

Eupatorium cannabinum

Taraxacum sect. vulgare

Convallaria majalis

Maianthemum bifolium

Ornithogalum angustifolium

Polygonatum multiflorum

Paris quadrifolia

Allium ursinum

Iris pseudacorus

Orchis mascula

Hydrocharis morsus-ranae

Typha latifolia