



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Latvia recce
20th – 24th May 2013

These are some notes from a recce visit to Latvia which was arranged by Baltic Wildlife www.balticwildlife.eu. Rob Macklin and I were accompanied around potential areas that a Honeyguide group could visit by Karlis Millers, birdwatching guide and ornithologist working with Baltic Wildlife. Karlis runs the Latvia Birds website www.latvijaspusti.lv.

Photos in this report were all taken on the recce. Bird photos, except yellow wagtails and blackthroated diver, by Karlis Millers. Cover photos, all by Karlis, clockwise from top left: red-backed shrike, honey buzzard, crane, capercaillie. Other photos by Chris Durdin.

Chris Durdin, June 2013

Monday 20th May

We arrived late in Riga on a warm and close night. We were met by Karlis, our guide from Baltic Wildlife, and very briefly his colleague Martins. It was about an hour's drive to the Valguma Pasaule hotel, during which a pine marten ran across the road. Then to bed.

Tuesday 21st May – Kemeru National Park

What were those strange bird songs we could hear in the trees outside the hotel? Rob and I, comparing notes over breakfast, had both looked and found icterine warbler and pied flycatcher in the oaks and pines between the hotel and the lake. The roof of the breakfast room is astroturf and was at just the right height to look into the trees at woodland birds.

After such a cold spring all over Europe, or so it seemed, it was surprising to be so far north – about the same latitude as Aberdeen – and for it be so very warm. For about an hour and a half we took a walk, a circuit marked out with oblong wooden picture frames – nature pictures is the concept – finding or hearing wood warblers, goldcrest, red squirrel and willow tit. The woodland flora was excellent: wood anemone, wood sorrel, hepatica and herb Paris leaves, lily-of-the-valley, fly honeysuckle, bilberry and yellow anemone.



Open meadows with whooper swans
in Kemeru National Park.



River warbler.

We packed up and headed into Kemeru National Park. White stork nests, swallows, marsh harriers and lapwings were frequent and whinchats and red-backed shrikes easy to find, too. There were several whooper swans in a meadow. A small patch of sallow had a very close singing river warbler – so close that the barred undertail coverts were easy to see. In Dunduri meadows, an extensive open area, we stopped for lunch by an observation tower. From here we could see the Konik ponies and Heck cattle that graze the meadows. A crane flew past, then more, and there was a flock of about 20 in the distance. A lesser spotted eagle appeared over the wood beyond the meadow. A swallow had such long tail streamers that it reminded us of African widow birds. There was much to see: a damp ditch held a singing marsh warbler; an adult white-tailed eagle soared in the distance; two black storks flew over. White butterflies were everywhere, plus a map (quite a small sized individual), painted lady, brimstone and orange-tip. Of the numerous dragonflies, only four-spotted chaser stayed still enough to be identified but there was also white-faced darter *Leucorrhinia* sp. and probably more.

Our third main stop was in an area of very wet woodland. This started by some derelict tower blocks: an incomplete building project from the Soviet era, we learnt, which are now home to an eagle owl. The flooded wood – where I was glad to have brought mosquito repellent – is a great draw for woodpeckers. Karlis heard three-toed woodpecker (I missed that) and we were lucky enough to find white-backed woodpecker and have an excellent view of a lesser spotted. There were more pied flycatchers and a mystery sound was pinned down as a redwing. Interesting plants included bitter vetchling, chickweed wintergreen and water avens.



Wet woodland, favoured by a range of woodpecker species.

Chickweed wintergreen *Trientalis europaea* is found here, a flower in the primrose family and very much a northern species, as its alternative name of Arctic starflower suggests.

The nature trail and birdwatching tower at Lake Kanieris was our final stop. Solomon's seal was in the short woodland walk and birdseye primroses were a delight on the edge of the marsh. The tower looks over huge reedbed that seems to extend almost out of sight in every direction. Karlis is studying cormorants, and there were hundreds moving to and fro and settling in the huge colony in the distant trees. An osprey came low overhead before we climbed the tower. From here, there were distant white-winged black terns, closer common terns and several great white egrets. Just below were both Savi's and great reed warbler, and a bearded tit.

Then it rained, and rained, and rained some more, all the way to our second hotel in Roja.



←
View over the
path towards the
tower hide at
Lake Kanieris.

→
Savi's warbler in
reeds,
photographed
from the tower.



Wednesday 22nd May - Kolka

I took a quick pre-breakfast walk to the beach, where there was a serin on a building, a few yellow wagtails, shelduck and couple of long-tailed ducks at sea. Lesser whitethroats and a migrant marsh warbler were outside the hotel as we set off north towards the northern tip at Kolka, first of all turning off the main road onto an untarmaced road. In some high forest on a slope, mixed spruce, pine and birch, Karlis explained that this was a known area for greenish warblers, with the slight doubt about whether this rather late migrant had yet arrived. But all was well: there were about four singing males, sometimes quite prominent on high perches. It's an indistinct looking warbler with an unremarkable, slightly descending song, a little like a chaffinch.

It was then a short run into the Kolka National Park. We stopped in a meadow slightly before the cape, here on the north-western tip of Latvia. It's a migration hotspot and we'd timed it well. There were immediately red-backed shrikes on a short strip of hedge: at one point I counted seven shrikes in view in once. Honey buzzards started to move overhead, light, medium and dark individuals, in a



Greenish warbler, and two short-eared owls.
Same sky, two different places today!

trickle that lasted all morning: 40 was our estimate. Several sparrowhawks were also moving, again coming from the east over the Gulf of Riga and moving along the coast inland. An immature white-tailed eagle twice flew over; two short-eared owls appeared from nowhere. A singing warbler from a hedge, always out of sight, sounded like sedge and reed warbler: a marsh warbler, well-known for its mimicry. As we wandered across to try to see it, a grasshopper warbler appeared incredibly close. It was silent then, but reeled several times a little later. Whinchat, swifts and swallows added to the picture, plus a constant stream of dragonflies on the move, so far as we could tell all four-spot chasers, probably numbering in their thousands all told.

Rob and I left Karlis to watch for migrants and we walked to the beach. Scots pines had fallen onto the sand in a heavy storm in January 2005 and had sensibly been left where they fell: they help to protect the dunes. Among the pines was a group of five common sandpipers. A common lizard took advantage of the warmth of a charred, blackened log. At sea were dozens of long-tailed ducks, some close to enough to shore for good views, as was a summer plumage black-throated diver. At the tip of the peninsula we noticed the lighthouse offshore, on an artificial island constructed five kilometres from the land. Turning inland, we passed colourful patches of wild pansy *Viola tricolor*. A trickier flower was a white crucifer, quite common here and on sandy roadsides in the Kolka area: later study showed it to be Swedish cress (or Swedish thale-cress) *Arabidopsis suecica*. At the small national park information centre we picked up a map and bought ice creams, then walked along the road to complete the circuit back to where Karlis was watching a mixed group of warblers in some scrub.



Kolka point and shoreline. Top: fallen pines on the shore at Kolka cape; Swedish cress; common lizard. Bottom: wild pansies, most were less yellow than these; black-throated diver; signpost by the small National Park centre.

We then drove a couple of kilometres south, still in Kolka, to visit the Hotel Zitari, recently in new hands and not available when Laura from Baltic Wildlife was arranging accommodation for this recce trip. A quick look at rooms was arranged impromptu, and they seemed fine, which is helpful as the hotel is ideally placed for the Kolka Cape area. We bought some lunch in the small supermarket next door to the hotel, returning to the benches near the National Park information building to eat it.

Heading west, our next main stop, beyond the National Park, was the former Soviet radio-telescope north of Ventspils. This imposing structure – the full name is Ventspils International Radio Astronomy Centre or VIRAC¹ – was a key listening station for the former Soviet Union in the cold war era. It meant here and the Kolka area was out of bounds to civilians in those days. Now, with Latvia in NATO, it's used to monitor quasars and keep track of orbiting satellites. It's in an area cleared of trees, which gives a nice open aspect in this otherwise heavily wooded area.



Ventspils International Radio Astronomy Centre, view from up top and Soviet era control panel.

By happy coincidence, we turned up on one of the minority of days when neither of its designated tasks was underway. Karlis got talking to the engineer in charge – on his own on a non-business day, it seemed – and it turned out that not only did he speak very good English but he was very happy to give us a tour. And what a privilege it was. We started in the Soviet control room, where the control desk was still just in place, linked to some rather old-looking computers, before it all goes into a museum next year. The departing soldiers had cut wires but not wrecked the place before leaving, meaning it was all repairable, albeit complicated, and had taken some five years. Going up, we could see that the stairs and passages had been designed by ship engineers. Finally, we made it into the satellite-dish itself, where no photos were allowed. We'd already heard black redstart and seen a spotted flycatcher that appeared to be nesting in the structure. Agris, the engineer, told us that swallows nest every year in the movable dish. Not only does this mean that the nest's location moves around, it also tips up by up to 90 degrees. He said that the eggs don't fall out, young always fledge successfully and they keep returning. As we descended, a wryneck started to call and we were able to look down on it, perched atop a light.



Wryneck, seen from above; a roadside marsh that had a feeding crane.

¹ Information on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ventspils_Starptautiskais_Radioastronomijas_Centrs

On the return journey, we made brief stop where bogbean was throwing up pink flower spikes in a small lake where the water level had been boosted by a small beaver dam. Green sandpipers flew over, no doubt nesting in the area. In another small wetland adjacent to the road, a crane fed among the bogbean. We came back along the 'greenish warbler alley' road, along which we paused for another close crane, over which a black woodpecker flew.

Thursday 23rd May – Kolka, and towards Liepaja

Rob noted tree sparrow and garden warbler outside the Hotel Roja before we left, and we looked again at the herring gulls nesting on the rooftop of the house across the road, but they were modest successes compared with the surprise as we headed north back towards Kolka. A female capercaillie was sitting on a small patch of sand at the base of a telegraph pole, sunning herself, presumably. We had superb views, using the car as a hide, with her bold red eyebrow a striking feature. It was close enough for photos using my pocket camera, and Karlis took many close-ups with his long lens (see cover) before she walked slowly into the forest.

At Kolka, migration was again in full swing. A group of some 70 yellow wagtails moved around us, some of them settling in birch trees, many on the short grass over the fence, before they were spooked – perhaps by one of the many migrating sparrowhawks – and they'd be on the move again. We counted more than 100 honey buzzards altogether; twice an osprey flew in the opposite direction to the main raptor stream; hawfinch and golden oriole flew over at the same time; five hawfinches in a group; siskin flocks – these are highlights that come to mind, augmented by glorious sunshine and perfect light. Yesterday's red-backed shrikes were down to just a couple and there was only a trickle of dragonflies compared with the day before. This was all in and around a meadow set in a pretty area, with scattered properties and blossoming fruit trees everywhere.



A scene at Kolka.



Yellow wagtails in a birch tree.

After coffee, ice cream and loo at the information centre, we drove west. A racoon dog crossed the road – a Russian species now established in the area. We had a brief look at the Slitere lighthouse tower, though didn't enter it, which is possible. It's on a high point well inland, so was once a valuable landmark, though the offshore lighthouse at Kolka now takes care of marine safety. Around were more open habitats and broad-leaved woodland with English oak and small-leaved lime. Very briefly it hailed and we scurried back to the car. Another stroke of luck as we drove through forest away from here: a female black grouse ('greyhen') walked across the road and disappeared out of sight into the trees. Then some rain, but it didn't last.

The rest of this day was in the western part of the peninsula visiting various places that won't form part of a Honeyguide itinerary, mostly as the distances covered were impractical with a group – ruling out possibilities being as much part of a recce as ruling in. In a vast arable area, reminiscent of Cambridgeshire, though with many breeding lapwings and skylarks, Karlis located a field where in two previous seasons he'd seen passage dotterel. Amazingly, there were two there, a bright female and a less brightly coloured male. Karlis fancied getting a photo, but there was a ditch between the road and the dotterels. I recalled seeing some thigh waders in the car's boot, and jokingly suggested they may be the solution. Moments later, he was wading and leaping, then approaching the dotterel with the sun behind him, armed with camera and long lens.



Across a ditch in waders to photograph a dotterel.

Next were some fishponds, artificial lakes with reedbed and wet scrub. They were excellent (but just in the wrong place for a practical itinerary), with red-necked grebe, black tern, a great view of white-tailed eagle and penduline tit. There was also a whooper swan on a nest and a flock of non-breeding birds on a field. Near Liepaja, in a rather average looking bit of farmland with the occasional earth bank, we searched for bee-eaters, finding two. In Liepaja itself, there were crested larks in urban/industrial areas, but no sign of tawny pipits as we struggled to look over a wall by oil storage tanks. And then to a very nice hotel in Liepaja.

Friday 24th May – Liepaja to Riga

Rain at breakfast time, but it soon cleared and became another warm and sunny day. We visited two marshes this morning near Liepaja, both of which had citrine wagtails. The car needed a piece of plastic re-fixed to the underside, which took a friend of Karlis's moments to do. It was already 1:30 and time to head to Riga, which took three hours, including a short break, a little slowed by going-home-time traffic in Latvia's capital city.

This gave us two hours to walk around the city streets and central park in the early evening sunshine, admiring the many beautiful buildings, but not quite enough time to visit the Museum of the (Soviet) Occupation. It was warm enough to enjoy an outdoor meal in an Italian restaurant in one of the squares, where Laura from Baltic Wildlife joined us. Then the short hop to the airport for the evening flight home, which was an hour late leaving, and back to Stansted in the early hours of Saturday.



Riga scenes, including a confiding hooded crow in the park.

The following lists summarise some of the species noted on the recce.

COMMON TREES AND SHRUBS

(noted only from the potential Honeyguide holiday area in the east)
Scots pine...Norway spruce...Silver birch...Norway maple...Juniper...Hazel

COMMON WILD FLOWERS

(also see highlights place by place)
Lady's smock – in any damp meadow. Marsh marigold – in all wet areas.
Cowslip – in all dry areas. Early (or intermediate) wintercress – in disturbed ground.
Dandelion – often dominant in grassland.

MAMMALS

Brown hare (in the arable western part of the peninsula)
Roe deer
Pine marten
Raccoon dog
Fox (in the west)

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Marsh frog (heard) Common lizard
Common frog

DRAGONFLIES AND DAMSELFLIES

Four-spot chaser White-faced darter sp.
Hairy dragonfly Azure damselfly

BUTTERFLIES

Large white
Green-veined white
Orange-tip
Brimstone
Speckled wood
Painted lady
Red admiral

COMPLETE BIRD LIST

Black-throated diver	Great crested grebe	Black-necked grebe	Red-necked grebe
Cormorant	Bittern	Great white egret	Grey heron
White stork	Black stork	Mute swan	Whooper swan
White-fronted goose	Greylag goose	Shelduck	Mallard
Gadwall	Pintail	Shoveler	Teal
Garganey	Pochard	Tufted duck	Long-tailed duck
Goldeneye	White-tailed eagle	Osprey	Lesser spotted eagle
Marsh harrier	Honey buzzard	Rough-legged buzzard	Common buzzard
Sparrowhawk	Kestrel	Hobby	Capercaillie
Black grouse	Corncrake	Coot	Crane
Dotterel	Golden plover	Lapwing	Snipe
Black-tailed godwit	Green sandpiper	Common sandpiper	Redshank
Greenshank	Marsh sandpiper	Red-necked phalarope	Black-headed gull
Common gull	Lesser black-backed gull	Herring gull	Great black-backed gull
Common tern	Black tern	White-winged black tern	Woodpigeon
Cuckoo	Tawny owl	Short-eared owl	Swift
Bee-eater	Black woodpecker	Great spotted woodpecker	White-backed woodpecker
Lesser spotted woodpecker	Wryneck	Skylark	Crested lark
Woodlark	Swallow	House martin	Meadow pipit
Tree pipit	White wagtail	Yellow wagtail	Citrine wagtail
Wren	Dunnock	Robin	Thrush nightingale
Common redstart	Black redstart	Wheatear	Whinchat
Song thrush	Redwing	Mistle thrush	Blackbird
Garden warbler	Blackcap	Lesser whitethroat	Common whitethroat
Sedge warbler	Grasshopper warbler	River warbler	Savi's warbler
Reed warbler	Marsh warbler	Great reed warbler	Icterine warbler
Willow warbler	Wood warbler	Chiffchaff	Greenish warbler
Goldcrest	Spotted flycatcher	Pied flycatcher	Red-breasted flycatcher
Yellow wagtail	Citrine wagtail	Wren	Dunnock
Robin	Thrush nightingale	Common redstart	Black redstart
Wheatear	Whinchat	Song thrush	Redwing
Mistle thrush	Blackbird	Garden warbler	Blackcap
Lesser whitethroat	Common whitethroat	Sedge warbler	Grasshopper warbler
River warbler	Savi's warbler	Reed warbler	Marsh warbler
Great reed warbler	Icterine warbler	Willow warbler	Wood warbler
Chiffchaff	Greenish warbler	Goldcrest	Spotted flycatcher
Pied flycatcher	Red-breasted flycatcher	TOTAL = 143 SPECIES	

SITE BY SITE HIGHLIGHTS

TUESDAY MAY 21st

Hotel Valguma Pascaule and Grounds

Bird highlights:

In song Lesser spotted woodpecker, tree pipit, wood warbler, red-breasted and pied flycatchers, willow tit, golden oriole.

Seen Common sandpiper, common tern, crested tit.

Also Great spotted woodpecker, cuckoo, swift, swallow, blackcap, coal tit, goldcrest, siskin.

Mammals Red squirrel.

On the way to Kemer National Park

Bird highlights 10 white storks, 6 whooper swans, 2 lesser spotted eagles, 5 marsh harriers and a common crane.

Also Sparrowhawk, lapwing, red-backed shrike, hooded crow.

Kemer National Park

Bird highlights Great white egret, 3 black storks, white-tailed eagle, lesser spotted eagle, 2 corncrakes, 30 common cranes, 2 river warblers, several great reed and marsh warblers, 6 ravens, scarlet rosefinch.

Also Marsh harrier, snipe, green sandpiper, sedge warbler, red-backed shrike, golden oriole, reed bunting.

Butterflies Green-veined white, orange tip, brimstone, map, small tortoiseshell, painted lady and speckled wood.

Dragonflies Four-spotted chaser and white-faced darter.

Kemer Administration Centre

Bird highlights White-backed woodpecker, lesser spotted woodpecker, redwing (singing male) and pied flycatcher.

Also Snipe and mistle thrush.

Lake Kanieris

Bird highlights Red-necked grebe, black-necked grebe, 3 great white egrets, osprey, 3 white-winged black terns, Savi's warbler and male bearded tit.

Also Great crested grebe, mute swan, greylag goose, tufted duck, pochard, marsh harrier, coot, great reed warbler.

WEDNESDAY MAY 22nd

Viesnica Hotel, Roja

Bird highlights Singing marsh warbler and 2 lesser whitethroats.

Vidale Area

Bird highlights 2 lesser spotted eagles, 3 honey buzzards, 3 greenish warblers in song and scarlet rosefinch in song.

Also Tree pipit, wood warbler, pied flycatcher, treecreeper and siskin.

Kolka Migration Watchpoint

Bird highlights 3 white storks, white-tailed eagle, osprey, 7 honey buzzards, 12 sparrowhawks, hobby, 2 short-eared owls, 3 cranes, 2 wheatears, redstart, grasshopper warbler, marsh warbler, 4 icterine warblers, golden oriole and 7 red-backed shrikes.

Also Kestrel, thousands of swifts, scores of house martins, yellow wagtail (*thunbergi*), whinchat, bullfinch.

Dragonflies Thousands of four-spotted chasers moving through.

Kolka Cape and Beach Area

Bird highlights 2 black-throated divers in summer plumage, 45 long-tailed ducks, shelduck and 5 common sandpipers.

Also Great black-backed gull and common gull.

Plants Sea wormwood, wild pansy and *Sisymbrium supinum*

Sliteres National Park

Bird highlights Rough-legged buzzard (2nd calendar year), 10 common cranes, 2 black woodpeckers, 2 woodlarks.

Mammals Raccoon dog and roe deer.

Ventspils International Radio Astronomy Centre

Bird highlights 2 lesser spotted eagles, 2 honey buzzards, black woodpecker, wryneck, black redstart.

Plants: Rue-leaved saxifrage and yarrow.

THURSDAY MAY 23rd

Viesnica Hotel, Roja

Bird highlights Lesser whitethroat, garden warbler, tree sparrow and serin.

Purciema Viga

Bird highlights 3 honey buzzards, capercaillie female, crane, Savi's warbler, red-backed shrike.

Kolka Cape

Bird highlights 114 honey buzzards, 2 marsh harriers, 24 sparrowhawks, 5 lesser spotted eagles, 2 ospreys, 2 kestrels, hobby, 6 cranes, lesser black-backed gull, woodlark (singing male), 60 yellow wagtails (of the race *thunbergi*), redstart, icterine warbler (singing male), 2 golden orioles, 5 siskins, scarlet rosefinch, 14 hawfinches, bullfinch.

Sliteres Baka

Bird highlights Female black grouse.

Mammals: Raccoon dog

FRIDAY MAY 24th

Liepaja Lakes and Meadows

Bird highlights 2 white-fronted geese, 100 greylag geese, 4 gadwall, 3 garganey, 2 shoveler, white-tailed eagle, 2 cranes, golden plover, 2 black-tailed godwits, 25 redshank, marsh sandpiper, 2 greenshank, red-necked phalarope, 1000 black-headed gulls, 5 black terns, 4 citrine wagtails, 3 thrush nightingales, penduline tit, scarlet rosefinch.

Also Marsh harrier, buzzard, snipe, cuckoo, marsh warbler, garden warbler, grasshopper warbler, willow warbler, raven, reed bunting.

Plants Birdseye primrose, cuckoo flower, tormentil, celery-leaved buttercup, hairy buttercup and meadow saxifrage.

Liepaja to Riga

Bird highlights 3 whooper swans including one on the nest, red-necked grebe and marsh harrier.

APPENDIX

Some highlights in the western area towards Liepaja in places that aren't practical to feature in a Honeyguide itinerary.

Towards Liepaja – various sites

Bird highlights:

1. 2 cranes, 2 dotterels, wryneck and ortolan bunting (singing male).
2. 2 red-necked grebes, bittern (booming), grey heron, 110 whooper swans plus one on the nest, male goldeneye, white-tailed eagle, marsh harrier, 2 lesser spotted eagles, osprey, common crane, 2 black terns, white-backed woodpecker (drumming), Savi's Warbler (singing male), 2 penduline tits including adult at nest, golden oriole.

Also Cuckoo, reed warbler, great reed warbler, whitethroat, garden warbler and chiffchaff.

3. 2 bee-eaters and 2 red-backed shrikes.

Also Cuckoo, reed warbler, great reed warbler, whitethroat, garden warbler and chiffchaff.

Dragonflies Hairy dragonfly, four-spotted chaser and azure damselfly.

Mammals Fox, 2 roe deer.

Liepaja City

3 crested larks, yellow wagtail (*thunbergi*), 2 wheatears and 2 tree sparrows.