HEATHERLEA TRIP REPORT

BELARUS

SATURDAY 5 – SATURDAY 12 MAY 2018





Heatherlea Guide: Gerard Gorman

This was the first Heatherlea tour to Belarus, a fascinating, bird-rich country, and it was a tremendous success. We were assisted by excellent local birding guides and reserve rangers, and visited some wonderful wetland and wooded habitats, seeing a rich range of "eastern" bird species, mammals including the iconic European Bison, and a surprisingly rich selection of butterflies and interesting amphibians. On our travels between sites we also came upon fascinating architecture such as ornate orthodox churches and even the odd statue of Lenin (Belarus is one of the few countries where he still stands). We were served mainly local dishes, including *borscht*, a beetroot soup that is a specialty in Belarus (regarded by any as the national dish), and some of us tried the surprisingly smooth local vodkas!

Saturday 5 May

We met at Minsk Airport and after meeting our local guide Denis and driver Oleg, both of whom turned out to be invaluable and patient members of our team, we drove southwards to Turov - a small town which was to be our first base. As we went it was apparent that the countryside of Belarus was very different to that of the UK. There are some huge crop fields, but much of the land is still worked at a slow-pace with lots of edge habitats and hence birds. Half way through our journey we stopped for tea and pancakes and a "comfort break". As we went on, we saw both Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, "eastern" Jackdaws with their grey necks and heads, Crested Larks, Yellow Wagtails, Fieldfares, and White Storks in fields and on huge nests. Later, in roadside flooded fields there were many Ruff in a range of breeding plumage colours, as well as Wood Sandpipers and Black-tailed Godwits and Great Egrets. We checked into our first hotel, right by the bird-filled wet meadows and meandering river, had dinner, and outlined the plans for the next day.

Sunday 6 May

Today we explored the area in and around Turov and the Prypyatski National Park. This is one of the most important bird areas in Belarus, with vast wet meadows and a mosaic of oxbows, fens, pastures and forests in the floodplain of the River Prypiat (Pripet). An optional pre-breakfast trip along the river a few miles from our hotel was very productive, with various warblers, Golden Orioles, Red-backed Shrike, a Thrush Nightingale in full view, Wryneck and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker all seen well. A distant White-tailed Eagle was spotted, too. After breakfast back at the hotel, flooded areas near town soon produced all three 'marsh' terns - Whiskered, Black and White-winged Black Terns - as well as Little and Common Terns. There were many lekking Ruff, Wood Sandpipers, Spotted Redshank, Temminck's Stint and Terek Sandpiper – it was a shorebird paradise. Ducks included some smart drake Garganeys. Away from the water we saw a Syrian Woodpecker, several Serins and a Honey Buzzard flew over, too. We returned to the hotel for a fine local lunch and went out again for the afternoon. There were more Golden Orioles, waders and terns galore and we had good views of

a Cuckoo. A woodland walk at the end of the day was not too productive as the mosquitoes came out in force, so we hurried on. After dinner we ran through our checklist and announced our plans for the next day.

Monday 7 May

On an early pre-breakfast trip to an old forest in the Prypyatski National Park we found Pied, Collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers, Crested Tit and Common Redstart, several singing Wood Warblers, had superb views of a Grey-headed Woodpecker perched on a bare snag, and heard the very powerful drumming of a Black Woodpecker, but it would not show (we'd catch up with more obliging others later). After breakfast we went to a riverside dyke and saw a pair of Azure Tits, and a close Penduline Tit. Next up was a quiet area of wet meadows with adjacent woodland, where as soon as we got off the bus a Lesser Spotted Eagle was spotted, and then soon after a Greater Spotted Eagle - our main target here. It was good to be able to compare these similar raptors and hear about their conservation from Denis. It had been a great morning, and we returned to the hotel for lunch (we were being really well fed!). In the afternoon we birded an arguably less attractive area - the local water treatment plant. But the birds here were excellent, with a pair of Citrine Wagtails that showed as soon as we arrived being the highlight. The supporting cast included lots of Black-winged Stilts, Avocets, Black-necked Grebes in breeding plumage, Common Pochards, a lone Greater Whitefronted Goose and common Cranes feeding in nearby fields. Our final stop today was the riverside meadows near Turov where we saw, once again, many waders including even more Ruff lekking and the now familiar range of terns. It had been a bird-filled day, with visits to diverse habitats.

Tuesday 8 May

After a 7am breakfast, we left Turov and headed for the Belae fishponds, another famed birding Belarussian site. Highlights here were two drake Smew (this is a very southerly breeding population), Goldeneye, Caspian Gulls, Whooper Swans (also quite far south), a singing Savi's Warbler, Bearded Tit, our first Black Stork and several White-tailed Eagles. After a "comfort stop" and coffee, we pushed on north-westwards to the Vyhanaščanski forest reserve. Today, for a change, we had a picnic lunch and then met the very entertaining head of the local conservation office. This gentleman had arranged for his rangers to take us deep into the protected forest to see Great Grey Owl – a main target for just about every birder who visits Belarus. After a ride in smaller vehicles on forest tracks and then a twenty-minute walk, we were shown one of these magnificent owls sitting on a twig nest – probably that of a buzzard. The bird was comfortable with our presence and merely peered down at us as we ignored the mosquitos and got photos. Once again, this is one of the most southerly breeding populations of a bird species in Europe. On the way back to our vehicles some of us paused to examine the tracks of Red Deer, Elk and Wolf – testimony to how wild and wildlife rich the area is.

Then on we went and after a fine spread of snacks and drinks - our local team were pulling out all the stops - we walked out into a marsh before dusk. We soon began to hear the strange calls and mechanical noises of Great Snipe at a secluded lek, and then saw several birds displaying in the twilight. It had been a long, but successful day, and after a late dinner we retired to our very comfortable rooms in Belaazersk.

Wednesday 9 May

This morning we met another local expert birder and drove around the Selec fishponds. There were about a dozen White-tailed Eagles here, flying and on the ground in a drained basin, and several Black Storks which flew over us. There were also lots of the by now usual gulls, terns and waders here. Later we stopped at the Sporaŭski Reserve, which lies near the River Yaselda. Our main target was the globally threatened Aquatic Warbler (the marshes of Belarus host about half of the known world breeding population), and after we had heard a few, we finally saw a male perched upon vegetation and even doing his display flight. A Hobby was also seen here. Later, we moved on to our final base in the forests of Bielaviežškaja Pušča. On an easy walk by a flooded part of the forest with many tree snags we soon added a new woodpecker, a pair of White-backed, to our growing list. On the nonbirding front, we also saw several magnificent Camberwell Beauties today. Later we had dinner in a very pleasant restaurant right by the forest.

Thursday 10 May

Our final two days were in and around the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Bielaviežškaja Pušča and were memorable. The Belarusian part of the forest is larger and wilder that that in adjacent Poland, called Bialowieza. Today we set off early to look for a very rare mammal – European Bison. First up though, was a singing River Warbler which showed remarkably well. We drove around, and patches of mist hindered our search, but just when we thought we were not going to see any bison, a herd was spotted at the edge of a meadow. However, the animals were wary and soon moved off out of sight into the thick forest. After breakfast we birded various parts of the park. Today turned out to be particularly excellent woodpecker-wise with Black, White-backed, Great Spotted and Three-toed all being seen in the atmospheric, old, fungi-filled mixed forests. We also saw Collared and Redbreasted Flycatchers, Crested Tit, Common Treecreeper and Firecrest. On another forest walk we heard Hazel Grouse call, but they would not reveal themselves. As we moved on a Racoon Dog even walked out onto the road and stopped briefly to look at us before running into the forest. At our final stop just before a rain storm arrived, a Nutcracker perched at the top of a spruce, and back at the hotel a Black Redstart was new for the trip. We finished our day with another filling Belarussian dinner.

Friday 11 May

Our final full day was yet another fabulous one. The forests, meadows, pastures and quiet settlements of Bielaviežškaja Pušča were wonderful to be in. We explored by bus and on walks into various habitats seeing, amongst others, Montagu's Harrier and Lesser Spotted Eagle. In a remote cottage we were introduced to a remarkable old lady who lived alone, tending her garden and animals. Barred and Icterine Warblers were singing here. Later, as we scanned a vast marsh from a watch-tower, there was a surprise as a male Red-footed Falcon appeared above us hawking for insects – a very rare bird here. A female Goldeneye in an old hole from a Black Woodpecker was another highlight, and we saw more actual Black Woodpeckers. Hoopoes were spotted in the hotel grounds, too. Later, we were taken to a farmstead in a hamlet which functioned as an "eco-centre". Upon arrival a Common Rosefinch was spotted perched on a roadside wire. The farm was run by a young couple, one of whom, Serge, showed us around and showed us the Wrynecks nesting in his barn. As we had not had great views of the Bison, we decided to search again. Thanks to the local knowledge of our park guide, in the late afternoon we had excellent views of three groups of these huge animals and this time without early morning mist! It was a great end to the day.

Saturday 12 May

We left early for Minsk Airport, stopping on the way to have breakfast. On the way we saw roadside birds and an Elk which nearly crossed the road but thought better of it and headed back into the forest. We arrived safe and sound at the airport where check-in for our flights home went smoothly and quickly. I would like to thank everyone for contributing to the tour!



GROUP HIGHLIGHTS

Diane: The Great Grey Owl, the Bison and the overall countryside.

David N: The Great Grey Owl and the Bison, but not the mosquitos!

Maurice: The Great Grey Owl, bison and the eco-farm we visited.

Pat: The Great Grey Owl and the eco-farm, and the hedgehog.

Roni: The Hoopoes, Marsh Frog and the eco-farm.

David C: Favourites were the Citrine Wagtail, Camberwell Beauty and the extent of the swamps and marshes.

Chris: The Great Grey Owl, the Bison and the old lady who lived alone out in the wilds.

Sue: The Great Grey Owl and bison, and the morning mist over the forest lakes was a memorable sight.

Janice: The Great Grey Owl and the bison, and the blue fencing in many villages.

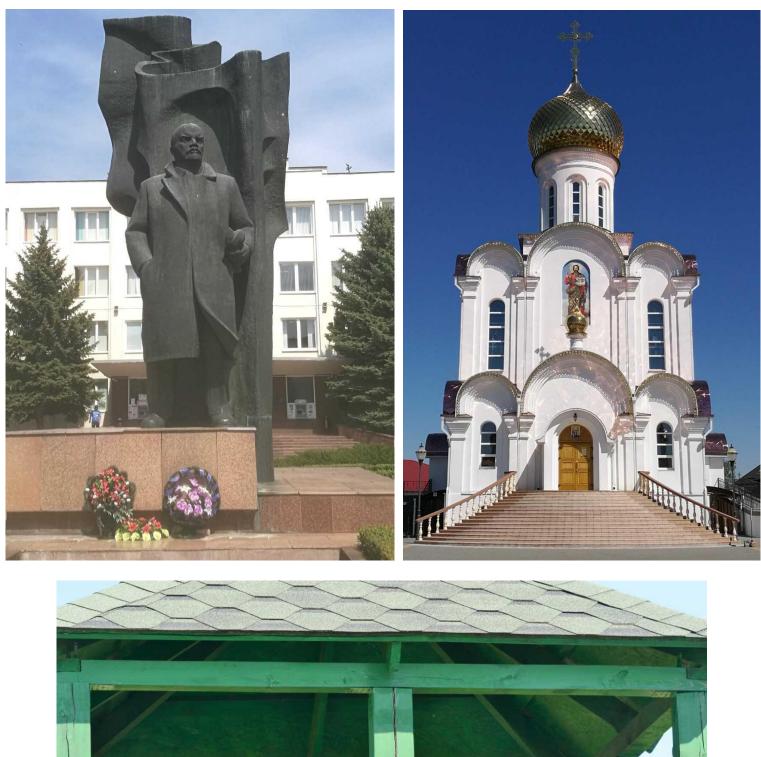
Robert: The Great Grey Owl, the Camberwell Beauties and the statue of Lenin!

Rob: The Great Grey Owl, the hedgehog and the eco-farm.

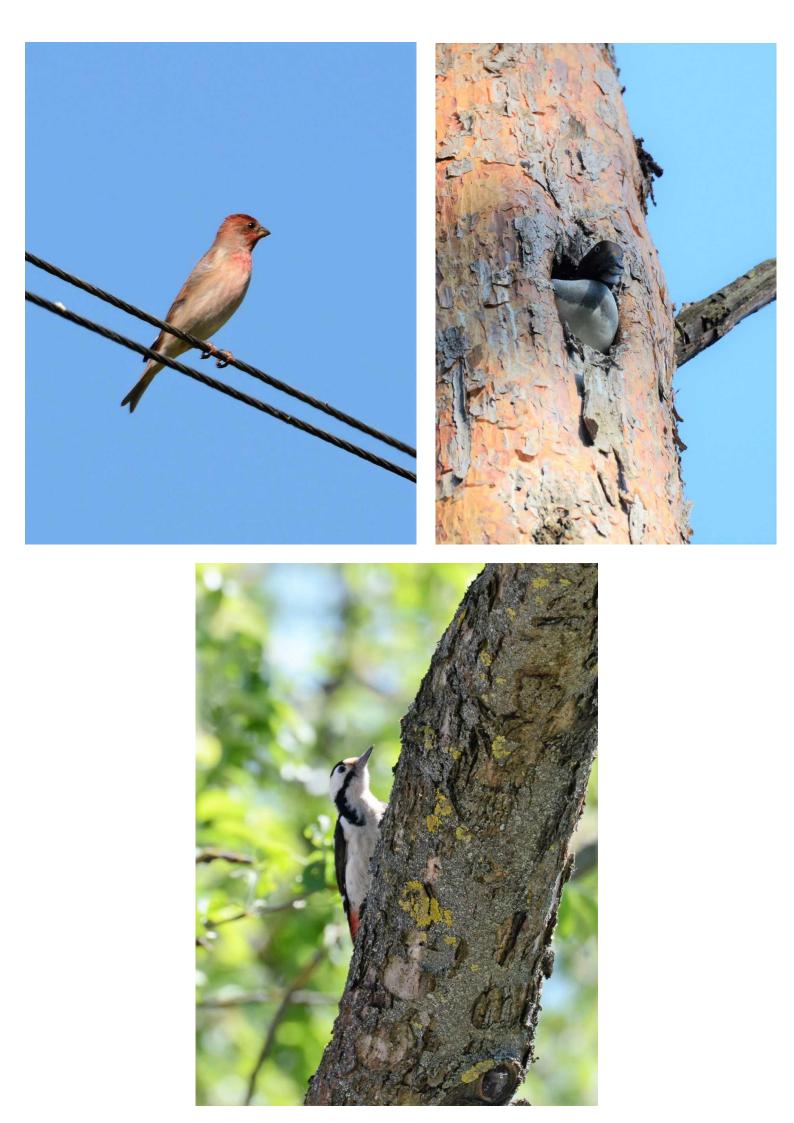
Gordon: The Three-toed Woodpecker, the thundering bison and the expertise of the local guides and forest rangers.

Photos and trip report by Gerard Gorman, May 2018.



















#	Species									
	BI	RDS	5.5	6.5	7.5	8.5	9.5	10.5	11.5	12.5
1	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	x	х	х	х	х			Х
2	Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus				х				х
3	Greater White-fronted	Goose Anser albifrons			х					
4	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	x	x	х	х	х	х	х	х
5	Gadwall	Anas strepera		x	х	х	х			
6	Pintail	Anas acuta			х	х				
7	Shoveler	Anas clypeata	x	x	х	х	х			
8	Teal	Anas crecca			х	х				
9	Garganey	Anas querquedula		х	х	х				
10	Pochard	Aythya ferina			х	х				
11	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula			х	х				
12	Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula				х			х	
13	Smew	Mergellus albellus				х				
14	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna			х					
15	Hazel Grouse	Bonasa bonasia						Н		
16	Grey Partridge	Perdix perdix		х	х	х				
17	Corncrake	Crex crex		Н		Н	Н	Н	Н	
18	Black-necked Grebe	Podiceps nigricollis			х	х				
19	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus		х		х	х			х
20	Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		x		х				
21	Bittern	Botaurus stellaris				Н				
22	Great Egret	Casmerodius albus	x	x	х	х	х		х	х
	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	x	x	х	х	х	х	х	х
24	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	x	х	х	х	х	x		х
25	Black Stork	Ciconia nigra				х	х			
26	White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla		х		х	х			
	Lesser Spotted Eagle	Aquila pomarina			х				х	
28	Greater Spotted Eagle	Aquila clanga			х					
29	Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	x	х	х	х	х	х	х	х
30	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus	x	х	х	х	х		х	
31	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	x	х			х	х	х	Х
32	Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus		х			х			
	Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	x	х	х					х
34	Hobby	Falco subbuteo					х			
35	Red-footed Falcon	Falco vespertinus							х	
36	Spotted Crake	Porzana porzana		Н		Н				
37	Little Crake	Porzana parva							Н	
38	Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	x		Н	Н				
39	Coot	Fulica atra				х				
40	Crane	Grus grus		x	х	х		х	х	
41	Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	x							
42	Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta			х					
	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus			х					
	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius		х	х	х	х			
	Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula		х	х	х	х			
	Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	x	х	х	х	х	х	х	х
	Temminck's Stint	Calidris temminckii		х						
	Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola	×	X	х	х	х			

19	Green Sandpiper Tringa ochropus			Н	х	x		х	
	Common Sandpiper Actitis hypoleucos		x		X	x		^	
	Terek Sandpiper Xenus cinereus		^ X		^	^			
	Redshank Tringa totatus		^ X	х	x	х			
	Spotted Redshank Tringa erythropus		^ X	^ X	^	^			
_	Greenshank Tringa nebularia		^	^ H					
	Black-tailed Godwit Limosa limosa	x	x	x	x	х			
	Great Snipe Gallinago media	^	^	^	^ X	^			
	Snipe Gallinago gallinago	x		x	^ X	х		x	
_	Ruff Philomachus pugnax	x	x	x	x	x		Λ	
	Black-headed Gull Chroicocephalus ridibundus	x	x	x	x	x			
	Common Gull Larus canus	^	~	~	X	Х			
	Caspian Gull Larus cachinnans				X	x			
_	Little Gull Hydrocoloeus minutus			x	^	x			
	Little Tern Sternula albifrons		x	x		x			
	Common Tern Sterna hirundo		^ X	x	x	×			
	Black Tern Chlidonias niger		^ X	^ X	^	X			
	White-winged Tern Chlidonias leucopterus		^ X	x		×			
	Whiskered Tern Chlidonias hybrida		x	x		Х			
	Feral Pigeon Columba livia	x	^ X	^ X	x	x			x
	Wood Pigeon Columba palumbus	~	x	X	x	x	x	х	x
	Collared Dove Streptopelia decaocto	x	x	x	x	Χ	~	Χ	x
	Cuckoo Cuculus canorus	x	x	x	x	x	x	х	~
	Great Grey Owl Strix nebulosa	~	~	~	x	Χ	~	Χ	
	Hoopoe Upupa epops			x				х	
_	Black Woodpecker Dryocopus martius			H			x	X	
	Grey-headed Woodpecker Picus canus			X					
	Great Spotted Woodpecker Dendrocopos major		Н	Н	х	х	x	х	
	Syrian Woodpecker Dendrocopos syriacus		х						
	White-backed Woodpecker Dendrocopos leucotos					х	х		
	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker endrocopos minor		х						
	Three-toed Woodpecker Picoides tridactylus						x		
81	Wryneck Jynx torquilla		х	Н				х	
82	Skylark Alauda arvensis		х	х	х	х	x	Х	
	Crested Lark Galerida cristata	x		х	х				
84	Sand Martin Riparia riparia	x	х	х	х	х		х	
85	Barn Swallow Hirundo rustica	х	х	х	х	х	х	х	х
86	House Martin Delichon urbicum	x	х	х	х	х	х	х	х
87	Meadow Pipit Anthus pratensis		х		х	х	х	х	
88	Tree Pipit Anthus trivialis				Н		х	х	
89	White Wagtail Motacilla alba	x	х	х	х	х	х	х	х
90	Yellow Wagtail Motacilla flava	х	х	х	х	х			х
91	Citrine Wagtail Motacilla citreola			х		х			
92	Robin Erithacus rubecula			х				Н	
93	Thrush Nightingale Luscinia luscinia		Х	Н	Н			Н	
94	Bluethroat Luscinia svecica				х				
95	Redstart Phoenicurus phoenicurus			Н	Н	Н	Н		
96	Black Redstart Phoenicurus ochruros		Х				х	х	Х
97	Whinchat Saxicola rubetra		х	х	х	х	х	х	
98	Song Thrush Turdus philomelos			Н		х	х	х	

99	Fieldfare Turdus pilaris	х	х	х	х	х	х	х	х
100	Blackbird Turdus merula	х		x	х	х	х	x	
101	Barred Warbler Sylvia nisoria				х			х	
	Garden Warbler Sylvia borin		Н	Н		Н		Н	
103	Blackcap Sylvia atricapilla		Н	Н	Н	Н	Н	Н	
	Whitethroat Sylvia communis		х	х	x	х		х	
	Lesser Whitethroat Sylvia curruca		X	X	X	X			
	Sedge Warbler Acrocephalus schoenobaenus		X	X	X	x		х	
	Aquatic Warbler Acrocephalus paludicola					x		H	
	Grasshopper Warbler Locustella naevia							Н	
	River Warbler Locustella fluviatilis						х		
	Great Reed Warbler Acrocephalus arudinaceus		х	x	х	х	X	х	x
	Icterine Warbler Hippolais icterina		~		~	~		x	
	Willow Warbler Phylloscopus trochilus		Н	х	Н	Н	Н	Ĥ	
	Wood Warbler Phylloscopus tiocinus		H	^ X	x	x	x	x	
	Chiffchaff Phylloscopus sibilititia		H	^ H	Ĥ	^	Ĥ	^ X	
	Goldcrest Regulus regulus		x			x	H	^ Н	
	Firecrest Regulus ignicapilla		^			^			
	Wren Troglodytes troglodytes			Н	Н		X H	Н	
					П		п		
	· · ·		Х	X					
	Red-breasted Flycatcher Ficedula parva			X			X		
	Pied Flycatcher Ficedula hypoleuca			Н			Х		
	Collared Flycatcher Ficedula albicollis		Н	Х			Х		
	Great Tit Parus major		х	Х	X	Х	Х	x	
	Coal Tit Periparus ater					Х	Х	Х	
	Blue Tit Cyanistes caeruleus			Х	x	Х	x		
	Azure Tit Cyanistes cyanus			Х					
	Crested Tit Lophophanes cristatus			Х		Х	х	х	
	Willow Tit Poecile montanus						Н		
	Bearded Tit Panurus biarmicus				х				
	Penduline Tit Remiz pendulinus		Н	Х	х			x	
	Nuthatch Sitta europaea			Х			х	х	
	Common Treecreeper Certhia familiaris						х		
	Great Grey Shrike Lanius excubitor			Х	х			х	
	Red-backed Shrike Lanius collurio		х	Х	х	Х		х	
	Magpie Pica pica	Х	х	Х	х				
135	Jay Garrulus glandarius					х	х	х	х
136	Jackdaw Corvus monedula	х	х	х	х			х	х
137	Rook Corvus frugilegus	х	х	х	х	х		х	х
	Hooded Crow Corvus cornix	х	х	х	х	х		х	Х
	Raven Corvus corax	Х	х	х	х	х		х	Х
	Nutcracker Nucifraga caryocatactes						х		
141	Starling Sturnus vulgaris	х	х	х	х	Х	х	х	х
142	Golden Oriole Oriolus oriolus		х	х	Н	Н		Н	
143	House Sparrow Passer domesticus	х	х	х	х	х	х	х	
144	Tree Sparrow Passer montanus	х	х	х	х			х	
145	Chaffinch Fringilla coelebs		х	х	х	х	х	х	
146	Linnet Carduelis cannabina			х		х		х	
147	Goldfinch Carduelis carduelis		х	х	х	х	х	х	х
148	Bullfinch Pyrrhula pyrrhula					Н			

149 Greenfinch Carduelis chloris		х	х	x	х		х	
150 Serin Serinus		x	X	x	x	x	x	
151 Hawfinch Coccothraustes coccothraustes		^	^ X	^	^	^	x	
152 Common Rosefinch Carpodacus erythrinus			^				^ X	
152 Common RosemicitCurpoducus crytimilas153 Reed BuntingEmberiza schoeniclus		x	v	×				
154 Yellowhammer Emberiza citrinella			X	X	v		X	
DRAGONFLIES		X	х	X	х	Х	х	
1 Siberian Winter Damsel Sympecma paedisca				v				
2 Downy Emerald Cordulia aenea		¥		X		¥		
3 Four-spotted Chaser Libellula quadrimaculata		X		X		X		
· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·				X			х	
4 Hairy HawkerBrachytron pratense5 Red-eyed DamselflyErythromma najas			х					
							х	
BUTTERFLIES								
1 Swallowtail Papilio machaon		X	X	X	X		X	
2 Large White Pieris brassicae	x	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	
3 Green-veined White Artogeia napi		X				X	X	
4 Orange Tip Anthocharis cardamines		X	X	X	X	X	X	
5 Brimstone Gonepteryx rhamni		Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	
6 Peacock Butterfly Inachis io 7 Red Admiral Vanessa atalanta		X	Х	X	Х	X	X	
,		Х		Х			Х	
8 Map Butterfly Araschnia levana		х		х		Х	Х	
9 Green Hairstreak Callophrys rubi						х		
10 Small Copper Lycaena phlaeas			Х		Х			
11 Sooty Copper Lycaena tityrus				x			Х	
12 Pearl-bordered Fritillary Boloria euphrosyne					Х			
13 Painted Lady Vanessa cardui		х		х				
14 Comma Polygonia c-album		х						
15 Queen of Spain Issoria lathonia					х			
16 Speckled Wood Pararge aegeria			Х					
17 Small Heath Coenonympha pamphilus							Х	
18 Checkered Skipper Pyrgus communis				х	Х	х	Х	
19 Camberwell Beauty Nymphalis antiopa				х	Х		Х	
MAMMALS								
1 Sthrn White-breasted Hedgehog Erinaceus concolor						х		х
2 European Hare Lepus europaeus		х		х	х			
3 Red Deer Cervus elaphus						Х	х	
4 Roe Deer Capreolus capreolus				х		х	х	
5 European Bison Bison bonasus						х	х	
6 Racoon Dog Nyctereutes procyonoides						х		
7 Red Squirrel Sciurus vulgaris						х		
8 Elk Alces alces								х
9 Red Fox Vulpes vulpes							х	
REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS								
1 Grass Snake Natrix natrix		х				х		
2 Common Toad Bufo bufo				Н				
3 Marsh Frog Pelophylax ridibundus		Н						
4 European Fire-bellied Toad Bombina bombina		Н	Н	Н	Н			
5 Moor Frog Rana arvalis				х				