

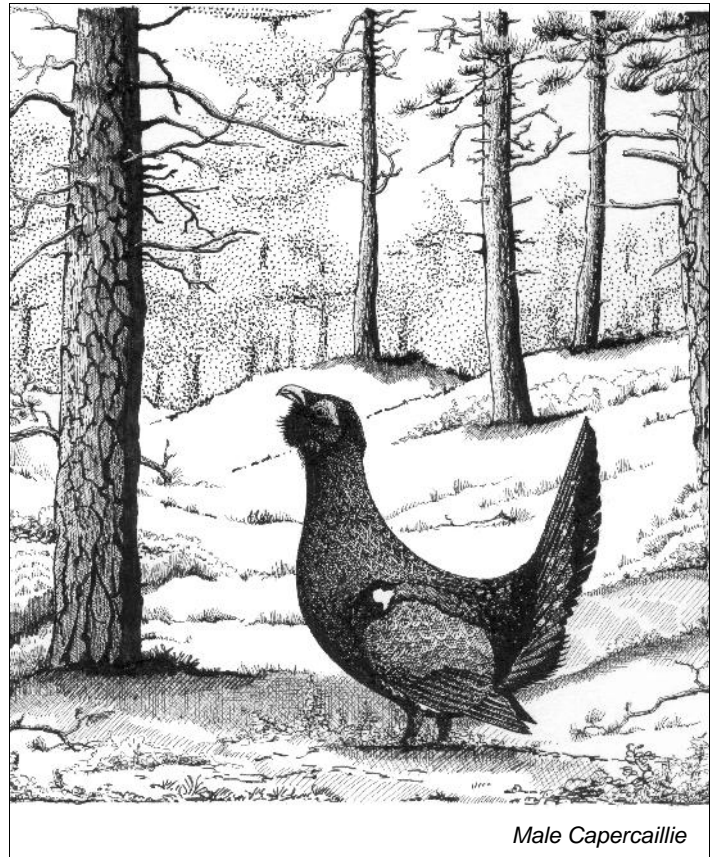
# LATVIA AND LITHUANIA

*two jewels in the Baltic*



Being rich in game and wildfowl, Latvia was once the luxurious secret hide-away for the Prussian aristocracy. Later, the Soviet elite would enjoy weekends hunting in its marshes and ancient forests, or strolling along the deserted Baltic beaches searching for amber washed up by the tide.

For this reason, Latvia's rich natural resources have survived intact to the modern day. The peace-loving Latvians have been welcomed into the European Union and much of their landscape is protected. A low population density means that there is little threat to the wild areas; something few countries can still boast.



*Male Capercaillie*

Our tour takes us into forests full of Elk, Red Deer, Beaver and Wild Boar. Martens and Red Squirrel are frequently seen. Woodpeckers leave their mark on every tree; we may see all eight Latvian species on the trip. Green Sandpiper and Goosander doze by golden marigolds in inky pools shaded by black alders. Ural Owls breed in neighbouring Lithuania, and a trip over the border will give us a good chance to see this phantom of the forest.

Our customers have been captivated by the beautiful location of our hotel in Kemeris National Park. The charming rural landscape is ablaze with golden, flower-filled meadows that stretch over the horizon, dotted with dew ponds and medieval manor houses. Here we are served up large portions of premier bird species such as Roller, Corncrake, Montagu's Harrier, Black Stork and Lesser Spotted Eagle. Vast swaying reedbeds resound to the boom of Bitterns, only becoming silent when White-tailed Eagles approach. Flamboyant Ruffs jostle for the right to mate, and other waders include Temminck's Stint and Spotted Redshank. Capercaillie and Hazel Grouse come to pick up grit at the roadside once their pre-dawn dances have ended; there are high populations of both here.

Cape Kolka is the best location in spring to see movements of passerines. A spike of forested dunes jutting into the Baltic is overflowed by flocks of finches, buntings and larks on their big push north. In the right conditions, Bluethroats, Common Crossbills, Golden Orioles and hundreds of wagtails fall from the sky. Watching the sea brings an exciting mix of divers, scoters and Long-tailed Ducks, with Rough-legged Buzzard, Merlin, pipits and finches all hugging the coast. Pallid Harrier is one of four species of harrier that we may find. There is a surprise around every corner. Birding is in its infancy here, and new discoveries are frequently made.

## ITINERARY

### KEMERIS NATIONAL PARK AND BIRZAI

After a short flight we will land by the medieval city of Riga and our hotel is not far away. It was once a top-secret Soviet retreat where Brezhnev's daughter practised ballet with only bird song to accompany her. It is hidden in a mossy forest, beside a small peaceful lake. Pied Flycatchers compete with the many Wood Warblers for top billing in this woodland song

contest, while Crested Tit is likely to be one of the first birds we see.

With two nights here we will make trips to a range of lakes, reedbeds and forests. Inside Kemeris National Park there are numerous trails that allow us to seek out the many species of woodpecker. Black and Grey-headed shout the loudest, so are usually the first to be seen. The rotting spruces are perfect for good populations of Three-toed Woodpecker. We have enjoyed great views of them on every trip.

It might tempt fate to say that Middle Spotted Woodpecker is guaranteed; but they nest by our hotel and are certainly not rare. White-backed Woodpecker, too, is reliably found. Green Sandpipers utilise old Fieldfare and Redwing nests and Golden Orioles add an exotic touch to these primeval-looking northern forests. The striking white-headed race of Long-tailed Tit would turn any birder's head. They often interrupt breakfast by appearing at the hotel window.

Surrounding fields, copses and deserted orchards provide homes for Ortolan Bunting, Hoopoe and Serin. Together with a remnant population of Crested Lark and Tawny Pipit, it feels strange to see species associated with the Mediterranean breeding alongside birds from the taiga zone. Even the gaudy Roller reaches this far north.

Our timing means that skeins of Taiga Bean Geese will be pausing to refuel. Ruff dance, Snipe drum and Garganey grunt, as water levels drop in the precious watermeadows. Black-tailed Godwit conduct aerial displays and seven whistles betray the occasional passing Whimbrel. Our eyes will be open for the many Temminck's Stints or occasional Broad-billed Sandpipers that pass through. Larger lakes, smothered with reeds, are home to many Great Reed Warblers. The voice of Savi's Warbler and Bittern are brought to us on the wind while Penduline Tits carry pussy willow fluff to their hanging nests. Three species of marsh tern (White-winged, Black and Whiskered) test the stability of flattened-reed foundations in readiness to lay, and Common Cranes will already have eggs.

#### CAPE KOLKA AND THE BALTIC COAST

Our journey to Cape Kolka takes us along the Baltic coast. Among the ice age erratics, migrants pause on their journey north. Red-backed Shrike and Bluethroat are expected and, by scanning flocks of Grey-headed and Blue-headed Wagtails, we will hope for one of the many Citrine Wagtails now breeding in Latvia. Wryneck and Thrush Nightingale will be noisily proclaiming ownership of blossoming fruit trees. A snippet of a Common Rosefinch's '*pleased-to-meet-you*' song may betray the first of the season.

We have three nights here, and our activities are governed by weather and wind direction. Like Falsterbo in the autumn, this place offers us a chance to witness the spectacle of mass bird migration. Dawn could see thousands of Siskins and other finches heading out to sea. Among them are Woodlark, Golden Orioles and Common Crossbills. The latter are easy to pick out as they *chip* to each other in flight. Their stocky cousin, the Parrot Crossbill, nests in pines on the cape itself, and occasionally drinks from car park puddles. At sea, large numbers of Velvet and Common Scoters loaf among breeding-plumaged Long-tailed Duck. A procession of eiders and divers provides the opportunity for us to pick out rarer fare. Our recce yielded a breeding-plumaged White-billed Diver among many Black-throated. Caspian Tern is likely, while one year we found Latvia's second Iceland Gull here.

By late morning, raptors have gathered above the point. Sparrowhawk and Buzzard are the most numerous, with smaller numbers of all four harriers, Merlin, Hobby, Golden and White-tailed Eagles and Rough-legged Buzzard. Something rare is noted here annually and almost any European raptor could occur in spring.

#### BIRZAI, LITHUANIA

Leaving Cape Kolka on day six we take the road known among local birders as the 'Grouse Safari'. Just inland, the woods hold good numbers of Capercaillie and Hazel Grouse

and our journey could produce sightings of either. The adjacent meadows draw Lesser Spotted Eagles. Corncrake will be arriving and even wolves are seen occasionally.

We will travel to Birzai in Lithuania, passing fish ponds and meadows frequented by Osprey, and Montagu's and Marsh Harriers. This is made easier as there are no border restrictions now. Our friends in Birzai monitor breeding Ural Owls that use natural holes rather than boxes. In good vole years there may be up to 30 pairs in the area. Two nights in the area give us an excellent chance of finding these ghostly birds. In addition, the forest is superb for woodpeckers, Icterine Warblers, Red-backed Shrikes, Red-breasted Flycatchers and Pygmy Owls, whilst marshes next to our hotel are home to breeding Little Crakes.

After our final morning's birding, we will drive back up to Riga for our flight home. If you would like to extend your stay with a city break, please don't hesitate to contact us.

#### CLIMATE AND PACE

Weather is changeable, in fact, rather similar to British weather at this time of year. Breakfast will be taken at about 7am most mornings, with optional pre-breakfast trips at Cape Kolka to fit in with migration patterns. Basic fitness is all that is required. Full days will be spent in the field and reasonable length walks on the flat will be undertaken regularly.

#### ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full board accommodation is provided, with two nights at Kemer National Park, three nights at Cape Kolka and two nights at Birzai. All accommodation is of a very good standard, with excellent food. All rooms have en suite facilities. Lunch is usually packed, and taken in the field to maximise birding opportunities.

#### PRICE INCLUDES .....

All birdwatching excursions with expert leader and local guide, full-board accommodation (starting with breakfast on 4<sup>th</sup>, ending with lunch on 10<sup>th</sup>), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, reserve entrance fees, local transport by minibus, international flights.

#### WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

#### INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Direct flights are available from London Gatwick to Riga using the scheduled services of Air Baltic. The outbound flight leaves late afternoon, with the return arriving late afternoon. Flights are also available from Manchester, Leeds and many other regional airports using KLM, for a small supplement.

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| <b>7 nights:</b>   | <b>3<sup>rd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> May 2016</b>        |
| <b>Principal leader:</b>   | <b>Phil Palmer</b>                                       |
| <b>Local guide:</b>  | <b>Karlis Millers</b>                                    |
| <b>Maximum group size:</b>   | <b>12 clients with one leader and a local guide</b>      |
| <b>Cost with discount (if you book before 18<sup>th</sup> January 2016):</b> | <b>£1780 per person sharing (£180 single supplement)</b> |
| <b>Full Cost:</b>  | <b>£1880 per person sharing</b>                          |
| <b>Deposit:</b>  | <b>£300 per person</b>                                   |