

Germany: Brandenburg – Crane & Goose Concerto!

Sun 20th – Thu 24th Oct 2013



Photos (clockwise, from top left): A flock of 21 Great Bustards takes flight • A young Hen Harrier floats above a field, ignored by a Roe Deer • A lovely Lesser Spotted Woodpecker • One of the many groups of Common Cranes seen during the week • Three alert Tundra Bean Geese • A pale Common Buzzard, possibly a migrant Arctic bird © Stephen Daly/www.andalucianguides.com

**report compiled by tour leader:
Stephen Daly**

Trip Diary

Tour Leaders: Stephen Daly

with Robin Arch, Janet Fraser, Margaret Holmes and Joan Wilcox

We had a number of tour highlights, those listed below are the favourite moments from the week.

- **Watching the Great Bustards at Nennhausen**
- **Spectacular views of Cranes at their roost**
- **Seeing White-tailed Eagles hunting**
- **Immense flocks of geese**
- **Wonderful views of Hen Harriers and Rough-legged Buzzards**

Day 1 - Sunday 20th October 2013

The London flight went without a hitch and from the rain at Gatwick we landed in sunshine at Berlin's Schonefeld airport. After a super-fast collection of our minibus we were soon on the *autobahn* circumnavigating the southern side of Germany's capital city. A few birds were seen en route with Common Buzzards sitting on top of the roosting poles that the farmers put up for them plus Jays, Ravens, Lapwings, Grey Herons and Great Egrets feeding, sleeping or flying across the countryside.

After stopping off for a light lunch, we continued on to our hotel at Semlin. There was still a few daylight hours left so we explored the lake and the surrounding open fields where we found lots of Greylag, Tundra Bean Geese and Common Cranes in flight. At the hotel we dropped off our luggage and then took the last few hours of daylight out in the fields finding a few Rough-legged and Common Buzzards, Sparrowhawk and a few distant Marsh Harriers hunting across the old flooded meadows towards the West Havelland area. Three Whooper Swans were seen feeding on the winter wheat and there were many Mute Swans, Grey Herons and Great Egrets dotted through the landscape.

Day 2 - Monday 21st October 2013

A pre-breakfast scan across the lake at our hotel in Semlin revealed lots of Great Crested Grebes, Coots and Mute Swans. Common and Black-headed Gulls were on the lake and a few White Wagtails, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Greenfinch and Chaffinches were seen or heard in the surrounding habitat.

Around Berlin and the surrounding countryside the old DDR or Eastern Germany was very much a place where the Eastern Bloc used to practice military manoeuvres fearing that these vast open plains would be the grounds for any potential tank battles. Happily Germany is united and many of those huge military areas have been cleaned up and turned into nature reserves or leisure areas where you can sail and watch birds on the nature areas. West Havelland in particular is an important stopping off area for migrating and wintering cranes, geese and swans from the north and is also the place where you can see the most northerly group of Great Bustard in Europe. The landscape is pretty flat but the birds and volume of quiet areas in the countryside are wonderful.

We travelled across country towards Buckow and Nennhausen in search of Great Bustards. Just across from the Great Bustard centre we found a group of 10 females that were quite close in a rapeseed field. We met Torsten Ryslavy, one of the Great Bustard project biologists from the reserve centre who gave us some information before we visited the centre and it's exhibition area.

Close to the centre is a large protected area, which is part agricultural land and part uncultivated strips in which taller natural vegetation is allowed to flourish. Many Roe Deer graze here and there are two observation tower hides that give great views across the slightly undulating landscape. The first hide was being painted and access wasn't possible although we did see many Fieldfares and some Redwings in the

taller trees. The second hide provided us with our first good views of Hen Harriers with two birds seen hunting; Rough-legged Buzzards were watched sitting on the ground or hovering while hunting; Common Buzzards were also present and we saw some of the extremely pale Common Buzzards that come from Scandinavia with a few Sparrowhawks and one Goshawk being pursued by Hooded Crows. A short while later Ravens were watched as we saw another two groups of distant Great Bustards from the second hide.

Red Kites were seen cruising over the landscape as we made our way across country to watch the mass arrival of Cranes and geese come in to roost at Linum ponds. As we drove to Linum we spent a lot of time stopping off to watch many groups of Cranes and open fields full of mixed geese tucked between the many woodland strips. From here we took a walk around some of the eastern ponds before taking up a good position with the setting sun behind us. The weather couldn't have been better to watch this sunset spectacle and it was dark when we arrived back at Semlin.

Day 3 - Tuesday 22nd October 2013

Travelling across to the Gulpersee we took a walk along the shoreline and woodland strip on the south side of the lake. A huge raft of duck and geese were looked through and we found Wigeon, Goldeneye, a pair of Smew, Common Pochard and two Red-necked Grebes. Great Crested Grebes and Mute Swans were abundant and sifting through them we found two Whooper Swans. A distant White-tailed Eagle flew and put up thousands of geese across the lakeside and we had fleeting views of the massive raptor as it went out of sight. Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers were seen as a parties of smaller passerines were watched along the pines. Eurasian Treecreeper, Marsh, Coal, Great and Blue Tits came in as did a group of Siskin and we also saw and heard a few overflights of Brambling, Goldfinch and Chaffinch.

Taking the road across more flooded meadows towards Havelberg we stopped to watch a perched sub-adult White-tailed Eagle in a dead tree. Setting up the 'scopes we had great views of this fine bird of prey that makes the geese so nervous when they take to the air. Fortunately, they spend most of their time sitting around and if you can find a close bird then you can take the opportunity to study this fine creature.

We stopped in Havelberg and had lunch then walked through the old town along the River Havel, before continuing eastwards to the beech woodland around the Wöplitz area. Here we had better views of Marsh Tit, heard a Black Woodpecker and saw a flock of calling Hawfinches as they passed overhead. There were many signs that Wild Boar had been feeding and we met one of the foresters, who told us about the local control of these abundant creatures that always seem so elusive; night would be the best time to catch up with these mammals.

Day 4 - Wednesday 23rd October 2013

We drove on the minor, cross-country roads towards Netzen and to the nearby Stengsee, stopping occasionally to watch groups of Cranes, Lapwings and many species of geese. This large lake holds good numbers of wintering duck and geese and is, like most lakes and flooded meadows, a protected area.

Parking down a country track we took a walk along along a canal stopping to watch a Kingfisher take off from its perch and quickly fly off. Several small birds were seen in the tops of the trees and Robin picked up a lovely Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Bramblings and Yellowhammers came and went as Chaffinches flitted around with Great and Blue Tits. Some distance down the track we found another Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, which was more obliging and gave us great views. A few Song Thrushes and Blackbirds came past and more Bramblings flew overhead. On the lake good numbers of Teal, two Pintail and two Goosander were seen and a few more Red-necked Grebes swam and fed with the other wetland species. Again this lake held thousands of geese with Greylag and Tundra Bean Geese being the most common. We hadn't seen many butterflies but a nice Peacock was seen by Margaret.

We had a picnic lunch at the lake then drove off towards the Great Bustard hides again to watch the Hen Harriers. From hide no.2 we watched an incoming Goshawk out hunting low across the coarse vegetation

and managed to watch it come past, getting great views of this powerful raptor. The Hen Harriers put on a wonderful hunting display and this time we saw both adult male and females and three juvenile birds in the same area.

Day 5 - Thursday 24th October 2013

Our last day went well after we departed the hotel. Taking advantage of the sunny skies and hoping for one last look at the Crane-filled skies, we drove the short distance to the Great Bustard reserve. En route we had to pull over and watch as thousands of Cranes lifted off several fields from behind a ridge, their calls ringing in our ears and the sheer quantity almost filling half of the sky. This was an incredible sight to witness and we looked around for any aerial predators that had spooked them. Within a few seconds we saw them: two White-tailed Eagles were flying from the back of the last of the group and now hundreds of Greylag and White-fronted Geese had also lifted off in panic as these huge eagles flapped and glided above.

Many of the Cranes came in to land in some nearby fields where tractor drivers were cutting and collecting silage. The Cranes are used to farm machinery, but the eagles are much more wary, so with safety in mind most of the birds came in right in front of us. We stayed for a while changing positions and getting a bit closer but the views were stunning and as a few Red Kites, Common and Rough-legged Buzzards came over we couldn't have asked for such a good start to the day.

After checking out one of the bustard hides and seeing many of the males feeding and taking to the air, we spent time with a good selection of Hen Harriers, with adult males and females being seen as well as some bright looking juveniles that hunted low over the numerous Roe Deer in the meadows. A few Sparrowhawks and Kestrels were seen and a single Goshawk came from the treeline low and fast, putting up the Lapwings, Fieldfares, Redwings, Yellowhammers, Tree Sparrows and Sky Larks that were feeding.

We took our picnic lunch at another field entrance where a few hundred cranes were noisily coming and going and watched a good flock of male Tree Sparrows line up in the sun on top of the nearby farm buildings. Many species of geese were on the move, some high flying other birds descending to feed near the many groups of Cranes and as we departed on our journey to Berlin we felt very content to have had such a lovely impression of this undiscovered part of Europe.

Thanks to all for such a lovely visit, your companionship and good humour throughout our stay. I hope to see you some time in the future.

Stephen Daly

ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED

(total number of species recorded by the group was 139)

Tundra Bean Goose *Anser serrirostris rossicus*

Flocks were flying overhead on all days and watched at many sites.

Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*

Good numbers seen every day.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Very common and seen in huge numbers each day.

White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons albifrons*

Seen on every day of the tour.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Numerous and seen every day.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*

A few seen on two days. The warm weather most likely had kept them in the north.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Common at most wetland sites.

Wigeon *Anas penelope*

Fairly common on the lakes especially at the Gulpersee.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Common and seen every day.

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Common and seen on every day.

Pintail *Anas acuta*

Small groups seen on a few days.

Teal *Anas crecca*

Common.

Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Common at most lake sites.

Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

Seen on two days.

Smew *Mergellus albellus*

Seen only once on the Gulpersee.

Goosander *Mergus merganser*

A few seen on the Strengeesee.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Very common.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Abundant.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*

Quite few pairs seen on the Gulpersee

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Common and seen every day.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Common and seen on every day

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*.

Some roosts seen most days.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Seen in ones and twos most days.

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Seen on four days.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*

Seen on two days with perched views and excellent close views in flight.

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Single birds seen on three days.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Seen most days with some excellent comparative views of both juveniles and adults birds.

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Singles hunting every day.

Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

Two birds seen hunting on two days.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Seen most days including the very light Scandinavian birds.

Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*

Seen in small numbers on most days.

Great Bustard *Otis tarda*

Great views each day some close views of both males and females with young.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

One to a handful seen and heard on every day.

Coot *Fulica atra*

Abundant and seen on every day, in huge flocks.

Crane *Grus grus*

Huge numbers each day probably the most impressive bird in sheer numbers and sound.

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Large flocks seen most days.

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Delayed arrival with warm weather with small groups seen only one day.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

Locally numerous

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

Fairly common on all lakes.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Abundant both on water and in the fields.

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia domestica*

Numerous seen every day.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Small flocks in flight and seen in the surrounding fields in low numbers.

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Numerous and seen on every day.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Common around towns and villages.

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Single birds seen twice on different canals.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*

Good view of two birds on the Strengees woodlands.

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*

Three birds seen in woodland on one day of the tour.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Fairly common seen on four days.

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Surprisingly only one bird seen.

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Fairly common seen every day.

Magpie *Pica pica*

Abundant.

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Common and seen every day.

Hooded Crow *Corvus corix*

Numerous and seen on every day.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Small numbers seen most days.

Raven *Corvus corax*

Seen in small numbers most days.

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus*

One heard at the Strengees.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*

Seen on two days.

Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*

One heard at the Gulpersee woodland.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Fairly common and seen every day.

Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Fairly common and seen every day especially at the hotel gardens.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus europaeus*

A party of six seen in woodlands at the Gulpersee.

Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

A single bird seen at the Strengsee.

Bearded Reedling *Panarus biarmius*

Watched on three days, often fleetingly.

Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis*

A huge flock arrived on the 23rd.

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

A few birds seen on the 22nd.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Fairly common in local gardens.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Six birds seen at the Gulpersee.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

One birds seen and heard only once at the Strengsee.

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

One birds seen in woodland near Havelberg.

Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

Seen on three different days.

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Very common.

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Fairly common and vocal.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

Watched most days with a big influx on 100+ on the 23rd.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

Seen on a couple of days.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Low numbers seen on four days.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Singles every day.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Only one birds seen on the tour.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common widespread.

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Good numbers in the countryside. Seen most days.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Only seen on one day of the tour.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

A few seen pre-breakfast on 21st.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common seen each day.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

Watched on two days with some small flocks seen in the countryside.

Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

A few birds seen and heard most days.

Siskin *Spinus spinus*

Fairly common each day with small flocks seen.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Noted on two days.

Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Noted on three days.

Hawfinch *Coccythraustes coccythraustes*

Around a dozen birds seen on the 22nd.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

Seen every day.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

Good views on two days.

MAMMALS

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

Daubenton's Bat *Myotis daubentonii*

BUTTERFLIES

Large White *Pieris brassicae*

Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*

Peacock *Inachis io*

DRAGONFLIES

Migrant Hawker *Aeshna mixta*