

Germany:
Brandenburg – Crane
& Goose Concerto!

Sun 19th – Thu 23rd Oct 2014



Pale Common Buzzards are one of the features of eastern Germany – they may be local birds or pale buzzards coming from the north or east © Stephen Daly/www.andalucianguides.com

report compiled by tour leader:
Stephen Daly

Trip Diary

Leader: **Stephen Daly**

with **Rosemary Ferrell, Mick & Amanda Kusmidrowicz, Ann Pritchard and Ursula Wells**

Tour Highlights

- **Watching the Great Bustards at Nennhausen**
- **Spectacular views of tens of thousands of Cranes**
- **Watching White-tailed Eagles and Hen Harriers hunting**
- **Immense flocks of mixed geese and duck**
- **Great views of 'white-headed' Long-tailed Tits**

Day 1 - Sunday 19 October 2014

Having driven across Germany the day before, I had met up with Rose and managed to do a couple of hours' bird watching around the Potsdam area earlier that morning. Travelling up to Schonefeld airport, Berlin, we met the rest of the party and were soon heading across to our base at Semlin. Along the way, a few Marsh Harriers were seen hunting and there were lots of skeins of geese and many on the ground. Common Cranes were also seen in the fields and in flight. A good number of Great Egrets stood out across the landscape, their large structure and yellow bills being instantly recognizable. Red Kites and Common Buzzards were also seen and a Green Woodpecker flew across the motorway.

En route, we stopped off for a bite to eat and were able to take a walk at our base around the lakeside town. It was unseasonably warm with temperatures in the mid 20's and really felt like a summer's day. Around the lake were Mute Swans, Common and Black-headed Gulls, Great Crested and Little Grebes, Cormorants, Coots and some Mallards. Great, Blue and Coal Tits were seen through the many willow trees in the area as troops of Tree Sparrows and a large party of over 25 Long-tailed Tits flew around. Nuthatches, Blackbirds, Goldfinches, White Wagtails, Meadow Pipits and Greenfinches were also seen.

Later that evening, we dined at the hotel restaurant and talked about what we could see around this little known birding area that held so many wintering birds. We had just heard that the record had been broken in Brandenburg this autumn with 1500 Cranes arriving a few days before. This we had to see!

Day 2 - Monday 20 October 2014

After a good night's sleep and breakfast we drove through the open meadows and agricultural land between Semlin and Havelland. These large open spaces are bounded by forest strips of mixed and pine woodlands and are ideal places for birds feeding. Some of the areas are of particular interest as they flood in winter and have protected status and attract many species of birds. It was the height of harvest time and the uncut fields of maize stood tall, whereas the cut crops, particularly maize, were good feeding areas for massed flocks of cranes and geese. Buzzards were mainly Common Buzzards but we were on the lookout for the Rough-legged Buzzards that migrate westwards through Europe in winter, especially when the temperatures drop below zero.

With the warm weather in the Berlin area, we wondered about the chances of seeing a Rough-legged. Many of the Common Buzzards in northern Germany through to Scandinavia show a lot of white on their plumage; taking our time and looking carefully with such variants, we studied their structure and size looking for our rarer Rough-legged. It was reported that there were only a few to be seen and we felt lucky when we heard news that there had been heavy snow falls with plummeting temperatures in western Russia. Our patience paid off and we got a positive ID on one buzzard which was identified a Rough-legged.

White-fronted, Greylag and Bean Geese were also watched and we managed to pick out some Tundra Bean Geese in amongst the large flocks that were feeding on the open fields. A pair of Whooper Swans were also seen.

Driving over to the Gülpersee, we parked and walked around the south side of this large lake. Here was a huge flock of 2000+ Common Cranes and countless thousands of geese and ducks. The noise coming from the birds on the lake was incredible. We watched small and larger parties of geese and cranes come and go and had good views of some that flew right over our heads.

There was a strong breeze blowing off the lake around the woodland strip and the noise from the geese and the wind made it difficult to listen for any passerines, though we did see Treecreeper, Wren, Robin, Chiffchaff, Siskin, Jay, Fieldfare and Redwing as well as a few Great Spotted Woodpeckers. We also had two close flypasts from two different White-tailed Eagles, one bird came right over our heads. A dashing Peregrine Falcon was watched hunting a flock of Corn Buntings and a short while later we saw Stock Doves close to a huge flock of Wood Pigeons.

After our picnic lunch at Grossderschau meadows watching Cranes coming into feed on the cut maize, (and later along the road to Havelland) we watched another White-tailed Eagle perched in a dead tree out in one of the flat meadows. Red Kites were abundant and we had good views of six birds in this area.

We then drove over to the Nennhausen area, checking the two double-storey tower hides and looking out across the landscape for Great Bustards. We spotted a White Stork feeding near some cattle and several Grey Partridges hiding in a field of winter wheat with Lapwings; small flocks of Fieldfares flitted through the nearby treetops. Checking the second tower hide and looking from on high out across the landscape, we found four young male Great Bustards feeding in the short grass. Nearby there were lots of Cranes in family groups and Hen Harriers hunted nearby. In the distance there were lots of Roe Deer leaving the safety of the woodland strips to feed close to the birds. It was a lovely scene and was enhanced by several of the male bustards putting on a half-hearted practice display by strutting and bending their tail feathers in a fan-like shape. Although not yet fully mature these attempts at display are quite interesting to watch and it won't be long before they are in action for real!

Great Bustards had a good population before WWII with 3,400 birds in Brandenburg, which accounted for more than half the German population. After the war, natural pastures, the preferred habitat of the great bustard, were drained and converted to sown grassland or ploughed into cropland. In the former GDR, numbers had not surprisingly crashed to only 57 in 1997. Habitat diversification and breeding programme using eggs taken from local breeding pairs, which were incubated in the centre, was established. Older juveniles were slowly released and numbers have risen to around 150 birds. Harsh winters have on occasions decimated the numbers over the years but this species may be one that benefits from climate change as winters become warmer.

Day 3 - Tuesday 21 October 2014

After breakfast we left the hotel making our way by minibus over to the Heidesee. The weather was changing for the worse with the end of an Atlantic hurricane now affecting the European weather. The wind had become stronger but we could see that by heading east we might avoid the worse of the morning's rain. Fortunately the sun was shining over on the Heidesee and as we arrived the diminutive form of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker flew off from a fruit tree. Walking along the canal leading to the lake was surprisingly quiet although Fieldfares, Blackbirds, Wren and Robin showed themselves.

Once at the hide on the lakeside we watched a large group of ducks, which included Wigeon, Shoveler, Teal, Mallard and Gadwall. Greylag and White-fronted Geese were in abundance on the lake and the huge mixed flock suddenly took off as a juvenile White-tailed Eagle came in hunting. With so many birds in the air, they almost blackened the sky as the huge eagle came across the far bank looking for an easy kill. After a few minutes the bird headed back to a far tree line and settled without a catch.

Walking back to our parking spot and picnic table, we watched a Kingfisher call then fly off down stream and a few Blackcaps looked for berries in the scrub. Linnets and a party of Long-tailed Tits came in to the tree line. The Long-tailed Tits were especially lovely looking birds of the nominate, white-headed form.

After lunch we drove to the Linum ponds, stopping en route many times to watch fields of cranes or to check out buzzards. A few more Red Kites were seen and some of the harvested fields contained thousands of geese. Everywhere we looked there were birds in the air and on the ground. We took a coffee break at Linum then walked around the ponds. Another White-tailed Eagle was seen and as there was poor visibility with low clinging mist, the cranes seemed reluctant to come to their usual roost. Thousands of cranes could be seen settling in the nearby fields and the noise of crane song filled the air.

We then drove across country and stopped many times to get some very close views of the cranes feeding. In the trees and hedgerows we saw quite a few Goldfinches as well as a small group of Siskins. Even although the light was fading we could see these beautiful creatures very well and some in the group managed to get excellent photos of them.

Day 4 - Wednesday 22 October 2014

We had decided the night before to get up early and drive to the Gülpersee and watch the mass departure of cranes and geese from their roost as daylight came up. We could feel the temperature drop with cooler wind from the northwest and it had started to rain. Undaunted, we found shelter under a tree and watch this amazing spectacle as wave after wave of birds took to the air - again the noise was incredible! A single Sparrowhawk was seen coming in low and fast and flew towards a nearby woodland, where it was lost from view. We watched the crane and geese take-off for some time before hunger reminded us it was time for breakfast!

As we arrived back at our restaurant Nuthatches and two Black Redstarts were around the trees outside the hotel and a single Green Woodpecker was feeding on the grassy area opposite.

Revived, warmed and ready for more birding, we crossed through the area known as the Havelländisches Luch towards Buckow again seeing more cranes and geese. There were quite a few Grey Herons around as well as Great Egrets and in the distance a White-tailed Eagle flew as did some Red Kites and a few buzzards. Passing the Great Bustard area we found a group of ten young birds near to the breeding centre. A flock of around 25 Skylarks were seen out on open pastures and there were a few Corn Buntings, Fieldfares and some Redwing flying in mixed flocks. A huge flock of Lapwings were hunkered down on the ground as we scanned the landscape picking up Hen Harriers, distant finches and a few more Sky Larks and Meadow Pipits.

We continued down the country roads stopping to look at two adult Whooper Swans that were close to the road and feeding with some small family groups of Cranes. Taking a very long concrete track across country we stopped to check out some of the huge flocks of geese that were feeding on short grassy meadows. There were 1000s of birds and the hill behind us was covered in a grey mass of Common Cranes. The geese included White-fronted, Pink-footed, Greylag and Tundra Bean Geese with a few Taiga Bean Geese.

The dismal weather continued and we took a coffee break before working our way back slowly across country to Semlin.

Day 5 - Thursday 23 October 2014

This was our last morning and fortunately we had time to travel back to the Great Bustard breeding centre and as well as seeing some of the birds from the roadside, we met Torsten Ryslavy, one of the biologists working for the environmental agency (Landesumweltamt) in Brandenburg and dealing with this species

protection (Staatliche Vogels). Torsten showed us around the centre and we watched a video about the history of the breeding programme.

We left the Great Bustards and said goodbye to our only White Stork that had been in the same field for a few days, then checked out some more flocks of geese and Cranes and headed back through Rathenow and Brandenburg to first Tegel then Schonefeld airports.

It was a great trip with wonderful weather on the first days then it got cooler and wetter but didn't dampen our spirits. Thanks to you all for the fun and happy spirits throughout our stay in Germany. Until the next trip!

Stephen Daly

ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED (80 species)

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix* - Seen once on tour.

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* - Mostly male 'ring-necked' seen at a few sites

Tundra Bean Goose *Anser [fabalis] serrirostris*- Flocks were flying overhead on all days and watched at many sites.

Taiga Bean Goose *Anser [fabalis] fabalis* – A few seen with Tundra Beans

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.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* – Just the one in the Nennhausen area

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 at some lakes.

Teal *Anas crecca* - Common.

Pochard *Aythya ferina* - Common at most lake sites.

Tufted Duck *Anthya fuligula* - Seen just the once.

Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* - Seen on two days.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* - Very common.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* - Abundant.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* - Common and seen every day.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* - Common and seen on every day.

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis* - Some roosts seen most days.

- Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus* - Seen in one's and two's most days.
- Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus* - Seen on two days.
- Red Kite** *Milvus milvus* - Seen on four days.
- White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla* – One of the highlights of the trip, we saw several individuals, sometimes hunting and always magnificent!
- Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus* - Singles seen most days.
- Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus* - Seen most days with some excellent views of both juveniles and adults birds from one hide.
- Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus* - Single bird seen on one day.
- Buzzard** *Buteo buteo* - Seen most days including the very light Scandinavian birds.
- Rough-legged Buzzard** *Buteo lagopus* - Only one bird recorded.
- Great Bustard** *Otis tarda* - Good views views of both males, females and juveniles.
- Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* - One to a handful seen and heard on every day.
- Coot** *Fulica atra* - Abundant and seen most days, often huge flocks.
- Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus* - Large flocks seen most days.
- Common Gull** *Larus canus* - Locally numerous
- Black-headed Gull** *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* - Abundant both on water and in the fields.
- Feral [Rock] Pigeon** *Columba livia 'domestica'* - Numerous seen every day.
- Stock Dove** *Columba oenas* - Small groups 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* - Fleeting views only of this diminutive woodpecker.
- Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major* - Fairly common seen on four days.
- Green Woodpecker** *Picus viridis* - Surprisingly only one bird seen at Semlin and one over the motorway on our first day
- Jay** *Garrulus glandarius* - Fairly common seen every day.
- Magpie** *Pica pica* - Abundant.
- Jackdaw** *Corvus monedula* - Low numbers seen and these were on the motorway heading back to Berlin.
- Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix* - Numerous and seen on every day.
- Rook** *Corvus frugilegus* - Small numbers seen on only one day.
- Raven** *Corvus corax* - Seen in small numbers twice.
- 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.
- Coal Tit** *Pariparus ater* – Seen in mixed tit flocks
- Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus caudatus* - Several groups seen a few times.

- Penduline Tit** *Remiz pendulinus* - Single birds heard.
- Sky Lark** *Alauda arvensis* - A huge flock found on one day only.
- Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita* - A single bird watched feeding.
- Blackcap** *Sylvia atricapilla* - A few only seen. Rather scarce this year.
- Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes* - Two birds seen and heard and seen twice on tour.
- Nuthatch** *Sitta europaea* - Fairly common this year.
- Treecreeper** *Certhia familiaris* - Seen on two different days.
- Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris* - Very common.
- Blackbird** *Turdus merula* - Fairly common and vocal.
- Fieldfare** *Turdus pilaris* - Watched on a few days with early migrants arriving.
- Redwing** *Turdus iliacus* - Seen on a couple of days.
- Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus* - One bird only.
- Robin** *Erithacus rubecula* - Singles on three days.
- Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros* - Two birds seen at hotel restaurant gardens.
- House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* - Common widespread.
- Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus* - Good numbers in the countryside. Seen most days.
- White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba* - Seen at the lake near the hotel
- Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis* - Only seen on two days of the tour.
- Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs* - Seen only twice.
- Greenfinch** *Chloris chloris* - A few birds seen and heard most days.
- Siskin** *Spinus spinus* - A group of eight seen only on one day.
- Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis* - Noted most days.
- Linnet** *Linaria cannabina* - Noted only on one day.
- Hawfinch** *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* - Birds flying overhead only on two occasions.
- Corn Bunting** *Emberiza calandra* - Seen every day.

MAMMALS

- Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*
- Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*
- Common Raccoon *Procyon lotor*
- Brown Rat *Rattus rattus*

AMPHIBIANS

- European Marsh Frog *Pelophylax ridibundus*

BUTTERFLIES

Peacock *Aglais io*

Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*

Painted Lady *Vanessa cardui*

Small White *Pieris rapae*

Large White *Pieris brassicae*