

Birds of the Ardennes and Northern France

Belgium and Northern France are essentially on our doorstep in Northern Europe and offer exceptional birding in April. The first summer migrants and lingering winter birds stay on the polders and reserves along the English Channel coast. Our journey starts in the Ardennes, a sparsely populated area of southern Belgium, and progresses to areas in Northern France. This tour offers you chances of rare breeding birds and migrants of Europe.

Day 1: A morning flight to Brussels and then journey south to the Ardennes. The Ardennes has a wide range of habitats from quarry workings to areas of woodland and blanket bogs. Hertogenwald is a large forest of beech and spruce where we search for the localised Grey-headed Woodpecker. Other species include Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreeper and Hawfinch. Before dusk a visit to a quarry along the river Ourthe may reveal calling and hunting Eurasian Eagle Owls. Two nights at La Roche-en-Ardenne.

Day 2: Our main interest is Hautes-Fagnes, the highest point in Belgium and an exceptional area for bird life. Hautes-Fagnes supports a few Black Grouse and within the forested areas Black Woodpecker, Woodlark, Eurasian Siskin, Common Redpoll and Common Crossbill. At this time of the year it is also possible to find returning migrants, which may include Black Stork, Common Crane, Hen Harrier and Red Kite. Around the information centre bird flocks may include Willow, Marsh and Coal Tits. In the afternoon we visit Fagne de Malchamps, an area of heath and bogs holding Eurasian Nutcracker and Common Stonechat among others. Wanne is a reliable spot for Eurasian Nutcracker, Crested Tit, Firecrest and Great Grey Shrikes, which find a stronghold here. Any fast-flowing rivers hold populations of White-throated Dipper, Grey Wagtail and Common Kingfisher. As dusk falls, a return visit to Hautes-Fagnes for the possibility of Tengmalm's Owls which utilise the nest boxes.

Dates

Tuesday April 9th - Sunday April 14th 2019

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 8

Birds: 120-150

Day 3: Today we leave the Ardennes and travel to Northern France via Harchies and Pommeroeul Marshes near Mons. The ponds, a result of the defunct mining industry, have a habitat of open water, reedbeds, poplar stands and a series of hides. Species we may encounter include Black-necked Grebe, Eurasian and Little Bitterns, Garganey, Eurasian Marsh Harrier, Great and European Reed Warblers and colonising European Penduline Tits. Rare species which appear on a regular basis include Purple Heron, Osprey, Whiskered, Black and White-winged Terns. Transfer to Escalles near Cap Blanc Nez for three nights.

Day 4: This morning we head south to Crecy Forest, a rich woodland dominated by beech trees and open areas of scrub. A wide range of birds use the forest with the cleared areas attracting Tree Pipit, Common Whitethroat, Blackcap, Garden and Willow Warblers and Common Chiffchaff. The more mature trees attract Green Woodpecker, Eurasian Nuthatch, Common Redstart and possibly a returning Honey Buzzard or Eurasian Hobby. En route to Marquenterre, a short diversion to an area of marshes may produce sightings of European Turtle Dove, Bluethroat and



White storks

Photo: Jo Finn

Whinchat. Once at Marquenterre we take a walk around the extensive trail system overlooking lagoons, patches of scrub and pinewoods. The lagoons attract high numbers of waders in spring which include Black and Bar-tailed Godwits, Common, Green and occasionally Curlew Sandpipers, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew, Dunlin and breeding species, Black-winged Stilt and Pied Avocet. The reserve also attracts high numbers of Little Egret, Eurasian Spoonbill, White Stork, Mediterranean Gull and on occasions Great and Cattle Egrets and Black-crowned Night Heron.

Day 5: This morning we head to Cap Gris Nez, which juts out into the English Channel with views of the Kent coast on clear days. The 'cap' is a noted migration spot and a check of bushes and fields can reveal interesting species, notably Common Nightingale, Black Redstart and migrant warblers. In the bare fields European Golden Plover and Northern Lapwing often rest on migration. If the winds are northerly or westerly in direction a short seawatch may reveal passing Northern Gannets, Brent Goose, Common Scoter, Arctic Skua, Common, Arctic and Little Terns and chances of Manx Shearwater and Little Gulls. Later in the day we visit Hardelot, an upmarket town

with holiday homes set in a pinewood. Our main interest here is a population of Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, European Serin, Crested Tit and, in sandy areas, Crested Larks.

Day 6: Today we head back to Brussels for late afternoon flights back to the UK. If time permits a visit to Oye Plage for waders and terns will be made as it is close to the motorway network.

Prices

Ground Price: £1,095

Single room: £85

Deposit: £150

*Air Fare: £110

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, transport and permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

Not included: drinks, insurance, baggage and credit card charges, items of a personal nature and any relevant fuel surcharges.

**Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights*