

## **Big day - Big birds**

May 19<sup>th</sup> and May 21<sup>st</sup> 2008

### **Introduction**

Having visited Europe once before, Bob and Barbara decided to return for a family visit in Germany. Their plan was to bird a few sites in Germany (Kühkopf and Rieselfelder Münster) and then move on to the Netherlands to visit the magnificent wetland reserve Oostvaardersplassen.

When looking for information on birding in Holland, Bob came across [www.birdingholland.com](http://www.birdingholland.com), a website for guided birding in the Netherlands. Since Bob and Barbara had already seen quite a few of the more common European birds, they decided to hire a local guide to help them see as many of the difficult to find birds as possible.

### **Target birds**

There were no specific target birds that Bob and Barbara wanted to see, but of course they did have a "wish list" of birds they hadn't seen before, ranging from simple to hard to see birds:

- . Bluethroat
- . Black Woodpecker
- . Rook
- . Garganey
- . As many of the skulking warblers (Reed Warbler, Marsh Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Savi's Warbler, Garden Warbler, Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat) as possible
- . Eurasian Eagle Owl

We managed to see all but one of these birds; Savi's Warbler was not seen, but heard very well!

### **Weather**

The weather was dry with chilly mornings and quite a bit of wind on the first day. The afternoons were warm and sunny and the temperature ranged from 8° to 23° Centigrade (47 to 73 Fahrenheit).

### **Hotels**

During their stay in the Netherlands, Bob and Barbara stayed in Hotel Boshuys in Lelystad, very close to some of the best birding sites in the Oostvaardersplassen.

### **Miscellaneous**

All logistics were taken care of by Pieter, the owner and one of the guides of Birding Holland ([www.birdingholland.com/aboutus](http://www.birdingholland.com/aboutus)). Bob and Barbara started and finished the first day at their hotel where they were met by Pieter and Remco, the guides for that day.

The second day they met Pieter in the central part of Holland and drove to Limburg, visiting sites along the way as well.

In the e-mail contact Bob had with Pieter they agreed to do a big day the first day, then take a resting day and then to go to the province of Limburg the third day, getting to as many different habitats as possible.

A big day is a very long day of birding, trying to see more than 100 species of birds in one

single day. The day tour to the province of Limburg was chosen to get a chance to see species that are difficult to see in other parts of the Netherlands, such as Black Woodpecker, Rook and Eurasian Eagle Owl.

## **ITINERARY**

### **Monday, May 19<sup>th</sup> 2008**

Pick up at the hotel in Lelystad by Pieter and Remco, two of the guides of Birding Holland, at 5.15 AM. The goal for this big day is trying to see more than 100 birds, not an easy task, especially since it is rather chilly and windy this morning, which means some of the warblers will take more time to find than usual.

We start birding right at the hotel entrance, a good place to see Song thrush feeding along the sides of the road in the morning. After securing this bird for the day we move on to the nearby wetland reserve Oostvaardersplassen.

The first trail is good for warblers like Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Sedge Warbler and Eurasian Reed Warbler of which we get good views. The hide at the end of the trail is a little disappointing with only Greylag Goose and Shoveler present.

Since we have limited time to spend at every stop during a big day, we quickly move on to the next sites in the Oostvaardersplassen, seeing birds like Bluethroat, House Martin, Eurasian Spoonbill, Marsh Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Spotted Flycatcher. The vantage points overlooking the reserve have some birds but especially a pair of European Red Foxes with no less than seven cubs is the main attraction here.

Between the Oostvaardersplassen and our next site, close to Amsterdam, we visit an area known for Montagu's Harrier. Remco has been managing the Dutch birdline for seven years and he knows several possible sites for this species. At the first possible site we hit the jackpot: in a field with 36 Great Egrets, several Eurasian Oystercatchers, Curlews and Stock Pigeons, Remco spots a first summer male. After a few minutes this bird is joined by an adult female and an adult male which gives a fantastic show for minutes on end, eventually soaring past at less than 30 feet! A Eurasian Turtle Dove is the last bird for Flevoland, a good bird to see on a big day!

We leave the province of Flevoland and pass Amsterdam to visit the next site, Kinseldam. The area is the western part of the IJsselmeer, the lake that used to be a sea until the 1930's. On the landside of the dike protecting the inland polders there is a bird reserve with birds like Black-tailed Godwit, Pied Avocet and Common Redshank. The main attraction here however, is the Kinseldam itself with several breeding pairs of Mediterranean Gull. We see a dozen or so of these pretty gulls flying overhead and we can even hear them make their soft "kyow" call. Other birds here are Dunnock, Icterine Warbler and a White Stork soaring above us.

The area we want to visit for some of the forest birds appears to be very windy, but we decide to enter it anyway. Even though we will not see a great number of birds here, we do see some good ones. We start with a family group of Long-tailed Tits, another Spotted Flycatcher, Crested Tits and several Great Spotted Woodpeckers. A long walk proves to be a long dry spell, which is finally broken by a singing Common Redstart. While we try to locate the bird, Pieter discovers the most unexpected bird of the day: a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, very rare in this part of the country and very good views. While celebrating this good sighting, we see a mixed flock of Great Tit, Blue Tit and Marsh Tit taking a bath nearby, making this walk worthwhile after all.

A newly formed wetland area has had some good waders the previous week, but most of them appear to have left recently. After some careful scanning we see Common Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, Lapwing and Common Sandpiper. While we enjoy the many low-flying Swifts (some come to within 10 feet of our face before finally changing course), Remco has found another very good bird: Temminck's Stint. The bird is difficult to see at first, but shows itself well after a few minutes. We leave this site adding Common Moorhen and Little Grebe to the list, when Pieter hears a Black Redstart singing. After scanning the rooftops we locate the bird close to the car. By now we have seen 94 species of birds and we have good hopes of breaking 100 today.

The site where we hope to see Gray Partridge and Eurasian Tree Sparrow fails to produce either one of them, but we do find a Mew Gull there. A quick stop at the coast only has a female Eider and no terns or waders.

By now we are in rush hour and it takes us a long time before we reach our next site, where we hope to see Little Owl. This bird is notorious for disliking windy days however and we fail to see it. When we also miss Purple Heron, we decide it is time for dinner.

Having eaten our typical Dutch meal we now have new energy and immediately find Purple Heron and hear a Savi's Warbler singing. Because we have not seen Black Tern today, we make a quick detour to a small breeding colony where we see a few birds breeding on the artificial platforms in the water.

On to our last stop for today. While preparing for this big day, Pieter has visited this site several times over the past few weeks and he is confident that we will see well over 100 birds today. Even though quite a few of the birds present here over the past weeks appear to have moved on we are able to add birds like Greater White-fronted Goose, Red-crested Pochard, Garganey, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal, Yellow Wagtail and Water Rail here. When we are about to end this day Remco finds bird #104, a Pied Wagtail.

We drop off Bob and Barbara at their hotel again and agree on where to meet on Wednesday.

### **Tuesday, May 20<sup>th</sup> 2008**

A resting day. Remco has given Bob some sites for a few other birds and with this information Bob is able to add Bearded Tit and White-tailed Eagle to his list!

### **Wednesday, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2008**

To see as many of the birds left on the wish list, Bob and Barbara meet Pieter in the central part of Holland. The first site has recently produced good sightings of Savi's Warbler. The first birds of this day come quickly: Ruff, Shelduck, Purple Heron, Marsh Harrier, Black Tern, Bluethroat and after some time a Common Snipe comes into view as well. Suddenly a Savi's Warbler starts singing at close range. No matter how hard we try, this bird does not want to show itself. To make up for this we do have excellent views of Marsh Warbler, a bird that is difficult to see usually.

Our next site is good for woodland birds, but we also see some open field species here, such as Meadow Pipit, Sky Lark, Yellow Wagtail and Common Stonechat. The main reason for going to this site is one of the big birds: the world's second largest woodpecker, Black Woodpecker. A long walk through this area produces Crested Tit, Tree Pipit, several Hobbies, excellent views of Stock Pigeons and several Common Buzzards.

When Pieter hears a Black Woodpecker calling, he starts to call it in. The bird comes

frustratingly close and even starts hammering in a nearby tree, but we do not see it. Instead of walking back the same way, we decide to make a full circle, getting to some other habitats as well. A wise decision, because we do get some very good birds on this part of the walk: Red-necked Grebe in summer plumage, a couple of Common Redstarts, Willow Tit and a Black Woodpecker! The bird, a male, lands in a tree about 35 feet away and stays for almost 10 minutes in the area, giving excellent views.

Satisfied, we walk back to the car, only to find a second Black Woodpecker, this one even closer than the previous one. It starts working on a fallen tree, feeding on the insects inside it. Eventually it even comes to the ground to feed, a first even for Pieter!

We have lunch in the reserve with a Eurasian Sparrowhawk flying overhead, our only one in two days.

On our way to the southern part of the province of Limburg we visit a site just across the Belgian border. Very few birds here, although we do see some Rooks up close and we also see the third Black Woodpecker for the day flying overhead!

Because of the evening rush hour, Pieter decides to re-arrange the schedule. Instead of going for the Melodious Warbler first, we go to the site for Eagle Owl, because we will have better light now than later in the evening. The Eurasian Eagle Owl is another big bird: the world's second largest owl. Because of construction work, getting to the site itself proves rather difficult, but when we finally get there, we are not disappointed.

While Pieter is looking for the nest, Bob spots an adult Eagle Owl sitting on a cliff, not too far away, in bright sunlight. Every detail of the bird can be seen, including the orange eyes and the white throat. When the adult starts flying to the nest to feed the young we can not believe our luck, a flying Eagle Owl is not something you see every day.

After spending more than half an hour studying the Eagle Owls we return to the car to drive to the Melodious Warbler. A Yellowhammer taking a bath in a puddle in the parking lot will be the last bird of the day however, because Bob makes the wise decision to stop here.

No matter how nice the Melodious Warbler will be, it can't compete with the Eagle Owls on any level, and we decide to end the day with a high, the best view of Eagle Owl imaginable.