



TOUR INFORMATION FOR BELARUS

These notes are designed to help you prepare for your tour. Please read carefully.

ENTERING BELARUS: United Kingdom citizens will need a passport which is valid for six months beyond the intended length of stay. A "Type C" short-term single-entry visa, valid for up to 90 days, is required for this tour. A visa will take a full page of your passport so make sure you have at least 1 page free. Please see the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in London's website for further information on how to obtain a visa <http://uk.mfa.gov.by/en/>, or telephone 0207 937 3288 (ext.3). Their opening hours are from 09.30 to 12.30 (except Wednesdays and weekends). The standard processing time is 5 working days. Citizens of other nations should contact their nearest Belarus Embassy for entry requirements.

There is a compulsory state **medical insurance** for visitors to Belarus, except for British passport holders. Even if you have worldwide medical insurance, it is common for customs control to insist you purchase insurance at the airport. This can be purchased just before you go through customs, so it is important you carry a few euros with you. The rates are one euro per two nights.

We will need to issue you with a letter of invitation to accompany your visa application form. This will be sent to you with your final payment invoice, around 80 days before departure.

There are visa service agencies that can provide you with an information pack on how to obtain a visa. They will also process your application for you however they will charge a handling and processing fee. One such company is Trailfinders Visa Service <http://visas.trailfinders.com> (tel: 0207 368 1504).

It is always a good idea to take a photocopy of your passport and air ticket with you when travelling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get replacements if your originals are lost or stolen. Obviously you should keep the photocopies in a separate bag to the originals.

TIME DIFFERENCE: Belarus is 3 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, therefore 2 hours ahead of British Summer Time.

CURRENCY: The currency is the Belarusian Ruble (BYR). These can be obtained at exchange facilities at Minsk airport. Most of the hotels cannot change money. As the tour price includes all travel, accommodation, meals and drinks with meals, you will require only enough currency to cover snacks, drinks other than at meal times, or other purchases of a purely personal nature. Changing travellers' cheques at the airport can be very time consuming, whereas changing notes is much quicker. We advise therefore taking some sterling, Euro or dollar notes and changing them at the exchange facility.

LANGUAGE: Belarussian is the national language. English is not widely spoken.

CLIMATE: We can expect almost any kind of weather during this trip. Mornings can be cold, while can be warm around midday, so relatively high daily temperature fluctuations can happen. If we get sunny days it can get very hot (30°C) but we expect those to be tempered with a pleasant breeze. A good waterproof jacket is needed as is a warm sweater but it is advisable to bring a sun hat as well.

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PACE OF TOUR AND DAILY ROUTINE: This tour is not strenuous. Daybreak is at around 05.30 so we'll offer a few optional pre-breakfast local walks, and on most days we will stay out taking a packed lunch with us. The majority of the time we'll have leisurely walking, occasionally over moderately rough terrain. Some longer walks may be necessary for a chance of Great Grey Owl and other specific species, however the vehicle is never far away if anyone wants to return early or sit out any particular walk. On a few days we will have an early evening meal and return to the field to look for owls or visit a lek.

Our first day is a long travel day to get to our hotel in time to check-in and have dinner. We will, however, have some stops enroute. We'll have another long travel day mid-tour, birding enroute, to reach our hotel close to Sporovo Reserve. After discovering the best parts of the reserve the next day we will continue to our base in the primeval forest close to the Polish border.

HEALTH: It is essential that you contact your own doctor to obtain the latest information on the regions you are visiting. Please contact your doctor well in advance of your tour's departure as some medication must be initiated weeks before the period of possible exposure.

Although there are no major health problems in Belarus, it is recommended that you are up-to-date on routine vaccinations. These include measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, varicella (chickenpox), polio, and your yearly flu jab.

Water is safe to drink at all the places we stay at. We may have problems with mosquitoes in marshy and forest areas, especially if we go into the forest at dawn to look for woodpeckers or at dusk to look for owls when they can reach plague proportions. In this instance it is best to cover as much of yourself as is possible. You might find gloves useful here.

In a few areas we may encounter a small number of ticks but they are very scarce.

If the weather is fine, the sun can be surprisingly strong so sun block is a good idea.

It may be difficult to obtain any special medication during the tour, so bring all you are likely to need.

For further information on health advice refer to the Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad website www.masta-travel-health.com

ACCOMMODATION: Throughout the tour we will stay in good quality accommodation with comfortable rooms, close to birding sites. All rooms will have private facilities and hot water. Towels are provided.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Laundry services are not provided by the hotels we use on this tour.

ELECTRICITY: 220V AC 50Hz. An international travel plug is useful and can be bought in most airport departure lounges. You may find the following website useful: <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com>.

FOOD: In recent years the standard of food in Belarus has improved with a wide variety of dishes now available. There will be many local dishes including lots of varieties of wholesome soups. Breakfasts typically consist of a selection of cold cheeses and meats, and most hotels provide something cooked as well, typically boiled sausages or eggs. Toast is rarely offered. We will have packed lunches or provide a picnic at a suitable birding site. These consist of a variety of meats, cheese, vegetables, and fruit. Picnics also include tea, coffee, or water. Dinners is likely to consist of soup, followed by meat or cured fish, rissoles, vegetables and various salads.

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Sunbird tours are all-inclusive and no refunds can be issued for any tour meals participants choose to miss. While we will try to do all we can to accommodate the requirements of all participants, please note that we cannot guarantee all causes of food allergies can be avoided at every destination. Many restaurants offer set menus and are unable to accommodate all special requests within a group. Thus, participants with significant food allergies or special dietary needs should bring appropriate foods with them for those times when their needs can, regretfully, not be accommodated.

Our tours are carefully scheduled to ensure the best possible birding experience and although the leaders will do all they can to make sure the group eats at a reasonable time, sometimes early or late lunches and/or evening meals cannot be avoided. Any participants who need to eat at specific times may need to take supplementary food with them.

DRINKS: Bottled water, a soft drink or a beer (or wine if appropriate) are provided at meals, as is coffee or tea. In addition we keep a supply of bottled water on the tour vehicles. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some rooms where we stay.

INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONE ACCESS: WiFi is available at our hotel in Beloozersk and Belovashkaya Pushcha. Both require a scratch-card which contains both the username and password. WiFi is also available at the restaurant we use whilst staying at our hotel in Turov. Access, whilst using the restaurant, is issued by the proprietors at the leader's request. WiFi is very cheap in Belarus with a 30-minute scratch-card costing the equivalent GBP 0.27 pence. If you wish to use WiFi please ask the leader for further information during the tour.

FIELD CLOTHING: Since the weather can be very mixed, bring waterproofs (including a hat), warm sweater and gloves. We might be in shirtsleeves in warm sunshine or it could be cool, wet and windy! Stout, waterproof footwear such as good quality walking boots are ideal - it can be moist underfoot in places in the forests or when walking through long grass in the early morning. Some of the marshes can be very wet, especially if it has been a wet winter. For this reason we advise participants to bring wellington boots. In some years getting to the Great Snipe lek has meant, traversing a stream and wading through some deep water. However, if it has been dry, you may find you don't need them at all but we feel it is better to be safe than sorry! Please bring subdued-coloured clothing for birding in the forest areas.

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS:

Notebook and pen	Alarm clock
Small daypack/rucksack	Sun screen
Small torch (with spare batteries)	Insect repellent
Water canteen	Personal medication

Optional: Telescope & tripod, spare binoculars and spare spectacles (in case of loss or damage), and a field guide. Telescopes would be an advantage in the open areas.

Note: The most effective insect repellents are those containing at least 35% of the active ingredient diethyltoluamide (DEET). The higher the percentage, the greater the effectiveness. However, care must be taken to avoid getting the repellent on to optical equipment as it dissolves rubber and plastic and can damage coated lenses. A reasonably effective alternative, which isn't corrosive, is Mosi-guard, produced by MASTA, and we recommend this. It is available in most high street chemist (including those at the airport). Camping supply stores sell a product containing permethrin 0.5%, which must be applied directly to clothing in advance of wearing and allowed to dry. This non-staining, odourless chemical is non-toxic to humans and protective on clothing through several launderings. Please make sure you never to spray insect repellent inside the vehicle or when you are standing close to other participants – it may drift on to their optical equipment.

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LUGGAGE: Our Final Information document, which will be sent to you approximately three weeks before departure, will give details about baggage weight and size restrictions imposed by the airline used for this tour.

If possible, please bring your luggage in soft-sided bags or cases (rather than large hard 'Samsonite'-type suitcases) as these pack more easily into our vehicles during the tour. Please note that on many tours there are no porters to carry your luggage so please ensure that **no bag is so heavy that you are unable to lift and carry it yourself**. As a general rule, in addition to using your luggage labels, it is a good idea to fix identification to the *inside* of each piece of luggage.

LEADER'S EQUIPMENT: The leader will provide the following:

Telescope & tripod
Field guides
Playback equipment
Laser pointer

Basic First-aid kit
Reference books
Spotlight

PHOTOGRAPHY: Scenery and memory shots will be plentiful and simple to obtain, some birds such as herons and egrets can be obliging photographic subjects but warblers etc can be difficult to photograph. Bring all your film or memory cards with you as it may be difficult to find precisely what you need on short notice. Camera equipment should be packed in moisture- and dust-proof bags, as a precaution. "Digiscoping" is perfectly compatible with the tour, though it is recommended you bring your own telescope!

There will be plenty of opportunities to take photos of birds, mammals and scenery and the leader will do all he can to accommodate anyone wishing to take photographs. However if you are a serious photographer please bear in mind that this is first and foremost a birdwatching tour. Please do not allow your photographic desires to conflict with other participants' bird-watching activities.

TRANSPORT: We will be using a small coach, or large minibus, throughout the tour. The main road infrastructure is good, with several dual carriageways that take you over flat countryside. Although some local roads are in bad shape we will, wherever possible, use the main highways, but it will be necessary to travel on dirt roads to get to some of the birding sites. The leader will arrange a seating rotation and participants should be able to ride in any seat in tour vehicles.

SMOKING: Smoking is not allowed in the vehicles or when the group is gathered for meals, checklists etc. If you are sharing a room with a non-smoker, please do not smoke in the room. If you smoke in the field, we ask that you do so well away and downwind from the group if possible.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: Travel insurance is essential and we insist that you take out suitable cover as soon as your tour is booked. If you are bringing expensive optical equipment or other valuable items, please make sure they are also adequately insured on your home contents policy, as most travel insurance policies do not cover very expensive individual items. You may wish to consult your insurance broker regarding coverage. Please also ensure that your policy covers you in the event of a medical emergency, cancellation of a trip or severe delays. Medical costs abroad can often be extremely expensive. Please note that Sunbird is not liable for any medical or repatriation costs resulting from injury or illness during a tour or for covering any costs resulting from a flight delay such as extra hotel accommodation.

If you wish, insurance can be arranged by Helen Fisher, Bullerwell Independent Insurance Brokers, 13 Goldington Road, Bedford, MK40 3JY. Tel: 01234-866964. Please contact Helen for a quote and she will send the schedule directly to you.

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TIPPING: All tour-based tips are included in the tour price. These include tips to local guides, drivers, hotel porters, and waiters and waitresses when we have group meals together in restaurants. You only need to pay tips for personal services such as room service or drinks from the bar.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Jonsson. Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East. 1992. Helm, London. All five volumes of the original series in one book. Completely revised with many new and superb illustrations. Available in paperback.

Mullarney, Killian et al. Collins Bird Guide. 2010. HarperCollins. The 2nd edition is the latest, most up-to-date and portable field guide to the birds of Europe. This book has quickly become established as the standard field guide for the region. **Highly recommended.**

Macdonald, D and C Barret. 1993. A Field Guide to the Mammals of Britain and Europe. Harper Collins. The latest and best field guide to mammals of the region.

Portrait of the Living Marsh: A collection of paintings produced following the gathering of Europe's top bird artists at Biebrza marshes. Wildlife Art Books.

Chinery, Michael. Butterflies of Britain and Europe. 1998. HarperCollins, London. (ISBN 0-00-220059-7). A good photographic guide to Europe's butterflies and while the following title is out of print, the best alternative to bring on the tour.

OBTAINING BOOKS: Most of the field guides and the major ornithological references in print are available by mail order from booksellers specialising in natural history titles.

Natural History Book Service Ltd
Tel: 01803 865913
www.nhbs.co.uk

Subbuteo Books
Tel: 0870 010 9700
www.wildlifebooks.com

WildSounds
Tel: 01263 741100
www.wildsounds.co.uk

MAPS: Maps of the region may be available from:

The Map Shop
Tel: 01684 593146
www.themapshop.co.uk

Stanfords
Tel: 020 7836 1321
www.stanfords.co.uk

FINAL INFORMATION: Final information with instructions for meeting the group, hotel addresses etc., and your air tickets, will be sent to you about three weeks before the start of the tour. Other news will be communicated as necessary. If you have any questions about any aspect of the tour, please contact us.