

**GERMANY: BIRDS & ART
IN BERLIN & BRANDENBURG**

SEPTEMBER 30–OCTOBER 8, 2016

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By Rick Wright

To anyone whose impressions are still colored by grainy photographs or grainier memories from the days of the Wall, twenty-first-century Berlin is absolutely unrecognizable. The city is lively, bright, and bustling, full of cultural, historical, culinary, and natural highlights that are once again open to all. On this inaugural tour, we took advantage of as many of Berlin's offerings as possible—and most of us, I'm sure, left wanting even more.

Our comfortable hotel, right across the street from a convenient and quickly familiar S-Bahn station, gave us easy access to everything from woodland birds to world-class museums. At times, as on our first afternoon's visit to the medieval treasures of the Museum of Decorative Arts or on our windy walk through the agricultural meadows near Belzig, we found ourselves privileging culture over nature or nature over culture; for the most part, though, each of our destinations throughout the week beautifully combined both aspects of the tour.

The small park surrounding the baroque palace of Charlottenburg, for example, which we visited on an evocatively dim, occasionally misty morning, gave us not only a glimpse into the courtly life of the early eighteenth century, but lingering looks at one of the indisputable highlights of our time together, a massive juvenile Northern Goshawk that blithely ignored our admiring stares as it searched for a juicy starling or pigeon for breakfast. The breathtaking Mandarin Ducks there and at nearby Sans Souci, refuge and residence of Fredrick the Great, were the descendants of birds introduced centuries ago to ornament landscapes already adorned with such native beauties as European Robins, Blue Tits, and Eurasian Jays.

Our first introduction to those and the other common woodland bird of the region was in another former royal and imperial park, the Tiergarten, whose dark woods, quiet ponds, and inviting paths stretch from our hotel to the now effaced border between what were once East Berlin and West Berlin. Colorful Chaffinches fed on the graveled paths while cryptically marked Short-toed Treecreepers and colorful, dashing Great Spotted Woodpeckers worked the tree trunks; most memorable for most of us, though, was probably our first Eurasian Kestrel of the tour, a male circling against the blue sky just above the monumental symbol of German unity, the Brandenburg Gate.

It would have been easy to linger right in the exciting center of Berlin for the entire week, but a few very special birds called us farther afield. Our first visit to the meadows and pastures of the Belzig area was not helped much by the terrific winds, though they made the sight of a Peregrine Falcon flushing Wood-Pigeons from the tall trees even more dramatic; Stock Doves, Linnets, and brightly colored

Yellowhammers did their part, too, to take the sting out of our missing the local bustards, which were no doubt hunkered down in the vast fields out of the raging wind. We made up for it in spades a few days later, when on our way to the large and bird-rich lake at Gülpe we found not one but two flocks of Great Bustards, a total of 33 individuals loafing unconcerned on roadside fields; the numbers of this enormous and enormously appealing bird in Germany have rebounded encouragingly from its post-war low of only about 50 individuals, but the two flocks we encountered still made up something like 15% of the country's entire bustard population, a sobering and at the same time gratifying thought.

October is also prime time for migrant geese and cranes in the region drained by the Oder River. We had good views of Tundra Bean Geese along with the more familiar Graylags and Greater White-fronted Geese, and the crane show was better with each passing day. By the time we paid our visit to the roosting grounds at Linum, the local tally of Common Cranes had neared 65,000. We enjoyed close and lingering looks at small troops on the ground, this year's juveniles still easily picked out as they fed with their parents, then watched in awe as some tens of thousands streamed in during the late afternoon. Along with the Sandhill Crane, this is the only one of the world's gruins whose population is significantly increasing, a circumstance that makes autumn in central Europe that much more exciting.

After millennia of human habitation, of course, even the "wildest" countryside in northeastern Germany is a landscape mixing nature and culture. A particularly evocative example is the thirteenth-century monastery of Chorin, just a few miles from the bottomlands of the Oder River. On the holiday weekend when we visited, the beautiful ruins of the church provided the stage for a festival of local artists and craftsmen and for the afternoon concert of a Black Redstart, singing his gravely, gristly song from 700-year-old brick shaped by the hands of long-gone monks and forgotten peasants.

Berlin's more modern history was all around us, too, in the bullet-pocked walls housing the overwhelming riches of the museums on the Museumsinsel, the busy construction and restoration still underway at the Potsdamer Platz, and the jumbled but still fascinating displays at the Checkpoint Charlie museum commemorating the lives destroyed when a wall divided one of Europe's greatest cities. We are fortunate to live and to visit in a time when Berlin is once again whole, and the surrounding countryside of Brandenburg is once again accessible to visitors interested in nature or art or history—or, like our congenial group, in all of the above, ideally all at once.

ITINERARY:

October 1: Kunstgewerbemuseum, Potsdamer Platz; Lindenbräu dinner.
October 2: Tiergarten, Checkpoint Charlie; Novotel lunch, Lutter and Wegner dinner.
October 3: Teerofenbrücke, Kloster Chorin; Klostercafé lunch, Josty dinner.
October 4: Belziger Landschaftswiesen, Sans-Souci; Mövenpick lunch, Dicke Wirtin dinner.

October 5: Charlottenburg; Marjan Grill dinner.

October 6: Havelländisches Luch, Gülper See; Marzahner Eck lunch, Restauration 1840 dinner.

October 7: Museumsinsel, Linum; Wiener Feinbäckerei lunch, Marjan Grill dinner.

BIRDS:

Waterfowl

Tundra Bean Goose, *Anser serrirostris*: common throughout on fields and lakes, with the best views of birds on the water at Linum.

Greater White-fronted Goose, *Anser albifrons*: abundance difficult to gauge as the flock was so distant at the Gülper See, but we had fine looks (and distinctive listens) at Linum.

Graylag Goose, *Anser anser*: common throughout on fields, especially abundant and conspicuous at the Gülper See and at Linum, where thousands joined the late afternoon flight to roost.

Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*: small numbers throughout on fields and ponds, many pairs still attending full-grown sooty young.

Whooper Swan, *Cygnus cygnus*: two on the water at the Gülper See; a flock of a couple of dozen swans on a field nearby may also have been this species, but there was no way to get close to them.

Mandarin Duck, *Aix galericulata*: common at Sans Souci and Charlottenburg, where this spectacular introduced species has been firmly established for a very long time.

Gadwall, *Anas strepera*: common on the Gülper See and, especially, at Linum; the males were already giving their burping courtship calls.

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*: small numbers throughout, on lakes and ponds and in large parks.

Northern Shoveler, *Anas clypeata*: small numbers at the Gülper See and at Linum.

Northern Pintail, *Anas acuta*: a few at Linum, seen only at a distance as they fed in a mixed flock against the reeds.

Eurasian Wigeon, *Anas penelope*: a few on the Gülper See, more common at Linum.

Common Teal, *Anas crecca*: abundant on the Gülper See, feeding in the muddy shallows like shorebirds; a few also at the Teerofenbrücke and at Linum.

Common Pochard, *Aythya ferina*: common at Linum, flocking with coots and other ducks.

Red-crested Pochard, *Netta rufina*: a half dozen or more at Linum, including one drake still in dull plumage but with a bright red bill.

Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula*: a few at Charlottenburg and on the Gülper See, common at Linum with coots and pochards.

Common Goldeneye, *Bucephala clangula*: a few on the Gülper See; this species breeds commonly throughout Brandenburg.

Common Merganser, *Mergus merganser*: one female-plumaged bird at the Teerofenbrücke.

Pheasants

Common Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus*: small numbers on the fields in the Havelland. This introduced species rarely shows a neck ring in Germany, where it has been established for centuries.

Cormorants

Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*: common throughout, including birds over the city and very large numbers on the Gülper See.

Hérons

Gray Heron, *Ardea cinerea*: small numbers throughout in parks, on fields, and over large wetlands.

Great Egret, *Ardea alba*: still increasing in northeastern Germany, where this impressive species was rare not that many years ago. Our best single-site count was the 27+ at the Gülper See.

Hawks, Kites, and Eagles

Eurasian Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus*: good views of single birds at Sans Souci and at Charlottenburg; some birds just have good taste, it seems.

Northern Goshawk, *Accipiter gentilis*: this species is one of the most sought after in Berlin, and one of the least often seen. The enormous juvenile that landed in bare oak branches above our heads in the park of Charlottenburg Palace was certainly one of the highlights of the entire tour.

Red Kite, *Milvus milvus*: the half dozen we saw in open country was a low number, obviously depressed by dim skies and strong winds; this is a very common species in the right habitat, and conspicuous in the right conditions.

White-tailed Eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*: one of the seven or eight loafing and scavenging at the Gülper See was a fine bright-tailed adult; the closest view was of an immature flying just a few feet from the blind there. Once rare, this species has recovered in northern Germany nearly as well as its close relative in North America.

Rough-legged Hawk, *Buteo lagopus*: another raptor highlight was the individual hovering and hunting over the fields at Linumhorst, apparently the first of this uncommon winterer reported in the area this autumn.

Common Buzzard, *Buteo buteo*: living nicely up to its name, this species was common on fields and along roadsides everywhere, with the most dramatic views of a very dark bird at the Teerofenbrücke.

Bustards

Great Bustard, *Otis tarda*: not always the easiest bird to see, this extremely rare species was missed entirely on our first effort at the windy Belziger Landschaftswiesen; our luck was very different at the Havelländisches Luch, however, where we discovered two flocks totaling 33 birds roosting on open fields not far from the road. The recovery of this bird in Germany remains tenuous, but such numbers are heartening.

Rails

Eurasian Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus*: present in the Tiergarten, but most did not get to see this homely aquatic rail until Linum, when two were floating outside one of the first blinds.

Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*: common in parks and on lakes and ponds throughout; several birds at Linum had their meals stolen repeatedly by pushy Gadwall and other ducks.

Cranes

Common Crane, *Grus grus*: common to abundant throughout on the fields, this species gave a spectacular show at Linum, where we saw a fair portion of the approximately 65,000 individuals roosting in the area.

Plovers

European Golden-Plover, *Pluvialis apricaria*: at least one feeding with Dunlin at the Gülper See. This species is sometimes present in large numbers on the fields, but this year's winds apparently kept them hunkered down out of sight.

Northern Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*: common on the fields, with a couple of flocks of several hundred birds here and there.

Sandpipers

Dunlin, *Calidris alpina*: common on the shores of the Gülper See.

Gulls

Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*: surprisingly small numbers on rivers and ponds.

Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*: a few on the Spree in Berlin, with a couple of dozen on the Gülper See.

Pigeons

Feral Pigeon, *Columba livia*: moderate numbers in urban and agricultural habitats throughout.

Stock Dove, *Columba oenas*: 20 or more at the Belziger Landschaftswiesen, giving excellent views of the wing pattern as they were blown around by stormy winds.

Common Wood-Pigeon, *Columba palumbus*: very common throughout, large flocks even in the cities feeding on beech nuts and acorns.

Eurasian Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*: scattered individuals or pairs in villages, with the total for the tour not reaching 10.

Kingfishers

Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis*: one perched in the reeds at Linum, giving prolonged views of a species more often seen only as an electric-blue streak low over the water

Woodpeckers

Middle Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos medius*: one seen well at the Teerofenbrücke.

Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos major*: common, noisy, and usually easy to see throughout.

Eurasian Green Woodpecker, *Picus viridis*: one seen bounding along over the ponds at Linum.

Falcons

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus*: the first and most memorable was male circling the blue skies above the Brandenburg Gate; otherwise small numbers throughout in open country.

Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*: a juvenile harassing wood-pigeons at the Belziger Landschaftswiesen.

Shrikes

Great Gray Shrike, *Lanius excubitor*: one at the Teerofenbrücke and two or more at the Belziger Landschaftswiesen made for a good showing by this uncommon species.

Jays, Magpies, and Crows

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius*: common throughout, especially in parks and other wooded areas with oaks and beeches.

Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica*: small numbers throughout on agricultural lands and in villages.

Eurasian Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula*: four birds flying across the road on the outskirts of Berlin were strangely the only ones seen all week.

Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*: very common throughout, one of the most conspicuous city birds and present everywhere on tilled fields.

Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone*: scarce in winter so far north and east in Germany, a single bird was in a flock of Hooded Crows in the Havelländisches Luch.

Common Raven, *Corvus corax*: scattered individuals and pairs throughout.

Swallows

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*: half a dozen at the Teerofenbrücke, similarly small numbers at other lowland localities.

Tits

Marsh Tit, *Parus palustris*: two at Sans Souci eluded all but the leader.

Great Tit, *Parus major*: common throughout.

Eurasian Blue Tit, *Cyanistes caeruleus*: common throughout.

Bushtits

Long-tailed Tit, *Aegithalos caudatus*: one flock at the streetcar station at our hotel gave far better views than the birds flying from tree to tree at Charlottenburg.

Nuthatches

Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europaea*: common throughout in wooded habitats such as the Tiergarten, the Teerofenbrücke, Sans Souci, and Charlottenburg.

Treecreepers

Short-toed Treecreeper, *Certhia brachydactyla*: common in the Tiergarten, with smaller numbers in other parks and woodlands.

Wrens

Eurasian Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*: at least half a dozen in Tiergarten, two or three at the Teerofenbrücke and scattered individuals elsewhere, singing loudly on bright mornings.

Kinglets

Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus*: two in Tiergarten, seen well only by the leader.

Leaf Warblers

Common Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*: half a dozen in Tiergarten, several at Teerofenbrücke, some giving occasional snatches of song. This species was considerably less common later in the week, when the cooler weather may have moved many individuals south.

Sylviids

Eurasian Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla*: two in the Tiergarten. This sturdy species is increasingly frequent as a winterer even in northern Germany.

Chats and Flycatchers

European Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*: common in Tiergarten, a couple at the Teerofenbrücke and virtually all other wooded habitats; so familiar and confiding in Britain, robins are much shyer on the continent, but we had excellent views of several.

Black Redstart, *Phoenicurus ochruros*: two or three on the ruins of Chorin, singing in sunny moments.

Thrushes

Eurasian Blackbird, *Turdus merula*: fairly common throughout.

Fieldfare, *Turdus pilaris*: a small roadside flock seen by some.

Song Thrush, *Turdus philomelos*: one fast flyby at the Teerofenbrücke, not seen by all.

Mistle Thrush, *Turdus viscivorus*: several at the Belziger Landschaftswiesen, rocketing past in the wind.

Starlings

European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*: very common on fields in large bands; one flock of some 9,000 roaring through the air at Linum.

Wagtails

White Wagtail: scattered flocks of half a dozen on open areas and in palace gardens.

Buntings

Yellowhammer, *Emberiza citrinella*: common at the Teerofenbrücke and the Belziger Landschaftswiesen.

Reed Bunting, *Emberiza schoeniclus*: three or four at the Teerofenbrücke, with small numbers at the Belziger Landschaftswiesen and Linum too.

Finches

Common Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs*: half a dozen in Tiergarten, a couple at the Teerofenbrücke, small numbers at Sans Souci and Charlottenburg.

European Greenfinch, *Chloris chloris*: about ten at the Teerofenbrücke.

European Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis*: small numbers throughout, with flocks of a couple of dozen in the weeds at the Belziger Landschaftswiesen.

Eurasian Linnet, *Carduelis canebina*: a few in the weeds at the Belziger Landschaftswiesen.

Hawfinch, *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: excellent looks at two of these often elusive birds perched high at the Teerofenbrücke.

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*: fairly common in the Tiergarten and other parks, with small numbers on fields and in small towns in the countryside.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus*: small numbers at the Belziger Landschaftswiesen.

MAMMALS:

Rabbits and Hares

European Rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*: fairly common in city parks and on nighttime lawns.

Squirrels

Eurasian Red Squirrel, *Sciurus vulgaris*: hearteningly common in parks and woodlands.

Mice and Rats

House Mouse, *Mus musculus*: one in a train station in Berlin.

Canids

Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*: one glimpsed crossing the road at Linumhorst.

Roe Deer, *Capreolus capreolus*: common on agricultural fields and pastures.

AMPHIBIANS:

Common Toad, *Bufo bufo*: two on a chilly morning at the Teerofenbrücke.