

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

SEPTEMBER 29–OCTOBER 8, 2017

**LEADER: RICK WRIGHT
LIST COMPILED BY: RICK WRIGHT**

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

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By Rick Wright

“Orkanartige Sturmböen.” Not nearly as much fun as it sounds.

Low pressure tropical storm systems aren’t usually a feature of our autumn visits to eastern Germany, but halfway into this year’s tour, hurricane-force winds drove us out of the usually bird-rich gardens of Charlottenburg Palace. Had this been “just” a birding tour, the day might have felt like wasted time—but the itineraries for our Birds & Art excursions let us make lemonade out of even the most extreme meteorological lemons. We simply walked across the street to the safety of the Berggruen and Bröhan museums, marveling over the Picassos and Matisses and admiring masterpieces of the art nouveau while outside leaves and branches and trees tumbled and swirled in the most powerful storm the region had experienced in ten years. We would make up for it later in the tour, when most of us enjoyed a chamber concert in Charlottenburg’s White Salon, the perfect setting for an intimate and peaceful evening of fine music.

Happily, the weather over the rest of our ten days in Germany’s great metropolis and the surrounding countryside was more welcoming. Intermittent mist and occasional sprinkles kept our rain jackets close at hand, but we also had periods nearly every day of beautiful blue skies, none more heart-rendingly lovely than an afternoon at Frederick the Great’s palace of Sans Souci, where over-the-top baroque gardens and the fanciest of rococo architecture provided the cultural backdrop for our encounters with a dazzling Common Kingfisher, noisy Middle Spotted Woodpecker, surprisingly abundant Hawfinches, and snowball-headed Long-tailed Tits.

Good weather is nice, but it’s far from the most important part of a tour.

Nature and culture would come together again and again during our trip. Yellow-legged Gulls and Great Cormorants welcomed us to the Museum Island, where we paid our respects to Nefertiti, the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, and the Ishtar Gate. The centuries-old fish ponds at Altfriedland harbored thousands of waterfowl, including Barnacle and Bar-headed geese among the abundant Tundra Bean, Graylag, and Greater White-fronteds; our lunch overlooking the ruins of the town’s thirteenth-century monastery was enlivened by a male Black Redstart on a rooftop out the restaurant window. The ancient carriageways through the Tiergarten, the 500-acre forest across the street from our comfortable hotel, gave us easy access to fruiting trees and bushes full of resident birds and migrants fattening for the rest of their southward journey; our first afternoon’s walk stalled completely in front of a dogwood thicket where such Christmas-card-colorful birds as European Robins, Blackcaps, Song Thrushes, Blue and Great tits, and European Nuthatches were gorging themselves on the ripe drupes, all watched over by the ghosts of kings and emperors and the shimmering Nike atop the Victory Column.

That column—towering more than 200 feet above our hotel’s street—was a welcome landmark and a constant reminder of Berlin’s complicated and often catastrophic past. One less tragic result of the city’s history is its remarkable mixture of architectural styles, almost all of which were on view on our walks together: from the commercial modernism of the Sony Center and its wonderful restaurants to the historicizing kitsch of the Reichstag topped by its marvelous mirrored glass dome, which we visited on our second afternoon for a breathtaking view of Berlin and its rural environs. And above it all, Wood Pigeons and Hooded Crows and flocks of southbound Chaffinches.

A handsome cityscape may not be the most important part of a good tour.

It was hard at times to turn from the city’s surprising natural wonders to its artistic marvels, but we managed. The Guelph Treasure, an incredible hoard of medieval art and artifacts, was fascinating not just for its inherent value but for its twisted past, both illuminating the complicated relationships between church and state at the end of the Middle Ages and recalling the often sinister ways that works of art changed hands in the Germany of the 1930s. The imposing ruins of the Cistercian monastery at Chorin demonstrated how the forms and traditions of architecture in stone were translated into the homelier material of red brick. And the White-tailed Eagles soaring over the trees on the eastern—the Polish—bank of the Oder River reminded us of the geopolitical fluidity that has so long characterized this beautiful landscape.

Historically evocative places and objects are not the most important part of a good tour.

Our experiences and our thoughts were punctuated with some excellent meals in the city’s most authentic “Old Berlin” restaurants. The most charming, or the most idiosyncratic, of all, was in the country, though, where following a successful search for Great Bustards, stuffed birds and beasts and an antique music box welcomed us to the traditional inn at the Marzahner Eck.

Good food may not be the most important part of a good tour, but just try it sometime without it: it’s possible, but how much better the birding when it is followed by a hearty risotto or schnitzel.

It was a delight to explore one of my favorite parts of the world with such a sharp-eyed and congenial group. And there we have what is truly the most important part of a good tour: new friends and old whose interests are broad, whose spirits are high, and whose humor is good.

ITINERARY:

September 29: flights to Berlin.

September 30: introductory meeting in hotel, Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of Decorative Arts), dinner at Lindenbräu.

October 1: breakfast in hotel, Tiergarten birding, lunch at Englisches Teehaus, break, Reichstag dome, dinner at Lutter & Wegener.

October 2: breakfast in hotel, Teerofenbrücke and lower Oder Valley, lunch at Kreta in Eberswalde, Chorin Monastery, break, dinner in hotel.

October 3: breakfast in hotel, Sans Souci palace gardens, lunch at Alter Stadtwächter, Sans Souci palace tour, break, dinner at Restauration 1840.

October 4: breakfast in hotel, Garlitz and Gülper See, lunch at Marzahner Eck, break, dinner at Josty.

October 5: breakfast in hotel, Museum Island, lunch at Bode Café, briefly Charlottenbug, Bröhan and Berggruen museums, dinner at Opera Italia.

October 6: breakfast in hotel, Altfriedland, lunch at Klosterschänke, break, concert in Charlottenburg palace, dinner in hotel.

October 7: breakfast in hotel, free time and lunch on own, Linum crane fields, break, dinner at Lutter & Wegener.

October 8: breakfast in hotel, departures.

BIRDS:

Waterfowl

Graylag Goose, *Anser anser*: common in and over wetlands throughout.

Greater White-fronted Goose, *Anser albifrons*: rather small numbers in wetlands throughout, total for the tour less than 100.

Tundra Bean Goose, *Anser serrirostris*: the most abundant and conspicuous goose of the countryside, total for the tour in the thousands. Three birds flew—or rather, blew—over Charlottenburg in the storm.

Bar-headed Goose, *Anser indicus*: one very handsome adult in the goose flock at Altfriedland. This introduced species has established breeding populations at scattered sites in Germany, and can be encountered in small numbers with migrant waterfowl.

Barnacle Goose, *Branta leucopsis*: one at Altfriedland; this is an uncommon species inland in eastern Germany, usually arriving in early October.

Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*: small numbers in wetlands and parks throughout.

Mandarin Duck, *Aix galericulata*: common at Sans Souci, where this stunning introduced species has established a healthy self-sustaining population.

Northern Shoveler, *Anas clypeata*: small numbers in waterfowl flocks throughout.

Gadwall, *Anas strepera*: common and conspicuous on wetlands throughout.

Eurasian Wigeon, *Anas penelope*: small numbers on our first excursions, but arrivals were evident in the course of the tour, with ever-increasing flocks by the time we visited Linum.

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*: common and conspicuous on wetlands throughout.

Northern Pintail, *Anas acuta*: like the Eurasian Wigeon, increasingly common towards the end of the tour, with the largest numbers at the Gülper See and Linum.

Common Teal, *Anas crecca*: common on wetlands throughout.

Common Pochard, *Aythya ferina*: common at Linum and Altfriedland.

Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula*: small numbers throughout on wetlands and in large parks.

Common Goldeneye, *Bucephala clangula*: only about four total for the tour, at Altfriedland and Linum.

Grebes

Great Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus*: moderate numbers on larger ponds; some young birds still showing striped faces.

Little Grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: two birds at close range at Linum.

Pigeons

Feral Pigeon, *Columba livia*: common in Berlin and surrounding small towns.

Stock Dove, *Columba oenas*: a few with wood pigeons on fields around Garlitz.

Common Wood-Pigeon, *Columba palumbus*: common to abundant throughout, gorging on acorns and beech nuts in agricultural and urban areas alike.

Eurasian Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*: scarce in villages in the countryside; much more abundant in western Germany. Total for the tour less than ten individuals.

Bustards

Great Bustard, *Otis tarda*: fifteen flying (!) low overhead at Garlitz represented a significant percentage of the entire country's population.

Rails

Eurasian Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus*: small numbers on wetlands throughout, including in city parks.

Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*: common throughout, especially on larger marshes and lakes, but also in city parks.

Water Rail, *Rallus aquaticus*: one flushed from edge of path at Altfriedland to give good, if brief, views in flight.

Cranes

Common Crane, *Grus grus*: common in small flocks on fields throughout the countryside; largest flocks at Linum, as expected, where some thousands were gathered on the roadsides and gave outstandingly good views.

Plovers

Northern Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*: flocks of several dozen at some open-country sites, including Gülper See and Garlitz.

Sandpipers

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

Little Stint, *Calidris minuta*: two or three very active juveniles on the shore of the Gülper See.

Gulls

Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*: fairly common on marshes and ponds and along rivers and canals in Berlin.

Yellow-legged Gull, *Larus michahellis*: two or three at the Museum Island, and small numbers on larger ponds in the countryside, including a dozen or more roosting with cormorants at the Gülper See.

Cormorants

Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*: common throughout, with especially large numbers at the Gülper See.

Hérons

Gray Heron, *Ardea cinerea*: small numbers throughout, on ponds and marshes and in city parks.

Great Egret, *Ardea alba*: small numbers throughout. One flew over the Brandenburg Gate; the highest count was of more than 20 at Altfriedland.

Hawks, Kites, and Eagles

Eurasian Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*: one at the Gülper See, one at Linum.

Red Kite, *Milvus milvus*: conspicuous in open country, on many days the most common raptor seen from our minibus.

Black Kite, *Milvus migrans*: one at Altfriedland. This species is uncommon in northern Germany.

Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*: one at Altfriedland, one at Linum. A scarce breeder in the region, most are gone by October.

White-tailed Eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*: small numbers throughout on ponds and lakes and over the lower Oder.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus*: one in Potsdam.

Northern Goshawk, *Accipiter gentilis*: a fast fly-by at Sans Souci.

Common Buzzard, *Buteo buteo*: common in the countryside.

Kingfishers

Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis*: one in flight and briefly perched at Sans Souci.

Woodpeckers

Middle Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos medius*: one perched in the open at Sans Souci.

Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos major*: small numbers throughout, including city parks and the Tiergarten.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, *Dryobates minor*: one perched briefly in the parking lot at the aptly named Vogelsdorf while most of us were inside at a rest stop.

Eurasian Green Woodpecker, *Picus viridis*: heard and briefly seen at Sans Souci.

Falcons

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus*: small numbers throughout.

Merlin, *Falco columbarius*: one seen by some at Altfriedland.

Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*: one seen from the vehicle by some.

Jays, Magpies, and Crows

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius*: common throughout, with good views to be had in the larger parks and Tiergarten.

Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica*: fairly common in the countryside.

Eurasian Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula*: scarce, seen only twice during the entire tour.

Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*: common throughout, and the most conspicuous bird in urban areas of Berlin.

Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone*: a couple of apparently “pure” individuals in the Havelland.

Common Raven, *Corvus corax*: small numbers throughout in open country.

Larks

Eurasian Sky Lark, *Alauda arvensis*: a few flyovers at the Gülper See and Linum.

Swallows

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*: common, with flocks of a dozen or more frequently seen over fields.

Bank Swallow, *Riparia riparia*: one feeding over the ponds at Linum.

Tits

Marsh Tit, *Parus palustris*: heard and briefly seen at Sans Souci and at the Gülper See.

Great Tit, *Parus major*: common and conspicuous throughout.

Coal Tit, *Periparus ater*: seen by some at Sans Souci.

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

Bushtits

Long-tailed Tit, *Aegithalos caudatus*: six or seven white-headed birds seen very well by some at Sans Souci; another small flock at Linumhorst seen briefly by some from the vehicle.

Nuthatches

Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europaea*: common throughout, easily seen in the Tiergarten.

Treecreepers

Short-toed Treecreeper, *Certhia brachydactyla*: small numbers in woodlands, with the best views in the Tiergarten.

Wrens

Eurasian Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*: small numbers heard at several woodland sites, with the best views of this often secretive bird at Sans Souci.

Kinglets

Firecrest, *Regulus ignicapilla*: good views eventually had by most of the group behind the bus parking lot at Sans Souci.

Leaf Warblers

Common Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*: small numbers throughout.

Sylviids

Eurasian Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla*: small numbers throughout, with the best views of males and females in the Tiergarten and at Sans Souci.

Reed Warblers

Reed warbler sp., *Acrocephalus sp.*: one seen fleetingly at Altfriedland was likely a Eurasian reed warbler.

Chats and Flycatchers

European Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*: small numbers throughout, with especially good views in city parks.

Black Redstart, *Phoenicurus ochruros*: one distant and high on a building ledge at the Kulturforum was eclipsed several days later by a fine male singing from a rooftop in Altfriedland.

Thrushes

Eurasian Blackbird, *Turdus merula*: common and conspicuous throughout.

Song Thrush, *Turdus philomelos*: excellent views of several birds feeding from fruiting bushes in the Tiergarten.

Mistle Thrush, *Turdus viscivorus*: the majority of the large thrushes moving at the edge of migrant finch flocks were of this species.

Starlings

European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*: common throughout.

Old World Sparrows

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*: fairly common throughout, most abundant in the city.

Wagtails

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*: very small numbers, with the best views of a bird perched on the roof of the Cistercian church in Altfriedland.

Finches

Common Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs*: very common overhead, and common in woodland settings throughout.

Hawfinch, *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: remarkable numbers at the park of Sans Souci; it was impossible to count them as they roamed the woods, but a minimum of two dozen seems likely.

European Greenfinch, *Chloris chloris*: heard only at the Teerofenbrücke. This species appears to be declining rapidly in northern Germany.

European Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis*: a few roadside birds near Schwedt.

Eurasian Linnet, *Carduelis canebina*: a small flock swept past at the Teerofenbrücke, giving only the leader good views.

Buntings

Yellowhammer, *Emberiza citrinella*: excellent views of two or three individuals feeding on the path and perching on bare branches at the Teerofenbrücke.

MAMMALS:

Rabbits and Hares

European Hare, *Lepus europaeus*: two on a field near Linum.

Squirrels

Eurasian Red Squirrel, *Sciurus vulgaris*: small numbers in woodlands throughout, especially well seen in the Tiergarten.

Mice and Rats

A rather large, furry-tailed rodent seen crossing the path in the Tiergarten remains a mystery.

Canids

Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*: two very handsome animals on the fields at Linumhorst.

Deer

Roe Deer, *Capreolus capreolus*: common on fields.

AMPHIBIANS:

Common Toad, *Bufo bufo*: chilled on the path at the Teerofenbrücke.

Green or Edible Frog, *Pelophylax sp.*: heard at the Teerofenbrücke.