

# FROM THE AZORES TO ZAVOTSKOY – THE NATIONAL BIRDS OF EUROPA SPREAD THEIR WINGS

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Zavotskoy may only be an obscure suburb of Vladivostok but the sale of the magnificent Russian stamp for Europa 2019 from its post office would allow an A-Z to demonstrate the impressive geographical scope of the 2019 Europa National Birds issue!

This was not the only factor that made an impression on me after the issues started to stream in about March last year. I had decided that this was an opportunity to assemble an easy cameo collection within my bird stamp collection. It was not to prove so!

My last recollection of taking notice of Europa stamps was when a friend at school gave me the stamps for the first GB Europa issue in 1961! Even a year ago, I only had a vague idea that the number of countries issuing these stamps was more than just the 28 members of the EU – right, there turned out to be 66 in the end!

## **Europa, CEPT and Bird Stamps**

The organisation of Europa issues was therefore my first topic for research. The first issues were in 1956, hard on the heels of the signing of the Treaty of Rome by the 6 new member states of the former EEC, and prior to the forming of the CEPT, the European Conference of Posts and Telecommunications, in 1959, which became the official postal coordinator in Europe and the promoter of the Europa series.

By then, the theme for the Europa stamps was a different symbol of union or peace each year, used by all the members of CEPT until 1973. The only birds to appear on these stamp designs were the peace doves of 1958 and 1961, shown in *Fig 1*. on stamps of Germany and Saarland (1958), Great Britain (on the first anniversary of its membership) and Belgium (1961) but which featured on the stamps of a total of 8 and 16 countries in these respective years.



*FIG 1. Europa peace doves of 1958 and 1961*

## **Expansion under PostEurop**

The membership of CEPT continued to expand between 1974 and 1992, due initially to EEC/EU enlargement but latterly more so to the integration of services into the former Soviet bloc. The number of administrations issuing Europa stamps rose by a further 17 to 42.

With an increasingly free market approach to the provision of services, the provider role of the postal administrations was split from the regulatory one of CEPT, and PostEurop was formed to represent them in 1993. PostEurop took over the promotion of Europa stamps reaching a membership today of 54. Yet, these are not the only country administrations issuing Europa stamps.

Kosovo is an example of a non PostEurop member, as it is still only recognised by 94 of the 193 UN members; nevertheless it issues unofficial Europa stamps. Autonomous republics within the former Soviet states also operate on an unofficial basis, such as the Republic of Artsakh in Azerbaijan or Transnistria (the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, PMR) in Moldova.

■ EUROPA



Fig 2. Kosovo miniature sheet of three species (one misidentified as Great Tit instead of Yellow Wagtail) and one of two stamps with labels from Transnistria (PMR) not bearing the official Europa logo.

On the other hand, if a single postal service provides for a number of countries, all the countries may issue different official Europa stamps, e.g. Postnord represents the 5 Scandinavian states along with Greenland and Faeroes (Danish autonomous territories) and yet Åland, an autonomous island region of Finland, has its own official agency, Åland Post, and is a member in its own right (Fig 3.).



Fig 3. Gutter block from Ålandpost and Andorra's issues from its neighbouring administrations, La Poste and Correos.

In the case of the UK, a member of PostEurop, the Crown Dependencies of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man and the Overseas Territory of Gibraltar all issued Europa stamps in the 2019 series, but not GB itself – more on this later. Portugal and its autonomous regions of Azores and Madeira made three issues, with the mother country using one each of the same stamps as its island territories. Then there is the situation of dual, or even triple, postal services in a single country – Andorra (Fig 3.), Cyprus and Bosnia Herzegovina, for example.

### Thematic Issues

From 1973, a common Europa theme was adopted each year, related to culture, history or environment, before PostEurop came into existence in 1993. However, with more focused commercial aims, it was established not only to coordinate postal services but to promote them, one means being through philately. The thematic Europa issues became key to this, with subject appeal to collectors, a multitude of “official products” and an annual design competition.

One might have expected that birds would have appeared more often than they did in the 45 years to 2018. However, in this time, only 11 birds appeared on Europa stamps. The first and most prolific occurrence of birds was in the Nature Conservation theme of 1986. These included the European Robin (Norway), Greater Flamingo (Cyprus), Cory's Shearwater (Madeira) and Common Kestrel (San Marino).



Fig 4. Bird stamps from the Europa 1986 issue for Nature Conservation

Other birds to appear were the White Stork (Russia 1995), Three toed Woodpecker (Poland 1999), Water Rail (Liechtenstein 1999), Greater Flamingo (France 1999), Robin (Madeira 2011) and Grey Heron (Rumania 2012). The 2019 issue increased the number more than tenfold.

### National Birds or Native Birds?

Another of my incorrect assumptions about this issue when I started was that the term ‘national bird’ was meant to refer to the designated emblematic bird for any country. I was reminded of a series of three articles on the subject by the late Phil Landspeary in “Flight” in 2008. This is turn referred to a detailed analysis by Reg Jones of all 108 official national birds in the world which appear on stamps, with every issue of each bird listed by country, in five editions from March 2003 to March 2004.

Of the 66 administrations issuing Europa stamps, only 31 have official national birds according to Wikipedia, while 16 have unofficial national birds and 19 have none at all. Indeed, of the 31 official national birds of the Europa countries only 14 appear on the 2019 Europa stamps. So, had PostEurop discovered something that the rest of did not know?

In the case of the 2019 Europa theme, however, it turns out that the term was to be taken as referring to any bird which is native to that country, as the issues emerging in May from Germany and France made clear. “Heimische Vögel” (native birds) on Germany’s Europa stamp and “Oiseaux de nos Régions” (regional birds) on the French stamp suggested that something had been lost in the English translation of the brief written by an official in PostEurop HQ on Boulevard Brand Whitlock in Brussels. Admittedly, the attractive but impractical tete-beche Belgian sheetlet uses both Flemish and French languages to describe the Jay and Oriole in their issue as “Nationale Vogels” and “Oiseaux Nationaux”!



*Fig 5. Not only do these stamps from Germany and France carry titles which clarify the theme of the issue but they represent two contrasting approaches to design. The German image of Yellowhammers is adapted from an illustration in John Gould's early seminal work on Birds of Europe (1832). The modern design for the French stamp was commissioned from Japanese origami artist Tatsuya Oka as a flock of Swallows with references to the French Tricolour and in origami style.*

Altogether, 120 stamps, illustrating 124 birds were issued by the 66 administrations for the 2019 Europa theme, although 13 did not carry the Europa logo. Apart from the non PostEurop members, some countries issued Europa stamps within sets on a wider theme. Jersey and Guernsey, for example, designated only two stamps for Europa out of sets of 6 birds and Isle of Man issued a set of 10 stamps featuring a range of the island's wildlife, including the single Stonechat stamp for Europa.

Out of 79 species represented, the top five species featuring in the Europa 2019 stamps were the Golden Eagle (8 stamps), White Stork (7 stamps), Barn Swallow (5 stamps), Peregrine Falcon (4 stamps) and Goldfinch (4 stamps).

### **A Curious case of Non Participation**

Only two members of PostEurop did not issue stamps for the 2019 Native Birds theme. Albania promised but failed to deliver, leaving only GB unaccounted for as a PostEurop member. For those who knew that Royal Mail had only issued Europa stamps once, in 2017, after a continuous period of 30 years up to 2013, it was maybe no surprise that there was no GB issue. However, what better opportunity than to use a couple of the excellent Birds of Prey issue in April to support the Europa theme. Perhaps Royal Mail was misled by the meaning of National Birds in the way I was and drew the line at yet another Robin on GB stamps?

Of course, those of us in Wales and Scotland were delighted that this set featured the Red Kite and Golden Eagle, voted the unofficial national birds of the respective devolved nations in ballots held by the RSPB in 2007 and 2013. There was no opportunity to feature the Oyster Catcher, however, which has been the unofficial bird of Northern Ireland since 1960.



*Fig 6. Two values from the GB Birds of Prey issue of April 2019 representing the unofficial national birds of Scotland (Golden Eagle) and Wales (Red Kite).*

### **Significance of the Featured Species**

Of the 14 countries which clearly took the opportunity to feature their official national birds, 4 countries (Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, and Ukraine) featured the White Stork, while Estonia's Swallow, Iceland's

Gyr Falcon, Latvia's White Wagtail, Malta's Blue Rock Thrush, Norway's Dipper and Sweden's Blackbird all feature. Hungary relegated its national bird, the Saker Falcon, to the surrounds of a miniature sheet featuring a White Stork and a Great Egret.

Surprisingly, there is little reference to a conservation theme. Serbia features the endangered Squacco Heron and the Russia Federation the critically endangered Siberian Crane (current global population estimated at just 3000 birds). Slovakia, which issued its stamp of a European Roller (*Coracias garrulus*) under the heading of Rare Birds, includes a full information sheet in the first day cover highlighting the decline of the bird in Europe, as well as making references to the significance of the bird in early Slovak mythology.

By far the most interesting story around species selection comes from Georgia which used the opportunity to issue a miniature sheet to highlight the Legend of Tbilisi, the tale of the founding of its capital city. The story goes that the king of Georgia went hunting in a forest with a hawk which caught a pheasant. In the struggle both birds fell into a nearby hot spring. The king was so impressed with the discovery that he decided to build the city known as Tbilisi or "warm place". The Sparrow hawk is now the emblem of the city.



Fig 7. Georgia's birds from the Legend of Tbilisi

### The Design Competitions

In 2002, to raise the profile of Europa stamps, PostEurop decided to hold a ballot at its annual plenary session of members to award a winning design for the year. In 2007, the vote was opened to the public on the Internet and, in 2011, a jury of philatelic experts was added to make a different award. The public vote winners for 2019 are shown in Fig 8. and those of the jury in Fig 9.

The editor has already conducted a debate in the latter half of 2019 on the design merits of the stamps, with some controversy over the competition results. If I am to add my tuppenceworth, I would point

out that bird stamp collectors were unlikely to have contributed a significant element of the 25,000 votes, nor collectors of any particular Europa theme for that matter. The merits of what passes as a “good bird stamp” to us, therefore, would be lost on someone who is more interested in the purpose of Europa, artistic style, postal functionality, or even last year’s theme on bridges. Indeed, most non-Europa collectors would, like me, not even have been aware of the vote until long after it had taken place.

Accordingly, I can only agree with the editor’s “pick” of the Russian Siberian Crane stamp. It’s a beauty, with drama, ornithological interest, habitat interest, a well laid out, big stamp to boot. Having said that, I find the jury pick of the Slovenian Bearded Reedling, equally satisfying as a bird stamp. If you are to look at stylistic aspects, at least the jury’s runner up of the imposing eagle’s head against a subdued background of a forested mountainside, is a pleasing study in impressionism. On the other hand, the public pick of the Armenian Swallow in a decorative art style may be pretty, but that is all. Please write in to the editor if you have seen a swallow in a flowery bush? And what about that Turkish owl – was that a case of tactical voting, Eurovision style?



Fig 8. Jury vote winners for 2019 – First prize Slovenia (Bearded Reedling); Second prize Liechtenstein (Golden Eagle); Third prize Finland (Whooper Swan in se-tenant pair)



Fig 9. Public vote winners for 2019 – First prize Armenia (Barn Swallow); Second prize Turkey (Pallid Scops Owl); Third prize Finland (see Fig 8)

### The Bird Song App

The final, but arguably most intriguing aspect of the issue is the use of Augmented Reality (AR) to allow appreciation of the song of the birds on a smart phone. AR had been used for sound experience with the 2014 Musical Instruments issue and here it was provided through the free CEE-App which could be downloaded, with an online video guide on its use. It was used by 23 countries, some of which prompted the use of the app. through a label attached to the stamp, as with the Norway stamp in Fig.9



Fig 9. The Norway stamp has a tab referring to the bird song app which allows the listener to hear the song of Norway’s national bird, the Dipper.

### Conclusion

As the write-up of my Europa 2019 National Birds collection heads towards completion, at 80 pages (having decided to add first day covers to allow a full page for each country) it is rather more than I expected at the outset. However, it has added an interesting, up to date perspective on birds as iconic representations of national identity.

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