

The Netherlands & Belgium | May 14 – 26, 2026

Trip Report by Kris Faber



**With guide Carl Grillett, NJ Staff Host Kris Faber,
and clients Clara, Christina, Christa & Robert**



Thursday, May 14

Arrival | Naardermeer Nature Preserve | Konik

Today Carl and I met Christina and Clara at the Arrivals area at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam and then we headed over to the Citizens Airport hotel to pick up Christa and Robert. After introductions and Carl's skillful luggage organization in the van, we headed out of the city, northeast to Naardeen where we had a lovely lunch outside at the nature center getting to know each other. While having lunch, we were lucky enough to spot a Purple Heron and a White Stork flying overhead, giving us a nice preview of the wonderful species we would see on our trip.

We had a nice walk on the grounds getting spectacular views and pictures of the Northern Lapwing and the White Stork in the fields before we headed deeper into the trails. The group was also introduced to Carl's exceptional bird song identification skills along the way, when we were able to hear the Common Reed Warbler, Common Whitethroat and European Greenfinch.

On our way towards the hotel, we were able to stop and see the herds of Konik Horse that are direct descendants of the Tarpan. They are left to roam free as part of the rewilding efforts of this area. We checked into our hotel in Lelystad where we would stay for two nights. We enjoyed dinner and the bird checklist tonight at our hotel restaurant, where Carl also started the important task of translating the menu for us.

Friday, May 15

Oosterderplassen Nature Preserve | Marker Wadden

We woke up and had a nice breakfast at the hotel restaurant, and we were off to the Oosterderplassen Nature Preserve, which is part of man-made reclaimed land built with dikes to help create new habitat for birds and other species. We took a lovely bird song filled path to a hide over the lakes where we saw multiple species of waterfowl including Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Mallard, Common Shelduck, Graylag Geese, and Mute Swan.

On our way out of the park, Carl tuned in to a rare bird alert in the area, and we stopped along a road next to a lake to find one single Baikal Teal.

In the afternoon we headed for the boat dock to board the Marker Wadden Ferry to take us across to the artificial archipelago developed in the Markermeer Lake as part of the reclaimed land rewilding project. The ferry ride was comfortable, and we enjoyed coffee, conversation, and comfort from the rain while onboard.

We had a nice quick lunch at the nature center café and headed out to explore. We spotted several Eurasian Oystercatcher, Common Ringed Plover, and a Little Ringed Plover and a Kentish Plover. We happened upon a great hide with an underwater view just in time to get out of the rain where we happily watched more waterfowl and shore birds from a waterline perspective.

We also spotted plenty of Common Moorhen and Eurasian Coot families with little chicks along the way that Clara cleverly named “Sith Babies” because of their black and red coloring (a Star Wars reference). The final surprise was several Pied Avocet, young and old, milling about the mudflats in the center of the island. We did hear the “boom boom” of the Eurasian Bittern today and did all we could to find him in the reeds, to no avail.

Then it was dinner and bird checklist at the hotel’s restaurant where the menu was well translated again by our fearless leader Carl.



Saturday, May 16 Ezumakeeg Lauwersmeer National Park | Seal Sanctuary

We had breakfast at our hotel and packed up, venturing further north towards Friesland, with great birding stops on the way. We paused to check out the Seal Rehabilitation and Research Center, where Christina spotted a Common Redshank by the docks. We decided to break for lunch here and support the seal research center and then move on for more birding.

We made several stops along the road and continued to explore the National Park. Carl’s networking skills paid off, and we found the popular place to spot the Ruff —four males in full breeding plumage, some in white and some in black. They were magnificent! We had plenty of lapwings to marvel at as well and we spotted a Green-winged Teal.



We headed toward our new hotel at the Fredeshiem Estate and settled in to clean up and get ready for dinner. The estate was on spectacular grounds with quiet country roads and trails to explore for a pre-dinner birding outing. Just the parking lot and outside our room doors offered us beautiful views and sounds of nature where we were able to get an up close and personal look at just how big the Wood Pigeon are in Europe, as one perched in a tree outside our windows. Dinner was spectacular and the group started to get used to using their phone apps to translate the menu.

Sunday, May 17 Giethoorn Canal Villages | DeWieden | Weerribben

Today's treat was exploring the canal villages that are often called the "Venice of the Netherlands". We hopped on a covered boat for a delightful tour along the watery streets, along beautiful gardens and under magical arched bridges. We ventured further out of the village across the lake into the National Park, where we stepped off to take a climb atop the tower for a panoramic view. Special sightings included an up-close view of a Mute Swan pair and their babies, a giant long haired tuxedo cat in the village, and a specialty cheese shop with samples.

We ventured over to another part of De Wieden National Park to enjoy a walk through the gardens lavished with insect houses, boardwalks through the wetlands, and windmills. We stopped by the nature center for some gift shopping, and we also had a wonderful lunch at the nature center's very quaint café. Here, Carl surprised us with a plate full of delicious, sweet treats after our meal.

We headed a bit further northwest after lunch to our new home for the next few nights. The Herberg de Loohoeve is a lovely inn close to the town of Schoonloo. The Inn has an amazing dining room with a beautiful patio, the inn keeper's very well-behaved dog and free-range chickens.

Monday, May 18 Boger Dolmans | Orvelt Historical Town | Dwingerldervel National Park

We had a very restful night sleep at the Herberg De Loohoeve where we all sat down to have one of the most amazing breakfast presentations I had ever seen. A large charcuterie board presented with yogurt, granola, handmade bread, pastries, meats, cheeses, and fruit.



Today we explored the ancient stone monuments of the area, which are often called the Stone Henge of the Netherlands. The main dolman consists of 28 support stones and 9 giant stone caps. Robert, our expert geologist among us, was enthralled with the different glacial rocks that were transported to this location during the ice age. We ended with a mythical grand finale listening to a local musician known as “Oakbeing” who played his homemade oak root didgeridoo in the forest amphitheater for us.

We stopped for lunch at our hotel patio with the chickens and the inn keeper’s dog, then ventured to the historic museum village of Orvelt. Here we enjoyed the view into the wool shop window with bags of wool and the sheep herding dog peering at us through the window.

On our way to Dwingelderveld National Park we spotted many storks, some nesting on farm silos and power lines and sightings of the Common Buzzard were abundant as well. Today’s afternoon walk took us far off the beaten path, where we were able to finally get a good look at the very vocal Wood Warbler that had been singing to us along the path.

At the end of our wooded trail, we were met with a wide-open lake and a gorgeous view of the Eurasian Spoonbill and its amazing bill. The antics of a Black Woodpecker and its sloppy dinner manners at a tree stump entertained Christa to giggles until it was time to head back to the van. We ended our evening with another amazing dinner at our hotel, and we were lucky enough to spy a double rainbow over the thatched roof of the building outside our hotel.

Tuesday, May 19 Detour to Germany | Eagle Owls at Quarry | Belgium

Today we departed our lovely inn after another amazing large charcuterie board breakfast and headed south and east towards Belgium. Carl thought a detour to Germany would be exciting and we were able to see both the Greater and Chilean Flamingos (the Chileans here originated from an escaped captive flock) nesting. There were many other nesting gulls, and the hide was quite a lively sounding place.

As we crossed back over the border into the Netherlands, we stopped at Willinks Weust Nature Preserve near a quarry in search of the Eurasian Eagle Owl that nest in the cliffsides. After just a few minutes of standing at the hide built just for watching the owls, Clara, who is quite our “eagle eye” spotted the adult for the whole group and the other birders at the hide. We were then able to locate the babies nearby and we could even see them circling and bobbing their heads in owl-fashioned circles through our lenses.

We had a long drive to make it to Turnhout, Belgium, but we had Eagle Owlets and flamingos on our minds. We had dinner tonight in a historic restaurant on the grounds of Postel Abbey, and then we headed over to our hotel, which was also on the grounds of a medieval abbey that functions as an event center and hotel, and they also make their own beer.



Wednesday, May 20 Liereman Reserve | Sculpture Garden | Artist Studio

We had some free time to venture about the grounds at the Corendonk Hotel full of lovely gardens and architecture. Most of us ventured out around Turnhout, Carl's stomping ground.

We visited a private garden and art studio, along with an amazing garden full of mystical sculptures by one of Carl's friends. We were able to spot some cranes in the field next to the road on our way to visit Liereman nature preserve and had lunch where Carl actively collaborates on conservation projects, which includes tending to the nesting boxes of Little Owl.

We had the final Carl stomping ground stop today where we visited Carl's lovely flat where his partner Paulien shared her amazing artwork with us. We then headed out to Fort van Broechem, Paulien in tow, to peer into the fort's gunports in search of Barn Owl. We were able to spot one that stayed very still for us to take many pictures. We then took a short drive to the area of Anderstad to meet up with one of Carl's ornithologist friends who helped us spot the Great Reed Warbler along the banks. We were also treated to a show of a baby Great Crested Grebe taking a ride on its mother's back.

We had a late dinner today at a nearby restaurant and then headed back to our old abbey hotel for our second and last night near Carl's town.

Thursday, May 21 Bastogne War Memorial | Bois Jacques Foxholes | Night Mammal Safari

Today we stopped at the Bastogne war memorial. Some of us took optional museum time inside while others stayed at the outdoor cafe and outdoor memorial grounds to take in such sobering wartime history. We then took a walk through the foxhole area of the easy Company of the 101st Airborne Division. In the foxhole forest,

we padded softly on the quiet pine floor, soaking in the history. We were then gifted with a song and view of the Common Firecrest right above us in the tall pines.

We continued into the Ardennes region of Belgium where we found our way to the lovely La Panorama Nardrin Hotel, our lovely home for the next two nights, where the owner Stephane and his wife only spoke French. The view and the grounds of the inn were spectacular, and we were able to spot Red Kite soaring over the valley right in the back yard of the Inn.

After dinner, we took a night safari with one of Carl's naturalist friends who helped us spot Beaver, Red Deer and Roe Deer with the assistance of a thermal night vision scope. Jorn, our night guide, has been involved in rewilding and conservation efforts that have helped bring back the European Beaver that was previously wiped out of Belgium.

We slept well with the sound of frogs lulling us to sleep at La Panorama tonight.

Friday, May 22 Chabrehez Beaver Reserve | Ardennes | Nardin Hotel Grounds

After a wonderful breakfast served up by the hotel owner Stephane, we headed out to explore the areas around Nardrin and the Chebrehez Beaver Reserve where we were last night for some of our night safari. We walked a tractor path along farm pastures enjoying watching some beautiful horses graze, then Carl lifted some snake boards, and we were able to spot our first and only Grass Snake. We also found a few very well-established beaver dams and spotted the beautiful Cleopatra Butterfly.

We headed into the lovely town of La Roche en Ardenne where we explored the town center and had an excellent lunch with a view of the spectacular Château Féodal de La Roche-en-Ardenne along the Ourthe River.

We headed back to do more exploring along the rivers in search of dippers and then headed back to the hotel where part of the group opted to go out to have pizza and sit in a night blind, hoping to see more mammals, while the other half of the group stayed back at our comfortable hotel and grounds in Nardin.





Saturday, May 23 Orchids & Butterflies | Lauaux St. Anne Castle | The Menin Gate

Today we said our goodbyes to Stephane at La Panorama after he served us yet again another amazing breakfast. We first turned west to marvel at a special orchid and butterfly area that Carl knew well. We marveled at several different kinds of orchids and spotted over 10 different species of butterflies.

We continued on to a quaint little town to have lunch and visit the Lauaux St. Anne Castle and take a peek at the castle grounds where a wedding was taking place, and then we continued northwest to the city of Ypres to view the Menin Gate Memorial for the World War I soldiers. A very moving memorial, with dedication wreaths decorated with red poppy flowers.

We checked into our new hotel tonight just north of Bruges, halfway to the coast, and we slept well.

Sunday, May 24 Zwin Preserve | Oransjezon Preserve | Bruges City Center

Our hotel had a great buffet breakfast, and then we caught up on our birding checklist while we scoped out the waterfowl on the lake outside our scenic modern hotel. We headed to Zwin Preserve along the coast where we spotted many shorebirds as well as a sunbathing harbor seal. The park was busy with weekend bike riders, but we stayed up on the dyke path reserved for pedestrians.

We continued to beat the heat and head across the border to the Netherlands for our special surprise that Carl was keeping a secret. We parked at a busy beach location and walked in on a long beach trail to be greeted by a pair of beautiful European Bee-eater. We were able to sit and watch them on the fence, the ground, and near their nest holes. We enjoyed the cooler coastal air today and were thrilled to watch this beautiful bird with both Fallow Deer and Konic Horse in the background.

We entered the beautiful city of Bruges this evening just in time for a nice dinner and a wonderful evening stroll around the many beautiful buildings. We enjoyed looking at the shops and intricate architecture by moonlight as we traversed the cobblestone streets. After a long evening of walking, we slept well for our last night in Belgium.

Monday, May 25 Groot Rieveld | Brouwersdam

Another great breakfast buffet at our hotel found us overlooking the lake while we caught up on our birding check list and we packed up for one more night closer to Schiphol airport. We stopped along a few special birding spots and were able to spot Black-winged Stilt along a grove line road next to a waterfowl filled lake.

We continued through north along the coast and crossed into the Netherlands to a great spot to watch both Grey and Harbour Seals feeding alongside oystercatchers and gulls. It was well spent Whit Monday, a national holiday. We drove to our hotel outside of Noorddijerhout and sat on the lovely patio for our final dinner together. Some choose to take an after dinner walk to the beach, while others stayed back and packed.



Tuesday, May 26 Depart for Airport

The group met at the breakfast buffet in the hotel and then we headed off to Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam for flights and we said our goodbyes with hopes to meet up with our guide Carl and our new friends on another journey.

Photo Credit: Group Photo (Kristine Faber, KF), Windmill House (KF), Wild Horses (KF), Stork With Chick (KF), Wild Horses And Barnacle Geese (KF), Eurasian Oystercatcher With Chick (KF), White Stork (KF), Marker Wadden Blind (KF), Ruff (KF), Eurasian Eagle Owl (KF), Double Rainbow (KF), Lapwing (KF), Group At Stonehenge Of The Netherlands (KF), Black-tailed Godwit (KF), European Bee-Eater (KF), Great Crested Grebe (KF), Eurasian Jackdaw (KF), Gray Seal (KF), Flamingos (KF), Orchid And Butterfly Viewing (KF), Marker Wadden (KF)