

DETAILED ITINERARY (Hungary, Slovakia & Transylvania GT)

Day 1. The journey time from Budapest airport to our hotel in the heart of the Zemplén Hills is around three hours and we will arrive in time for some initial exploration of the superb woodlands and wetlands. Zemplén is a quiet and forested landscape, the foothills of the Carpathians. The wonderful mosaic of small rounded peaks, forested slopes, beautiful valleys and rivers meandering through a countryside dotted with tiny villages and castles, creates an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. Oak and beech woods cloak the northern slopes, coniferous forests cover the tops, and the vineyards of the famous Tokaj wine stretch away out to the south. Dramatic Carpathian castles are a feature of the area and represent a transition between the medieval fortresses and the later baroque castles. Two nights in Komlóska.

Day 2. In the protected tranquil old forests of the Zemplén valleys lives the surprisingly small-eyed and long-tailed Ural Owl. We can often only see this perfectly camouflaged bird when our guide, Zoltán Petrovics, an expert local researcher, puts the telescope on an owl sitting quietly in the dense canopy. We can often examine the impressive bird in daylight for as long as we want. However, there are many more birds around. Black, Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted, Great Spotted, White-backed and Grey-headed Woodpeckers are all also here in these forests and Green and Syrian Woodpeckers can be found near the settlements. In the abandoned small and middle sized holes Collared Flycatchers have already started nesting and Hawfinches are around the clearings. At the end of the day, coming back from the forest to the hotel we stop at the floodplain meadows of River Bodrog where the first Corncrakes have already started to call and the Barred Warblers and River Warblers are in full song. We will also visit an abandoned quarry to look for the Eurasian Eagle Owl. Common Nightingale is particularly numerous in the area and Bee-eaters are already nesting in the quarry's steep clay walls. Raptors are also abundant in the area and include Lesser Spotted, Short-toed and Eastern Imperial Eagles as well as Honey Buzzard. One evening we will visit a cellar in the Tokaj World Heritage Area and taste the famous white wine of the same name, frequently called the 'wine of kings' or the 'king of wines'.

Day 3. After some early morning birding in the Zemplén Hills we will cross the border into nearby Slovakia. Our birding efforts here will be centred on the Érc Hills and in the Slovenski Raj National Park. This is sub-alpine landscape with more pine-covered hillsides and is generally higher than the Zemplén Hills. The rushing streams are the home of Dippers and Fieldfares breed in the village gardens. One of our main targets is the skulking Hazel Grouse and although we should consider ourselves lucky to see this elusive chicken, the area has a very high density of them. Eurasian Pygmy Owl and Tengmalm's Owl both inhabit these superb forests. Over the years we have invested in an extensive owl nest box scheme for Tengmalm's Owl and in most years we have a few breeding pairs. We will also have our first chance to see the Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker on the tour, which breeds in the mixed or coniferous forests of the Carpathians. This is potentially our tenth species of woodpecker and a clean sweep on all the breeding members of this family in Europe. Black Stork, Goshawk and Lesser Spotted Eagle are all regular sights in the sky over the forests and other possibilities are Eurasian Woodcock, Grey Wagtail, Firecrest, Crested Tit, Willow Tit, Bullfinch and Crossbill. One night near Dobsina.

Day 4. After some final birding in Slovakia we will drive to the famous Hortobágy National Park. The steppes of this World Heritage area represent the western fringes of the Asian 'artemisia' steppes and thus are unique in Europe. On our drive to this bird-rich area we will look for the the endangered local form of Greater Short-toed Lark and also visit the Great Wood of Debrecen to look for Short-toed Treecreeper, as well as having some very close encounters with Hawfinches and if we lucky even Collared Flycatcher. Two nights in Nádudvar.

Day 5. Today will be our first taste of the Hortobágy National Park. The area has several vast fishpond complexes and is one of the greatest birding Meccas in Europe. We will return to this area for more birding at the end of the tour so today we will try to see Great Bustard because after their display period and with the spring grass growing taller they become more difficult to see into May. The males of these magnificent birds are active in the early hours of the day, with their females already on their nests by now. Hungarian Grey Long-horned Cattle and the strange Racka Sheep with their long twisted horns can be seen on the grasslands, recalling the atmosphere of the Asian steppe. In this

southern part of the national park breeding Montagu's Harrier can be seen and we will make a special effort to find the scarce Stone Curlew, which is an obligate breeder of the bare natron soil habitat. Our other main target for the day is the 'vulnerable' Aquatic Warbler, which has its southernmost breeding outpost in the Hortobágy. The tussock grasses of the marshy meadow depressions are the favourite nesting areas of these rare birds and the area holds more than 500 singing males. It is easy to spot the singing males on the top of the tallest grasses at this time of year. On the dirt roads Tawny Pipits run in front of us, calling to announce our presence. After this action-packed day we will be eagerly looking forward to our return to this superb park.

Day 6. We will travel east into Romania today. Our birding will start in the Bihar area where we will visit a reservoir, which often has many interesting migrants this time of the year, notably Red-necked and Black-necked Grebes, Ferruginous Ducks and all three species of marsh terns. White-winged Terns are in full breeding plumage now and are a fabulous spectacle whilst hawking for insects. In this area we will also seek out the localised Ortolan Bunting as well. In the afternoon we will arrive in the tiny village of Torockó at the foot of the Székelykő Mountain - a truly spectacular limestone valley in Transylvania. This World heritage village is a great base to explore the surrounding hills. In the afternoon we will watch out for superb display flight of the Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush with a supporting cast of Woodlarks and Rock Buntings. While Golden Eagle is possible in the sky we can also find both Lesser and Great Grey Shrikes breeding side by side - another unique experience in this area. In the evening we will search for Eurasian Scops Owl before we enjoy a home-cooked dinner and settle into village houses for the night. One night in Torockó (Rimetea).

Day 7. After an early morning birding in the Torockó area we will drive further east towards the higher mountains of Transylvania. Along the way we will stop and look for Crag Martin, which is a localised bird in Eastern Europe. We arrive to Székelyudvarhely and in the afternoon we will look for Thrush Nightingale and visit the Szentpál Fishponds, another great birding area. Three nights in Székelyudvarhely (Odorheiu Secuiesc).

Day 8-9. Over the course of the next two days we will explore a variety of habitats in this area. We will visit the Hargita and Görgényi Mountains and also visit the truly spectacular Békás Gorge (Bicaz). In the higher elevation coniferous forests we will look for the elusive Western Capercaillie and also for Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker if we have not seen it before in Slovakia. We bird along the roads and clearings of the Carpathian pine forests where Water Pipit, Ring Ouzel, Nutcracker, Crested Tit and Firecrest are all common. Depending on our success in Slovakia we may search for Ural, Pygmy and Tengmalm's Owls again in this vicinity, if necessary. Another star attraction is Red-breasted Flycatcher and we will make a special effort to find this diminutive canopy-dwelling flycatcher. There are also orchid meadows and rich butterfly communities on the edge of these higher elevation forests. In the afternoon we will also visit our Brown Bear hides and hope to see this remarkable mammal of the coniferous forests of the Carpathians. On our second day we will drive to the famous Békás Gorge (Bicaz) to search for the butterfly-like Wallcreeper. Sometimes it is not easy to find them on the huge surfaces of the limestone walls but with patience we will succeed. After this long excursion with a packed lunch we will return in time to visit another Brown Bear hide if we did not see them the previous day.

Day 10. We begin our return journey across Transylvania taking a different route, through the famous small town of Segesvár (Sighisoara). Here we will stop and visit its castle area with the original Dracula's House. Afterwards we will drive back towards Hungary. In the late afternoon if time allows we will also visit a superb wetland area just south of the Hortobágy in the Bihar region before reaching our final destination in Nádudvar. Two nights in Nádudvar.

Day 11. Our last full day birding will be in the Hortobágy National Park again! We will visit a breeding site of the magnificent Red-footed Falcon, a very special raptor as it breeds in colonies. Naturally these colonies are in rookeries as the falcons use the rooks' abandoned nests. Recently with the help of artificial nest boxes the population is happily on the increase. Later in the day we will be sure to visit whichever are the best fishponds at the time of the tour, depending on water levels. The reeds are alive with birdsong at this time of the year! Great Reed, Savi's and Marsh Warblers are common and even the secretive Moustached Warbler can be found here. Great White Egrets and Spoonbills, Little Egrets, Purple Herons, Night Herons, Squacco Herons, Bittern, Little Bittern and the Glossy Ibis also all inhabit the reed beds. In the noisy cormorant colony we can observe the Pygmy Cormorant, which now numbers over 300 breeding pairs. All three marsh tern species are possible at this time of the

year, even if the nomadic White-winged Terns happen not to be breeding. There are great flocks of migratory birds on the drained and freshly exposed mudflats and it is an exciting time to look for rarities among the myriads of waterbirds roosting and feeding here. The huge feeding flocks are frequently disturbed by raptors such as White-tailed Eagle, Peregrine or Saker. While exploring the various wetlands we will certainly see Bearded and Penduline Tits and singing Bluethroats are also common. Our midday lunch in a restaurant is always a nice way to find some shade from the strong sun for an hour or so. Sandpits nearby hold a few special breeding birds like Sand Martins and Bee-eaters while Hoopoe and Roller are also relatively common. We visit some other fishponds alive with shorebirds, ducks, terns, egrets, herons and we will search here for Black-necked and Red-necked Grebes as well as Ferruginous Duck. Lesser Grey Shrikes have returned to the forest by now, Red-backed Shrikes are everywhere and we will end the day watching a family of Long-eared Owls. The northern part of Hortobágy is a slightly different landscape with the steppe here having more patches of woodland. The grassland is full of sousliks - the favourite rodent prey of Eastern Imperial Eagle, Saker and Long-legged Buzzard. Northern Goshawk and White-tailed Eagles may appear above the forested patches and, with luck, even Lesser Spotted Eagle. We will also visit the Dinnyés-lapos man-made wetland, where Common Cranes are now present almost throughout the year.

Day 12. After some early morning birding we will leave this remarkable area and make our way to Budapest airport along the northern foothills for an early afternoon departure back to home.



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