

# Trip Report

## Hungary May 2009



Ural Owl

*Tim and Janet Davie and I booked a spring trip with Sakertours & Janos Olah to Hungary. We visited the Zemplen Hills and the plains of the Hortobagy between 16th & 23rd May 2009.*

## Day 1 – Zemplen Hills

A trouble free trip down from Lancashire to Luton was followed by a smooth flight to Budapest. Janos picked us up as planned and we set off towards the **Zemplen Hills**.

After reaching our smart accommodation in **Tokaj** we found a pair of **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** feeding young in the tree behind our porch, the first of many woodpecker encounters.

We soon set off to explore the **Bodrog Floodplain**, noting typical village birds such as **White Stork, Black Redstart** and **Serin** along the way. The sudden appearance of a female **Syrian Woodpecker** was a nice surprise.

As we viewed the flood plain several **Black Storks** circled around before heading off towards their nests in the surrounding hills. Then an excellent male **Honey Buzzard** appeared and began to display quivering his wings over his back.

We then visited a nearby meadow and small lake in beautiful evening light. We enjoyed great views of **Black Kite, Ferruginous Duck, Whiskered** and **Black Terns**. It was also delightful to note that **Red Backed Shrikes, Yellow Wagtails** and **Corn Buntings** are still a common sight in Hungary.

We then moved to **Erdobeny** to look for the quarry loving **Eagle Owl** and found a juvenile pretending to be a rock! Whilst waiting for an adult to turn up Janet spotted an awesome female **Goshawk** above the quarry. Giving great views struggling to take a large prey item to the nest, she was visibly panting as she passed overhead!

We went back to a local restaurant for some excellent Hungarian cuisine and a few beers. This provided a great end to the first day and we were very excited about what the next day would bring.

## Day 2 – Tim’s Birthday

Before breakfast we were joined by Zoly, a great friend of Janos, who has the privilege of being warden of this area. We visited another area of the **Bodrog Floodplain** and were soon rewarded with great views of **River Warbler** and lots of **Red Backed Shrikes**. An inquisitive **Wryneck** was expertly whistled in for us by Zoly. A **Corncrake** was calling from the adjacent meadow and **Marsh** and **Barred Warblers** sang from the scrub.

After breakfast we set off to **Erdobeny** but had hardly got out of **Tokaj** when our ‘eagle’ eyed guides spotted a **Lesser Spotted Eagle** in a roadside tree. Careful positioning of the car provided outstanding views of the perched eagle followed by great flight views as it circled low overhead.

The **Erdobeny** area consisted of wooded hillsides and meadows and it was a lovely area to spend a warm spring morning. An early highlight came in the form of a male **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** feeding young.



Lesser Spotted Eagle

As the day warmed up raptors began to appear with **Common** and then **Honey Buzzards** rising above the hill sides. The sudden appearance of a pair of **Imperial Eagles** caused a great deal of excitement and they put on a virtuoso performance.

The male was displaying over his nest site folding in his wings, diving down before sweeping upwards in majestic fashion. Below him the female was breaking off large, leafy branches before bringing them back to the nest. Then the pair circled up together high into the sky, sparring with the many Buzzards present. Then with their bond strengthened and their territory secured they returned to the nest.

On our way to the next stop a distinctive 'Crex crex' call was heard coming from a roadside meadow. We stopped and had a walk through the meadow and were lucky to flush a **Corncrake**, which gave a nice close fly-by.

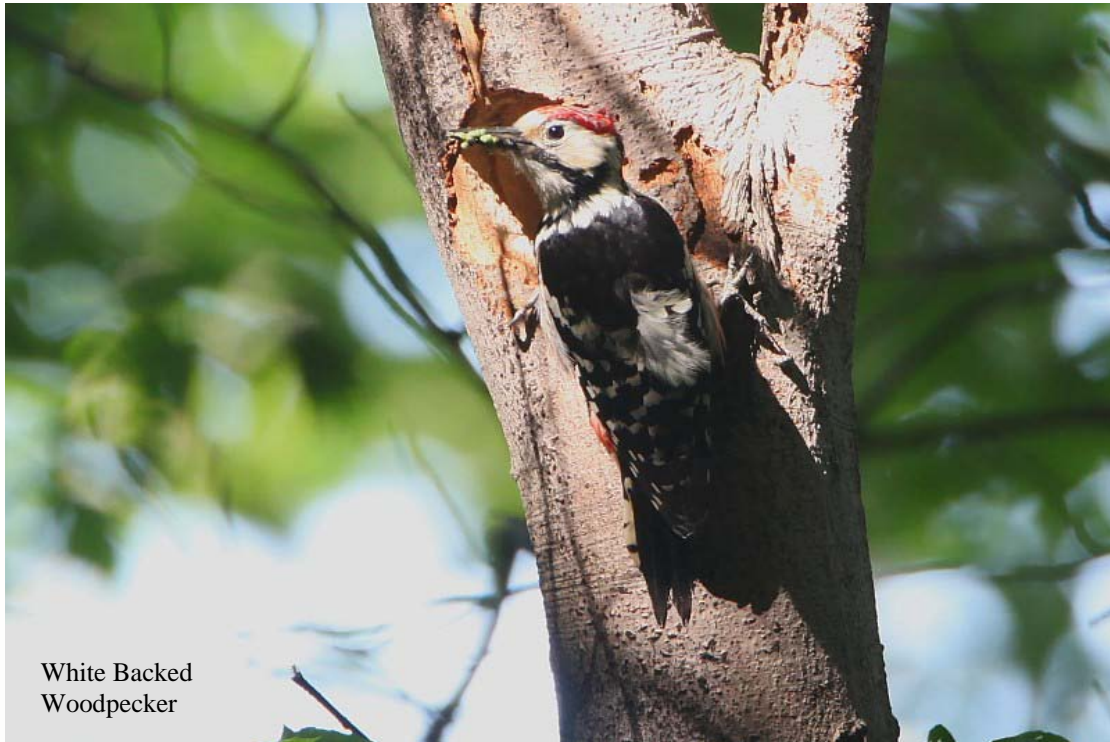


Corncrake

After a great morning we headed to the beech woods of **Komloska**. As we ate our picnic on the edge of the forest a male **Goshawk** flew over, the first of several exciting lunch time sightings.

We then headed into the forest hoping to see some very special birds. As we climbed up along a ridge a male **Collared Flycatcher** was singing from a tree stump. As we watched the flycatcher a call from Janos revealed a beautiful **Ural Owl** staring down at us. What a great birthday present for Tim!

After enjoying great views of the owl we continued through the forest and settled in a safe distance from an intriguing looking nest hole. After a short wait both male and female **White Backed Woodpeckers** gave great views. They were feeding large young that could be seen sticking their heads out of the nest hole.



White Backed  
Woodpecker

With two mega birds showing well we wondered what might be next. A short walk revealed another nest hole and great views of a pair of **Black Woodpeckers**. As we watched these birds Zoly whistled in a **Grey Headed Woodpecker**, whilst a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** fed busily overhead. As we walked back down to the car this woodpecker extravaganza was completed with a beautiful **Middle Spotted Woodpecker** showing well in the evening sunshine.

This amazing day was not quite over as the **Ural Owl** appeared again hunting thrush chicks by the edge of the path. A trip to look for Nightjars was unsuccessful but an encounter with a **Beech Martin**, in the headlights, certainly made up for that.

After a lovely meal with a few beers Tim's birthday ended with him finding a spectacular **Eyed Hawkmoth** in the porch of our pension.



### Day 3 – Butterflies and Barred Warblers



Eagle Owl

An early start saw us visiting another quarry in the **Tokaj Hills**. Here an impressive female **Eagle Owl** was sat out in full view with two chicks hiding nearby.

A walk around the quarry produced a range of interesting sightings with **Bee eaters**, **Golden Orioles** and the attractive **European Green Lizard** (*Lacerta viridis*).

Also here we found the Tokaj race of **Zephyr Blue**. Janos explained that butterfly experts are carefully studying this race as it may actually be a full species.



After breakfast we headed for **Keked** to look for **Golden Eagles** and almost immediately picked up an adult circling over the forested hillside. The eagle soon disappeared and we were distracted by a nice pair of **Whinchats** in an adjacent meadow. A singing **Barred Warbler** then proved very co operative providing the best views of the trip.

A call then came from Janos that the **Golden Eagle** was back in view. To our delight this male bird came out from the hillside with his golden crown flashing in the sunshine. Then for the second time in 48 hours we had great privilege of watching one of the great eagles displaying overhead.

Very happy with our morning we moved onto **Nagy-patak** and a lovely walk through a woodland area. Bird life was quiet at this time of day but we did find two male **Black Woodpeckers** sparring at the base of large tree. They rocked their heads from side to side, whilst flicking their wings and tails before disappearing into the forest. As we moved on up the path their eerie calls continued to ring out.



Whilst birds were hard to come by we encountered a fantastic range of wildlife around the woodland edges. These included a great variety of butterflies including **Fenton's Wood White**, **Camberwell Beauty**, **Chequered Skipper**, **Duke of Burgundy**, **Glanville Fritillary**, **Map** and the charismatic **Common Glider**. Along the path, which was bathed in sunshine, we also found a **Aesculapian Snake** and a large **Slow Worm**.

Zoly's knowledge and enthusiasm were infectious and at one point he dipped into a puddle and pulled out a cute little **Yellow Bellied Toad**. The final excitement came in the form of a **Fire Salamander** in the middle of the track, unfortunately this was because it had been run over!

Returning to the car for our picnic lunch we were joined by 3 lovely **Hawfinches** feeding on the edge of the road.

After lunch we headed briefly into Slovakia and then back into Hungary to visit another quarry at **Tornanadaska**. This was the last known breeding sight for **Rock Thrush** in Hungary in 2008 but very sadly we could find no sign of the birds. Zoly and Janos thought the demise of the species in Hungary was down to a change in land use and a reduction on grazing

The Tokaj area is a World Heritage Site famous for its vineyards and dessert wine. A visit to a local wine cellar was therefore a must and we enjoyed a very merry time. We then headed for another fabulous evening meal. Freshwater fish is not something I have tried at home but the Zander (pike/perch) served here was beautiful.

A late evening trip to **Szar Hegy** produced a male **Nightjar** churring and then dancing round us in the spotlight. Also here we had a number of **Stag Beetles** whizzing past in an ungainly fashion. At this point we said good bye to Zoly, it had been a privilege to spend time with someone with such a love for his environment.



#### Day 4 – Wetland Wonderland

Waking up to a beautiful morning I had a pre breakfast walk in the area round our pension. **Barred, Marsh and River Warblers**, numerous **Red backed Shrikes** and 2 male **Golden Orioles** made for a very pleasant start to the day.



After ham and eggs we made a short trip to **Szegi** to look for raptors. We were rewarded by a **Honey Buzzard** lazily gliding around. This area also provided a very photogenic **Turtle Dove**, thankfully this species is still plentiful in Hungary. Heading out of the **Zemplen Hills** we stopped at some sandy agricultural fields and heard a singing **Short Toed Lark**.

Our anticipation was growing as we approached the plains and marshes of the **Hortobagy National Park**. First stop was a Rook colony at **Magdolna**, which is shared by a good colony of **Red Footed Falcons**. Unfortunately our excitement was somewhat dampened by a thunderstorm. After a quick look at the falcons we headed for our accommodation in nearby **Balmazujvaros** and had lunch.

Janos knows this huge area so well that he anticipated the direction that the storm was travelling. As a result he based our itinerary for the rest of the day in an alternative area and this proved to be an inspired choice. He picked the **Andahaza Wetland Reserve** and arranged to meet one of the wardens on site. This was so we could be guided to a good site for another much sought after species.

After meeting the warden we walked out across a short cropped grassy area bordering the wetland. This area was good for **Tawny Pipits** and **Yellow Wagtails**, including some nice examples of the '**dombrowski**' race.

We then arrived at a new wetland area full of tussock sedge. Janos flushed the hoped for **Great Snipe** almost immediately and we had some lovely flight views showing off the barred belly, strongly marked wings and white outer tail feathers.

Janos headed back over to join us and then flushed a **Baillon's Crake!**



This is a major Hungarian rarity and caused great excitement. The only twitchable birds had been found by Janos the previous year but the warden and his manager had both missed out.

A frantic phonecall followed and the reserve manager appeared as the Baillon's Crake was seen skulking back to its favoured area.

He was particularly delighted to get some pictures as the bird 'moused' through the tussocks. Great smiles all round as this was a new bird for Tim & Janet as well. Being with these birders as they got a new bird on the reserve they have created was great value.

Other highlights at this fantastic site included **Pygmy Cormorant, White Winged Black Tern, Ferruginous Duck, Bittern, Purple Heron, Night Heron, Spoonbill, Great White & Little Egrets.**

It had now developed into a beautiful evening and as a final treat Janos pulled over by a large electricity pylon. In surely one of the most secure nest boxes in the world a family of **Sakers** was sitting. To our delight the female left the nest and headed our way before landing on a nearby track to enjoy a dust bath. She then circled up and headed back to the nest giving great views to end a spectacular day.

## Day 5 – Paddyfields and Pratincoles

After breakfast we headed to the **Hortobagy Fishponds** in search of another Hungarian rarity, a **Dalmatian Pelican**. The bird had been present for some time but was ranging widely and not always easy to find. Thankfully Tim quickly located this breeding plumaged bird, which gave us plenty of time to explore this rich area.

We really enjoyed our time here with several sightings of **Little Bittern**, an approachable **Night Heron**, lots of **Savi's Warblers** and **Bluethroat** and **Penduline Tit** showing well.

Other wildlife encountered included a dozing **Grass Snake** and the butterfly highlight was the striking **Large Copper**.



Night Heron



Large Copper

Our lunch again proved rewarding with an **Icterine warbler** showing well in willows by the picnic site.

Then we moved onto the **Kisujzallas Paddyfields** and met the rice guard! Nearby we found a **Bittern** and instead of creeping away it crouched down and pointed its bill skywards. A great camouflage when in a reed bed but quite comical when out in the open. Unfortunately, at this stage Janet's camera stopped working but after a few nervous minutes Janos skilfully dealt with the problem much to her relief.

Several of the paddyfields in this area were drained and these proved very popular with a wide range of waders resplendent in their breeding plumage. Seeing the hordes of **Ruff** and **Black Tailed Godwits** was expected but finding **Bar Tailed Godwit** and **Turnstone** in the heart of Europe was more of a surprise.

**Wood Sandpipers** also put on a good show as they fed around the pool edges close to the track. Broad Billed Sandpipers had been seen in this area but we could not find them on this occasion.

Our only **Crane** of the trip was seen here with **White Storks** before the stars of the show appeared. **Collared Pratincoles** are a scarce breeder in Hungary but this is a regular site for them. Great views were had in flight and running around on the mud catching insects. Janos, sharp as always, then picked up a **Black Winged Pratincole** overhead. Views were brief but the short tail and black underwings were seen before the bird disappeared.



Collared Pratincole

## Day 6 - Falcon Frenzy

We decided that a return visit to the **Red Footed Falcons** at **Magdolna** was in order and on a sunny morning we enjoyed fabulous views. The adults were already on eggs but the immatures newly arrived back from Africa were extremely active. A newly vacated **Rook's** nest was the focus of all the attention, with several young males and females competing for this des res. We stood on the edge of the wood and the birds circled overhead sweeping backwards and forwards calling loudly.

The young males were hunting close to the colony and regular bringing back voles to improve their chances

with the females. In amongst the immatures adults went about their business with the sunlight highlighting the silvery primaries of the males and the orange and blue contrast of the females.



Red Footed Falcons

To spend time with these most charismatic birds was a real pleasure and it was no surprise when **Red Footed Falcon** went on to be voted bird of the trip.

Alongside the falcons a pair of **Lesser Grey Shrikes** showed well with the male catching bees for his partner.



**Moustached Warbler**

One of the birds I had hoped to see was the focus of our next stop at **Zam Marsh**. **Moustached Warbler** had evaded me on several trips but Janos was sure that my search would soon be at an end! He was right to be confident and before long 2 rival males were singing from the top of the reeds and putting on a fine performance. Several showy **Savi's Warblers** and **Bearded Tits** also entertained at this site.

A phonecall from one of the Hortobagy wardens resulted in a twitch to **Hajduszoboszlo Fishponds**. A drained fish pond produced another good wader, this time a **Terek Sandpiper**. The bird was rather distant as it scurried around but a **Caspian Tern** standing with **Caspian Gulls** provided much better views. Dragonflies here included a **White Tailed Skimmer** and numerous **Lesser Emperors**.

After lunch we headed to **Dakassa** a traditional farming area and soon found a **Suslik**. These mammals are the favoured prey of many birds of prey including **Long Legged Buzzard** and we watched a pair hanging in the air searching for their prey. A ghostly male **Montagu's Harrier** was also watched quartering this area. As we moved to our final destination of the day Janos explained that that the range of Saker perfectly matches that of the Suslik!



**Suslik**

Arriving at **Nagyivan** we picked up another friend of Janos who wardens this area. He took us to a small hillock overlooking a vast area of farmland and immediately a group of **Great Bustards** strutted into view. We had good views of this party of males and also picked out **Roe Deer**, **Brown Hares** and 2 **Red Foxes**.



One of the foxes drew our attention to a lone male bustard and to our surprise this bird went into its extravagant display.

Being late in the display season we were very fortunate to see this giant puff ball.

Another male **Montagu's Harrier** was seen before we moved to our final site of the day very pleased with ourselves.

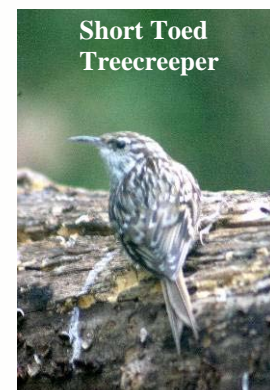
A really special bird lives in the marshes here and has very particular habitat requirements. Unfortunately perfect habitat for **Aquatic Warblers** is also perfect habitat for mosquitoes. We hoped the birds would appear quickly and thankfully they did and we got great views before returning to the car unscathed! A **Stone Curlew** then provided a nice end to another exciting day.



## Day 7 – Broad Billed Bonus

An early start today and Janos had a real treat in store for us. Sakertours have developed a series of photography hides and we visited the **Drinking Pool Hide**. The weather had been hot and dry and the birds literally queued up to take advantage of the fresh water. The views were simply stunning as the birds drank or sat and preened on some strategically placed perches.

One of the first birds to appear was a **Short Toed Treecreeper** and then an obliging **Green Woodpecker**. This was followed by several **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** and a lovely **Middle Spotted Woodpecker**. **Jays** and **Nuthatches** also provide regular entertainment.



**Hawfinches** soon began to arrive and throughout the morning a constant procession of these great birds entertained us. Finches, buntings, tits and warblers all came regularly before the appearance of a stunning male **Collared Flycatcher**. Several of these beauties enthralled us and to see these birds only a few metres away was a real treat.



Collared Flycatcher

We then moved onto **Kaba Sugar Factory ponds** and had lunch. These pools held good numbers of birds with **Garganey, Black Winged Stilt, Little Stint** and **Curlew Sandpiper** all noted but no sign again of the hoped for Broad Billed Sandpiper.

An island in a deeper pool held a colony of **Black Headed** and **Mediterranean Gulls**. As often seems to be the case **Black Necked Grebes** were also noted around the colony. Seven birds in summer plumage was a lovely sight. Lots of warblers were singing in the surrounding reeds and scrub with **Marsh** and **Great Reed Warbler** sitting up and showing despite the breezy conditions.

A return to **Hajduszoboszlo Fishponds** found the **Terek Sandpiper** much closer and giving great views.

Tim managed to get some photos and to his delight Janos put these on the Hungarian bird forum that evening.



Terek Sandpiper

We had noticed that one of the **Gyökérkút Fishponds** was being drained so we headed there as it was close to our final destination of the day. With his first scan Janos picked up a pair of **Broad Billed Sandpipers**, a bird that was high on our wish list. After nice views of these birds we headed off to the heronry at **Derzsi Fishpond 10**.

The colony here is in a reedbed but a raised platform allows good views of the comings and goings of the various species present. Lots of **Spoonbills, Great White & Little Egrets, Purple, Grey, Night** and **Squacco Herons, Glossy Ibis** and **Pygmy Cormorants** were flying to and from the fishponds passing at eye level.

Returning to our pension we had a very fiery brandy with the friendly owner and then headed out for our evening meal. We sat on the veranda of a hotel enjoying quality Hungarian cuisine and reflecting on what a great trip it had been.

## Day 8 – Bee Eaters, Hoopoes and Rollers



Lesser Grey Shrike

Our final morning began with a final visit to the **Red Footed Falcons** at **Magdolna**. They once again thrilled us with their antics and the pair of **Lesser Grey Shrikes** also showed well.

We then headed for the local **Cherry Orchards** to see if any Rose Coloured Starlings had arrived. None could be found but we enjoyed eating the cherries anyway!

The range of habitats in the Hortobagy is very varied and we now headed to a much drier southern area of the park. The area round **Álomzug** marks the start of the great steppe that spreads from Eastern Europe through Russia and Central Asia. What an amazing contrast to the marshes and fishponds and the area had a really wild and remote feel.

Large numbers of Dotterels come here to moult in the autumn but we could not find a spring trip. Janet found us a **Stone Curlew**, which looked very much at home in this habitat. It was interesting to see that all the traditional farm buildings here have thatched roofs, including the dog kennels!

We had come to this area to look for **Rollers** and were not disappointed with a bird seen well on roadside wires. On the same stretch of road **Hoopoes** were collecting food for their young.

There was one last species we hoped to see so we headed to **Fényes** to look for **Little Crake**. Janos knew of a good spot and we could hear a male calling but he eluded us.

Waking back to the car a **Marsh Harrier** flew over and Janos pointed out it was a dark phase male. A very handsome bird and a colour phase we had never encountered before.



Marsh Harrier

Our final stop of the trip was the **Bee eater** and **Sand Martin** colony at **Kis-Jusztus**. Here we had our last picnic lunch despite a dog nipping in and eating a sandwich from the car, cellophane and all! Spending an hour watching the **Bee eaters** at close range was the perfect end to a wonderful trip. Janos dropped us off at the airport in Budapest at the start of a trouble free journey home.



Janos is a brilliant guide who worked his socks off to find us the birds we wanted to see. His preparation and organisation are first class and we would recommend him and his company without reservation.



**Bee Eater**