

HUNGARY: Red-breasts & Lesser White-fronts Weekend

Thu 4th-Mon 8th March 2010



Photos, clockwise from top: Our 'Wild Goose Chase' in the Hortobágy National Park, in search of the two most sought-after European species: Red-breasted Goose and Lesser White-fronted Goose • Middle Spotted Woodpecker poses beautifully in Debrecen Great Wood • Juvenile White-tailed Eagle sails overhead in the Hortobágy © János Oláh/Sakertour • For a more extensive selection of photos taken on our tours to Hungary see our online Gallery feature at www.limosaholidays.co.uk

report compiled by tour leader: János Oláh

Trip Diary

Limosa has operated dozens of tours to Hungary since the early 1990s, but this was our first Hungarian 'Wild Goose Chase' - an early Spring break designed to find the two rarest and most sought-after of Eurasian geese within one short tour. Despite the unexpectedly wintry conditions (falling to -7C at night), we encountered a total of around 50,000 geese - including, most importantly, both the magical **Red-breasted Goose** and the subtle **Lesser White-fronted Goose**.

In March, the whole of the Hortobágy National Park is transformed into one vast wetland as innumerable shallow depressions across the steppe fill with meltwater. And just as the Hortobágy National Park begins to stir from its long winter 'sleep', hordes of grey geese are returning to these immense Pannonian lowlands, making this a classic spring 'goose stop-over'. Great Bustards are also busy in the park at this time, gathering close to their display grounds in full breeding dress, and Saker Falcons are back on territory, too. It's an exciting time and though we had to work harder than expected over the weekend due to the uncharacteristically difficult weather, we not only succeeded with our main targets but had a great time exploring this wonderful national park.

On our drive east from the airport, a short detour resulted in fantastic views of a pair of adult **Eastern Imperial Eagles**. We then stopped briefly at Tisza Lake - and realised here that the weather had turned back to winter after a run of sunny and more typically spring-like days (with temperatures of 14C) earlier in the week. A few **Smew** entertained us here - but we were soon back in the warmth of the car! Upon reaching the Hortobágy, we met with our first roadside flock of geese - but I guess it would have been too much to ask to find either of the rarer species on our first goose stop of the weekend!

Though the weather conditions were far from ideal (with a strong northerly wind and a maximum daytime temperature of just 2C), the Hortobágy did not disappoint us. Everywhere we went, everywhere we looked, flocks of **grey geese** could be seen. More than 50,000 geese were present on the *puszta* - and we had to check a good portion of them before we finally found both **Red-breasted** and **Lesser White-fronted Geese**! The latter was particularly challenging as it is seldom easy to pick one or two individuals out from a big flock of the much more abundant Russian **White-fronted Geese**, especially for those who have had no experience with the species before. Fortunately, one of the park's wardens was on hand to help us and, prompted by János's continuous questioning (*mit csinál?*), provided a running commentary (in Hungarian) of what the bird was actually doing until, finally, we had got everybody on the bird and enjoyed great views - even seeing the diagnostic golden eye-ring of this declining species!

In addition to the mass gathering of the geese, other birding delights that came our way in the Hortobágy this weekend included 22 adult male **Great Bustards**, seen in perfect sunlight as close as any bustard allows humans to approach; the first spring arrivals of **Golden Plover** and **Ruff** on the endless plains; a lovely pair of **Saker Falcons** allowing walk-away views; up to 25 different **White-tailed Eagles** seen on a single day; **Long-eared Owls** and **Little Owls**; excellent views of **Black**, **Middle Spotted** and **Syrian Woodpeckers**; fabulous looks at some handsome drake **Smew** ... and the list could go on!

Based at one conveniently-located hotel throughout, this trip was taken at a gentle pace, and we even experienced a bit of off-road action too while getting to some of the more remote goose areas. Add some great landscapes, great birds and good food - and this was surely a most memorable tour for us all!

Systematic list of species recorded

(A total of 96 species was recorded by the group)

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Seen daily in the Hortobágy even around our hotel.

Taiga Bean Goose *Anser (fabalis) fabalis*

Small numbers were seen in the various grey geese flocks.

Tundra Bean Goose *Anser (fabalis) serrirostris*

The closest and best look we had of a Bean Goose was one with a very narrow orange ring on the bill, more reminiscent of 'tundra' Bean Goose. This was on a small floodwater pool within a small flock of Greylags and White-fronted Geese.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Very common, up to 500 were seen in the Hortobágy. This is the 'Eastern' *rubrirostris* race.

White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*

The most common grey goose, with an estimated 50000 birds seen over the weekend. The largest single flock was of about 30,000 birds at the Hortobágy Fishpond.

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*

One of the star birds of the weekend. We saw three individuals in the various grey goose flocks, though it took some time until everybody got to see one well. Most managed to see the golden eye-ring too, and other minor differences such as the dark neck, short pink bill, orange hindneck and the smaller, more restricted belly bars. These individuals were most probably from the Russian population as the remnants of the European population migrates later, arriving on the Hortobágy in a single flock during late March.

Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis*

A single individual was seen amongst the large flock of grey geese at the Hortobágy Fishpond.

Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*

The other star bird of the weekend! The first two individuals were seen only by János on the first day as, unfortunately, as soon as they were found the flock was off! Next day, however, five birds were located at the Hortobágy Fishpond among the large flock of grey geese. Later on the same day, a further six birds were seen on the *puszta*, allowing fairly close approach. This last look was superb, and we greatly enjoyed seeing these diminutive and fantastically coloured wildfowl!

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Up to 15 were seen on the various fishponds.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Maximum 20 on the Hortobágy Fishponds.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*

A common early spring migrant with up to 500 seen on the Hortobágy Fishponds.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Small numbers were seen daily.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

About 200 were seen on the Hortobágy Fishponds.

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

The first arrivals had just reached the Hortobágy. We saw 4 males on the Hortobágy Fishponds and another 8 birds at Akadémis Fishponds.

Common Teal *Anas crecca*

A common early spring migrant. Up to 1000 were seen on the Hortobágy Fishponds.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Just a few were seen in the Hortobágy area, but we had larger flocks at Tisza Lake.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

A fantastic duck. Five males and three females in a flock allowed very close approach and superb looks at their distinctive white 'rear end'.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Only one pair was seen in the Hortobágy area, with up to 300 on our last day at Tisza Lake.

Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

A common early spring migrant - and we hit the peak of the migration with up to 120 birds on the Hortobágy Fishponds and about 750 individuals at Tisza Lake.

Smew *Mergellus albellus*

One of the most decorative European 'winter ducks', the male birds in their crisp, clean plumage are amazing. A few were seen in the Hortobágy area and up to 25 at Tisza Lake on our last day.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

A few seen in the Hortobágy and up to 30 at Tisza Lake.

[European White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*]

One (most probably injured) overwintering individual was seen in the Hortobágy village.

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

We saw 80 full breeding plumaged individuals at their breeding colony in the Hortobágy area. With the wind blowing their 'hair-like' crests, they looked spectacular!

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Common in the Hortobágy area.

Great Egret *Egretta alba*

Common on the fish ponds, with a maximum count of 100 birds.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Common in the Hortobágy area.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Small numbers seen daily.

Saker *Falco cherrug*

We gradually achieved better and better views as the trip progressed. The climax was a superb pair (with the female being 20% bigger than the male), perched together and allowing walk-away views!

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*

A large individual of the race 'calidus' was seen in the Hortobágy.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*

Seen daily on the Hortobágy, with a maximum of 25 individuals a day. Always an impressive bird - but when you see 14 circling together it is a truly memorable sight!

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Small numbers were seen on the Hortobágy.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

A few were seen on the Hortobágy.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

A male was seen by Joan at Kungyörgy Fishpond, plus a female briefly at Debrecen Great Wood.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Common throughout the tour.

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*

We had excellent looks at two adult birds on our way to the Hortobágy.

Great Bustard *Otis tarda*

An amazing encounter with 22 full breeding plumaged males in the southern Hortobágy. They were still in the wintering area and allowed very close approach to us. Truly fantastic birds!

European Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

(H) Two heard at Hortobágy Fishpond.

Coot *Fulica atra*

Small flocks encountered in the Hortobágy area.

Common Crane *Grus grus*

We saw 28 individuals in several small flocks on our last day. The spring migration is far less spectacular in the Hortobágy area than the autumn passage (which involves up to 100,000 birds!).

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

The first three arrivals of the year were present at Derzsi Fishponds on the 7th March. (The earliest ever record from the Hortobágy area is 3rd March.)

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Fairly common near the wetlands and grasslands on the Hortobágy.

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Well over a hundred individuals seen. A great bird for our Canadian participants Joan and Malcolm to get!

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

The first two arrivals of the year for the Hortobágy region were seen at Derzsi Fishponds on 5th March.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

One was on the Akadémia Fishponds.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

A single individual was seen with Ruff in the southern Hortobágy.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

A flock of 60 present in the southern Hortobágy.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

Seen regularly on the fishponds with up to 50 birds daily.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

Three birds were present on Derzsi Fishponds.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*

Common in the Hortobágy area.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

Common in the Hortobágy area.

Feral Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Common.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Just 8 birds were seen, in the southern Hortobágy.

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

A single bird was in the garden of our hotel.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Very common in the villages.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

Three seen in the Hortobágy area.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*

It was not a priority for our group to see large numbers, but we did cast our eyes over four individuals.

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*

Fabulous looks at two different birds in Debrecen Great Wood.

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*

Heard on several occasions and we finally tracked one down near Tiszacsege.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Common in Debrecen Great Wood.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*

Our first bird was on the roadside near Balmazújváros, allowing great looks from just 10 metres. Later, we had another one in Debrecen Great Wood.

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Heard on several occasions, but only one seen, briefly in the hotel garden.

Northern Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*

Noted daily in the Hortobágy area.

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Just two seen in Debrecen Great Wood.

Magpie *Pica pica*

Common in the Hortobágy.

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Several seen on the tour. Some close to the Hungarian Grey Cattle bulls wintering barn were of the eastern race (ssp. *soemmeringii*), with their nice white collars.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Very common in the Hortobágy.

Hooded Crow *Corvus corone*

Common in the Hortobágy.

Marsh Tit *Parus palustris*

A few were visiting the feeder in Debrecen Great Wood.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Common in Debrecen Great Wood.

Eurasian Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus*

Common in Debrecen Great Wood.

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

Just one was seen at Hortobágy Fishpond.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

About 15 of the nice white-headed form were seen on the tour.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Small numbers recorded daily in the Hortobágy.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Up to 25 seen daily in the Hortobágy area.

Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus*

(H) Surprisingly, only heard in the Hortobágy.

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Two were seen in Debrecen Great Wood.

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Very common. Flocks of 3000 were seen daily.

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

A few were seen on the tour. It was most numerous in Debrecen Great Wood.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

Regularly encountered in the Hortobágy, the largest flock of 250 birds.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

Four birds were seen in the Tisza River gallery forest, near Tiszacsege.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Heard singing in the hotel garden, and a few seen near Tiszacsege.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

One was seen very well in Debrecen Great Wood.

Robin *Erithacus rubecola*

A single bird seen in Debrecen Great Wood.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

A pair was seen at Tisza Lake on our last day.

Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*

Daily encounters in the Hortobágy area.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common.

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Very common. Up to 150 were seen together.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

A few early arrivals were present in the Hortobágy.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

A few were seen in the Hortobágy.

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Common.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Common.

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

A single bird was seen at Akadémia Fishponds in the Hortobágy.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

Several were seen in Debrecen Great Wood.

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*

Fairly common in the Hortobágy.

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Fairly common in the Hortobágy.

Mammals

Brown Hare *Lepus europaeus*

Seen every day in the Hortobágy.

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

A single was watched in Debrecen Great Wood.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

A total of four were seen in the Hortobágy area.

Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*

Seen almost daily.