

Hungary & Romania: Birds & Brown Bears

27 Sep-6 Oct 2008



Clockwise, from top left: Autumn colours in the Carpathians, Transylvania • White-throated Dipper at Békás • Sunrise in Transylvania • Our accommodation in the World Heritage village of Torockó, Romania • Numbers of Pygmy Cormorants have increased dramatically in the Hortobagy since colonising this National Park in the early 1990s • Wallcreeper is just one of many highlights on this exciting and very varied tour © János Oláh, October 2008. For a more extensive selection of photos taken on this tour visit our Gallery feature at www.limosaholidays.co.uk

Tour Leader: János Oláh

TRIP DIARY

Hungary and Romania is a great combination to see the special birds of Central and Eastern Europe! This autumn tour is focusing on the migration spectacles of the famous Hortobágy National Park in Hungary and the autumn colours and atmosphere of the Transylvanian forest of Romania. The timing of the tour is selected to give a chance to see some of the last summer visitors and also sample the migrants and winter visitors. In addition to birds the other main focus of this superb holiday is to see the shy Brown Bear which is fast disappearing from the European wilderness. This was only the second time Limosa run this tour but again it was a wonderful experience and a great success! Our tour had two base: the well-known and famous Hortobágy in Hungary and the magical Transylvania in Romania where visitors can still see and feel how Europeans did leave in harmony with nature in the past (sadly). This year again we had a great selection of exciting specialities like Greater Spotted Eagle, Wallcreeper, Three-toed Woodpecker, Ural and Pygmy Owls, Nutcracker in Transylvania and Lesser White-fronted Goose, Great Bustard, White-tailed Eagles, Long-legged Buzzard, Red-footed Falcon, Saker, Dotterel, Long-eared Owl and Eastern Imperial Eagle in the Hortobágy. We had superb views of the previously mentioned species and recorded 165 species on this action packed tour, which is not a bad total for an autumn tour! Non-birding highlights were the absolutely superb views of nine Brown Bears, the corn-eating “giant” hamster and a magical encounter with a fishing Otter right by our lodge on the last morning. The weather was very kind with fantastic ‘Indian Summer’ almost throughout the tour except a single afternoon of rain on a travel day! All in all it was an excellent tour with an enthusiastic and keen group!

We started and finished our tour in the Hortobágy National Park, which is undoubtedly one of the finest birdwatching areas in Europe! Even in a week difference between our two visits we could notice in the change of birdlife. The autumn spectacle of **Cranes** were really superb by the end of our tour with up to 35,000 seen. The atmosphere and the experience of these **Cranes** made it the winner of the ‘Bird of the trip competition’. As usual it was superb birding here with 33 **Lesser White-fronted Geese**, magnificent **Red-footed Falcons** and 27 **Dotterel** on our first visit and **Great Bustards, Saker, Long-legged Buzzard** and many many thousands of **Cranes** on the second leg. The supporting cast was strong too with **Pygmy Cormorants, Spoonbills, Black Storks, Ferruginous Ducks, White-tailed Eagles, Great Grey** and **Red-backed Shrikes**. The magical **Long-eared Owl** roost was a favourite too. Also the unique domestic animals including the famous **Woolly Pigs, Hungarian Grey Longhorn Cattle, spiral-horned Racka Sheep** and **Komondor, Kuvasz** and **Puli** dog breeds were seen.

In the middle part of the tour we visited one of Europe’s least disturbed places: Transylvania. This unique area with the rolling mountains and limestone gorges and its traditional way of life is fascinating. We had many memorable moments from the early arrival **Black-throated Diver** to the butterfly-like **Wallcreeper**. Birding is always slow in the autumn forest but with persistence we managed to find the secretive **Three-toed Woodpecker** and had a wonderful experience with the enigmatic **Ural Owl**. The **European Pygmy Owl** also entertained us well while **Nutcrackers** and **Crested Tits** were numerous. One day we also visited a wetland area in Transylvania where a juvenile **Greater Spotted Eagle** and some **Jack Snipes** were the definite highlights! Our last port of call was the Székelykő Mountain near Torockó village where we enjoyed the magical Transylvanian atmosphere, excellent local food and great views of **Golden Eagle** and **Rock Bunting**. Our other main target in this part of our journey was the **European Brown Bear**! We managed to see nine different individuals from a hide, which was a fabulous afternoon for everybody. These large mammals are sadly declining and simply a very special experience to see them in their natural environment: the coniferous forest of the Carpathians.

Day 1. Saturday September 27th 2008 The flight from London was not on time so our birding was very limited on the first afternoon. As Lorna and Quentin arrived by train we had an extra two hours around the airport before the rest of the group landed. This did not produce much but we had a couple of fly-by **Hawfinches**, many **Tree Sparrows** and **Reed Buntings**. After arrival we soon started our journey towards the Hortobágy. Our birding on this first afternoon was limited for a short stop near Újszász where we were hoping to find some of the last **Red-footed Falcons** before they migrate to Africa. After a while we located about 28 birds of different sexes and plumages and had great views. Additional birds were **Green** and **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and our first **Common Crane** flock. Although it was only a short birding stop, it was a good start for a tour.

Day 2. Sunday September 28th 2008 After our breakfast we were soon off to the northern section of the Hortobágy National Park. Our main target for the day was the globally threatened **Lesser White-fronted Goose**. We soon learned from a park ranger that a flock of 33 of these special birds were seen at Dinnyés-lapos wetland just when we set off from our hotel. After a quick bus ride we climbed up to the observation tower and found that the geese were still there! We could watch these handsome birds from a considerable distance (any other location in the Hortobágy is far worse) and finally we all were satisfied with the golden eye-ring. Also two **Little Owls** and a few **Black Redstarts** were seen from the tower. Still before lunch we visited Nagy-Vókonya wetland where we had both **Black** and **White Stork** (the latter being very late on migration) two **White-tailed Eagles** and a fine selection of waders like **Wood Sandpipers, Spotted Redshanks, Little Stints** and many **Common Snipe**. On our way out of this area we encountered a very late **Common Cuckoo** and also saw a family party of white-headed **Long-tailed Tits**. After a substantial and traditional fish-soup lunch at Tiszacsege we headed for Magdolna-pusztá but the hoped-for Long-legged Buzzard did not show. Our afternoon was mainly spent in the Angyalháza area of the Park where we managed to find 27 **Eurasian Dotterels**. Just a few people know that the Hortobágy is the only regular moulting stop-over area of these arctic waders and they usually arrive in late August and leave with the first frosts in November. Numbers vary greatly year to year mostly depending on the conditions of the pusztá. This year with

everything being dry, we had a good migration. We also had a juvenile **Grey Plover** with the Dotterels, a brief **Saker** and several fly-over **Red-throated Pipits**. A great day on the Hortobágy!

Day 3. Monday September 29th 2008 Early morning we left the Hortobágy and started our day-long travel to Transylvania. Our first stop was at the Hungarian/Romanian border briefly and then at Élesd reservoir. The lower reservoir was on very low water level so we only had dabbling ducks, a **Black-necked Grebe** and a few juvenile **Little Gulls**. The upper reservoir however was on normal water level and we had about 750 **Great Crested Grebe**, 16 **Ferruginous Ducks** and best of all a **Black-throated Diver**. A rather early arrival to this wintering area. Other notable birds were **Common Kingfisher**, **Northern Wheatear**, **Whinchats** and fly-over **Common Crossbills** (we did not know yet how difficult they would be in the high Carpathians because of the lack of food). Later we had a picnic stop near Bánffyhunyard with lots of Meadow Saffron in the fields. After another few hours of drive we had a well-earned break at Radnót Fishponds where a drained fishpond produced a late **Black Tern** and a few scarce (for inland) waders like **Ruddy Turnstone** and **Sanderling**. We also had great views of **Common Snipe**, **Spotted Redshanks**, **Wood Sandpipers**, **Little Stints** and **Ruffs**. Also of great interest there was a skulking **Hamster** in the corn-field which had János puzzled as to why nobody followed him after leaving the bus! Most people do not know how big a wild European Hamster is so it is always nice to see one alive (rather secretive mammal). After about an hour we were on our way again for the last leg of our journey towards Székelyudvarhely (Odorheiu Secuiesc). We arrived in time for a nice dinner and our first taste of the famous Blueberry brandy!

Days 4-6. Tuesday September 30th-Thursday October 2nd 2008 We had three full days around eastern Transylvania which was blessed with excellent weather and we were very successful both with birds and mammals! The main target was the **European Brown Bear** and one afternoon we were lucky enough to see no less than nine of these magnificent creatures! It was simply superb. Especially pleasing after last year's experience when half the group failed to see them at all. The foresters told us last year that the beech mast was extremely abundant and it only happens every 20 years. This was the main problem in 2007 but we were slightly hesitant to believe it until it was proven by this year's excellent success! Our birding around the Hargita Mountain produced **European Three-toed Woodpecker**, **Black Woodpecker**, **Eurasian Nutcracker**, **Ring Ouzel**, **Crested Tit** and other high mountain birds. Although it took us two occasions to find the enigmatic **Ural Owl** finally we had fantastic views of two different birds as they were hunting. One individual was extremely dark, even the facial disk was almost black! In the Békás Gorge we tracked down about five different **Wallcreepers** of which one was circling right around our heads in response to "pishing". We spent about an hour with these special birds as they were feeding and chasing each other, undoubtedly one of the highlights of Transylvania. Additional bonus at Békás was a very co-operative **White-throated Dipper** of the black-bellied form. We also found the diminutive **European Pygmy Owl**. A fine male was calling and posing on the top of spruce trees – a classic sight. A short visit to a nearby fishpond system produced two late **Purple Herons**, a fine juvenile **Greater Spotted Eagle**, a very late juvenile **Eurasian Hobby**, several **Jack Snipes** and lots of pipits and wagtails. All in all we had an action-packed and bird-filled time around Hargita with some real specialities!

Day 7. Friday October 3rd 2008 It was time to start our travel back towards Hungary. After a short birding stop at the Bucsin Tető we continued towards Segesvár (Sigishora) where we visited the citadel. This is also known as Vlad the Impaler's place (alias Dracula). We spent an interesting hour around the town seeing the sights as well as several **Common Crossbills**. Later we moved towards our next port of call, the picturesque world heritage village of Torockó (Rimetea) at the base of the Székelykő Mountain. When we entered the limestone valley our first stop at Kö-köz produced a magnificent **Golden Eagle**, first perched on the rock then a private flight show for us. Then a very short drive to our accommodation. Before dusk we took a walk in the terraced fields below the crags. Here we managed to find several **Green Woodpeckers**, **Woodlarks** and a minimum of 13 **Rock Buntings**. We also had a very late migrant **Common Redstart** and lots of **Chiffchaffs**. The beautiful evening sunlight on the limestone Székelykő, the far carrying sheep bells in the distance and the tiny village with only the rooftops visible was a wonderful atmosphere.

Day 8. Saturday October 4th 2008 Early next morning we had another walk around the village then a substantial breakfast and we were off by 09:00 am. We had a few hours uneventful drive back to Hungary and also gained back our "lost hour" so we arrived at Debrecen Great Wood by lunchtime. For a change the weather was murky with low clouds and some drizzle. We had a quick picnic then a nice stroll in the old oak woodland. Birding was slow but finally we had both our main targets: **Middle Spotted Woodpecker** and **Short-toed Treecreeper**. An additional bonus was a brief **Black Woodpecker** and a flock of about 20 **Hawfinches**. By the time we finished our loop trail it started to rain properly so we altered the afternoon program. We drove to Balmazújváros and spent almost one hour watching not less than 47 **Long-eared Owls** at their 'winter roost', a truly memorable moment for the group. Later still in rain we drove to the northern part of the Hortobágy National Park and looked for raptors. We had two female **Hen Harriers** and finally found an orange-ginger coloured **Long-legged Buzzard** a real speciality. The rain also gave us a seldom-seen bird as a soaking wet **Common Quail** came on the road and walked in front of our bus for minutes! This was a new bird even for Quentin! Fortunately the rain started to ease so we took our position for the cranes coming to roost. We had a great experience seeing "endless" lines of Common Cranes coming overhead going in to their evening roost. We estimated about 20,000 flying over our head! Magical, though with a nice setting sun it could have been even better! We were definitely back on the Hortobágy!

Day 9. Sunday October 5th 2008 Our final full day of birding on the tour was rather busy and we still had a few Hortobágy specialities to find! After breakfast we set off for Hortobágy-Fishpond but our drive was disturbed by a Saker! We had absolutely excellent looks at this perched **Saker**, which later flew towards us and landed even closer, it filled the scope on 60 times magnification. Fantastic! Then we continued to the Hortobágy-Fishpond complex to look for some migrant and resident passerines. We took the small train up to the furthest point then had a nice walk along the willow bushes amongst the reedbed with many **Pygmy Cormorants** and **Bearded Reedlings** around us. We also saw a motionless **Eurasian Bittern**, seven **Eurasian Spoonbills**, three **Little Egrets**, 141 **Pied Avocets**, **Spotted Redshanks**, **Black-tailed Godwits** and many ducks and gulls. A few juvenile **White-tailed Eagles** also entertained us and a late **Blackcap** was seen in the bushes. It was rather cold so it was time to take a nice siesta in the warm Csárda and a good "gulyás" soup for lunch. After this we drove to the south-western part of the Park where our main target bird was **Great Bustard**. We picked up the local warden Dr. Gábor Kovács who took us around his 'local patch'. First we had good views of a **Eurasian Stone-curlew** just in the outskirts of the village and then found seven **Great Bustards** on a stubble field, which allowed good looks too. For the last hour of the day we drove to a different **Common Crane** roost and we saw up to 10,000 again but this time with a lovely setting sun and pink sky! The **Black-crowned Night Heron** on the way out was a surprise. What a wonderful day to finish the trip and also to say goodbye to the Cranes of the Hortobágy!

Day 10. Monday October 6th 2008 Our final day still had a few surprises! After breakfast we were loading up when Lorna and János spotted a **European Otter** on the lake just 50 meters away eating a fish. We could watch this magnificent and secretive creature for minutes in the morning sun as he was enjoying his fish breakfast. Finally we left our lodge and drove to Tisza Lake. Still in Nádudvar we had four **Common Crossbills** (very rare on the Hortobágy) in a coniferous tree, obviously associated with the influx to the lowlands and a fly by **Black Woodpecker**. After arriving to Tisza Lake we found the water level too high but a fine **Eurasian Penduline-tit** was most welcome. We carried on towards the airport but we had still one main target bird: **Eastern Imperial Eagle**. Going on some country roads we arrived to the best area for these rare raptors and we soon located a juvenile bird. It was circling with Common Buzzards and came right overhead! Later another six Imperial Eagles were seen and 53 **Common Buzzards** were counted from one observation point. Everybody relaxed now and we got back to our bus and some of us even packed the binoculars. It was a mistake however as while having our picnic lunch a super **Syrian Woodpecker** was located. It gave prolonged views to everybody (even Kathleen got back in time to see it) and was the last bird of the tour. After this there was nothing else left but to get to the airport in time to catch our afternoon flight back to London.

A superb trip where most of our targets were seen very well! Many thanks to all the group for making the trip so easy to lead! I hope everybody had a great time and also had many birding and non-birding experiences and found Hungary and Romania an interesting destination to travel! And don't forget the Brown Bears!

János Oláh, Limosa, October 2008

Systematic list of species recorded

(The figure in brackets is the number of days each species was recorded, species in square brackets were heard only)
(A total of 163 species was recorded by the group).

Eurasian Capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus* (1)

Our first attempt to locate this shy forest bird in the top of Hargita Mountain was not successful. Later a single female was flushed at the Bucsin Pass near Borzont from the top of a coniferous tree but it was only the briefest of a glimpse for some of us.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* (2)

Amazingly we had two sightings in the Hortobágy. The first two was only seen by Charles as we were driving out from Angyalfáza puszta (Dotterel site). Later on our rainy and dark afternoon in the northern Hortobágy gave us superb views of a soaking wet bird coming out to the tarmac road. She was walking along the road for some time allowing excellent views for all of us. Another was flushed of the same road a few minutes later. This time we did benefit from the rainy conditions.

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* (6)

Seen regularly especially on the Hortobágy.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser* (2)

A few sightings on the Hortobágy. These birds were of the eastern race *rubrirostris* with pink bills. Maximum count was about 500 birds on the 5th.

White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* (1)

A single bird was seen at Szentpál Fishponds on the 1st of October.

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* (1)

Absolutely amazing views of 33 birds at Dinnyés-lapos on the Hortobágy. Finally everybody managed to see the golden eye ring on the adult birds! Fantastic! This was one of the highlight of the tour and certainly the only lifer for Charles!

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* (1)

13 were seen in the Hortobágy area. About 10 from the train and three juveniles at fishpond 6 at Hortobágy-Fishponds.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* (1)

About 300 were seen at the Hortobágy-Fishponds.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* (2)

About 50 birds were seen at a recently flooded steppe area in the Hortobágy area and another two at Hortobágy-Fishpond.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* (6)

Common on the wetlands in the Hortobágy area and a few seen in Transylvania too.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* (4)

Several sighting throughout the tour. Around the Hortobágy and also on reservoirs in Transylvania.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* (1)

About 20 were seen at the Hortobágy-Fishponds.

Garganey *Anas querquedula* (2)

Up to 15 were counted at Nagy-Vókonya in the Hortobágy area and another 5 at Élesd Reservoir in Transylvania.

Common Teal *Anas crecca* (4)

Up to 500 daily in and around the Hortobágy and 200 at Szentpál fishponds.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* (2)

About 30 were seen at Élesd Reservoir and a few around the Hortobágy.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* (2)

Great views! 16 birds were seen perfectly at Élesd Reservoir and two juveniles at Hortobágy-Fishpond.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* (1)

About 80 were counted at Élesd Reservoir.

Black-throated Diver *Gavia arcica* (1)

A fine dult was seen very well at Élesd Reservoir. This is a very early record (29th September) at this wintering site.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (3)

A few in the Hortobágy area and about 40 at Élesd Reservoir.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* (3)

Large gathering of about 750 at Élesd Reservoir, a few at Szentpál Fishponds and two at Hortobágy-Fishponds.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* (1)

A single bird in winter plumage at Élesd Reservoir.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* (2)

Two were seen in the Hortobágy area at Nagy-Vókonya wetland and three birds at Szentpál Fishponds in Transylvania.

European White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* (1)

A very late individual was seen soaring at Nagy-Vókonya wetland in the Hortobágy area.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* (1)

Our only encounter with this species was at Hortobágy-Fishpond where 7 individuals were seen. Also rather late record.

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* (1)

Single sighting of a motionless bird at Hortobágy-Fishpond where the train stop was.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* (1)

A single bird was flushed by the lake side at Elep-Fishponds on the Hortobágy when coming out from the Crane roost area.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* (4)

A few in the Hortobágy area, about 50 at Élesd Reservoir and up to 80 at Szentpál Fishponds in Transylvania.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* (1)

Surprisingly late record of two juvenile birds at Szentpál Fishponds in Transylvania. They were feeding on the flooded edge of the lake where we were sniping.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* (6)

Commonly seen around the Hortobágy area and a few in Transylvania.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* (1)

Just three were seen at the Hortobágy-Fishponds but it was a very late record anyway of this migrant.

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus* (1)

Just 50 were seen at the Hortobágy-Fishponds.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* (1)

Maximum 120 in the Hortobágy area.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (8)

Quite common and seen almost every day. About 30 were seen on our first day in the Hortobágy area.

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus* (1)

We had 28 birds on our first afternoon near Újszász. They were coming to roost into a small woodland. We were lucky as there were up to 600 at this roosting site 3 days before us but they migrated so it was great to see them. We had all kind of plumages and sexes. A magical bird to see!

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* (1)

A single juvenile bird was seen at Szentpál Fishponds in Transylvania on the 1st of October (very late).

Saker *Falco cherrug* (3)

We had great views of a perched bird on a pylon in the Hortobágy area. It did actually fill the field of view in the scopes on 60 magnification! Two more sightings. Two birds on our last day but we did not even stop because our superb look was unbeatable.

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* (1)

A single bird was seen briefly on our morning above Torockó village. Lorna spotted it above Székelykő but it quickly disappeared.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* (2)

Several good views in the Hortobágy. A super juvenile was feeding on a dead bird at Hortobágy-Fishpond allowing excellent looks.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* (4)

A few were seen throughout the tour but more common in the Hortobágy where we saw at least 10 on our last day.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* (2)

Two females were seen quartering the steppe in the Hortobágy area.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* (4)

About 5 were seen in Transylvania and a 5 birds in the Hortobágy area too.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (10)

Common and seen every day.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* (1)

Great views of one perched on a well in the Hortobágy area at Darassa. Much paler and longer winged than Common Buzzard.

Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* (1)

A superb juvenile showed very well several times at Szentpál Fishponds in Transylvania on the 1st of October.

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* (1)

A superb juvenile was seen circling with Common Buzzards near Jászdózsza on our drive to the airport on our last day.

We also had several immature and adult birds more distantly in the same area totalling 7 birds.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* (1)

Terrific perched and flight views of an adult bird at Kő-köz near Torockó in Transylvania.

Great Bustard *Otis tarda* (1)

One of the highlights of the trip, seven females were seen very well near Nagyiván on a stubble field late afternoon.

[European Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* (1)

Heard in the Hortobágy but not seen.]

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* (2)

One was seen at Élesd Reservoir and two at Szentpál Fishpond in Transylvania.

Common Coot *Fulica atra* (5)

Up to 300 at Élesd reservoir and a few around the Hortobágy.

Common Crane *Grus grus* (6)

Many many amazing views in the Hortobágy. The bird of the trip. Definitely several magical moments when large flocks going to roost. Their bugling call was constantly in the air in the Hortobágy area. The real highlight however when skein after skein pouring into a roost area from all points of the compass. We probably saw about 35 000 in total.

Eurasian Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedipnemus* (1)

One was seen very well near Nagyiván on the 5th.

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* (1)

A flock of 141 was seen at Hortobágy-Fishpond.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* (5)

Up to 250 were seen daily in and around the Hortobágy and a few in Transylvania.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* (1)

A singleton was seen with the Dotterels at Angyalháza in the Hortobágy area.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (3)

Up to 30 were seen at Radnót Fishpond in Transylvania and a few at Szentpál Fishponds plus a single in the Hortobágy.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* (1)

Two were seen at Szentpál Fishpond in Transylvania.

Eurasian Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus* (1)

Another stunner! We had 27 at Angyalháza-puszta in the Hortobágy on 28th. Some had still the remnants of their breeding plumage.

Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus* (1)

Three were seen at Szentpál Fishpond in Transylvania. As usual for this species we had to go wading in the marsh to flush it. The "bat-like" flight, short bill and the silent flight makes it easy to identify.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* (4)

Up to 60 were seen daily in the Hortobágy area and about 30 in Transylvania.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* (1)

A flock of 26 was seen at Hortobágy-Fishpond.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* (2)

Up to 50 were seen daily in the Hortobágy area.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* (3)

We saw two at Nagy-Vókonya wetland and 18 at Hortobágy-Fishpond in the Hortobágy area. Also had about 10 at Radnót Fishponds in Transylvania.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* (1)

Two were seen at Radnót Fishpond in Transylvania.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* (1)

Two were seen at Szentpál Fishpond in Transylvania.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* (3)

Up to 10 were seen in the Hortobágy area and about 15 in Transylvania.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* (2)

A singleton was seen at Elep Fishpond in the Hortobágy area and 5 were seen at Élesd Reservoir.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* (1)

A single juvenile was seen at Radnót Fishpond in Transylvania.

Sanderling *Calidris alba* (1)

Four juveniles were seen at Radnót Fishpond in Transylvania.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta* (4)

The largest gathering of 50 were seen at Radnót Fishpond in Transylvania.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (4)

The largest gathering of 40 were seen at Hortobágy-Fishpond.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* (4)

The largest gathering of 20 were seen at Radnót Fishpond in Transylvania.

Common Gull *Larus canus* (1)

Just two were seen at Hortobágy-Fishpond.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* (1)

Just two were seen at Hortobágy-Fishpond.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* (1)

Up to 300 were seen in the Hortobágy area. Recently split, this bird is slimmer and less compact than *michahellis* with a thinner bill and longer legs and, in the adults, less sharply defined black wing tips and a paler mantle. Both are, of course, a split from Herring Gull. Caspian Gull is the commoner of the two in the Hortobágy for most of the year.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* (1)

The other name is Baltic Gull. A single adult was seen on a recently ploughed field in the Hortobágy area.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* (4)

Up to 300 were seen in the Hortobágy area and up to 200 in Transylvania.

Little Gull *Larus minutus* (2)

Three juveniles were seen at Élesd Reservoir and another three juveniles at Szentpál Fishponds.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* (1)

Only a single was seen in flight at Radnót Fishponds in Transylvania.

Feral Rock Dove *Columba livia* (10)

Seen every day mostly around human habitation.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas* (3)

The largest gathering of 300 was noted at Szentpál Fishpond in Transylvania.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* (10)

Seen every day.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (7)

Commonly seen especially around human habitations.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* (1)

One very late bird at Nagy-Vókonya in the Hortobágy area on the 28th.

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis* (1)

The second best 'bird of the trip' which we saw in Transylvania. We were very lucky to get superb views this year. Our first attempt to locate this enigmatic bird was not successful but on our return we had two different birds, hunting still in daylight! Magical!

Eurasian Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium passerinum* (1)

Absolutely excellent views of a very responding male at Csalhó National Park in Transylvania.

Little Owl *Athene noctua* (2)

We had two sightings in the Hortobágy area. The best view was at the Dinnyés-lapos tower on our first morning!

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* (1)

On the rainy day we had 47 at a roost in trees in Balmazújváros. This winter roost gets even bigger by winter.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* (3)

Heard a few times before we had one perched at Élesd Reservoir.

[Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor* (1)

We only heard this tiny bird at Torockó this year].

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius* (1)

After some patience we finally had good views at Debrecen Great Wood.

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus* (2)

A few fly-by woodpecker in various villages were thought to be this species. Also Quentin saw one at Bánfihunyad but the rest of the group saw one on the way to the airport (the last bird of the tour).

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* (5)

Common in various wooded habitats.

Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus* (1)

Finally we had excellent views of a female at Bucsin Tető in Transylvania. We could watch this female feeding for several minutes.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* (5)

We had three different sightings and heard on two more occasions. Best views were at the Bucsin Tető in Transylvania.

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* (4)

Great looks at one on our first afternoon but the best views were at Torockó when we saw 7 birds.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* (3)

We had still many encounters with this common summer visitor both on the Hortobágy and in Transylvania.

Northern Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* (9)

Seen almost daily on the tour! We had up to 4 birds daily with some really nice views.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* (8)

A common bird seen on many occasions.

Common Magpie *Pica pica* (8)

Seen nearly every day.

Eurasian Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes* (3)

We had many good views in the pine forests of Transylvania.

Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* (8)

Common in the Hortobágy area and Transylvania too.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus* (7)

Up to 300 in the Hortobágy area daily.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* (9)

Seen nearly every day.

Common Raven *Corvus corax* (6)

Seen on several occasions but they were particularly obvious, noisy at the top of Hargita Mountain in Transylvania.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris* (3)

We heard it in Transylvania but it was seen only in Debrecen Great Wood.

Willow Tit *Poecile montana* (4)

A common bird in mixed bird parties in the Transylvanian pine forests. Up to 10 were seen daily there.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater* (4)

Very common in Transylvania especially in the higher areas.

Crested Tit *Parus cristatus* (3)

A fairly common bird in mixed bird parties in the Transylvanian pine forests. Up to 20 were seen daily.

Great Tit *Parus major* (5)

Common in Transylvania but also recorded in Debrecen Great Wood and the Hortobágy area.

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* (4)

Surprisingly the first sighting was as late on the tour as Torockó in Transylvania but then we had several sightings.

Eurasian Penduline-tit *Remiz pendulinus* (2)

It was only heard at Hortobágy Fishpond in the strong wind but two showed nicely on the last day at Tisza Lake.

Common Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* (1)

Two rather late individual was seen at Hortobágy Fishpond.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* (3)

The highest count of 300 was on our first afternoon near Újzsász.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* (1)

A family party of the white-headed race was seen at Nagy-Vókonya in the Hortobágy area. Superb little birds.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* (3)

Roadside birds seen on a few occasions. It was numerous on the trackside shingle at Élesd Reservoir.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* (3)

Fairly common in the Hortobágy where up to 30 were seen daily.

Woodlark *Lullula arborea* (2)

Fairly common in the Hortobágy where up to 30 were seen daily.

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* (2)

One in the Hortobágy area at Nagy-Vókonya wetland while 'snipe-ing' and two more at Szentpál Fishponds also while 'snipe-ing'.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* (1)

About three were seen in the Hortobágy area on our first day.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* (6)

Up to 10 were seen almost daily on the tour.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* (1)

A single female was seen at Hortobágy Fishpond.

Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus* (3)

Several heard and about 6 were seen well at Hortobágy Fishpond.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* (5)

Commonly seen in the pine forests of Transylvania.

Northern Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* (6)

Several sightings but even at the end of the tour not everybody had seen this tiny little bird.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* (4)

Commonly seen in forests of Transylvania and in Debrecen Great Woods.

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria* (1)

Absolutely fantastic views of about 5 birds at Békás Gorge in Transylvania. One circled around our heads in response of 'pishing'.

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* (4)

A few sighting in Transylvania.

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla* (1)

One was seen very well in Debrecen Great Wood on the 4th.

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* (7)

Seen almost every day with flocks of several thousands.

Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus* (1)

It was numerous this year at the top of Hargita Mountain. We encountered small flocks in the blueberry undergrowth. It is the very scaly *alpestris* race here.

Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula* (7)

Seen nearly every day.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* (2)

We had only a few in the Gyergyó Basin in Transylvania.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* (5)

Seen a few times in Transylvania.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* (4)

Seen regularly in Transylvania. We had up to 25 around Pisztrángos.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* (5)

Regularly seen in the woodlands of Transylvania.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* (7)

Several sightings both in Transylvania and the Hortobágy area.

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* (1)

A single very late migrant was seen in the bushes at Torockó.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* (2)

Three active birds at Angyalháza in the Hortobágy area and a family party of four at Élesd Reservoir.

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola* (7)

Seen almost every day.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* (2)

A late juvenile was seen in the Hortobágy area and another juvenile at Élesd Reservoir.

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus* (1)

Two very obliging birds were entertaining us at Békás Gorge. This is the black-bellied *aquaticus* race.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (8)

Seen almost every day.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* (8)

Flocks up to 200 were seen nearly every day.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis* (2)

Two sightings in Transylvania.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* (3)

Up to 10 were seen in the Hortobágy area and singles in Transylvania. All those seen well were of the nominate 'Blue-headed' race.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* (3)

We had singles on three occasions in Transylvania. Best was the very "ginger-orange" one at Békás Gorge.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* (8)

Commonly seen throughout the tour with up to 100 at Radnót and Szentpál Fishponds (coming to roost).

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* (3)

We had seen small flocks three times both in the Hortobágy area and in Transylvania.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* (2)

Seen on two dates in Transylvania.

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* (3)

We had three encounters but unfortunately just fly-overs. Three in the Hortobágy area and one in Transylvania.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* (2)

Ten were seen at Szentpál Fishponds in Transylvania and one in the Hortobágy.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* (8)

Commonly seen throughout the tour.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* (3)

It was a non-leader for a long while as Quentin kept seeing them but finally on the last day we all saw a few.

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus* (1)

Just five were seen at Pisztrángos in Transylvania.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* (9)

Commonly seen throughout the tour.

Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* (4)

A few sightings in the Hortobágy area and more common in Transylvania.

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* (4)

We had 6 fly-overs at Élesd Reservoir then four at the top of Hargita Mountain (where usually common) and then about 18 at Segesvár (Sighisora) and finally four on the Hortobágy. Most sightings were in very unusual places this year. Two weeks after the tour there turned out to be a great influx of the species from Siberia.

Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* (2)

Two sightings in Transylvania but unfortunately both leader only.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* (3)

Only four were seen at Transylvania and a flock of 20 at Debrecen Great Wood.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* (2)

Seen twice in the Hortobágy area.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* (6)

Up to 20 around Torockó and also seen on the Hortobágy.

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* (2)

Superb views of several at Székelykő near Torockó. Up to 13 on our first day there and 5 more next morning.

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* (3)

Up to 15 in the Hortobágy and a pair at Szentpál Fishponds in Transylvania.

Mammals

European Hare *Lepus europaeus* (3)

A few sightings in the Hortobágy area.

European Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* (3)

Several classic animal in Transylvania.

European Brown Bear *Ursus arctos* (1)

One of the major highlights of the trip! Nine individuals were seen in Transylvania allowing excellent views!

Black-bellied Hamster *Cricetus cricetus* (1)

Seen once at Radnót Fishponds in Transylvania. It was feeding in a cornfield.

Weasel *Mustela nivalis* (1)

One was seen at Élesd Reservoir.

Bank Vole *Myodes glareolus* (2)

One was seen at Élesd Reservoir.

Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* (2)

Great views of one which was having breakfast just in front of the lodge in the Hortobágy! A nice way to say good by to Trófea.

Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus* (4)

Several sightings on the tour.

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus* (2)

A female was seen and several males were heard.

Common Noctule *Nyctalus noctula* (1)

Two were seen flying around while we were watching the Ural Owls in Transylvania.

Reptiles & Amphibians

European Tree Frog *Hyla arborea*

Heard regularly.

Common Marsh Frog *Pelophylax ridibundus*

Most of the frogs we saw in aquatic habitats were probably of this species but they are included in a difficult complex with Pool and Edible Frog, *P. lessonae* and *P. kl. esculentus*, which are notoriously difficult to separate.

The 'Bird of the tour' contest:

<i>Species</i>	<i>Points</i>	<i>Nominations</i>
1st Common Crane	44	5
2nd Ural Owl	28	5
3rd Wallcreeper	21	4
4th Crested Tit	18	3
5th Lesser White-fronted Goose	16	2