

ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO HUNGARY
Autumn Tour 2011



Tour leader:
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29. October – 04. November 2011

Saturday, 29th of October

The group met at the Budapest Liszt Ferenc Airport early in the afternoon. The weather was fine, sunny and quite warmish – around 14 °C, which is definitely warm in late autumn in Hungary. We had not too much time as we wanted to spend some time with bird watching and the days are rather short here this time of the year (the sun sets between four and five p.m.). So, as we packed our luggage into our minibus we started immediately our two hours drive along the M3 motorway to the east. We had only one short stop by a petrol station before we stopped by the western bank of the huge Tisza Lake. A mostly swallow pond along the Tisza River with gallery forests, reed beds and expansive open water. There were about 1500 Greylags (and many more in the distance) and many Great Cormorants, Mute Swans and some Great Egrets. We had an excellent opportunity to compare adult Caspian Gulls with the lone adult Yellow-legged Gull (in Eastern Hungary usually the previous one is more numerous, though the latter is also common). There were some dead willow trees and floating logs which were occupied by the Cormorants with opened wings as they were drying their feathers. Among them we noticed two Pygmy Cormorants. From a handful of breeding pairs in the 80's it established a big population and still spreading. Though in mid-autumn most of them migrate to the south so it is rather scarce this time in the Hortobágy area.

As there were plenty of birds on the lake we could spend easily the rest of the afternoon here, we added a Greta Grey Shrike to our list and we drove through the Hortobágy National Park, but it was already pitch dark when we arrived to our Hotel, situated on the south-eastern corner of the Hortobágy near Nádudvar.

Saturday, 30st of October

In the first morning one part of the group woke up early and took a short walk around the hotel where is a small pond and old willow trees around it. One can walk along small trails beside the pond among poplar trees. The morning was cold, so the bird activity was not too good that early, though we saw a nice Kingfisher and a male Great Spotted Woodpecker beside the commonest species. After breakfast we drove to the southern grasslands of the Park, where we hoped to see some Dotterels. They arrive to moult in the Hortobágy, so they stage in the short grassed areas from late August till late October – usually till the first freeze weather. As it was still quite mild during the day we had excellent chance to find at least some birds. After we had driven several kilometres into the 'puszta' – as the Hungarian grassland is called – we saw a biggish flock of birds flying and landed beside our vehicle. Most of them were European Golden Plovers – but among them, there were 18 Dotterels. They moved away from the Golden Plovers and they started to feed. We set up our scopes and walked closer and closer to them. These obliging pretty birds let us to walk close enough to have excellent views.

After about 45 minutes we walked away from them back to the bus and drove to the north where a big fishpond system, the Virágoskút Fishponds is situated. The weather had been so dry during the last three months, that all the dirt roads were driveable so even the biggest pond which is the furthest away was easy to approach. This pond was the best for geese (and cranes in the evening) this autumn, and we did see more then 20.000 Greater White-fronted Geese swimming in the middle of the pond. Even the closest flocks were too far to pick up any goodies from the mass. Though the lights were excellent and eventually a few Red-breasted Geese (one of the key birds of this trip) were picked up. Unfortunately the flock was frightened too quickly by a White-tailed Eagle and they moved even further away without giving a real chance to have a view. On a smaller pond we saw a juvenile Velvet Scoter among the Tufted Ducks - a real rarity in the Hortobágy region, which is regular only on the deeper waters in Hungary.

It was time to go to our restaurant where we had a fantastic fish soup. As we had a quite late lunch we had limited time for the afternoon so we decided to visit only a few more places. First we stopped by the road in the northern grassland area, where we picked up a Long-legged Buzzard quite easily sitting on the top of a tree. On the way we saw smaller and bigger flock of Common Cranes flying towards their roosting area. We still had time to drive in a farmland area where we found two Sakerfalcons sitting on pylons. From the cover of a tree line we managed to get really close views. From a nearby fishpond flocks of Greater White-fronts were flying towards their feeding area. It was almost dark

when one part of our group saw a Red-breasted Goose in a smaller flock. It is really small among the much bigger White-fronts.

Monday, 31st of October

We had to wake up early again and have breakfast before we started our one hour long drive till the south western part of the Park. Along the way we saw many feeding flocks of Common Cranes. We picked up the local ranger and we started to check the rape fields for Europe's heaviest – and one of the most threatened - bird species. This area has the stronghold of the Great Bustard population of the Hortobágy. Though they prefer the grassland, for the winter usually they move to these rape fields as it can provide them with food even in the harshest weather. During our drive we saw many Hen Harriers, a Rough-legged Buzzard and a Merlin. Eventually on a distant rape field we counted 23 female Greta Bustards. Eight birds were close enough to have beautiful views of these so shy birds. In a nearby reed bed a small party of Bearded Reedlings was very confiding coming very close, climbing up to the top of the reed first, later feeding on the side of the dirt road. After this we still had enough time to visit a traditional Great Spotted Eagle wintering site before lunch. In the area we found quite quickly an adult bird, which was sitting on a dead tree. Nearby there were some White-tailed Eagles too. One of them made the Great Spotted fly away from its perch. We were lucky as it was flying towards us and it started to circle just above our heads.

From here we drove to Hortobágy village where we saw a female Syrian Woodpecker before lunch, not far from our restaurant.

After lunch we returned to the same fishponds where we were the previous day, as that pond was this year which attracted the biggest numbers of Common Cranes. We had enough time to check some other ponds before and we saw some Black-necked Grebes, many White-tailed Eagles, a few Pintails and even a Black Woodpecker feeding on the top of a dead poplar. Then we went to the western side of the pond and stopped between the reed bed of the pond and a line of big poplar trees. The geese were flying out (among them three Red-breasted) when the first bigger flocks of Common Cranes appeared above the poplar trees. After this, line after line appeared and their sound filled the air. They were flying against the beautiful sunset and they were just coming and coming till it became almost dark. There were at least 30.000 Cranes around – a real spectacle!

Tuesday, 1st of November

The mornings were getting colder and it was even below zero and a little bit foggy, but soon after sunrise it became sunny again and the temperature started to rise quickly. Today we planned to visit some sites south from our hotel in the so called Bihar region.

First we visited the ponds of a former sugar factory. On the pond there were many ducks and grebes – Little, Great Crested and Black Necked, respectively. It took some time till we managed to find our first Ferruginous Duck among the other ducks. Usually this is the best place to find this migratory species as late in the season. Later we saw another one flying, and found a Pygmy Cormorant as well. Nearby we visited a small mudflat –the remnants of an extensive wetland which was left behind the big rains of 2010. On the mud we saw many waders, namely Spotted Redshanks, Ruffs, Gray Plovers and Dunlins. On the reed beds of a channel we saw about ten Penduline Tits just a few meters from us. From here we drove to a freshly flooded habitat reconstruction area, which was full of ducks. We hoped to find some Red-breasted Geese among the White-fronts – but unfortunately somehow they stayed far away from this site today and we managed to see only a small flock of White-fronted Geese. Maybe they were chased away by that adult White-tailed Eagle which was sitting on an island in the middle of the wetland.

From here we drove to Debrecen and visited the mature oak woodland north of the town. As it was quite late in the afternoon the forest seemed to be very silent first and in the beginning we saw only a handful of Tits (Great, Blue and Marsh). Later Mistle Thrushes started their activity and we saw more and more Hawfinches flying ahead. Some of them perched up on the top of the trees, so we could have good views of them. We saw two Black Woodpeckers flying in the forest, a Green Woodpecker feeding on a dead branch and a Great Spotted nearby. So woodpecker activity rose toward the evening. We saw at least three different Middle-spotted Woodpeckers feeding on side branches of huge old oak trees. The lights were perfect and these prolonged scope views were really fantastic of the busily

feeding woodpeckers. As we were walking out the forest we saw even a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker on the top of a dead tree. A fantastic day for woodpeckers!

Wednesday, 2nd of November

Before we left the hotel this morning we had an encounter with a big flock of Long-tailed Tits in front of our hotel. Both Black-browed and White-headed subspecies were in the flock.

We dedicated this day for the geese as we still had to obtain good views of the Red-breasted Goose for all the tour participants. So we wanted to start the day at the same locality as we tried previously. As we were getting closer we received news that a juvenile Pine Bunting was caught in a nearby ringing station – a mega rarity in Hungary. The group decided to see that bird, as it was really close and we had to take literally no effort to have an in hand view. We took some pictures of the bird which represented only the fourth ever record for the country! Soon we were back on the road and we tried to get closer to the geese from the other side of the pond. Huge flocks were much closer from this site but not in good light. Above a carcass (most probably a White-front) eleven White-tailed Eagles were circling. Sometimes one of them landed on the carcass but they could not drag it out from the deep water. Suddenly a new eagle arrived – an almost adult Imperial Eagle. It stayed with the White-tailed Eagles for a while, but eventually it was chased away, then it was circling beside us for a while. Though we found a Barnacle Goose (scarce locally) in the flock we decided to try the previous locality hoping that the geese will be closer this time. We were lucky as a few thousands were really close and with the help of some local birders we picked up a couple of species, like Brent and Canada Goose (both rare here), but best of all we saw at least four beautiful Red-breasted Geese. A real stunning bird! Later two Lesser White-fronted Geese (a pair) were found. Unfortunately they were quickly swimming into the mass of Greater White-fronts, so only one of the tour participants managed to have a view of them. On another pond we saw five Taiga and one Tundra Bean Geese among the Greylags, so we recorded amazingly 9 different kinds of Geese in one locality!

After lunch we visited a site in Balmazújváros which is famous for its wintering Long-eared Owls. These birds return every autumn to the same trees to spend the winter here communally. Without any effort we saw more than 30 birds very close and sure there were many more on other trees. We heard a Syrian Woodpecker nearby before we left to visit an alkaline pond close to this little town. On the pond not too many birds were observed, but among them we saw a Wood Sandpiper which is – though very common earlier – very seldom seen in the second half of the autumn.

Thursday, 3rd of November

Today we planned to have a leisure day and start the bird watching once more around the hotel. Bird activity was much better today and we saw most of the commoner passerines, like Goldcrest and Common Treecreeper.

Then we drove again to Debrecen and continued the bird watching in the forest. After a while we managed to found our main target: a Short-toed Treecreeper which was climbing up on the trunk of a huge oak tree. As we had only either distant or poor flight views of the Black Woodpecker we decided to spend the rest of the morning with the search of this species. Not far from the road we heard the so typical loud and strong drumming of them. This drumming was of great help to find the bird high on a tree searching after its food. We had long scope views of this bird and we even witnessed an unsuccessful attack against this huge woodpecker. A brave juvenile Sparrowhawk attempted to catch it – the woodpecker dropped down to avoid the attack and flew back to the same feeding spot. The Sparrowhawk realised that the woodpecker is too big to catch so it rather perched beside it and flew away after a while. We were still watching the woodpecker when its conspecific arrived and landed on a nearby tree.

We had a lunch halfway between Debrecen and the Hortobágy and after that we visited a nearby fishpond. Here we saw a juvenile Great Spotted Eagle - a really beautifully patterned bird. On the pond there were several thousand geese (Greater White-fronts) but too far away. Later eventually we managed to find at least two Red-breasted Geese among them.

In the evening we went to Tetétlen, where, around a temporary wetland we managed to add Water Pipit to our list.

Friday, 4th of November

This day we had no time for bird watching as we had to arrive to the airport quite early to catch our plain. So we took the three hours' drive from the hotel to Budapest and say good bay to this magnificent birding site, where we saw tens of thousands of water birds (cranes, geese and ducks) many raptor species and all together over 110 species (112 indeed).

Itinerary and Weather

DAY 1

Saturday, 29th of October London - Budapest – Hortobágy (via M3 motorway), short stop by the Motorway near Gyöngyös – and a longer stop by the Tisza Lake near Poroszló
Sunny and warm weather, about 14 °C. No wind.

DAY 2

Sunday, 30th of October – Hotel Garden (Trófea, near Nádudvar) – Angyalháza (expansive grassland near Nádudvar) – Virágoskút Fishponds (near Balmazújváros) - Tiszacsege (lunch) – Darassa (northern grassland) – Téglahát (farmland)
Very nice weather. Sunny and warm, about 14 °C, but cold in the morning. No wind.

DAY 3

Monday, 31st of October - Nagyiván (southern and western grasslands and farmlands) – Elep (near Nagyhegyes) –Hortobágy village (lunch and bird watching) – Virágoskút Fishponds (near Balmazújváros – Crane roost)
Very nice weather. Sunny and warm, about 14 °C, but cold in the morning. No wind.

DAY 4

Tuesday, 1st of November – Kaba (pond) – Tetétlen (grassland with temporary wetlands) – Földes (flooded area) – Debrecen (woodland)
Very nice weather. Sunny and warm, about 14 °C, but cold in the morning. No wind.

DAY 5

Wednesday, 2nd of November – Hortobágy Fishponds (ringing station) - Virágoskút Fishponds (near Balmazújváros) - Hortobágy village (lunch) – Balmazújváros (town) – Nagy-szik (wetland near Balmazújváros)
Very nice weather. Sunny and warm, about 14 °C, but cold in the morning. No wind.

DAY 6

Thursday, 3rd of November – Hotel Garden (Trófea, near Nádudvar) - Debrecen (woodland) – Elep (fishponds near Naghegyes) - Tetétlen
A bit foggy in the morning, later sunny and warm weather, about 13 °C. No wind.

DAY 7

Friday, 4th of November – Drive to Budapest Airport
Mild and sunny.

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING THE TOUR**Abundance scale**

(max for any one day)

1 = 1 - 4

2 = 5 - 9

3 = 10 - 99

4 = 100 - 999

5 = 1000+

SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	No. of days recorded	Abundance
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	5	3
Grater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	5	5
Lesser White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser erythropus</i>	1	1
Tundra Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis rosicus</i>	1	1
Taiga Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis fabalis</i>	1	2
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	7	4
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	1	1
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	1	1
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	1	1
Red-breasted Goose	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>	3	1
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2	1
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	4	3
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	2	3
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	5	4
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	5	5
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	1	3
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	3	3
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	3	3
Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	1	1
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	4	3
Velvet Scooter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>	2	1
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	6	3
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	2	3
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	2	3
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	4	3
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	5	3
Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>	2	1
Great Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	6	3
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	6	3
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	4	3
Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	1	1

Greater Spotted Eagle	<i>Aquila clanga</i>	2	1
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	4	1
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	5	3
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	1	1
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	7	3
Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	1	1
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	4	1
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1	1
Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>	1	1
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	6	2
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1	1
Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	6	4
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	6	5
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	1	3
Dotterel	<i>Charadrius morinellus</i>	1	3
Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	1	3
Gray Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	1	3
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	3	3
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	3	3
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	1	1
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	1	2
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1	H
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	3	3
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	3	2
Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	2	2
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	6	4
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	2	1
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahelis</i>	3	2
Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	6	4
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	7	3
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	1	4
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	6	3
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	4	1
Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>	1	3
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	3	1
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	2	1
Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	3	1
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2	1

Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	2	1
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>	1	1
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>	1	1
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	4	1
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	1	2
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	4	3
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	1
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	1
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	1
Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	1	1
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	1	3
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	3	1
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	2	3
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	H
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	2	1
Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	5	1
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	5	3
European Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	3	3
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	2	1
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	1	3
Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	4	2
Eurasian Penduline-Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	2	3
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	2	3
Common Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	2	1
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	1	1
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	2	1
Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	6	3
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	2
Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	2	3
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	7	5
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	7	3
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	7	3
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	7	4
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	7	4
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	4	2
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	6	3
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	3	1
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	1	1

Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula	2	1
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes	1	3
Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus	4	3
Pine Bunting	Emberiza leucocephala	1	1
Corn Bunting	Miliaria calandra	1	2

MAMMALS

Red Fox

Weasel

Roe Deer

Brown Hare

AMPHIBIANS

Common Marsh Frog

BUTTERFLIES

Clouded Yellow

Red Admiral

This list represents those birds and other animals seen by any of the party members of this tour.
H means in the last column, that species was only heard.