



Red-breasted with Greater White-fronted Geese (Dániel Balla)

RED-BREASTED GOOSE SPECIAL TOUR with SAKERTOURS 4th – 10th November, 2023

Leader: Dániel Balla

It has been several years since the Red-breasted Goose tour is running with us in the Hortobágy region in Eastern Hungary. It never did disappoint us before and it was great fun this year as well. On special request this year's tour was two days longer, but almost all that extra time was spent with these fantastic looking wildfowl and the accompanying species.

Our string of success with this tour is still lasting and this year we enjoyed all together more than 80 individuals of the endangered Red-breasted Goose and found 9 Lesser White-fronted Goose amongst the tens of thousands of Greater White-fronted ones covering the grasslands and wetlands of the Hortobágy National Park. Supporting cast to boost our list on the tour included Brant Goose, Barnacle Goose, Tundra Bean Goose, Ferruginous Duck, Pygmy Cormorant, Saker Falcon, Eastern Imperial Eagle, dozens of Hen Harriers, a few thousand Common Cranes, Little and Long-eared Owl, Syrian Woodpecker, Bearded Reedling and even a few Snow Bunting all seen on the lowlands. As our time permitted us, we did some birding in the nearby woods at Debrecen and had fantastic views of Black, Lesser Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and Short-toed Treecreeper. On our last day a short visit to the mountains gave the special Wallcreeper, Grey-headed Woodpecker and a surprise White-backed Woodpecker.

4th November (Saturday)

After meeting at the airport hotel, we drove to the Northern part of the Kiskunság National Park for our usual tour start, to see the Great Bustards in an easy setup. We were very lucky with the weather which was sunny and no wind was disturbing us, though the temperature was unusually warm, reaching 15°C. We did a great job finding the Great Bustards as we arrived and at first a group of 51 birds were feeding in front of us on a rape field which then later were joined by another flock of arriving birds finally totalling at 70 birds all together. We had flocks of Water and Meadow Pipits flying around as they were disturbed by the Hen Harriers hunting above the Bustards – at least 10 individuals were seen during 1,5-hour roadside birding in the area, supported by a dozen Kestrel and a Rough-legged Buzzard, which was gliding South above us. After a comfortable drive – during which we saw our first flocks of Cranes – we arrived in the Hortobágy region at the Bíbic Lodge where Tibor (our host) and a Little Owl were greeting us.



Usual start of our tours with Great Bustards in the Kiskunság National Park (Dániel Balla)

5th November (Sunday)

It was a stormy day. The weather was not kind to us today and our back up plan was to find the Geese and other specialties from our vehicle. We drove around the Eastern edge of the National Park but luck was not on our side today. Although we did not find larger flocks of Geese some other birds were kind and showed very well. We had a nice encounter with a Little Owl, first a female then a male Rough-legged Buzzard and saw more than a dozen Hen Harriers on various patches of grassland while Common Cranes were numerous on every harvested maize plot with Caspian Gulls joining them on some sites. In the afternoon we found White-tailed and Imperial Eagles flying above the woods as the rain stopped for a few minutes. We finished the day checking the local Long-eared Owl roost, where at least 15 individuals were spotted despite they did their best hiding from the severe wind, while a bonus Syrian Woodpecker started calling and soon was observed through our bins as it was moving on a dry walnut tree.

6th November (Monday)

After yesterday's horrible circumstances it was a bright, sunny day with a constant light breeze. Ideal conditions for a good birding, we spotted a juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle as start from the Lodge's terrace. Driving into

the central parts of the Hortobágy National Park a Saker Falcon crossing the air low above us was a nice surprise, unfortunately we couldn't get in front of it for a second view. Arriving to the Fishponds we found dozens of Pygmy Cormorants, and masses of ducks mainly consisting of Mallard, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon and Common Teal, but Northern Pintail and a few Tufted Ducks were also present. As the wind was a bit chilly, we decided to move on and changed location to another set of Fishponds further West, where finally we heard the loud noise of some Geese from one of the lakes. A short walk and we were searching between a few hundred Greater White-fronted and Greylag Goose for something unusual. Our search revealed a Barnacle Goose, a scarce species in this region but nothing else, and we saw a Ferruginous Duck flying between the lakes – a late encounter with this species. We spotted Water Rail in the edge of the reeds and a Rough-legged Buzzard was scoped in a thermal shared with Common Buzzards and White-tailed Eagles. After an early lunch we stopped near the main road to check the wetland on the Eastern edge of the Park. We were amazed to find thousands of Greater White-fronted Geese and Greylag Geese grazing on the grassland and swimming on the water a few hundred meters away from us in the best lights possible at this time. It didn't take too long to spot our first Red-breasted Goose, which was soon followed by another two and so on our count totalled 6 individuals in this flock and further 8 in another close flock which we drove closer to check. We had time and the conditions were perfect to study the difference between the juvenile and adult birds. Our quest was not over yet and while admiring the Red-breasts we found the other endangered specialty, the Lesser White-fronted Goose in the flock. After finding the first bird, another pair turned up and with careful scanning we found altogether 6 adult individuals of this great species. The flock was flushed a few times by White-tailed and Eastern Imperial Eagles, the latter one we saw 5 together soaring above the woods in the background. We just started heading back to Balmazújváros when we received information about a Brent Goose observed near the Lodge – a lucky coincidence. We drove to the spot where Gyula the local birdwatcher showed us our only missing Branta species for the day, and we also found 5 more Red-breasted Geese to top up our daily count to 19. We finished the day enjoying the Cranes coming past above us heading to their roosting site.



Red-breasted Geese in the Hortobágy (Dániel Balla)

7th – 8th November (Tuesday – Wednesday)

Considering our extra time we decided to spend more time on the Southern parts of the Hortobágy National Park and reached the Bihar region where another great wetland was waiting for us to be discovered. We left early in the morning to arrive to the site near Berettyóújfalu which is a grazed pasture and wetland mixture habitat managed under the caring eyes of the National Park's professionals. Arriving at the observation tower the numbers of waterfowl was mind-blowing as we looked around. We spent half of the day here and enjoyed unusually close views of a Lesser White-fronted Goose family, Red-breasted Geese were picked out regularly here-and-there from the huge flocks of Greater White-fronted Goose, some long staying shorebird were seen such as Pied Avocets, Northern lapwing and Eurasian Curlews. White-tailed Eagles were feeding on a Crane carcass and time to time they were joined by two Eastern Imperial Eagles. Our total count of Red-breasted Goose become 27 here and adding another pair of Lesser White-fronts made a total of 5 individuals seen here. Visiting the open grassland of the southern Hortobágy was memorable as this region gives us the feeling of the truly endless puszta. Navigating here needs great local knowledge and finding birds here can be tricky sometimes but we were lucky bumping into three Snow Buntings here, a scarce winter visitor in Central Europe, probably the Hortobágy being the most reliable spot for them. Common Cranes feeding on the grassland were lovely and seeing more than 10 Hen Harrier during a morning session was outstanding. Skylarks were migrating and we found them hiding in the short grass a few times letting good looks on them, this is the site for Dotterels and we gave a shot as sometimes there could be a few long staying individuals left but it seems all left this year. A welcomed gift was a Merlin before we decided to head out from the area for a lunch and checking the local Saker Falcon territory where two birds were hanging around for our luck.

The afternoons were spent as usual scanning the flocks of Geese around Balmazújváros and trying to have as many good looks of Red-breasted Geese as possible. They never disappointed us and we found almost 30 of them in total and a few Lesser White-fronted Goose as well to make it more exciting. It is never enough of them...



Lesser White-fronted Goose family in the Hortobágy (Dániel Balla)

9th November (Thursday)

The woods near Debrecen are close enough for a half day visit and walking on the right patch can be fruitful for birdwatchers. We spent the morning in search for the local woodpeckers and did a great job finding two Black Woodpeckers and three Middle Spotted Woodpeckers. It was interesting to see how more confident the second Black Woodpecker was as it had his territory along a busy trail where local dog walkers, runners and people who just come out to enjoy some fresh air makes them so used to humans they were not really caring about us standing a few meters away from this huge bird. Some nice additions to the woodpeckers were Eurasian Nuthatches, Short-toed Treecreeper, Bullfinch and some more common songbirds.

We spent the afternoon in the company of the Geese for the last time seeing Red-breasted Goose and locating a pair of Lesser White-fronted Goose in nice lights again.



Black Woodpecker (Dániel Balla)

10th November (Friday)

On our last day we were heading to the airport with an early morning start from the Hortobágy and made a detour to have a short hike to a well-known spot where wintering Wallcreepers turn up almost every year. The sunny but chilly weather welcoming us on the hill was perfect for a nice birding. After an hour easy hike, we arrived to the dedicated spot and just after 15 minutes waiting – which we spent enjoying a flock of Muflon climbing up the steep rocky slope – a Wallcreeper just flew across the path we were standing and landed on the limestone cliff. We were enjoying the bird when it suddenly took off and joined another individual flying by and they disappeared behind the huge rocks. Our attempt to relocate them failed but added a Grey-headed Woodpecker on the site as it was hanging on the cliff and moving on the small trees on the cliff side. Our greatest surprise was a calling White-backed Woodpecker soon after which then showed himself well. A Peregrine patrolling the top of the cliff was our last bird before we started heading down. Back at the carpark

we had some nice Bullfinch and we headed towards the airport where we said goodbye to each other as our great trip ended.



A beautiful male White-backed Woodpecker surprised us on our last day (Dániel Balla)



Common Cranes and Greylag Geese on the puszta (Dániel Balla)

BIRDS – list of bird species recorded on the 2022 tour

C = Commonly seen, more than 10 individuals

'Numbers' = Actual number seen on the tour

H = Heard only

LO = Leader only

NL = Non-leader

1	Brant Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	1
2	Red-breasted Goose	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>	80+
3	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	2
4	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	C
5	Tundra Bean Goose	<i>Anser serrirostris</i>	3
6	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	C
7	Lesser White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser erythropus</i>	11



Another Lesser White-fronted Goose family seen on the tour (Dániel Balla)

8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	C
9	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	3
10	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	C
11	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	C
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	C
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	C
14	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	C
15	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	C

16	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	2
17	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	25
18	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	1
19	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	4
20	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	C
21	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	4
22	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	7
23	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	11
24	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	C
25	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	C
26	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>	C
27	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	C
28	Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	13
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	C
30	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	C
31	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	C



Female Hen Harrier (Dániel Balla)

32	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	C
33	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	4
34	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	C
35	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	70
36	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	1
37	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	C
38	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	C
39	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	5

40	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	C
41	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	4
42	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	13
43	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	2
44	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	C
45	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1
46	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	11
47	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	C
49	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	2
50	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	C
51	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia f. domestica</i>	C
52	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	2
53	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	C
54	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1
55	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>	15
56	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	H
57	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>	3



Middle Spotted Woodpecker seen near Debrecen (Dániel Balla)

58	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>	1
59	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>	1
60	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	2
61	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	6
62	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	2
63	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>	1

64	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	2
65	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	C
66	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1
67	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>	3
68	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2
69	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	2
70	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	C
71	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	C
72	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	C
73	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	C
74	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	C
75	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	4
76	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	5
77	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	C
78	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	C
79	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	H
80	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	2
81	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	C
82	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	3
83	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	H
84	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	2
85	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H



Early sign of the upcoming winter was a small flock of Snow Bunting in the Hortobágy (Dániel Balla)

86	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	C
87	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	C
88	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	2
89	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	2
90	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	C
91	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	C
92	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	C

93	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	1
94	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	4
95	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	4
96	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	C
97	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2
98	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	C
99	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	C
100	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	H
101	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	C
102	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	C
103	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	C
104	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	C
105	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	2
106	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	5
107	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	C
108	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	2
109	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	C
110	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	2
111	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	3
112	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	2
113	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	C



Flock of Red-breasted Goose to land (Dániel Balla)



Greater White-fronted Goose (Dániel Balla)



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