



**SAKERTOURS**



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

## **RED-BREASTED GOOSE SPECIAL TOUR** with **SAKERTOURS** **5<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2022**

**Leader: Dániel Balla**

A long weekend spent in the Hortobágy National Park chasing geese sound a very good programme especially when a few endangered species are the icing on the cake. This year's Red-breasted Goose Special Tour was a success in all terms as we recorded 106 species during five days very comfortable birdwatching. The weather sometimes was against our plans but finally everyday turned to be a successful one and outstandingly we observed the probably best-looking waterfowl - the Red-breasted Goose every day on the tour. Our total count of our main target was above 70 individuals during the days we spent here and we have to highlight the 9 individual Lesser White-fronted Goose which of some were providing exceptional views. Some other species which really added to the quality of our tour were Ruddy Shelduck, Red-throated and Black-throated Loons, Pygmy Cormorant, Greater Spotted Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Great Bustard, Sociable Lapwing, Syrian Woodpecker, Merlin, Saker Falcon, Eurasian Penduline Tit, Bearded Reedling, Crested Lark but of course there were just supporting the tens of thousands of Greater White-fronted Geese which we were carefully investigating to find the gems between them and the massive flocks of Common Cranes coming for roost every day just in front of our lodge.

## 5<sup>th</sup> November (Saturday)

A mid-day start of the tour from the airport let us a short stop in the Northern parts of the close Kiskunság National Park where we had great views of an impressive flock of Great Bustards the total count finally being 68 of them. We had several Hen Harriers coming and going while watching the heaviest flying birds on our planet as they were feeding peacefully on a rape field.

As we calculated well, leaving in time the centre of the country could result in experiencing the first Crane roost of our tour – why not doing it on the first day?!

We had a comfortable 2.5 hours' drive to the Hortobágy region, where arriving to our base for the next days turned out to be just in time half an hour before sunset. Thousands of Common Cranes were just landing on the grassland well seen from the terrace just behind an impressive flock of Greater White-fronted Goose. Our first thing to do was to scan through the goose flock – according to some digital gossip it would be worth doing it asap – to find our first Red-breasted Geese for our tour. A flock of seven birds were adding colours to the brown-grey base of Greater White-fronts in our scopes. In the last rays of light, a Little Owl just sat in front of us on a small hut; no better start of our tour could be imagined.



*Part of the Great Bustard flock seen on the first day (image by Dániel Balla)*

## 6<sup>th</sup> November (Sunday)

In the morning we started checking the Geese from the terrace of our lodge and picked out nine Red-breasted Goose from a narrow 3000 Greater White-fronted one, possibly yesterday's seven birds were accompanied by two others arriving in the flocks coming to roost. As our appetite for breakfast was made, we had a quick break in birdwatching before we left the lodge. First, we drove to the southern open patches of grassland, known as puszta here. We were searching for some specialties here like Saker Falcon but none was showing well, we had to be satisfied with the Crested Larks and several Hen Harriers showing well in the area. Driving out from the National Park we found six Great Bustards and a Rough-legged Buzzard on the near plough fields.

Enjoying the beautiful sunny weather, we drove further south to a huge wetland managed by the national park and soon after our arrival to the site the wind was calming down fortunately. Carefully going closer to the edge of the habitat as masses of geese were close to us, we managed to place ourselves near a flock of about 4000 geese on the water in perfect light. It took a few minutes to pick out the first two Red-breasted from this flock, finally in sharp light – excellent views. We could finish the day here, but of course we went further in to have a better look on the birds and the other 70% of the habitat. Huge flocks of Geese were still waiting for us and



other wildfowl nearly covering the whole surface of water and grassland around. White-tailed Eagles were around and a Peregrine Falcon sometimes flushing the waders in the back. All together more than 15000 White-fronted Goose making the noise around us and with patience 24 Red-breasted Goose found between them, some giving fantastic views. In the back a flock of more than 2000 Northern Lapwings were acting as a magnet for further investigation – which resulted in a Sociable Lapwing (Sociable Plover) found between them – incredible. Using patience and looking further deep into the geese two Lesser White-fronted Goose showed up in the middle of the mass which after some careful explanations were seen very well by everyone, even the birdwatchers coming after the fresh news of the Sociable Plover.

We left the site around one hour before sunset to have chance enjoying another incredible Crane roost near the lodge. Arriving back what else could we finish the day with a nice flock of 19 Red-breasted Goose feeding together viewed in our telescopes.



*Wetlands were covered with geese during the tour (image by Dániel Balla)*

### **7<sup>th</sup> November (Monday)**

The day started with a light fog in the morning that kept the Cranes in front of the lodge at their roost and they just decided to leave when we finished our breakfast. The fog was too thick to do casual birding so we started checking the local Long-eared Owl roost, where we picked out at least 15 birds sleeping above us before we decided to leave and search for other species in the north central part of the Hortobágy National Park.

Our main target was to find Saker Falcon which is a challenge anyway in autumn but these weather conditions were not making it easier. We scanned several sites in the morning and found a Northern Goshawk which is a tough one here, three Rough-legged Buzzards which are wintering in the area and had nice views of Corn Buntings, Yellowhammers and Great Grey Shrike before we arrived near the Tisza River. Before lunch we had a short walk where we heard a Middle Spotted Woodpecker and saw some common songbirds.

After an easy lunch we drove further into the National Park and crossed some nice patch of the puszta where we had several Hen Harriers and a Merlin, the most numerous raptor being the White-tailed Eagle which we counted more than 10 around. We arrived to the main fishponds where we spent half an hour investigating the northern lakes. We had nice views of more than fifty Pygmy Cormorants fishing in a flock and several other ones in the surroundings.



As the afternoon was passing, we went back to the lodge to check the fog situation there as we might have a chance to see some geese today as well. Our luck finally reached us and we could enjoy the always changing flock of Greater White-fronted Geese from our cosy spot. The flock today yielded an adult Lesser White-fronted Goose and nine of the beauties called Red-breasted Goose. Again, a perfect finish after a tricky day of birdwatching.



*Red-breasted Geese (top), Syrian Woodpecker (bottom left) and Great Grey Shrike (images by Dániel Balla)*

## **8<sup>th</sup> November (Tuesday)**

The fog took it very seriously this morning, it was so thick that made us change plans and we went after some pretty songbirds in the morning which are usually dwelling in the reedbeds of the area. We drove to a nearby fishpond system, where we drove on the main dike to check the fog situation. We were extremely lucky as visibility was as low that we flushed a juvenile Greater Spotted Eagle from about 30 metres which after a few seconds showing well disappeared in the greyness. Choosing an easy access reedbed we started walking on the tarmac and carefully checking the reeds. We flushed a few Song Thrush and noted Winter Wrens before we heard one of our main target here the Bearded Reedlings. After a few minutes careful luring a flock of about 15 birds were feeding nicely sometimes completely open on the reeds, females and males both in all the combination some can imagine, we took our time and left the flock behind as we started walking back to our



vehicle. We saw a few Reed Buntings and just before reaching the call we got wind of a tiny bird from the reeds revealing himself by his high-pitched call – Penduline Tit. Responding quite well it was immediately in front of us a few metres away on a dry stick of reed.



*Penduline Tit and Bearded Reedlings (image by Dániel Balla)*

As the fog situation wasn't really improving, we decided to check another habitat to try for songbirds. We were driving through the puszta when suddenly a bird with rapid flight was approaching our vehicle and just got by when we got out of it – our luck with the Saker Falcon finally got alive and what a view and experience. The aimed patch of bushes was empty so we drove further down to investigate a flock of geese feeding on the grassland. We were hiding behind the bushes and scanning for goodies. Carefully panning through the flock, we spotted a Tundra Bean Goose and counted 15 Red-breasted amongst the numerous Greater White-fronted Goose. It was chilli here and we went for a lunch to stay in warm for a short time.



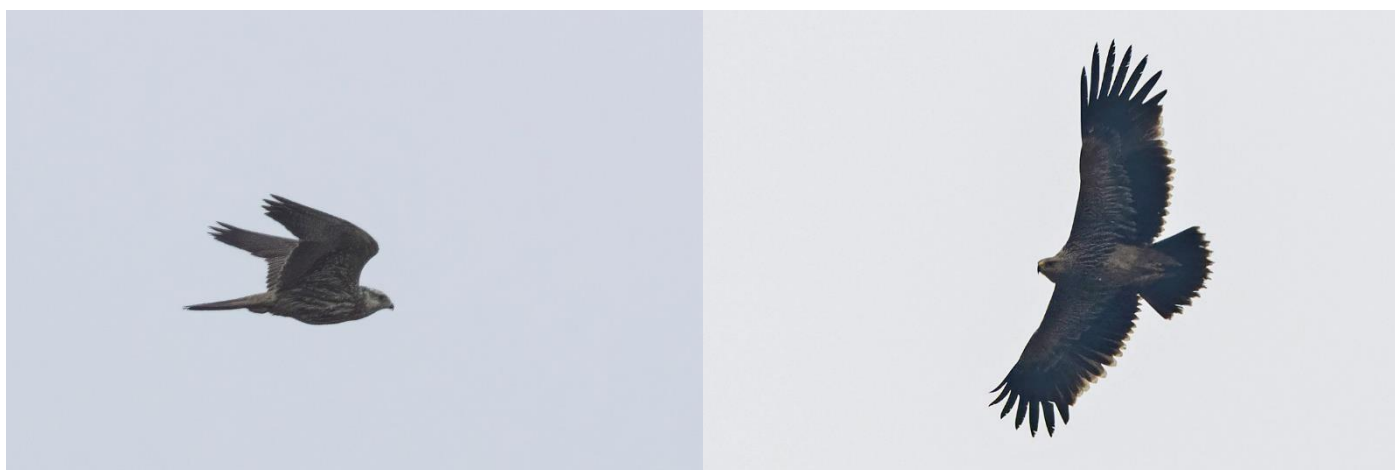
*We had magnificent views of this juvenile Lesser White-fronted Goose (image by Dániel Balla)*

In the afternoon the fog was clearing up and chances to search for some geese were viable. This time we opted to search for the geese on agricultural plots and started scanning thousands of hectares suitable fields. We had a very close encounter with a stunning male Hen Harrier, a Merlin slipped away parallel our car at another plot and an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle was observed with scope before finding a big flock of geese and Common Cranes on a plough field. The geese were surprisingly blending in to as they were feeding, but with patience we managed to pick out three Red-breasted Geese from the distant flock. We were not expecting better views of these birds and decided to go back and check the Goose-situation around the lodge. It turned out to be a very good idea. We stopped near the village and started scanning the flock of Greater White-fronts on the puszta.



*Two adult Lesser White-fronted Goose with Greater ones (image by Dániel Balla)*

A close group of birds had a pair of Lesser White-fronted Goose, our best views so far as they were just about a hundred metres away. Carefully checking all the features of the bird was not an issue this case and we were enjoying our time when checking a few geese which were ridiculously close to us revealed a juvenile Lesser White-fronted Geese. We were shocked to see this individual peacefully feeding with 4 Greater White-fronted mates. It was obvious that they got used to people walking on the roads and never disturbing them as they let us close somewhat about 20 metres. Almost 'bored' of these close birds we scanned the more distant birds where two more adult Lesser White-fronted Goose were picked out from the feeding flock. As the Cranes finished coming in to their roosting site in front of us, we also felt it is time to end the day and left the close and the distant birds behind and headed for our checklist-session and dinner.



*Two specialties of Hungary: Saker Falcon and Eastern Imperial Eagle seen on the tour (images by Dániel Balla)*



## 9<sup>th</sup> November (Wednesday)

Our last day of a fantastic 'goose run' has come. Everyone has packed and we agreed the previous day, that instead of driving up to the hills to climb for the Wallcreeper we would rather check the Lake Tisza for some waterfowl. After saying goodbye to the lodge staff, we had a rapid stop and last view on yesterday's juvenile Lesser White-fronted Goose as it was keeping its position close to the edge of the village.

We started crossing the Hortobágy National Park from east to west. Not driving 20 minutes we spotted a bigger flock of feeding geese that made us stop. We immediately picked-out Red-breasted Geese, these turned out to be the last ones of the tour, a total 16 individuals were counted here, while a Ruddy Shelduck was also adding some colour to the scenery.

A bit more than an hour drive and we arrived at the Lake Tisza. We took the chance and opted for the deepest bay for birding. Stopping on multiple observation points we had views of beautiful Goldeneyes, flocks of Tufted Ducks and Common Pochards and counted 12 Black-throated Loons and a single Red-throated Loon on the lake before finishing. Our last day was ending soon and we started heading to Budapest our only stop for a juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle being the last bird worth to mention of our impressive few days birdwatching tour.



*Ruddy Shelduck being the colour in this patch of geese (image by 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	Red-breasted Goose	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>	77
2	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	1
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	C
4	Tundra Bean Goose	<i>Anser serrirostris</i>	1
5	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	C
6	Lesser White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser erythropus</i>	9
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	C
8	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna feruginea</i>	2
9	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	C
10	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	C
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	C
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	C
13	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	C
14	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	C
15	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	C
16	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	C
17	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	45
18	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	C
19	Red-throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	1
20	Black-throated Loon	<i>Gavia arctica</i>	12
21	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	4
22	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	C
23	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	C
24	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	C
25	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>	C
26	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	C
27	Greater Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga clanga</i>	1
28	Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	3
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	5
30	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	1
31	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	C
32	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	C
33	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	C
34	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	4
35	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	C
36	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	74
37	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	C
38	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	C
39	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	10
40	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	C
41	Sociable Lapwing	<i>Vanellus gregarius</i>	1





*Hen Harriers are wintering in the Hortobágy (image by Dániel Balla)*

42	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	13
43	Ruff*	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	20
44	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	C
45	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	C
46	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	10
47	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	3
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	C
49	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	1
50	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	C
51	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	10
52	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia f. domestica</i>	C
53	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	3
54	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	C
55	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1
56	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>	17
57	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	3
58	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>	H
59	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>	H
60	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	4
61	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1
62	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	4
63	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	C
64	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	3
65	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>	1
66	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2
67	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	7
68	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	C
69	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	C



*Red-breasted Geese seen from our lodge (image by Dániel Balla)*

70	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	C
71	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	C
72	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	C
73	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	C
74	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	C
75	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	1
76	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	17
77	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	6
78	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	C
79	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	H
80	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	5
81	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	1
82	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	H
83	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	C
84	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	C
85	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	C
86	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	4
87	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	3
88	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	C
89	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2
90	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	C
91	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	C
92	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	6
93	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	5
94	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	3
95	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	1
96	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	3
97	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	H
98	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	C
99	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	C
100	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	8
101	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	12
102	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	C
103	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	C





*Flock of Red-breasted Goose in the Hortobágy (image by Dániel Balla)*



*Thousands of Geese – a nice challenge to scan (image by Dániel Balla)*



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