



*Eurasian Dotterel in the Hortobágy (Dániel Balla)*

## HORTOBÁGY – ZEMPLÉN AUTUMN TOUR with **SAKERTOURS** 23<sup>rd</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> September, 2023

### **Leader: Dániel Balla**

A week-long tour to Central Europe in Autumn is such a joy where birders can enjoy the best of fall migration while the weather is pleasing most of the time. Such great birding was done this year while thousands of birds surrounding us, we were also collecting the specialties of the area and recording 141 birds during easy walks on lovely sites. Not just the species but some real special moments were making our trip a memorable one such as enjoying the largest of Europe's owl the mighty Eurasian Eagle Owl on its roost, hearing the call and finding the huge Black Woodpecker, seeing the thousands of Common Cranes loudly arriving to their roosting site in the early evening or laying in between a flock of the lovely Eurasian Dotterels in the endless grassland of the Hortobágy National Park.

Highlight of this year's tour included Ferruginous Ducks, Pygmy Cormorant, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Lesser Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Pallid Harriers, Long-legged Buzzard, a flock of Great Bustard, Water Rails feeding in the open, Eurasian Dotterels, Caspian Gull, White-winged Tern, European Turtle Dove, Eurasian Eagle-Owl, Ural Owl, Lesser, Middle and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Black Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker, the scarce White-backed Woodpecker, Red-footed Falcon, Saker Falcon, Red-backed Shrike, Eurasian Penduline Tit, Bearded Reedlings, Crested Lark, Common Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper and Hawfinch.

## 23<sup>rd</sup> September (Saturday)

From the airport we drove to the Northern part of the Kiskunság National Park for a short visit to the mosaic lowland habitats consisting of a mix of agricultural fields, grassland patches and wetlands. The weather being a bit unpleasant with light rain and cool wind we scheduled only a short birding in the afternoon collecting the most important species the Great Bustard here. A stunning flock was feeding on a small plot close to the road thus giving us great views despite the poor weather conditions before we drove towards the Zemplén Hills.



*Flock of Great Bustards (Dániel Balla)*

## 24<sup>th</sup> May (Sunday)

In the wonderful autumn coloured Zemplén Hills we took Zoli our local guide with us in the changing weather in search for the specialties of the area. We had half an hour drive to arrive at a mixed beech, hornbeam and oak forest where a nice walk made us collecting Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Nuthatch, Common Treecreeper, Hawfinch and some more common passerines before the weather forced us to retreat. We did some roadside birding and fortunately found a late staying Red-backed Shrike along the road. Heading to a local restaurant we spotted a Lesser Spotted Eagle from the car and managed to pull over to enjoy this surprise late bird before arriving for lunch.

In the afternoon we drove to nearby quarry where several Eurasian Sparrowhawks were seemingly migrating taking advantage of the wind. Walking around in the abandoned quarry we soon spotted our main target, a huge Eurasian Eagle Owl sitting on the wall, hiding near a bush. As time was short in the afternoon our final plan for the day was to drive up a nearby hill where we luckily spotted a Ural Owl from the car sitting near the road on eye level. Great views and timing as this way we could head back to our warm hotel a bit earlier without the need to stay out until dawn to catch the Owl.

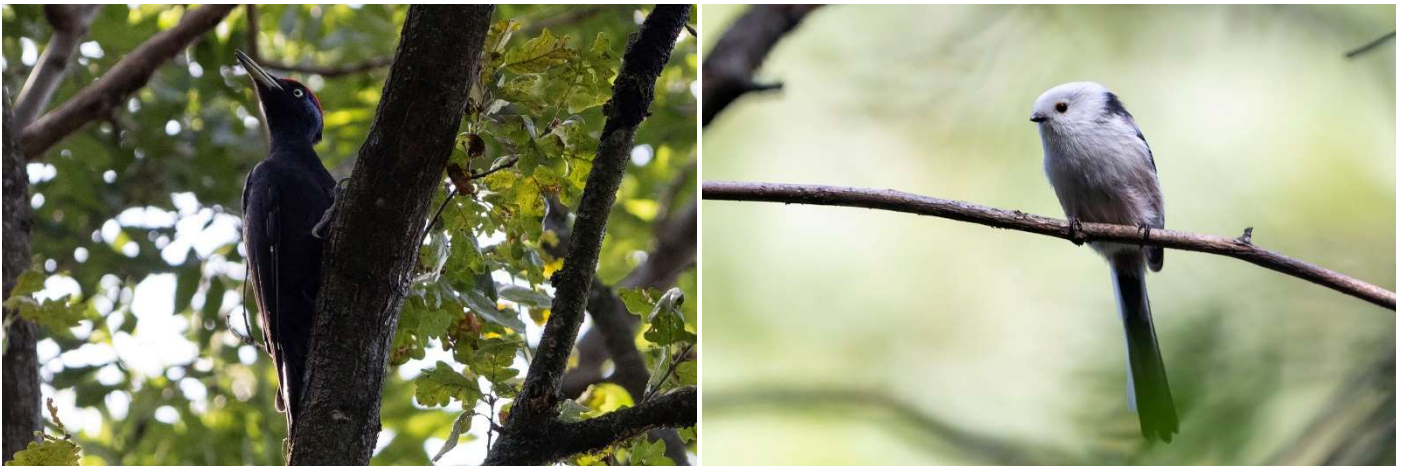


*Roosting Eurasian Eagle-Owl in the Zemplén Hills (Dániel Balla)*

## 25<sup>th</sup> May (Monday)

In the morning we took a small road and drove between the famous vineyards and managed to see Woodlarks, Linnets and found ourselves in the middle of a huge Starling flock which felt like a swarm as thousands of them were just flying in and out from the vineyards to the nearby grasslands.

Descending down from the hills we stopped in the old oak woods near Debrecen. As the weather was finally sunny, we did not waste our time and tried for some of the woodpeckers we missed in the hills so did we had found both ends of the scale seeing the huge Black Woodpecker and the tit sized Lesser Spotted Woodpecker here while Short-toed Treecreeper, Marsh Tit and the white-headed form of Long-tailed Tit were supporting cast.



*Black Woodpecker and Long-tailed Tit (Dániel Balla)*

Arriving to the Hortobágy region we only had short time to left in the afternoon we spent enjoying the very special Crane migration, where thousands of birds are coming from the nearby areas to roost on a very few special wetland sites in the area.



*Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (Dániel Balla)*

## 26<sup>th</sup> May (Tuesday)

The first full day on the lowlands we headed to the Northern edge of the Bihar plains where a fantastic wetland offered some good perspective on the waterbirds still hanging around such as Eurasian Spoonbills, Garganey, Ferruginous Duck, a few dozen Dunlins etc. while the highlight here became Eastern Imperial and White-tailed Eagles and a superb Saker Falcon perched on a dry tree overseeing the area.

In the afternoon we returned further north closer to our Lodge and birded some grasslands spending time with hunting Red-footed Falcons in the afternoon before taking another chance to be a part of the milieu filled by the load calls of Cranes this time on a different spot.



*Male Red-footed Falcon (Dániel Balla)*

27<sup>th</sup> May (Wednesday)

Focusing on the most open parts of the Hortobágy National Park we were heading into the core of the seemingly endless grassland in search for a few very special species. We had the advantage of the 4x4 car and were carefully driving on the dirt road web of the puszta realising that navigating in the open country could make us lost surprisingly easily without knowing the exact way to take. Driving through outside farm we found a good number of Meadow Pipits and a few Red-throated Pipits on the more wet areas. At a point we spotted our main targets the Eurasian Dotterels but flying around quite nervous, though we had good views with telescope and counted 36 individuals together. Trying another spot we were lucky to spot another, this time a smaller flock on the ground blending in the surrounding incredibly well. Knowing the behaviour of the birds and taking all our patience we found ourselves in the middle of the flock and enjoyed fantastic minutes spent together with these cute shorebirds some just literally a few meters from us laying on the ground occasionally catching some insect from the air. After taking our time with the Dotterels we looked around and spotted a Harrier which was mobbing a Kestrel in the air. We drove closer and had a great view of a female Pallid Harrier when suddenly a male turned up as well to complete our amazing encounter with the species.

In the short afternoon we visited the largest fishpond system where the afternoon lights were bringing more colours to the birds in front of the observation platforms thus, we enjoyed Common Snipe, Spotted Redshank and many others before repositioning ourselves to have the best Crane roost experience at this location. Not saying too much about it it was phenomenal as the birds were coming in front of the disappearing sun.



*White-winged Tern, a male Pallid Harrier and Bearded Reedlings (Dániel Balla)*

## 28<sup>th</sup> May (Thursday)

On our last full day we explored some reed habitats along another fishpond system in the morning. Our luck was still with us as we bumped into a flock of Bearded Reedlings feeding on the edge of the concrete road and suddenly jumping back to the safe reeds then coming back – doing this for several minutes we took our time and enjoyed them as long as we wanted. Walking further down the road we heard the call of Penduline Tit and managed to lure it closer making it perch in the open for us. In the dense reeds and bushes other birds skulking were Common Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler and a Common Firecrest.

Visiting a drained fishpond we found several species which we have not seen yet and collected Red Knot, Water Rail, a nice flock of Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns taking advantage of the mudflat and the fish filled shallow water.

We drove back to town seeing Syrian Woodpecker on the streets and checking the local roost of Long-eared Owls in the afternoon. For our last Crane roost watch we chose the terrace of our great Lodge where Little Owl was also seen in the last rays of light.

## 29<sup>th</sup> May (Friday)

On the way to the airport we made a detour to visit the mountains where our friend Márton joined us and showed his best places for some of our missing targets. We were lucky and had great weather, thus birds were active and we soon managed to find the scarce White-backed Woodpecker in the woods. Walking back to our vehicle we saw Grey-headed Woodpecker as well completing our task and seeing all possible woodpecker species on our tour. What a great ending of a wonderful week birding.



*Male White-backed Woodpecker from the last day of the tour (Dániel Balla)*

## BIRDS – list of bird species recorded on the 2023 tour

C = Commonly seen, more than 10 individuals

'Numbers' = Actual number seen on the tour

H = Heard only

LO = Leader only

NL = Non-leader

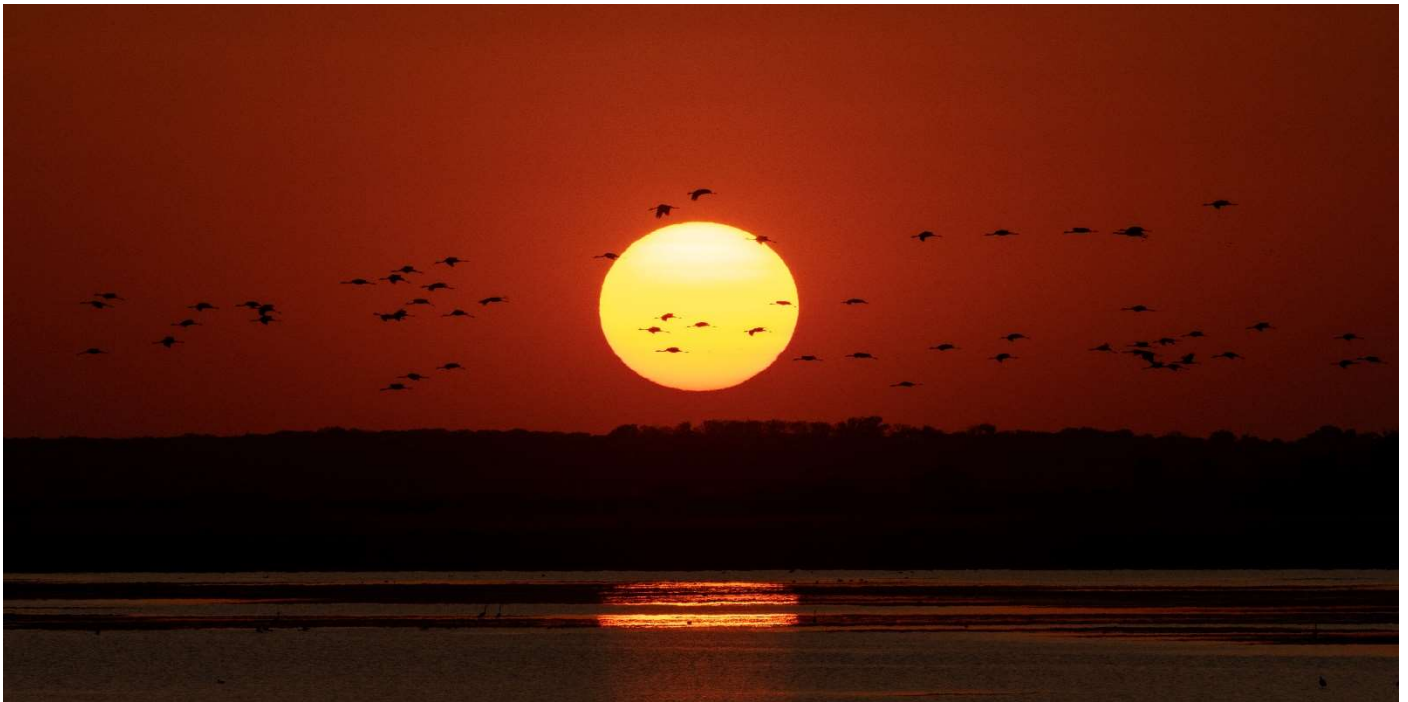
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	C
2	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	C
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	C
4	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>	2
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	C
6	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	C
7	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	C
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	C
9	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	C
10	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	C
11	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	C
12	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	C
13	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	C
14	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	C
15	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	3
16	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	2
17	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	4
18	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	C
19	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	4
20	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	C
21	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	2
22	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	C
23	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	5
24	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>	C
25	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	C
26	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	1
27	Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga pomarina</i>	1
28	Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	5
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	C
30	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	1
31	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	C
32	Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrorus</i>	3
33	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	C
34	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	1
35	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	C
36	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	40+
37	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	4
38	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	3
39	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	C
40	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	C
41	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	C

42	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	C
43	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	5
44	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	C
45	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	5
46	Eurasian Dotterel	<i>Charadrius morinellus</i>	44
47	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	C
48	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	6
49	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	1
50	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	C
51	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	C
52	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	LO
53	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	C
54	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	2
55	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	2
56	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	6
57	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	15
58	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	6
59	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	C
60	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	C
61	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>	C
62	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	12
63	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia f. domestica</i>	C
64	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	6
65	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	C
66	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	5
67	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	C
68	Eurasian Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>	2
69	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>	1
70	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	4
71	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>	12
72	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	4
73	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>	3
74	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>	1
75	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	3
76	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	C
77	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>	1
78	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	2
79	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	2
80	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>	1
81	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	C
82	Red-footed Falcon	<i>Falco vespertinus</i>	10
83	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	2
84	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>	3
85	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2
86	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	2
87	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	C
88	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	C
89	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	C



90	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	C
91	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	C
92	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	C
93	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	C
94	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	2
95	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	C
96	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>	3
97	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	C
98	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	C
99	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	2
100	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	30
101	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	5
102	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	C
103	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	C
104	Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	C
105	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	C
106	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	C
107	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	C
108	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	2
109	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	1
110	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	1
111	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	C
112	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	C
113	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	C
114	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	C
115	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	2
116	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	C
117	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	C
118	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	C
119	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	C
120	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	3
121	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	C
122	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	C
123	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	1
124	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	4
125	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	C
126	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	C
127	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	C
128	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	1
129	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	2
130	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	C
131	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	C
132	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	H
133	Red-throated Pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>	3
134	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	C
135	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	C
136	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	C
137	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	C

138	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	C
139	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	C
140	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	C
141	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	C



*Common Cranes in the sunset in the Hortobágy (Dániel Balla)*



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