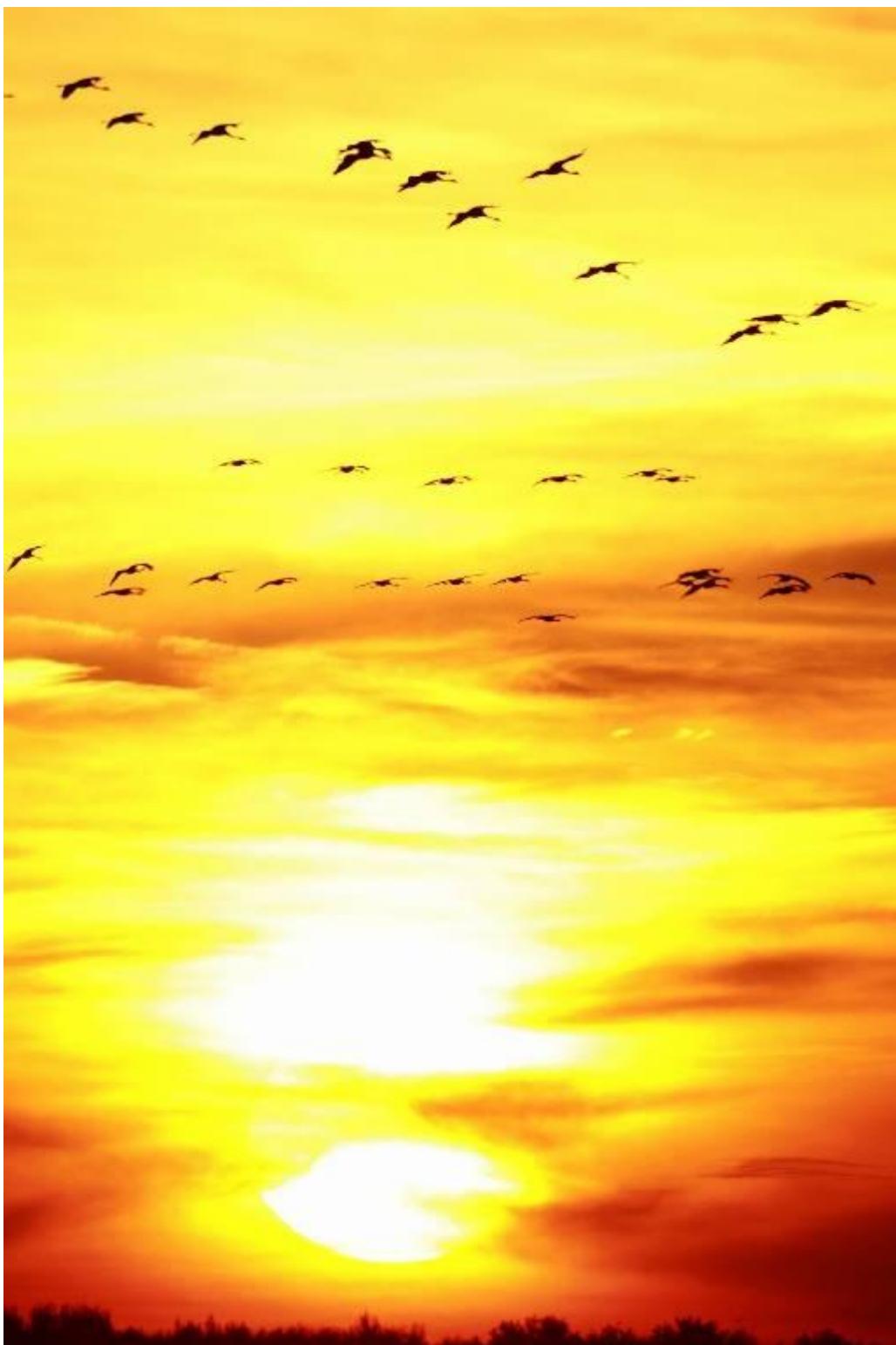


**Sakertour autumn trip to Hungary
(Hortobágy – Zemplén)**

5-11. October 2013



Day 1 – 5th of October

As part of the group had a pre-tour extension and others had arrived from different countries at different arrival time, quite unusually we met in Hotel Trófea, Nádudvar in the Hortobág, late in the evening. We met at the hotel bar to introduce ourselves and discuss the program for the rest of the week. Those who were picked up in Budapest and arrived much earlier had some time to do some bird watching in the hotel garden, where they saw a nice Black Woodpecker.

Day 2 – 6th of October

We had a rather early start this morning and we took a short pre-breakfast walk around the hotel. We had mainly the more common passerine species here, some Greylags and Common Cranes flying ahead and also a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was found which provided great views but not long enough as part of the group missed it.

The plan was to try to see Dotterels first as for most members of the group it was a high priority species to see and also cold weather (which we experienced in the previous days) could have chased them away. Though they usually stay much longer – at least till the second half of October -, it seemed worth to check a place with relatively easy access where a small flock was present in the previous days. Despite we had a thorough search we found no Dotterel here so we headed towards the more classical but much bigger sites. On the way we had good views of Penduline Tits and Bearded Reedlings and the first good views of Common Cranes feeding on stubble fields and grasslands. We also added Little Owl to our list. Because of the very dry summer, the suitable, short grassed area was more extensive than usual and the area itself was vast. We had no luck and Dotterels eluded us once more. From here we drove to a fish restaurant.



Juvenile Red-backed Shrike – very few stay till October (Photo: Simay Gábor)

In the afternoon we planned to visit the biggest Crane roost of the Hortobágy, but before that we still had time to visit a Long-eared Owl roost (9 birds seen very well) and grassland, where we had nice view of a Long-legged Buzzard. The Crane site proved to be good for other wetland species as well and beside the common wader and gull species we had a Ferruginous Duck and a Black Woodpecker, good views of a Red-throated Pipit and several White-tailed Eagles. Thousands of Cranes were already in (on the muddy surface of the huge drained fishpond) but half an hour before sun set other thousands started to fly in from all the directions. We estimated the numbers of Common Cranes well over 30.000 individuals this evening.



Bearded Reedling (Photo: Simay Gábor)

Day 3 – 7th of October

Today we had an earlier breakfast and after that we took advantage of the dry weather and drove to a nearby place on dirt roads where we had a good chance to find Great Bustards relatively easily. And we did so, as we found three of them feeding on a rape field in good lights and – considering the shy behaviour of the species – good distance. Right after this we tried again the Dotterels around well grazed sites where either they had been recently reported or the habitat looked very good. We had no luck until a small flock of plovers were found distantly. They turned out to be European Golden Plovers to the disappointment of the group. As a last chance we walked from here to the last possible place nearby and there, among another flock of Golden Plovers we found 13 Dotterels. We had very good view of them here and we could check the size difference between the two species which is really considerable. As a bonus species we had an unseasonal White Stork and two Peregrines feeding on Rock Dove and Black-headed Gull, respectively.



Flock of Dotterels in flight (Photo: Simay Gábor)

From here we drove to the northern part of the Park, where we had a picnic lunch. We scanned the huge pond which is the usual stop over site for the endangered European population of Lesser White-fronted Goose. This time, however – as they do quite often – chose another pond, probably because of the big number of White-tailed Eagles. Still we had a good range of water birds around with many duck and wader species, among them a local scarcity – a Bar-tailed Godwit.

The plan for the evening was to get back to the same Crane roost, but this time stop at a spot from where – as most of the group had an interest in nature photography as well – flocks of arriving Cranes would fly against the setting sun. On the way a call at the edge of a village made us stop and soon we had nice views of a Syrian Woodpecker. The rest of the day things happened according to our plan and beautiful pictures were taken as flock after flock were flying against the yellow then orange, later even deep red sky.



Flock of Common Cranes (Photo: Simay Gábor)

Day 4 – 8th of October

For today the plan was to get to another site where Lesser White-fronted Geese had turned up recently. Geese usually fly in to their day roost site between 10 and 11 a.m. this time of the year. So we still had time to check some other ponds where we – among other new-for-the-trip species – had great views of several Pygmy Cormorants and also a flying Great Bittern (unfortunately not seen by all group member). Penduline Tits were obliging and gave a good chance for the photographers.



Pygmy Cormorant in flight (Photo: Simay Gábor)

From here we got to another fishpond where the first pond was rather empty with a Ferruginous Duck among other diving ducks. The other ponds held good numbers (e.g. thousands) of geese, though most of them in bad lights and big distance. Most of them were – according to the date – Greylags, but many Greater White-fronted Geese were also present. Six Tundra Bean Geese were a nice addition – a once common but increasingly rare visitor. After a while, at the very far end of the pond small flocks of Lesser White-fronted Geese appeared. Unfortunately the views were really poor, we can say, just identifiable... However, as we spent two hours at the site, these extremely rare geese swam closer and closer to us, and eventually we had nice views of them – about 40 individuals, which make a considerable portion of the European population. Suddenly an eagle flushed all the geese and there were some exchange between the ponds so it seemed worth to check the other pond with good lights. It turned out to be a good idea, as ten of the Lesser Whitefronts were found here in good light and good distance. From here we drove to the old restaurant in Hortobágy village where we had traditional goulash soup. On the way we had a delightful flock of Long-tailed Tits, which contained both local subspecies, so white headed ones were also present, and – as they were really friendly – good pictures were taken.

In Hortobágy village everyone had a chance to visit museums or tourist shops around, before we headed towards some extensive grassland to try our last target for the Hortobágy – the Saker Falcon. Soon after we stopped a raptor was spotted sitting on the ground. The air was

hazy and it was miles away, but it was obvious, that it had a pale head – so worth to walk closer. And as we got closer and closer it became more and more obvious that it is a nice Saker Falcon. Eventually we received good views. After a while it took off in the air and flew beside us and took one of the bats flying around and landed further away where it was relocated. It was quite late so we headed to our hotel to spend our last night in the Hortobágy area. On the way we stopped here and there and had two Little Owls and two Black Woodpeckers.



The two subspecies *caudatus* and *europeus* subspecies in one flock (Photo: Simay Gábor)

Day 5 – 9th of October

We packed our luggage in the bus in the morning as we had to say goodbye to Hotel Trófea and move toward the Zemplén-hills. During our drive we took a little detour and we stopped by a nice wetland with water buffalos – a little known traditional Hungarian breed. Many dabbling ducks were on the water, among them plenty of Pintails. Two out of season Spoonbills and a Little Egret were also present. A nice adult Peregrine was perched on a tree and a Green Woodpecker was another addition to our list.

Our next stop was an old oak forest near Debrecen. Here we had very limited time, what was enough to have good views of a pecking Middle-spotted Woodpecker. From here we drove directly to a restaurant – about one and a half hours drive – near the hills, where we had lunch. It was already quite late in the afternoon, so we could plan only one more birding stop for the day. We chose a forest where we had a chance for Ural Owl. This species is especially difficult to see in the autumn when birds usually hide in the dense foliage, so one had to be lucky to come across one even in the best sites. We tried hard till dusk without any result. The forest itself was also silent with very little bird activity. A Fiery Salamander was a good find on the way back to the bus.

The hotel for the next two nights was in a small and very silent village (Komlóska) in the heart of the Zemplén. Here we had a nice dinner with some local drinks.

Day 6 – 10th of October

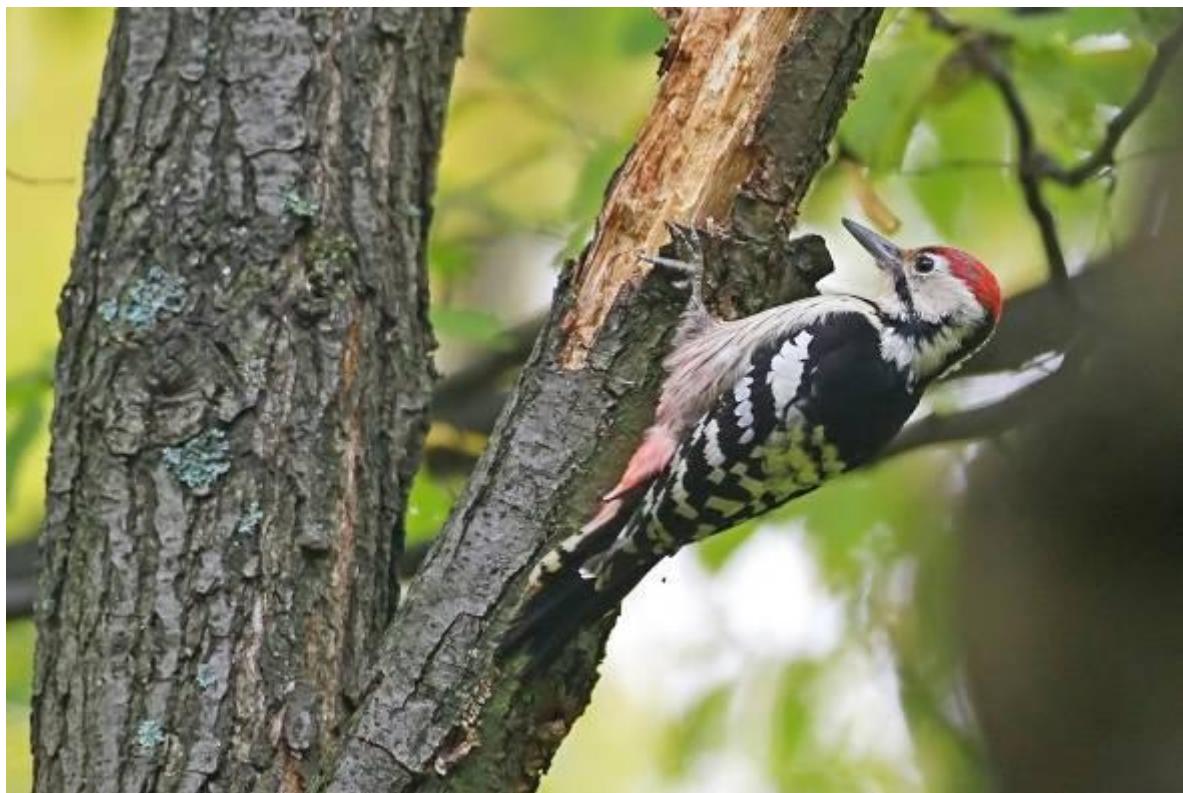
Those who chose bird watching instead of a little longer sleep met before the hotel early in the morning and took a little walk around. We had several forest birds by the road like Marsh Tits and Hawfinches and we also managed to get close to two Grey-headed Woodpeckers. After breakfast we got into the forest where our prime goal was to find a White-backed Woodpecker. This species is rather scarce and can be found only in good mature forest with dead trees. They have huge territories so in autumn it is a real challenge to find one. However this time we had some luck as with little effort we had great views of a male just by the path we were walking on. Birds were active in the forest with many Hawfinches and other passerines and some Middle Spotted and a nice Black Woodpecker. From here we drove to

the nearby plains where soon we found a beautiful adult Eastern Imperial Eagle on the top of a small bush. Though it was not close, the nice golden head and white shoulders were well visible. Later another one appeared and flew by close enough to have really great views of this superb raptor.

We had a picnic lunch before we walked to an old quarry where an Eagle Owl is usually – unlike most of its co specific – perch to an obvious place even during the day. However we were unlucky as some people were busily and loudly working on something and surely chased the owl to some more sheltered place - which was invisible for us.

In the afternoon we put again effort to find an Ural Owl. The late afternoon forest was silent again and we could not find any owl so we tried another – unfortunately well overgrown – valley. It started to rain but at the edge of a clearing an Ural Owl suddenly appeared and flew into the dense foliage of a large tree. Before we could find a window through the leaves the owl jumped down and flew away and gave for most of the group members a quite nice flight view. It was getting dark and the rain was also becoming heavier so – though we tried – we hadn't had a real chance to relocate the owl. For the last few minutes of the daylight we wanted to get to another quarry but as the rain had gone away the fog arrived. We were standing in the right position and we did hear two Eagle Owls calling around dusk but their perch was simply not visible in the fog. Eventually the female was spotted on the cliff almost in the dark. It stayed for only a few second there – too short time for most of us to get on the bird. Wheatear was not with us this time.

For dinner we went to a family run local wine cellar where we had a fantastic meal and we also had a chance to taste the famous Tokaj white wines (6 different one).



Male White-backed Woodpecker (Photo: Simay Gábor)

Day 7 – 11th of October

Our last day was rather short. For some even shorter as their flight departed quite early, while others had time to spend till early afternoon. We wanted to get better views of the Eagle Owl

so we went back to yesterday's first quarry – where we thought we had the best chance, but unfortunately people were still working, so we had the same result here. We checked some other quarries around without any luck. Unfortunately it was time to say goodbye for those who had an earlier departure time while the rest of the group kept trying to find an Eagle Owl. The next quarry eventually proved to be the right one. The owl was sitting on the cliff, fully exposed in beautiful light; it was a nice prize for our efforts. We still had time to have some bird watching in the nearby forest where we had some of the woodland birds but no further species was added to our list. A more than two hours drive was still ahead.

To sum up we had a good range of species during the week and basically all of the speciality species were seen and most of them well. No doubt, the cold weather right before the trip swept out many birds from the Carpathian-basin what made our list somewhat shorter as many migratory species had already gone. We were still lucky weather-wise as we had very little rain, nice mild temperature all week long and some perfect sunset as a background for the thousands of roosting Cranes.



Black Woodpecker and Long-eared Owl (Photos by tour participant Karen Hargreave)

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*: Commonly seen in most of the days.

Tundra Bean Goose - *Anser (fabalis) rosicus*: Sadly we come across this species rather seldom nowadays, so it was nice to see 6 birds together on 8th Oct. on the same pond as the Lesser Whitefronts.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*: Common in the Hortobágy, sometimes thousands together.

White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*: The first flocks had just arrived so rather low numbers were seen in the Hortobágy daily; on the best day about a hundred birds.

Lesser White - fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*: This species – in October, when the European population stages in the Hortobágy – usually use classical sites to roosts, however this time we had to put some effort to find them elsewhere which was rewarded by a flock of 40 individuals and great views on 8th Oct.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*: Recorded in single numbers on two dates.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*: Recorded on fishponds and other wetland sites, max. a couple of dozens at one sites.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: Only a few individuals at fishponds, in bigger numbers only at the buffalo reserve on 9th Oct.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Common in the Hortobágy at all wetland sites.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: Small flocks were seen on three different dates.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: About 10 birds were seen at the buffalo reserve.

Common Teal *Anas crecca*: A common migrant. The most commonly seen duck after – ofcourse – Mallard; sometimes in hundreds. Recorded on most of the days in the Hortobágy.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: Interestingly this otherwise common duck species was recorded only twice in small number.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: This species is only common from late autumn in the region. According to this, only a few birds were seen with other diving ducks.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*: Though it is common in the breeding season, as a migratory species it is less often seen in October. Still, it was observed on three different days in the Hortobágy.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: Recorded a couple of times during the week around different wetlands.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*: Interestingly, this otherwise common species was recorded only once.

European White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*: White Stork is one of the most characteristic bird species on the Hungarian lowlands, however it is quite unusual to see one on such a late date. So we were glad to find one feeding not far from a farm on grassland. It had an alu ring on its leg, but we were unable to read it.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*: Common till mid-September but scarce later. We had two birds feeding in the swallow water of the buffalo reserve.

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*: Only one bird was seen flying above a fishpond, unfortunately not by all the group members. Though we put some effort to find another one of this elusive species, we had no luck.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: Common in the Hortobágy area.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*: Common, sometimes numerous around the Hortobágy. Seen also around the Zemplén.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*: As a migratory species it becomes less numerous from the beginning of autumn. Only three birds were seen at different locations.

Pygmy Cormorant *Microcarbo pygmeus*: In autumn they become scarcer, or at least they are concentrated to a handful of sites around. We had good views of some landed and swimming birds and many flight views on two dates.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: In autumn it is rather common, especially around bigger fishponds.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: A widespread raptor species all over the country. It was recorded every day with the exception of the very first one.

Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*: One of the most characteristic birds of the Hungarian plains. Despite it had a remarkable population growth in the last decades, it can be still tricky to find one in the autumn months. Especially when food is not abundant and pairs are away from their territory. While checking the best hunting habitats, we had superb views of one bird on the ground then in flight hunting for bats.

Peregrine Falcon-*Falco peregrinus*: Good views of three individuals on two dates.

White-tailed Eagle-*Haliaeetus albicilla*: Towards the winter, this huge raptor gets more numerous around wetland sites. Though it was still too early to see dozens a day, we had great views of several individuals during the week, especially around big fishponds where waterfowl gathered in large numbers.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*: Most of them had already migrated south, but we still had some on three different days in the Hortobágy.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*: A winter visitor to the country. We had only one ring-tailed at the grasslands close to the Zemplén.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: This common raptor species was regularly seen during the week.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*: Very common.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*: They are scarce but regular breeding and summer visitors in the area. After late September their number drops and one has to put more effort to find them. We had good views of one bird in the Hortobágy.

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*: The foothills of the Zemplén and the surrounding plains are great places for this magnificent raptor. On 10th Oct. – a cloudy and grey day – we found one adult perched on a somewhat distant bush. The well visible golden head and white shoulders still made it a great view. Another bird (probably its mate) appeared later and flew across very close to us indeed.

Great Bustard *Otis tarda*: One of the key species on this trip. On 7th Oct. we started the day with the checking of suitable habitats as early mornings are far the best periods to find these shy birds. We didn't have to wait too much after breakfast to find three birds together on a field. Nice lights and good distance helped our observation.

European Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*: We heard its tipical loud call from reedbeds a couple times during the trip.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: Single birds were recorded on two dates.

Common Coot *Fulica atra*: Not many were seen of this otherwise very common species. Recorded only twice.

Common Crane *Grus grus*: Despite being a common one, one of the star bird of the trip. Smaller and bigger flocks were seen by the roads every day spent in the Hortobágy. We spent two evenings around the biggest night roost site where we had on both occasions fantastic weather, dramatic sunset and tens of thousands of Common Cranes (more then 38.000 birds were counted a few days before - so the number could be even higher as the peak was still ahead).

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*: The most numerous wader species on the trip.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*: On the mud surface of drained fishponds lone birds and small flocks were observed, with a maximum of 6 birds.

European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*: A flock of about 20 birds were seen on 7th Oct.

Eurasian Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*: This year many suitable habitats were available for them (e.g. very short grassed dry land with plenty of insect food), so it took some time while we found eventually 13 of these tame waders on 7th Oct.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*: Recorded on three days on the Hortobágy.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*: A scarce autumn migrant to Hungary so not often recorded. Only one bird on 7th Oct.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*: Many of them were seen on the trip.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*: Quite common, especially on drained fishponds.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*: Only one was seen on the Crane roost site on 6th Oct.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: On drained fishponds flocks of hundreds were seen a couple of times in the Hortobágy.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*: It was commonly seen around wetlands.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*: The commonest gull species in the region.

Common Gull *Larus canus*: Only one was seen on 7th Oct. They become more numerous later in the season.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*: Common, especially around fisponds and ploughed fields.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*: Common, especially around fisponds.

Lesser Black-backed Gull-Larus *fuscus*: A scarce migrant. We had one 1st year bird on the 6th Oct.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*: Common – recorded every day.

Common Wood Pigeon-Columba *palumbus*: It was seen only a handful of occasions as most of them had already migrated.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: Very common.

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*: After a long search, eventually one was seen on 10th Oct., in the evening. The weather was rainy, and the owl was shy. After it perched for a few seconds it flew out of sight giving us an opportunity to have good views in flight.

Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*: The evening of 10th Oct. was misty and despite we heard two birds calling, only one of them was seen for a very short period as they were hidden by the thick fog. On 11th Oct. we had wonderful views of a female sitting in the open on a ledge on the sunny side of the cliff.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*: Nine birds seen very well on their classical roost site on 6th Oct.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*: Though it is relatively common in the Hortobágy, usually we find only a couple of them on a trip. This time, however we recorded them surprisingly frequently, sometimes several on one day.

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*: Single birds were seen a couple of times during the week in the Hortobágy area.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*: Only one bird was seen in the hotel garden on the 6th Oct.

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos*: Incredibly good views of a male just by the path we were walking on. We had long and close views of this rare woodpecker species.

Middle Spotted Woodpecker-*Dendrocopos medius*: We had good views first on 9th Oct. near Debrecen, and later several in the Zemplén. They were quite vocal as well.

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*: One was heard and then seen in a village in Hortobágy. We had superb views of it feeding on a polar tree.

Great Spotted Woodpecker-*Dendrocopos major*: The most common woodpecker during our trip, recorded on most of the days.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*: Sometimes one has to put some effort to find this magnificent woodpecker. Not this time as we came across no less than in six occasions with one or two birds on six different days.

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*: One was seen well by the buffalo reserve on 9th Oct.

Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus*: Two birds were seen very well early in the morning on 10th Oct.

Red-backed Shrike - *Lanius collurio*: A common breeder which usually leave the Carpathian-basin till the end of September, so it was nice to see some juvenile birds (which usually stay a bit longer, then adults) in the Hortobágy on 6th Oct.

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*: It was recorded on three consecutive days in the Hortobágy.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*: Quite common, especially in the Zemplén.

Common Magpie *Pica pica*: Common.

Eurasian Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*: In the larger flocks of Rooks a few dozen were seen.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*: Common and numerous especially in the Hortobágy.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*: Common.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*: In total about ten birds were seen in the Zemplén.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*: A few birds at different sites were seen on 10th Oct. in the Zemplén.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*: Two birds were seen in a patch of conifers in the woods of the Zemplén.

Great Tit *Parus major*: It was seen on most of the days.

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*: It was seen on most of the days.

Eurasian Penduline-tit *Remiz pendulinus*: Small flocks were regularly seen – sometimes from a very close range - on four days in the Hortobágy.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: Surprisingly we had even flocks of several hundreds around night roost sites what is not really usual in October.

Long-tailed Tit - *Aegithalos caudatus*: Small flocks of both local subspecies were seen on a couple of occasions and sometimes they behaved really friendly.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*: Surprisingly this common species was recorded only on one day in the Hortobágy.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*: In grassland habitat they were regularly recorded in the Hortobágy.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*: A common migrant, especially in bushy habitats.

Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus*: Many smaller and bigger flocks were seen in the Hortobágy in most of the days.

Northern Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: Recorded on three days.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*: Common both in the forest near Debrecen and in the Zemplén.

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*: It was seen on 10th Oct. in the Zamplén.

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*: Very common during the whole trip.

Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*: Commonly seen around any bushy, wooded or urban habitats.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*: Common migrant, especially around bushy areas.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*: A few birds were seen in the forests of the Zemplén-hills.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*: Common around bushy habitats.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*: A few migrating bird were seen during the week.

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*: It was still quite common in suitable habitats.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*: Two birds were seen in the Hortobágy – quite late observations.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: Very common.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: Very common.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*: One was seen in the first afternoon in the hotel garden.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*: Lot of them were seen, especially on drained fishponds.

Mowea Pipit *Anthus pratensis*: Common around wetlands.

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*: It was recorded on three days at different locations, but only one bird was seen well on a drained fishpond.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*: A common species throughout the trip.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*: It was recorded only on two dates.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*: Flocks were seen only on two days.

Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*: About two hundred birds were seen in one flock near the Zemplén-hills on 10th Oct.

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus* (H): It was only heard on our last morning.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: Many good views were gained on 10th Oct. in the Zemplén.

Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*: One in the hotel garden in the Hortobágy.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*: Small flocks were seen on three days.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citronella*: It was seen only in the Zemplén.

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: Recorded on three days in the Hortobágy.