

ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO HUNGARY
Crane Spectacular & Wild Goose Chase

30 October – 05 November 2010



Leader: Gábor Simay

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A Personal Diary

Saturday 30th October

In Budapest it was sunny and unusually mild for the season when the group met me at 13.00 at the airport. Along the motorway Common Buzzards and Common Kestrels were seen and also the trip's only two Common Ravens. Our first stop was a parking area by the motorway where we had our packed lunch. Within five minutes two Eastern Imperial Eagles arrived and we could enjoy close views of these beautiful and rare raptors in stunning light conditions. This place held our first Crested Larks as well, which was a common species for the rest of the trip.

From this stop we drove directly to the Hortobágy. On the way we saw 28 Common Buzzards circling together, and just as we reached the western gate of the national park, we saw the first smaller flocks of Common Cranes and a few hundred Greater White-fronted Geese together with a few Greylags.

As the sun was about to set we drove quickly to a crane roost site, which was close to the hotel. We were extremely lucky, as it was the most beautiful sunset of the week, and big flock of cranes were flying above our heads and straight in front of the huge, red circle of the sun which ensured a fine photographic opportunity, which was good because the group members were keen nature photographers as well.

Within 15 minutes we arrived at our hotel, where we agreed to meet early in the morning to do some birdwatching around in the hotel garden.

Saturday 31st October

The morning was a bit chilly but nice and clear, the sun was shining – so the circumstances were just great to start out first full day of birdwatching.

In the hotel garden, due to the nice weather, the passerines were active and we found winter visitors – like Bramblings and Bullfinches - in ash trees, feeding on the seeds. Two Hawfinches called and stopped for a moment on the top of a tree.

The plan was to find big flocks of geese and in these flocks try to find some of the target species of the trip, namely the Red-breasted and the Lesser White-fronted Goose, both of which are globally threatened. Here, in the Hortobágy, one have a very good chance to find both of these rare species, as in late October, huge flocks of Greater White-fronts arrive from the Siberian tundra, and small flocks of these rare species often joins them. Nevertheless, to find them among the commoner species can be a tough job, so it is better to spend ample time with them to ensure an encounter with these declining beauties.

Driving towards the northern areas of the national park, we spotted two Saker Falcons, perched up on the top of the pylons beside the road. The closer one was in good light and we had nice view of this powerful falcon; its distribution reaches its western and northern limits in the Carpathian-basin.

Near Balmazújváros, in the Nagy-szik area we found a few thousand geese but this time we could not find anything but the two common species. In the town we stopped by the famous trees where every winter dozens (sometimes hundreds) of Long-eared Owls spend the winter. The owls were sitting on the trees, where we expected to see them, and they provided a good photo opportunity as they had not yet moved to the nearby spruce trees where they can find cover after the deciduous trees have lost their leaves.

Today we had lunch in a fish restaurant in Tiszacsege by the Tisza River. On the way we checked some of the northern grasslands for raptors, and we saw many Hen Harriers and a few Western Marsh Harriers.

After lunch we had a few hours remaining before it was dark, so we decided to walk some distances toward a wetland where beside different species of ducks we hoped to find some geese as well. There were about two thousand geese and after a while we managed to find the first Red-breasted Goose of the trip. Unfortunately it was in the densest part of the flock and was difficult to see. So we agreed that we needed to try to get better views of this stunning species. However, the geese were suddenly flushed as an adult White-tailed Eagle appeared. At this time of the year this huge raptor is not a rare sight, so we had daily encounters with this magnificent bird.

By the time we walked out of the area it was almost dark, so we drove back to our hotel, where we wrote the checklist together and checked our photographs from the last two days – there were some really nice shots among them.

Monday 1st November

We had to wake up early today again, as we had to drive for about an hour to the area where we had the best chance to see Great Bustards, Europe's largest bird species. After a long period of continuous decline, in the last few years their population has started to increase due to the conservation efforts. We were lucky as the dirt roads were dry and drivable, so we had to walk only a few hundred metres to find 14 female Great Bustards feeding on a field which was managed for them so they could find food and cover. As it was still quite early in the morning they were out in the open. Later on in the day they usually find some cover to rest in, which makes it more difficult to find them. We also found the trip's only Rough-legged Buzzard, a juvenile perched on a tree here.

From these southern grasslands we drove to the middle of the park, where several smaller and bigger fishpond systems can be found. These fishponds provide superb feeding and roosting opportunities for many, many waterbirds all year round. We visited a drained pond where we could compare Yellow-legged and Caspian Gulls; we found some Grey Plovers and saw a late-for-the-season Little Egret. On another pond we found 4,000 geese and among them we managed to see a juvenile Red-breasted Goose. Though it was a bit far away, eventually we had a clear view of this individual. While we were walking among the ponds, the reedbeds held some Penduline Tits and Bearded Reedlings. We had great and close views of both species, which fortunately called often, so this time it was easy to find them.

We had lunch in a nearby restaurant where we had some superb soup and afterwards there was the chance to take pictures of the famous 'racka' sheep, an indigenous Hungarian breed, with long, spiral horns. We visited a marshland during the afternoon. Around the farm buildings we saw a nice Little Owl, while beside the wetland many geese were feeding on the fields. Unfortunately this time they were too far away to give us a real chance to find something interesting among them.

Again the evening came very early, as at this time of the year it gets dark just after 16.00, so it was time to retreat to our hotel, which was on the other side of the park, for dinner.

Tuesday 2nd November

It was nice and sunny again today! So we had some breakfast and left quickly to start birdwatching in this stunning weather. We had luck this morning not only with the weather but also with birds. We had great scope views of an adult Greater Spotted Eagle, a scarce migrant and winter visitor of the Great Hungarian-plain. There were three White-tailed Eagles nearby as well and a Common Kingfisher flew by us and then perched up close to us on the top of a stick. Then we drove along a small road where we saw a huge flock of Corn Buntings which were bathing on small puddles by the road. Also some Great Grey Shrikes were observed sitting on the electric wires. These birds breed in small numbers in Hungary, but arrive in good numbers from September and spend the winter here.

On a small fishpond we saw 11 Common Shelduck, which is a good number, as this once scarce species has become more common in recent years. Another fishpond proved to be a very fruitful site as we saw at least 10 Pygmy Cormorants and four Ferruginous Ducks, which both are common during the summer, but migratory, so become scarce towards the end of the autumn. We also saw here a Black-necked Grebe, a confiding Water Rail and two Green Sandpipers.

We decided to have an early lunch this time in Hortobágy village. We stopped in front of the restaurant, and – as it was quite early - we decided to try to find first the Syrian Woodpeckers. Within a few minutes we heard the first one calling, and suddenly they appeared around us in the high poplar trees. We had close views of three different individuals and while we were watching them we found at least 10 Long-eared Owls roosting in a dense bush.

After lunch we drove to the north-eastern corner of the national park, where one of the largest fishpond systems is located. An easily approachable pond was drained, so it was a perfect site to find geese. About 12,000 Greater White-fronts were resting on the mudflats, and most of them were relatively close and in good light, though the flock was very dense so it was still quite difficult to pick up our target species. Eventually we managed to find a few Taiga Bean Geese, a couple of Red-breasted Geese (eventually perfect light conditions!) and also a local rarity, a juvenile Brent Goose. On the mudflats there were many thousands of other birds, such as gulls, ducks, Northern Lapwings and Eurasian Curlews and among them eight White-tailed Eagles which were feeding on large fish carcasses on the ground.

In the evening we visited a crane roost site, where we could enjoy close views of numerous groups flying ahead. It was a busy but memorable day!

Wednesday 3rd November

This morning we had a plan to try some different habitat and start the day in an old oak forest (the so called Great-wood) near Debrecen, a quite big town in the vicinity of the Hortobágy. Though it was a bit cloudy in the morning, bird activity was quite good in the forest, and eventually the light became better. One of the first birds we discovered was a magnificent Black Woodpecker, which landed on a nearby dead oak tree and we could enjoy nice scope views of this really huge bird. During our walk, we found many other forest birds, including Northern Goshawk, Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, Marsh Tits and Mistle Thrushes and also a flock of Short-toed Treecreepers, which were feeding busily around us on the trunks. On a big tree we noticed a feeding woodpecker which turned out to be a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, a typical species of the old oak woods in Hungary. We visited a bird feeder and drinking place as well, where it was easy to see Hawfinches and many other more common woodland birds.

This time we had a picnic lunch, and while we were eating we heard a distant Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, but unfortunately we could not locate it. In the afternoon we visited a wetland site south of the Hortobágy, which is a new habitat reconstruction area, managed by Water Buffalos, a traditional Hungarian livestock. From the watchtower we had a good overview of the area, where we saw many thousand geese. Unfortunately most of them were in the cover of the reedy vegetation so we could check only a small portion of them. Beside the geese we saw here a few Little Egrets and Eurasian Spoonbills, one Pied Avocet, a Little Stint among a flock of Dunlins and also a few Common Greenshank and Spotted Redshank – a quite good range of otherwise common species in November. We also saw many Hen and Western Marsh Harriers and an adult Peregrine Falcon, which was attracted by the many thousands Common Teal.

In grassland we saw the only Long-legged Buzzard of the trip. Here, we received the news that a local birdwatcher had just found two Lesser White-fronted Geese on the site we had visited previously. As we were still quite close to the area, we decided to return and try again. When we arrived the geese were flushed – maybe by an eagle – and they settled a lot further away. Although we could check about a third of the flock, we could not find them so we headed back toward our hotel.

Thursday 4th November

After some discussion, the team decided we should look for the Lesser White-fronted Geese again. The decision as to where to start was not easy as big goose flocks were scattered around a huge area in the Hortobágy and its surroundings. So we decided to start where we had finished yesterday: in Andaháza and we decided if we were unlucky there, we would try our luck elsewhere.

Nevertheless, as the geese are feeding out in grasslands and croplands during the early morning, we still had time to check a close by pond, which was the former sewage farm of a sugar factory. The factory had been closed, but some of the ponds were still excellent for waterbirds. On the pond we saw about 40 Ferruginous Ducks (a really good number for November), a Greater Scaup, some Black-necked Grebes and many other dabbling and diving ducks.

This time in Andaháza, we drove along a dirt road from we had a better view of the same wader species we saw yesterday and we could check out about 2,000 geese– the rest were hidden from view. We followed the latest news of the Lesser White-fronts and we drove back to the big fishponds to the north-east. Just as we arrived there we saw the huge flock of geese flying to the opposite side of the pond making it totally useless to make any further effort.

We still hadn't given up and we drove to a third location, a much smaller fishpond, where, after a walk we found about 2,500 geese at a good distance and perfect light. Within a few minutes we spotted one beautiful adult male Lesser White-fronted Goose. We had stunning views, but unfortunately not for everyone: it suddenly fell asleep and refused to move for at least 30 minutes. Though we knew which goose it was, it was not possible to tell why it was a Lesser White-front! So we had to wait, and eventually it raised its head so this time everyone could see the bright yellow eye ring, the steep forehead with huge white front and the very short pink bill – basically all the field characteristics. This time they were flushed by a White-tailed Eagle, and as they landed again, we found another two Lesser White-fronts. Eventually our efforts were rewarded with stunning views!

The goose chase had lasted quite a long time so we had a rather late lunch and after this we only had time for a final crane watch on our last evening. We drove to a mound, surrounded by marshes and grassland. When we arrived thousands of cranes were standing in front of us preening, before they flew to their roost site which is usually in a marsh or a drained fishpond. Many other thousands were still arriving from all directions and the air was full of their typical and now familiar call.

Friday 5th November

It was the last morning of the trip and unfortunately we had only a half day before we had to start our two-and-a-half hour long drive to the airport. To save time we found a birding destination – a big lake by the Tisza River, called Tisza-tó - in the very western part of the Hortobágy area, which is a bit closer to Budapest. By the road we spotted a raptor sitting on the top of a pylon and it proved to be a Saker Falcon which was feeding on its prey.

Because of the warm weather, we did not find the usual high number of diving ducks on the southern bay of the lake, but we still had many others to see. The lake was full of Common Coots and Mallards, but as we were driving around the bank we found a Black-throated Diver, a Goosander and a Red-breasted Merganser - all of which are rather scarce in Hungary – and eventually a smallish flock of Goldeneye.

From the lake we wanted to find a peaceful place to eat our packed lunch, so we visited a recently flooded area, but it did not hold much beside the usual range of birds like gulls, Common Teal and Great Cormorants. Not far from this area, just beside the road, we noticed a huge raptor, which was an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle. It was flying close and low down, thus providing us absolutely perfect views. It was a really nice 'good bye' species.

After two hours of diving we arrived at the airport well in time, and we said goodbye after a memorable, bird rich and successful autumn trip to the Hortobágy!

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December 2010

Itinerary and Weather

Saturday, 30 October	London - Budapest – Hortobágy (via M3 motorway), short stop by the Motorway near Gyöngyös – Crane roost: Angyalháza Nice, sunny weather. No wind.
Sunday, 31 October	Hotel Garden (near Nádudvar) – Nagy-szik (near Balmazújváros) – Tiszacseg (lunch) - Rókás Nice, sunny and warm. No wind.
Monday, 1 November	Nagyiván (for Great Bustard) – Csécs-fishponds – Meggyes-lapos Little bit cloudy, especially in the morning and evening, but mild and without any wind.
Tuesday, 2 November	Elep – Kungyörgy-fishponds – Derzsi-fishponds – Hortobágy village – Virágoskút-fishponds - Angyalháza Little bit cloudy, otherwise mild and without any wind
Wednesday, 3 November	Debrecen: Great-forest (Nagy-erdő) – Andaháza and Szentpéterszeg (near Berettyóújfalu) Nice, sunny weather. No wind.
Thursday, 4 November	Kaba – Andaháza – Virágoskút-fishponds – Csács-fishponds - Angyalháza A little bit windy and cloudy with some sunshine. Mild
Friday, 5 November	Tisza-lake (Tisza-tó) near Abádszalók – Tiszaroff – Budapest Airport Warm and sunny. No wind.

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING THE TOUR

No of days recorded

1 2h means seen on 1 day and
heard on 2 other days

Abundance scale

(max for any one day)

1 = 1 - 4
2 = 5 - 9
3 = 10 - 99
4 = 100 - 999
5 = 1000+

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Abundance scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Mute Swan	3	2	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Greater White-fronted Goose	7	5	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
Lesser White-fronted Goose	1	1	<i>Anser erythropus</i>
Taiga Bean Goose	1	2	<i>Anser fabalis fabalis</i>
Greylag Goose	7	4	<i>Anser anser</i>
Brent Goose	1	1	<i>Branta bernicla</i>
Red-breasted Goose	3	1	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>
Common Shelduck	2	3	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	4	3	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Gadwall	2	3	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Common Teal	7	5	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Mallard	7	4	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail	2	1	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Northern Shoveler	6	4	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Common Pochard	4	4	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Ferruginous Duck	2	3	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>
Greater Scaup	1	1	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Tufted Duck	2	3	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Common Goldeneye	1	1	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Goosander	1	1	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	1	1	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Common Pheasant	6	2	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Black-throated Diver	1	1	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
Little Grebe	2	1	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	3	3	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	3	1	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Great Cormorant	5	3	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Pygmy Cormorant	1	3	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>
Little Egret	2	1	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Great Egret	7	3	<i>Egretta alba</i>
Grey Heron	7	3	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Eurasian Spoonbill	1	1	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
White-tailed Eagle	6	3	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Eastern Imperial Eagle	2	1	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>
Greater Spotted Eagle	1	1	<i>Aquila clanga</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	5	2	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	7	3	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Long-legged Buzzard	1	1	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
Common Buzzard	7	3	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Rough-legged Buzzard	1	1	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	7	1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Northern Goshawk	1	1	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Saker Falcon	2	1	<i>Falco eleonorae</i>
Peregrine Falcon	1	1	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Common Kestrel	7	2	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Common Moorhen	- 1h	1	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Common Coot	4	5	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Common Crane	7	5	<i>Grus grus</i>
Great Bustard	1	3	<i>Otis tarda</i>

Pied Avocet	1	1	Recurvirostra avosetta
Gray Plover	1	1	Pluvialis squatarola
Northern Lapwing	7	4	Vanellus vanellus
Dunlin	1	3	Calidris alpina
Little Stint	1	1	Calidris minuta
Green Sandpiper	1	1	Tringa ochropus
Spotted Redshank	3	3	Tringa erythropus
Common Greenshank	2	1	Tringa nebularia
Eurasian Curlew	5	3	Numenius arquata
Common Snipe	3	1	Gallinago gallinago
Black-headed Gull	6	4	Larus ridibundus
Common Gull	4	3	Larus canus
Yellow-legged Gull	3	2	Larus michahellis
Caspian Gull	4	4	Larus cachinnans
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	7	3	Columba livia
Stock Dove	3	3	Columba oenas
Eurasian Collared Dove	7	3	Streptopelia decaocto
Little Owl	1	1	Athene noctua
Long-eared Owl	3	3	Asio otus
Common Kingfisher	1	1	Alcedo atthis
European Green Woodpecker	2	1	Picus viridis
Black Woodpecker	1	1	Dryocopus martius
Great Spotted Woodpecker	5	1	Dendrocopos major
Syrian Woodpecker	1	1	Dendrocopos syriacus
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	1	1	Dendrocopos medius
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	- 1h	1	Dendrocopos minor
Crested Lark	4	2	Galerida cristata
Common Skylark	- 1h	1	Alauda arvensis
White Wagtail	2	1	Motacilla alba
European Robin	4	1	Erithacus rubecula
Black Redstart	1	1	Phoenicurus ochruros
Mistle Thrush	1	1	Turdus viscivorus
Common Blackbird	8	2	Turdus merula
Fieldfare	2	2	Turdus pilaris
Common Chiffchaff	- 1h	1	Phylloscopus collybita
Goldcrest	2	1	Regulus regulus
Winter Wren	6	1	Troglodytes troglodytes
Great Tit	5	2	Parus major
European Blue Tit	7	3	Cyanistes caeruleus
Marsh Tit	1	2	Poecile palustris
Long-tailed Tit	5	3	Aegithalos caudatus
Bearded Reedling	4	2	Panurus biarmicus
Eurasian Penduline-Tit	4	1	Remiz pendulinus
Eurasian Nuthatch	1	2	Sitta europaea
Common Treecreeper	1	1	Certhia familiaris
Short-toed Treecreeper	1	1	Certhia brachydactyla
Great Grey Shrike	7	1	Lanius excubitor
Common Magpie	7	3	Pica pica
Eurasian Jay	2	1	Garrulus glandarius
Western Jackdaw	2	2	Corvus monedula
Rook	7	4	Corvus frugilegus
Hooded Crow	7	3	Corvus corone
Common Raven	1	1	Corvus corax
Common Starling	4	3	Sturnus vulgaris
House Sparrow	7	4	Passer domesticus
Tree Sparrow	7	4	Passer montanus
Common Chaffinch	4	2	Fringilla coelebs
Brambling	2	1	Fringilla montifringilla
Eurasian Linnet	2	1	Carduelis cannabina
European Goldfinch	4	3	Carduelis carduelis
European Greenfinch	2	1	Carduelis chloris
Eurasian Siskin	2	2	Carduelis spinus
Eurasian Bullfinch	4	2	Pyrrhula pyrrhula

Hawfinch	2	2	Coccothraustes coccothraustes
Reed Bunting	3	2	Emberiza schoeniclus
Corn Bunting	4	4	Miliaria calandra

MAMMALS

Roe Deer			Capreolus capreolus
Brown Hare			Lepus europaeus

REPTILES

Grass Snake			Natrix natrix
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BUTTERFLIES

Peacock			Inachis io
Red Admiral			Vanessa atlanta

This list represents those birds and other animals seen by party members of this tour.