

RED-BREASTED GOOSE SPECIAL, HUNGARY 2017

with **SAKERTOURS**

30 October – 3 November 2017



Red-breasted Goose with Greater White-fronts (Simay Gábor)

Leader: Simay Gábor

On our third Red-breasted Goose Special Tour we recorded 113 species, among them eight species of geese. Hortobágy National Park has always been well-known for its amazing number of wild geese and our tour is focusing on this spectacle! We had several encounters with smaller flocks of Red-breasted Goose and the views were just amazing. The geese have become much tamer in recent years, so with some luck one can have a really memorable experience with these colourful and threatened species. We also had great views of the also globally threatened Lesser White-fronted Goose. The spectacle of tens of thousands of cranes flying towards their night roost was unforgettable too. The supporting cast was also exciting and included many raptors such as Eastern Imperial Eagle, Long-legged and Rough-legged Buzzards and Saker Falcons. We also had seen Great Bustards, Ferruginous Ducks plus even managed to sneak in six species of woodpeckers.

This year our tour was blessed with excellent weather. It was rather mild and sunny on most of the days, though our first day was windy and most mornings were chilly enough. This short break is really designed to see the two rare geese as no better place in the World where somebody can find both of these in just a long weekend in relative comfort! In the last three years we have been running this tour and it is getting more and more popular. Come and join us for another wild goose chase next year!

Monday, 30th of October

This was a very short day because of the windy weather one of the flight was delayed and thus we could start quite late. Some arrived earlier to do a pre-tour extension and they were already waiting for us in the Bícic Nature Lodge.

The drive along the M3 motorway produced only one Rough-legged Buzzard, while the others at the lodge saw a Syrian Woodpecker.

As we arrived, we met the others and occupied our comfortable rooms. This autumn was rather dry, so the surrounding soda pan around the lodge was dry and very few geese were lingering around. However, we noticed a bigger flock of geese on the other side of the grassland, where – thanks to a habitat reconstruction project - small wet areas were provided for birds. We drove there and we checked thoroughly the 2000 Greater White-fronted and Greylag Geese for other species. Luckily a nice adult Lesser White-fronted was found quite soon, which gave us excellent views! Though this threatened species is regular in the Hortobágy, it is not easy to find one which is close enough to show all the characters of the species. This time we were lucky! So we were happy and satisfied with this excellent start. Later on we had another Rough-legged Buzzard and a nice male Saker Falcon. The evening sky was full of Common Crane flocks as they were flying towards their evening roost. As we were losing light quickly, we returned to our comfortable lodge.



Rough-legged Buzzard (Gábor Simay)

Tuesday, 31st of October

After breakfast we went to an area where it was the most likely to find a big flock of goose. Fortunately, recent changes in conservation actions turned many grasslands to a better feeding area for geese. Thus, quite often we don't have to go to the farmlands to chase the flocks, but we can find them within the protected areas, where usually it is much easier to get a closer view. We didn't have to wait long until the first big flock was found. We could find a position to get really close to some of the smaller groups, and we quickly found our first Red-breasted

Geese. The lights were fantastic so we could really admire the plumage of this superb species. Later on this day we returned and altogether we saw 12 Red-breasted Geese. Two Lesser White-fronted Geese were also found here but we lost them too quickly in the big flock. Our next stop was a fishpond system managed by the National Park. With a short walk we could check two ponds full of birds. Different dabbling duck species were numerous, but we had great views of more than 200 Ferruginous Ducks, and several Pygmy Cormorants too. A distant Great Bittern in flight was also nice, but the observation of a few Bearded Reedling from a really short distance was fantastic. We also had three Penduline Tits here and another Rough-legged Buzzard.



Bearded Reedling in the fishpond's reedbed (Simay Gábor)

After lunch we took a short walk in a woodland area where we were looking for woodpeckers but with not much success. However the very close views of wintering Long-eared Owls and a Syrian Woodpecker was great! We spent the evening close to the biggest Common Crane roost. Towards the evening, flock after flock were flying around us from every direction. The sunset was amazing with tens of thousands of cranes and geese in the air. We saw here another Lesser White-fronted Goose, which flew very close to us with a few Greater White-fronted. We estimated the number of cranes we had seen in the evening to at least 30 000. It was a truly wonderful evening!

Wednesday, 1st of November

As we had been doing well for our target geese we tried to find other speciality species. First we scanned areas after Great Bustards but we had no luck this time. Because of the mild weather they were still not on their wintering fields, which made the search a bit trickier. However, a flock of 300 Bramblings was interesting – and a good bird for our overseas visitors. A nice wetland was our next stop, where eagles (mainly White-tailed Eagles) were sitting on the trees around. Among them we found and had great views of four (two adult and

two immature) Eastern Imperial Eagles. We checked the few thousand geese on the water. We saw three Red-breasted Goose and we found a Dark-bellied Brent Goose too - which is rather rare locally. There were hundreds of Eurasian Wigeons, a few Northern Pintails and a small flock of Ruffs.



Red-breasted Goose – certainly one of the smartest goose in the World (Gábor Simay)

The next stop, where we had a picnic lunch, gave us great views of a Long-legged Buzzard perched on a tree. A hunting Saker, which later landed nearby on the grass was a nice bonus here. Hen Harrier was quite common, we saw at least ten on this day. A nearby wooded area held a pair of Black and a pair of Green Woodpeckers of which we had excellent views.

We finished the days by a grassland where big flock of geese were around. We found 18 Red-breasted Goose (some were really close). A striking Bar-headed Goose was also in the flock, which had most likely arrived from the introduced Northern-European population.



Saker in flight (Gábor Simay)

Wednesday, 2nd of November

This morning we drove directly to a vast area where we expected to find Great Bustards. We searched the fields thoroughly, but the locations where they had been recorded recently, were empty. We kept trying and eventually they were spotted on a small grassy field. Indeed they were very close to our car when we found them, so we had great views of 19 birds. Finally!

Our next stop was a big reservoir by the Tisza River. There were not many birds, but we managed to add to our list both Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, Red-necked Grebe and Red-breasted Merganser. There were a few Black-necked Grebe, and in the reedbeds we saw two Water Rails too. The woodpeckers in the nearby wood were also great. We had two Syrian, one Black and a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker. White-headed Long-tailed Tits were also seen.

After lunch we tried to flush Jack Snipe from a wet field, but we managed to find only Common Snipes. However a Water Pipit among the more numerous Meadow Pipits was nice. Late in the afternoon we found a small goose flock near our lodge, where Barnacle Goose was new for the trip. In the evening we found a Little Owl on a farm building. It was our last bird of our last full day.



Flock of Greater White-fronts (Simay Gábor)

Thursday, 3rd of November

We had only one morning left so we decided to change the habitat and visited a nice and old oak forest near Debrecen (Hungary's second biggest town, close to the Hortobágy). Though it was a bit rainy early in the morning, it stopped soon and we had yet another sunny day. The area was very productive! Our first bird was a perched Hawfinch and the three Short-toed Treecreepers nearby were really confiding. We had excellent views of another Black Woodpecker, and though we had to work a bit harder as usual for the Middle-spotted Woodpecker, eventually we had good scope views of it.

As we did well in the forest we took a short visit around a nearby fishpond, where a first year Little Gull, a few Spotted Redshanks and a Red-crested Pochard were new species for our list. We finished the morning (and the trip) by a field full of geese. We counted eleven Red-breasted among the closer geese and we also found a Dark-bellied Brent with them again. The best was a Tundra Bean Goose which is an increasingly rare sight nowadays. This was followed by our last lunch in the lodge, a quick packing and our final drive to Budapest Liszt Ferenc airport. All together we saw eight species of geese during the trip, and all of them were seen very well. The main target Red-breasted Goose was seen several times!



Common Cranes with sunset (Simay Gábor)

SYSTEMATIC BIRD LIST FOR THE RED-BREASTED GOOSE SPECIAL TOUR

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

Species which were recorded only by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*: Fairly common.

Tundra Bean Goose *Anser fabalis rossicus*: One was seen well on our last morning.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*: It was quite common, usually alongside with the more numerous Greater White-fronted Goose.

Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*: One was seen with Greater White-fronted Geese. Cat. C.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*: Big flocks (several thousands) were seen every day.

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*: We had good views of a bird on our first day. We had two very distant on the second, and on the same day another one in flight.

Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*: We recorded them on three days. The max. daily number was 21 individuals. We had excellent views of them on all three days.

Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis*: One was seen in flight with Greater White-fronted Geese.

Dark-bellied Brent Goose *Branta bernicla bernicla*: Interestingly we found two of this quite scarce bird during the trip.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*: A couple of dozen were seen on the bigger ponds.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*: We recorded it on two days. On one of the ponds there were more than a thousand.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: Especially at the sawlow, natural wetlands we found hundreds of them.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*: Common. The biggest flock was about 500 birds.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Very common.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: Quite common at different wetland sites. Our biggest flock was above a hundred.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: We recorded them on two days in quite low numbers, but the drakes were already in their breeding plumage.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: We saw them on four days. The max. count was over 500.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: There were about 200 birds on the reservoir by the Tisza River.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*: It was a good year. In most of the years only a few birds stay for November. But this time we found them at two localities, and at one site we saw at least 200 birds.

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*: One eclipse male found on a fishpond. A scarce bird in Eastern Hungary.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*: We saw about ten birds on the reservoir by the Tisza River.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*: We saw one bird on the reservoir by the Tisza River.

Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica*: One on the reservoir by the Tisza River.

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*: One on the reservoir by the Tisza River.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: About ten birds were seen on a fishpond.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*: Two of them were seen on the reservoir by the Tisza River.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*: The commonest of our grebes. A few dozen were seen.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*: During the trip we saw 12 individual at different locations.

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*: We saw one in flight over the reedbeds of a fishpond.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: We recorded it on three days.

Great Egret *Egretta alba*: We recorded it on four days.

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*: About 30 birds were seen well alongside with Ferruginous Ducks on a fishpond.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: A fairly common sight in the Hortobágy.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: We recorded it on four days.

Saker *Falco cherrug*: We saw one perched on a pylon in our first evening. On another day we had fantastic view of a bird hunting for pigeons (no success) and then it landed on the grassland fairly close to us. We had fantastic sope views.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*: Only one adult bird was seen in the Hortobágy.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*: Recorded on four days with a daily max. of 12 birds.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*: It was quite common around wetlands.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*: We recorded them on two days, but the daily max. was well over 10 birds.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: We recorded it on four days.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*: A very common bird around.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*: One was seen well on a fairly remote grassland.



Immature White-tailed Eagle (Simay Gábor)

Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*: We had great views of three birds. They had just arrived from the north.

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*: Absolutely stunning views of four birds. Two adults and two immaturs around a wetland.



Two Eastern Imperial Eagles with a White-tailed Eagle (Simay Gábor)



Five of the 19 Great Bustards (Simay Gábor)

Great Bustard *Otis tarda*: We had good views of 19 birds, though we had to spend some time with the search.

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*: Two birds were seen in a reedbed.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*: Common.

Common Crane *Grus grus*: We spent a very nice evening beside a roost site with spectacular sunset and over 30.000 cranes flying around. We also saw thousands out in the fields nearly every day.

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*: A lone boird on a fishpond.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*: Far the commonest wader of the tour.

Common Snpie *Gallinag gallinago*: We saw a bit more then a dozen on two dates.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*: We recorded it on three days. The max. number was 20 birds a day.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*: Distant views of five birds on a drained fishpond.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: About 20 birds were seen on the mudfalts of a wetland.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*: We recorded them on three days in low numbers.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*: Common around wetlands.

Common Gull *Larus canus*: We saw them on two days.

Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*: One first year bird was seen well, feeding above a fispond.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michaellis*: We saw them on four days at different locations.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*: Commonly seen around wetlands.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*: A very common resident throughout the tour.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*: We saw about ten birds on a pylon..

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: Very common in the villages and farmlands.

Long-eared Owl *Asia otus*: Six birds were seen well on a day roost.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*: One bird was seen on a farm building in our last evening.

European Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*: We had good views of three different birds.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*: We saw three birds on two days. Very good views indeed.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*: We had prolonged scope views of one bird in a poplar wood.

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*: It was not very easy to find this time, but eventually we had great views of a bird while we heard another one in the same wood.

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*: We recorded them on four days. We had very good views of a pair near the reservoir by the Tisza River.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*: We recorded them on three days.

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*: We saw four birds on the tour.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*: A few birds were seen.

Common Magpie *Pica pica*: Very common.

Western Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*: Quite common in the Hortobágy

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*: Numerous.

Hooded Crow *Corvus corone*: Common everywhere.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*: We saw a few in the woods near Debrecen on our last day.

Great Tit *Parus major*: It was common throughout the tour.

Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*: It was common throughout the tour.

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*: We had good views of three birds in the reedbeds of a fishpond.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*: We had a few nice encounters with flocks containing many white-headed (nominate) birds.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*: Recorded on three days.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* (**H**): We heard once calling over a grassland.

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*: One was seen in a bushy area on our third day.

Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus*: Extremely close and clear views of a pair on our first full day.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*: We recorded it on three dates.

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: We recorded it on four dates.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*: About 20 birds were seen in the woods near Debrecen.

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*: Three birds were seen very well in the woods near Debrecen.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*: Small flocks were commonly seen.

Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*: Only one bird was seen during the whole trip.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*: Small flocks were recorded on two days.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*: Only one was seen in the woods near Debrecen.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* (**H**): We heard it on only one day.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*: Two birds were seen on the trip.

Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*: One late migrant was seen on our first full day.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: It was common and we recorded it every day.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: It was common and we recorded it every day.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*: Small flocks were seen, especially around wetlands.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*: One bird was flushed from a small wet area.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*: A few birds were seen.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*: A flock of 300 hundred birds were seen on a farmland.

European Serin *Serinus serinus* (**LO**): Two birds were seen in flight.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*: Small flocks were seen regularly.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*: Big flocks were common.

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus*: We recorded them on three days in low numbers.
Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*: Three birds were seen on our first full day.
Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*: We had nice views of both, males and females.
Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: Good views in the woods near Debrecen.
Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*: Only a few birds were seen on two days.
Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: Heard and seen on two days.
Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*: We had good views of one bird and later another small flock was seen.

MAMMALS

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*: Three were seen at different locations in the Hortobágy.
Western Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*: Very common in farmlands.
Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*: One in the woods near Debrecen.