



The main objective of this short tour to see the amazing Red-breasted Goose in the Hortobágy NP in Hungary (János Oláh).

RED-BREASTED GOOSE SPECIAL

7 – 11 NOVEMBER 2015

LEADER: JÁNOS OLÁH

Red-breasted Goose is certainly one of the best-looking geese in the World and every birder should be able to see and admire its beauty one day! This species is classified as vulnerable and its numbers are highly fluctuating (or not properly surveyed). Also the species is undergoing a continuous change of wintering area. Until the 1950s most of the population occurred along the western coast of the Caspian Sea - mainly in Azerbaijan, Iran and Iraq. The wintering area then rapidly shifted to the western Black Sea coast, and 80-90% of birds now congregate along the Black Sea coast. Even more recently, however, they wander further inland into the Romanian Baragan (salt lakes) area, along the Danube and increasing numbers are seen in Hungary too. Nowadays even the Birdlife International distribution map shows the Carpathian Basin as a wintering area. Within the Carpathian Basin the Hortobágy National Park is the most important staging area. In the last 20 years the Red-breasted Goose numbers simply doubled every 5 years and in 2014 / 2015 winter the count was over 2000 Red-breasted Goose in the Hortobágy area and probably around 2500 in the Carpathian Basin.

So we changed the timing of our long standing Hungary in autumn tour to maximize chance to see this fantastic goose in a short birding break. Also there is a prospect to see another vulnerable species, the Lesser White-fronted Goose. In fact there is no better place in Europe to see the two species within a single tour but in the World Heritage Hortobágy National Park. Not only possible to see them in a single tour but sometimes in one very flock or in the case of our latest tour side by side! Yes we did see Red-breasted

Goose and Lesser White-fronted Goose standing next to each other in November 2015! Although the weather started off with foggy conditions but in three days we managed to see several Red-breasted Goose with the biggest flock being 49 together. Although we spent most of our time with geese watching we also had some fine supporting cast like Great Bustard, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Long-eared Owl, Saker and even five species of woodpeckers!



Red-breasted Geese on the Hortobágy (Sándor Borza).

The tour started in Budapest but as the entire Hungarian Great Plain was covered in thick fog we were not rushing to our hotel in Balmazújváros but instead we drove to the picturesque 'Danube Bend' north of the capital and visited the Visegrád Castle as well as checking the Danube for any wintering birds. The hoped for Alpine Accentor did not materialize on the Castle walls but we had Great Spotted Woodpecker, Goldcrest, Treecreeper and a few other common birds. Following this short but windy walk in this lovely area we drove to the newly opened Bíbic Nature Lodge in Balmazújváros located in the eastern part of the Hortobágy National Park right by a soda lake. In fact when the weather got better by the end of the tour and visibility allowed us to see several Red-breasted Goose on this soda lake, almost from the porch of the new lodge!

On our first full day we were treated with thick fog and a mere 100 meters visibility. So after a lengthy and nice breakfast we visited a Long-eared Owl roost, where we could watch up to 30 birds for as long as we wanted. We also had Syrian Woodpecker and fly-by Bramblings were heard in the mist. The weather was not changing so we decided to try our luck on agricultural areas where the geese often spend the day. We got to a suitable area and could hear thousands of geese around but with the very limited visibility it took us a good 2 hours to check just a few hundred geese where we did not find any of our targets. However, we had brilliant looks at a Saker as she landed on a pylon very close to us. This was the only time we did benefit from the fog and could watch this fine falcon for several minutes. It was getting linear unchtime and the fog situation had not changed so it was very likely we would stay for the entire day now. We drove slowly on some remote roads of the park for the rest of the day and again we got very lucky. We encountered several geese flock very close to the road (because of the mist) and after a few trials we located four Red-breasted Geese on the edge of a larger Greater White-fronted Geese flock. Although the views were not first class in the mist but considering the conditions it was pretty good view and everybody was very happy indeed! By late afternoon the weather and especially the fog situation just got even worse so we decided to call it a day. Despite difficult viewing conditions we did have a good starting day with two of our main targets seen!



Long-eared Owls gave us excellent looks close to our accommodation (János Oláh).

The next day started just as foggy as the previous one (in fact previous 5 days) but it was more promising as the local contacts started to report from Debrecen and various parts of the Hortobágy that the fog is more patchy and at some locations on the western part of the national park is getting better! So we were about to leave for Debrecen Great Wood to try for woodpeckers when Sándor Borza, a local warden called us that he located an adult Lesser White-fronted Goose in a roadside geese flock a few kilometers away. A quick change of plan and 30 minutes later we were scanning the geese flock in search of this rare goose. Finally we relocated it and with some hard work finally all group members managed to get a reasonable look at this sought-after goose – but it was just a bit distant for everybody to pick up the golden eye-ring. Success! The third main target of the tour was in the bag too!

The western or 'Scandinavian' population of Lesser White-fronted Goose regularly passes through the Hortobágy National Park in late September and early October. This year there was a record number of 131 individuals (the biggest flock since 1992) with lots of juveniles indicating a very successful breeding year. However, these geese continue to Greece for the winter and later - in early November – with the hordes of Greater White-fronted Goose, other Lesser Whitefronts arrive from Siberia. These more eastern birds also increasing in numbers and recently we have estimated up to 50 or more staging in the national park.

By this time the weather improved and the visibility was pretty good so we decided to look for raptors in the nearby grassland and within one hour we managed to see six Hen Harriers, several Marsh Harriers, a White-tailed Eagle and two splendid Rough-legged Buzzards. Also hundreds of Common Cranes were seen as well as Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teals and Mallards. The conditions were getting brighter and we decided to go and look for more geese. With the help of Sándor Borza we drove into the remote southern part of the park where it really feels like to be in the middle of (nowhere) the Hungarian Great Plain. This proved to be a fantastic move as we located a flock of 49 Red-breasted Geese with a few Greater White-fronted Geese. We spent about an hour watching these beauties and stalking closer and closer to them. When we were pretty close to the flock we spotted three adult Lesser Whitefronts in the same flock too. We gradually walked even closer and finally the golden eyering was clearly visible for everybody! It was amazing to see only Redbreasts and Lesser Whitefronts in the same field of view side by side. This was definitely the highlight of the tour! It was such a great experience to have walk-away views of these rare geese. We retraced our steps back to our car and slowly drove away from the geese. Our luck was still not over yet and on our way back we bumped into a flying male Great Bustard which landed not far from us. Again we slowly got closer to this remarkable bird and it allowed excellent scope views at the end! We had an amazing day with a special geese experience just what we were after!



Red-breasted Geese in the southern part of the Hortobágy national Park (Sándor Borza).

On our last full day the weather changed, more cold weather arrived with a northeasterly wind and wiped the fog out from the plains. After a nice breakfast we drove to a location where a juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle had been reported the previous evening and we scanned the grassland in sunny conditions! What a change of colours! In the wetlands around our scanning point we saw many ducks and a hundreds of Northern Lapwings. We also soon located the juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle as well as Peregrine, Hen Harriers and many Common Buzzards. After this great start we drove to Debrecen Great Wood where within just one hour of birding we managed to see Black, Green, Great, Middle and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and Short-toed Treecreeper and as many as 40 Hawfinches.



Hawfinches (left) were common and we also had Black Woodpecker (right) at Debrecen Great Wood (János Oláh).

After this very productive forest birding we drove back to the Hortobágy and had a fine Fish Gulyás and in the afternoon we checked various fishponds and wetlands to pick up a few other species like Pygmy Cormorant, Eurasian Bittern, Tufted Duck, Spotted Redshank, Caspian and Yellow-legged Gulls. On our way back to our accommodation we found a flock of 50 000 Greater White-fronted Goose and spent the rest of the afternoon watching the geese and Common Cranes. We picked up 12 Red-breasted Geese and a Taiga Bean Goose too. This fantastic day was finished with two more Saker Falcons just before we were back to the fantastic Bíbic Nature Lodge for a final dinner!



The newly built Bíbic Nature Lodge is on the shores of a soda lake (left) and bíbic=lapwing cake is a specialty (János Oláh).

Our last 'travel' day back to Budapest airport turned out to be an action packed one with still plenty of birding! While having breakfast the regular Peregrine was sitting in front of the lodge and lots of geese were flying around. However, it was time for us to pack up and leave but we did make one final stop on the Hortobágy where we soon located four lovely Bearded Tits. Our next stop was at Tisza Lake where we boosted our list with Black-throated and Red-throated Divers (side by side), lots of Goldeneyes, Common Pochard and two female Scaups. We also had a fine adult Eastern Imperial Eagle, many White-tailed Eagles and excellent looks of Penduline Tit! Our last birding with a picnic lunch was on the Budaörs Hillside where we twitched a Eurasian Nutcracker and also had several Rock Buntings. After these final birds we drove to the Liszt Ferenc Airport in Budapest. It was a short but action-packed tour with great moments and lots of geese!



Eurasian Nutcracker (left) and Rock Bunting (right) near Budapest (János Oláh).



Lesser White-fronted Goose was also seen on the tour – Redbreasts in background with big 'white flanks' (Sándor Borza).

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

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

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

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

CR = Critically Endangered, **EN** = Endangered, **VU** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened

Taiga Bean Goose *Anser fabalis* A singleton was seen on our last day on the Hortobágy.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser* Up to 500 were seen. This is the eastern rubrirostris race.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* We had large numbers, one day we estimated 50 000.

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* ◊ We had a four adults. Three adults side by side with redbreast. **VU**

Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis* ◊ We had four excellent sightings! Largest flock was 49 side by side LWfrG. **VU**

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* 150 were counted at Tisza Lake.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* Just two were seen on a floodwater.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* A few were seen on the Hortobágy.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Common.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* A few were seen on the Hortobágy.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* A few were seen on the Hortobágy.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* Hundreds were seen on the various floodwaters.

Common Pochard *Aythya farina* About 50 were seen at Tisza Lake. **VU**

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* A few were seen at Tisza Lake.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* Two females were seen at Tisza Lake.
Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* About 40 were counted at Tisza Lake.
Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* Common.
Red-throated Loon *Gavia stellate* Two were seen at Tisza Lake.
Black-throated Loon *Gavia arctica* Four were seen at Tisza Lake.
Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* About 50 were seen at Tisza Lake.
Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* A few sightings on the tour.
Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* One was seen in flight on the Hortobágy.
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Common.
Great Egret *Ardea alba* Common.
Pygmy Cormorant *Microcarbo pygmeus* ♦ Up to 50 were seen on the Hortobágy.
Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Hundreds were seen.
Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* ♦ A juvenile was seen on the Hortobágy and a fine adult at Tisza Lake. **VU**
Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* Several sightings throughout.
Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* A few were seen on the Hortobágy.
Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* Enjoyed many excellent looks on the Hortobágy.
White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* A total of seven were seen on the Hortobágy.
Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus* We saw five on the Hortobágy.



Rough-legged Buzzard was regularly seen on the Hortobágy (János Oláh).

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* Common.
Great Bustard *Otis tarda* ♦ A fine male gave excellent looks on the Southern Hortobágy. **VU**
Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* (H) It was heard at the fishponds on the Hortobágy and at Tisza Lake.
Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* About 400 were seen at Tisza Lake.
Common Crane *Grus grus* Up to 2000 were seen on the Hortobágy.
Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* Hundreds were seen on the Hortobágy.
Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* Just three were seen on the Hortobágy.
Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* Seven were seen on a drained fishpond.
Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Common.
Mew Gull *Larus canus* A few on the Hortobágy.
Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* Hundreds were seen on the Hortobágy.
Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* Three were identified amongst the previous species.
Rock Dove *Columba livia* Common.
Stock Dove *Columba oenas* Just 14 were seen on the Hortobágy.
Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* A singleton on our first day.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Common.
 Little Owl *Athene noctua* One was seen on the Hortobágy.
 Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* We enjoyed great views of 30 on the Hortobágy.
 Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* Three sightings on the tour.
 Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor* Two were seen at Debrecen Great Wood.
 Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius* Three were seen at Debrecen Great Wood.
 Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus* Two sightings on the tour.
 Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* The most common woodpecker on the tour.
 Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* One was seen at Debrecen Great Wood.
 European Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* Two were seen at Debrecen Great Wood and one at Budaörs.
 Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* Common.
 Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* ♦ We had superb views of one and later a pair on the Hortobágy. **EN**
 Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Up to three were seen in one day.
 Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* Just two were seen.
 Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* A singleton on our first day at Visegrád.
 Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* Common.
 Eurasian Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes* Great looks of one at Budaörs.
 Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula* Regularly seen on the Hortobágy.
 Rook *Corvus frugilegus* Common.
 Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* Common.
 Northern Raven *Corvus corax* A singleton on the Hortobágy.
 Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris* Just one at Debrecen Great Wood.
 Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* Common.
 Great Tit *Parus major* Common.
 Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* Excellent looks of this reedbed skulker at Tisza Lake.
 Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus* Great views on the Hortobágy.
 Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* Regular sightings.
 Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* Three encounters – some of them were ‘white-headed’ birds.
 Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* Seen at Visegrád and on the Hortobágy.
 Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* Regular sightings throughout.
 Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* It was seen at Visegrád and at Debrecen Great Wood.
 Common Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* One was seen at Visegrád and one on the Hortobágy.
 Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla* A singleton at Debrecen Great Wood.
 Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* Common.
 Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* A few at Debrecen Great Wood and Budaörs.
 Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* Two at Debrecen Great Wood and few more at Tisza Lake.
 Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* About ten at Debrecen Great Wood.
 European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* (H) Heard twice.
 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Common.
 Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Common.
 Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* (LO) One was seen at Visegrád.
 Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* Up to 25 on the Hortobágy.
 Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* Just a few on the tour.
 Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* (H) Heard at Balmazújváros in the fog.
 Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* Excellent looks at up to 40 at Debrecen Great Wood.
 Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* (H) Heard several times in the fog.
 European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris* Common.
 Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina* Just two were seen Tisza Lake.
 European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* Common.
 Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* A flock of 80 at Budaörs.
 Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* A singleton near Tisza Lake.
 Yellowhammer *Emberiza citronella* (H) It was only heard at Tisza Lake.
 Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* Regular sightings on the Hortobágy.
 Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* We saw six at Budaörs.

MAMMALS

European Hare (Brown H) *Lepus europaeus* Singletons were seen on the Hortobágy.
 Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* One was seen on the Hortobágy.
 Western Roe Deer (Roe D) *Capreolus capreolus* Up to 150 were seen daily on the Hortobágy.