



RIBBLE BIRD TOURS

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Hungary & Romania May 4th – 15th 2012

Trip Report

May 4th

The group of Stuart Meredith, Ken Harrison, Gordon Kinnaird, Gordon MacDonald, Jean Thomas, Jean Lund, Rachael Parks and Bob & Pat Martin met at Manchester airport for our flight to Budapest while Ken & Denise Halls flew from London Gatwick and met up with the rest of the group in Budapest. Also at the airport in Budapest was Gabor Simay, our guide for the first three days.

After packing the minibus with our bags and noting White Wagtail and Hooded Crow as we did we were on our way to our first accommodation at Komloska in the Zemplen Hills.

May 5th

A short pre breakfast walk in the village produced excellent views of a male Grey headed Woodpecker as well as Serin, Hawfinch, Golden Oriole, Nuthatch, Jay, Long tailed Tit, Grey Wagtail, Turtle Dove, Black Redstart, Common Buzzard, Swallow and Marsh Tit with an unseen River Warbler singing from cover and a Wryneck calling in the distance.

At breakfast a Short toed Eagle over a hillside was seen by some of the group.

After breakfast we were joined by local guide Zoltan Petrovics (Zoli) who took us to some beech forest in the Zemplen Hills. Ural Owl was soon located and everybody had great views of this impressive bird that was nesting nearby. Collared Flycatchers sang from all around and a few males gave good views and we also enjoyed Spotted Flycatcher, Black bellied Dipper, Chiffchaff, Coal Tit and Song Thrush with Orange Tip and Wood White butterflies too.

At our next stop a Corncrake was briefly seen in a meadow as a Stonechat and a pair of Red backed Shrikes were noted nearby. A singing Wryneck avoided detection.

Overhead Lesser spotted Eagle, Black Stork and 15 Common Cranes flew by.

Our next stop at a vineyard failed to result in the hoped for Short toed Eagle but compensation arrived with 5 White Storks, Turtle Dove, Sparrowhawk, Woodlark, Lesser spotted Eagle, a couple of Black Storks and fabulous views of a soaring male Goshawk right over our heads.

After lunch we visited an open area with isolated stands of woodland and a small marshy area.

The walk to our main point of interest was about 1km from where we parked our bus and produced numerous Yellow Wagtails, Marsh Harriers and Great White Egret.

The small marshy area produced good birds with the best being Moustached Warbler, Great Reed Warbler and Spoonbill while nearby a Hoopoe was seen. Little Crake was heard calling but not seen.

A few hundred metres further on was the isolated copse that we were walking towards and in a tree in the copse was the nest of an Eastern Imperial Eagle with an adult bird sat on it. Because of the distance involved, views of the Eagle were not great but we didn't want to disturb the bird by being too close.

However, patience was rewarded after a while when the sitting Eagle decided to have a fly around and show itself to the appreciative group.

3 Black Terns and Whiskered Terns flew by and a Hobby performed well with 4+ Lesser Grey Shrikes and Turtle Doves being notable.

We finished an excellent first day in another small area of woodland.

As we disembarked the vehicle a Roller flew by but was only seen by Stuart.

The highlights here were probably the magnificent prolonged scope views of both Wryneck and Syrian Woodpecker. Also here were singing Wood Warbler, Hawfinch, Lesser Whitethroat, Red backed Shrike, Common Buzzard, Golden Oriole and Great spotted Woodpecker.

May 6th

The day started well for Stuart when a Red rumped Swallow was watched for a few minutes hawking insects over the field at the back of the hotel. The bird was also probably seen by Rachael and Jean Lund as they saw a bird from the breakfast table that was “either a Swallow or a House Martin”. Red rumped Swallow is a major rarity in Hungary and on hearing the news Gabor went rushing around the village to see if he could find the bird but was without success.

After breakfast our first destination was to be a quarry where Eagle Owls reside. Along the way we had good views of Eastern Imperial Eagle, displaying Barred Warbler, Red backed Shrike and Lesser Whitethroat while a Nightingale sang from deep in a bush.

The quest for Eagle Owl in the quarry was unsuccessful but Lesser spotted Eagle, Yellowhammer, Bee Eaters, Tree Sparrow, Grey Heron and Greylag Geese were seen and another singing Nightingale was heard.

Nearby fishponds produced some new species for the trip but the wind kept many birds low down in the vegetation.

Caspian Gull, Sedge Warbler, Sand Martin, Green Woodpecker and Cormorant were new as was the back of a singing Bluethroat that was briefly glimpsed. Singing Great Reed and Savi's Warblers couldn't be seen but a male Penduline Tit repeatedly showed well at its nest. Other species here included Great White Egret, Marsh Harrier, Grey Heron, Hooded Crow, Little Egret, Barred Warbler, 12 Rooks and Great spotted Woodpecker.

Our next stop produced 2 Lesser spotted Eagles, a pair of Red backed Shrike, Hawfinch, Common Buzzard and an immature White tailed Eagle.

After lunch we made our way into a pristine unmanaged beech forest that was perfect for White backed Woodpecker.

Our guide Zolly knew of a nest hole and soon we had the site staked out. After a while a female arrived with a beak full of food but was reluctant to visit the hole for some reason. It became apparent that the reason was a Ural Owl perched in a nearby tree. The decision was made to ‘persuade’ the Owl to move on a little and after it flew a hundred metres or so away both adult woodpeckers started visiting the nest with food. Everybody had good scope views before we departed.

Other birds in the wood included Willow Tit, Goldcrest, Chaffinch, Turtle Dove, Chiffchaff and Blackbird.

Our next stop had Collared Flycatcher and Middle spotted Woodpecker nesting in the same tree along with Golden Oriole and Hawfinch.

We finished the day at another quarry where we had good views of Eagle Owl at the nest. Both birds of the pair were seen but one was flushed as we approached.

Numerous Nightingales sang from the undergrowth but still wouldn't show.

We had dinner at a local vineyard where various wines were sampled and we met up with Janos Olah who'd be our guide for the remainder of the tour.

May 7th

After breakfast we started our drive into Transylvania in Romania.

Our first stop gave us excellent views of a singing Nightingale and Barred Warbler with Bee Eaters and Golden Oriole seen too. Singing River Warblers were too far away to see.

A Night Heron flew over us as we crossed a river on the way to our next stop in some farmland literally in the middle of nowhere.

This area is one of the very few sites where the localised Short toed Lark can be found in Hungary and shortly after leaving the minibus the distinctive song of the larks could be heard as 2 males sang high in the sky. One of them disappeared from view as the second sang and sang and sang until it finally dropped out of the sky and into some vegetation. Eagle eyed Janos managed to locate the bird on the ground and scope views were obtained. Other interest here was provided by Crested Lark, Skylark, Northern Wheatear, Tree Sparrow and flyover Bee Eaters.

It was raining at Debrecen Great Wood and a wet picnic lunch was followed by a wet walk in the woods. Black Woodpecker was heard with a female being seen by Stuart. Other birds here included Collared Flycatcher, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Nuthatch, Swift, Nightingale, Cuckoo, Wryneck, Blackcap, Yellowhammer and Marsh Tit.

Our first Romanian birds were White Stork and Red footed Falcon – both being seen soon after we'd crossed the border.

At Elesd Reservoir half a dozen Ortolan Buntings showed well along with Stonechat, Whitethroat and Great crested Grebes.

As we drove around the reservoir the habitat became better for birds and we noted Whiskered, Black and Common Terns, Ferruginous Duck, Garganey, Dunlin, Ruff, Grey Plover, Wood Sandpiper, Little ringed Plover, Black necked Grebe, Grey Heron, Little Egret and Yellow Wagtail. Also here were Yellow legged and Caspian Gull allowing comparison of these two very similar species.

After reaching our accommodation near Torocko we had dinner and in the evening Scops Owls could be heard calling from nearby the hotel.

May 8th

The morning was spent exploring the lower slopes of a mountain near to the hotel.

Our targets birds of Golden Eagle and Rock Thrush were seen by all but a surprise Sombre Tit was only seen by some of the group. Janos hadn't seen this species here for about 8 years. Other birds seen were Black Redstart, Pheasant, Yellowhammer, Green Woodpecker, Red backed Shrike, Whitethroat, Tree Pipit, Common Buzzard and Kestrel. Syrian Woodpecker could be heard drumming in the distance.

Just outside the village great views of 2 adult and 5 juvenile Great Grey Shrikes were enjoyed by all and a Golden Oriole sang nearby.

The afternoon was spent driving further into Transylvania and as we neared Zetea we had views of 2 Golden Eagles and Common Buzzard.

This evening the group split into two to go to separate hides for a chance of bears. One group had a 45 minute drive followed by a 20 minute walk to their hide and were rewarded with good views of at least 2 adult and 3 juvenile Carpathian Brown Bears.

The first to appear was a lone male who was about 4 years old. He disappeared shortly before an adult female and 3 cubs emerged from the forest. There was also possibly a third adult bear glimpsed. Unfortunately the other hide failed to produce any sightings at all.

May 9th

The morning was spent in an area of coniferous forest and we were successful in finding our main quarry here which was Three toed Woodpecker. A female gave quite good views but alas no male could be found.

A flock of about 20 Common Crossbills showed well in treetops and Firecrest was seen a few times with many more singing from cover in the dense conifer canopy. Other birds seen this morning included Fieldfare, Great Grey Shrike, Garden Warbler, Raven, Common Buzzard, Yellow Wagtail, Tree Pipit, Red backed Shrike and Wood Warbler A Tengmalm's Owl was heard calling by Janos.

Golden Eagle, Redstart and Black Redstart were also logged today.

The evening bear watch to last night's successful hide was unsuccessful with no bears showing to the group.

May 10th

After breakfast we headed directly to the Bicaz Gorge.

After what seemed like an eternity the patient scanning of the gorge walls was rewarded when a couple of Wallcreepers finally gave themselves up with everybody eventually connecting with this 'must see' bird.

A lucky few managed very close if brief views of a male foraging on a nearby rockface.

Also here were Alpine Swifts, Common Swifts, Grey Wagtail and Dipper.

The Szentpál Fishpond system is a very important site for wetland species and our time there was rewarded with Whiskered and Black Terns, Ferruginous Duck, Purple Heron, Savi's Warbler, Great Reed Warbler, White Stork, Wood Sandpiper and a couple of Lesser spotted Eagles as well as more familiar birds such as Pochard, Whinchat, Great crested and Little Grebes, Yellow and White Wagtails, Greenshank, Grey Heron, Sedge Warbler, Marsh Harrier, Stock Dove, Mute Swan, Moorhen, Coot and Teal.

A couple of unseen Quail sang 'wet my lips' from tantalisingly close vegetation.

At Bear Lake the heavy rain showers and thunder put paid to any chance of the local Red breasted Flycatchers putting in an appearance but Collared Flycatcher and Spotted Flycatcher were seen along with Nuthatch.

Back in the hotel garden Marsh Tit and Common Redstart were active and in the area there were also half a dozen Bee Eaters, Common Buzzard, Swallow, Stonechat and House Martin.

May 11th

Today we'd start our return back to Hungary with an overnight stop again in Toročko. A bumpy drive up the Harghita Mountain was rewarded with good but brief views, for those sat in the right place, of a female Capercaillie that was flushed from the roadside. It flew away and out of view into the forest.

A male Ring Ouzel (alpestris race) was finally seen well as was a trio of Nutcrackers that took some tracking down but eventually gave good views to all.

Also in the area were Black Redstart, Chiffchaff, Willow Tit, Chaffinch, Cuckoo and Pied Flycatcher.

On our way back to Toročko we made a stop at the village where Vlad Dracul (Vlad the Impaler) was born.

Back in Toročko we visited the town square in the evening where we had at least 3 Scops Owls that included a bird at the entrance hole of a nestbox.

May 12th

After breakfast we continued our journey back through Transylvania into Hungary.

At the Kokaz Gorge we saw a couple of distant Red rumped Swallows and a couple of equally distant Crag Martins along with Peregrine, male Rock Thrush, Yellowhammer, Stonechat and Red backed Shrike.

In Torocko a short photographic stop coincided with displaying Serin, Black Redstart and White Wagtail.

At the Elesd Reservoir a 2nd summer Mediterranean Gull was picked out by Pat and there was also a 2nd summer Little Gull here too along with 20 or so Caspian Gulls. Tawny Pipit was new for the trip and also here were Black necked Grebe, Garganey, Ferruginous Duck, Great crested Grebe, Black Tern, Whiskered Tern, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Shelduck, Little ringed Plover, Redshank, Common Tern, Corn Bunting and Little Egret.

On arriving back in Hungary we decided that we'd alter the itinerary a little as the weather forecast for tomorrow and the day after was not great and we'd planned to visit the Hortobagy NP tomorrow to see Great Bustards. This would be difficult in poor weather as the tracks on the great plain would not be driveable in the rain. Arrangements were made to meet Dr Gabor Kovaks who is a senior warden in the NP and he always knows where the Bustards are likely to be.

True to form he directed the minibus to an area with a slight elevation and soon we were watching 5 fantastic male Great Bustards. A female Bustard then appeared and this encouraged a couple of the males to start displaying. Also in the area were 16 Common Cranes and a Quail sang concealed in the vegetation.

On our drive to the Bustards we'd noticed Rollers in a nearby tree and as Josef, our driver, returned Gabor to his home we spent a great 20 minutes or so watching these great birds as well as many other sought after species.

Perhaps the best of these (for some anyway) were the 2 singing male Bluethroats of the white spotted race that gave fantastic views in nearby shrubs. These vied for our attention with half a dozen Savi's Warblers that also showed well, flyover Spoonbills, Bee Eaters, Great White Egret, Egyptian Goose, Marsh Harriers that included a melanistic individual, Great Reed Warblers, Red footed Falcons and a vocal Little Crake that Ken Harrison managed to get a glimpse of.

3 distant White tailed Eagles perched on a barn roof while more familiar faces included Red backed Shrikes, Little Egret, Greylag Goose, Yellow Wagtail, Common Buzzard and Corn Bunting.

May 13th

The weather forecast was correct but in reality the weather wasn't as bad as we feared and morning rain and wind gave way to clearer afternoon weather.

Our first stop was at a newly established wetland in the Hortobagy and here we found shelter to watch Avocets, Little and Temminck's Stints, Black winged Stilts, Redshank, Greenshank, half a dozen Ruff, Little ringed Plover, Ferruginous Duck, 3 breeding plumaged Spotted Redshanks, 3 White winged Black Terns, Little Gull, Whiskered Terns, Black Terns, Common Terns, Sand Martin and Greylag Geese.

Nightingales and Golden Oriole sang from nearby trees.

Next stop was at a breeding colony of Red footed Falcons and we saw about 20 of these dapper raptors with good comparisons of males and females achieved.

A flypast Hoopoe was a welcome bonus.

The morning was completed with White tailed Eagle, Lesser Grey Shrike, Tree Sparrow, Common Buzzard, a pair of Hoopoe and Great White Egret.

The afternoon started with Night Heron, Green Woodpecker, Black Stork, Common Buzzard, Golden Oriole and distant Long legged Buzzard.

Also distant was a Saker at a nest box. A couple of Tawny Pipits were much closer when viewed from the minibus.

Another 2 Rollers were seen on wires, a couple of roadside Quail were flushed by the minibus, Kestrel was noted and singing Nightingales could be heard.

We finished the day with an adult and 2 juvenile Long eared Owls at a nest site, Cuckoo, male Marsh Harrier and yet another Roller.

May 14th

The day dawned dull and windy and continued with showers throughout the day. A drumming Syrian Woodpecker at the front of the hotel didn't seem too bothered.

A visit to the Halasto part of the Hortobagy was rewarded with a range of good birds with highlights being Squacco Herons, Pygmy Cormorant, Common Crane, Penduline Tit, 10 Spoonbills, Night Heron, Purple Heron, Lesser Grey Shrike, White winged Black Tern and 4 Black tailed Godwits. Also here were Black Redstart, Little Egret, Golden Oriole, Linnet, Nightingale, Marsh Harrier, Lesser Whitethroat, Wood Sandpiper, Grey Heron, Curlew, Reed Warbler, Gadwall, Teal, Shelduck, Cuckoo and Little Stint.

A search of the steppe in the Hortobagy finally produced a pair of Montagu's Harriers with good scope views being obtained. There were dozens of Marsh Harriers too along with numerous Yellow Wagtails.

In Hortobagy village a few Serins were singing, nearby 10+ Red footed Falcons hawked for insects and after dipping on Stone Curlew a trip of 6 female and 8 male Dotterels was a very welcome sight.

The last birding of the afternoon was to be a visit to another Saker nesting site and better views were had of this large falcon than had been experienced previously. On the way a couple of Rollers and Lesser Grey Shrike showed well.

May 15th

Our final day arrived and after checking out of our hotel we made our way back to the Halasto part of the Hortobagy and took a train ride to the far end of the reserve.

Avian rewards for the effort were many with gorgeous Bearded Tits showing very well and being very popular. Less obvious were Moustached Warbler and skulking Little Crakes and the reedbeds were full of singing Reed and Great Reed Warblers.

On the water a handful of Red crested Pochards and a few Wigeon were distant, a Shoveler was quite close and numerous Caspian Gulls of assorted ages were on a nearby island. Purple Herons and Squacco Herons were noted and all too soon we were having to return to the train to make our way back to the minibus and the drive back to Budapest airport where Ken & Denise were the first to depart on their flight back to London Gatwick. The rest of the group had an early dinner before returning to the airport in time for our return flight back to Manchester.

The flights were on time and on our return to Manchester we said our farewells and the tour ended.