



White-backed Woodpecker (Gábor Simay)

HORTOBÁGY – ZEMPLÉN AUTUMN TOUR with **SAKERTOURS** 5th – 11th October, 2024

Leader: Gábor Simay

This year we experienced once again a highly successful and really enjoyable autumn trip. The weather – most of the time – was nice and sunny, we had a lot of good bird sightings and we had some nice walks in the grasslands of the famous Hortobágy National Park and in the old beech and oak forests of the Zemplén-hills. We recorded 130 species and we saw almost all the expected specialities. We had some real special moments what made our trip a really memorable one, like the Ural Owl one evening in the hills perched just meters away from us or the walk-away views of a busily feeding White-backed Woodpecker. In the lowlands the sheer number of eagles we sometimes saw was amazing or the flock of Eurasian Dotterels which cheered us up after a good walk are also worth to mention. However, the most spectacular sighting was probably the flight of tens of thousands of Common Cranes toward their roost.

Highlight of this year's tour included Ferruginous Ducks, Pygmy Cormorant, Eastern Imperial Eagles a flock of Great Bustard, Eurasian Dotterels, Caspian Gull, Eurasian Eagle-Owl, Ural Owl, Lesser, Middle and Great Spotted, Black, Green, Grey-headed and White-backed Woodpeckers, Red-footed Falcon, Saker Falcon, Eurasian Penduline Tit, Bearded Reedling, Short-toed Treecreeper and Hawfinch.

5th October (Saturday)

The group met at the Liszt Ferenc Airport in Budapest in early afternoon. After a short discussion about the itinerary we found ourselves driving toward our first birdwatching site. After leaving the ringroad of the city and taking a few minor roads we arrived to a perfect habitat for the sought after Great Bustard. After a little drive and search we found a flock not so far from the road. From a nearby observation tower we had excellent looks at 43 birds scattered around the surrounding fields. Other birds around included Western Marsh Harriers, Common Kestrels and European Stonechats. We spent a fair amount of time observing the bustards when it was time to start our three hours' drive to our lodge in the Hortobágy. Just before dark we saw our first flocks of Common Cranes as they were crossing the motorway while flying towards their night roost. Soon after we arrived to the Bíbic (Lapwing) Lodge at the edge of the national park in the town called Balmazújváros.

6th October (Sunday)

Before breakfast we met at the porch of the restaurant from where we had a nice view of the surrounding "puszta" (the local name of the expansive grasslands). Beside the grazing local breeds of cattle and donkeys we had nice views of a small flock of Caspian Gulls and many Graylags. In the bushy areas around we saw our first Black Redstart and also a skulking Common Redstart. We glimpsed a fly over Syrian Woodpecker too. After having a good coffee and had a nice breakfast we drove to the well-known birding site, the Hortobágy-fishponds located in the centre of the national park. Though the previous weeks were wet, we managed to find a nice grassy trail which was not muddy so we took a comfortable walk, along which we saw a small flock of very showy Bearded Reedling. On a small pool we saw three Squacco Herons which was a real surprise in October. The bigger ponds were full of birds and we saw hundreds of Pygmy Cormorants though the most common bird was arguably Gadwall with many thousands seen. A few Spoonbills were also around. After getting to the van, we took a small road and checked every single Common Kestrel hoping to find a Red-footed Falcon among them. Though almost all of them has already migrated to the south, with some persistence we managed to find a nice female and a juvenile. Along this road we saw the first of many Eastern Imperial and White-tailed Eagles and also two cute Little Owls. After having a traditional local lunch (goulash soup) we visited some small nearby ponds where we saw Black and Red-necked Grebes and also a few Ferruginous Ducks. The lone juvenile Whiskered Tern and Little Gull were also unusually late observations. While walking back, an extremely tame Common Redstart entertained us. At this point the weather turned rainy so we decided to stay in the van and we drove to several potential sites where Saker was possible but this time we had no luck. It was still raining when we checked a traditional roosting site of Long-eared Owls where we had excellent views of 9 birds.



Raft of Black-necked Grebe and a Common Redstart on migration (Gábor Simay)

7th October (Monday)

On our second full day in the Hortobágy region we drove to the southern part of the National Park, where extensive alkaline grasslands seem to stretch till the horizon. On the way we had nice view of a Northern Grey Shrike. Due to recent plentiful rainfall, we had to park our vehicle where the tarmac road ended and took a walk along a grassy trail leading into the area where we hoped to find Eurasian Dotterels. In autumn, this part of the park act as a moulting place for these scarce birds, which might stay here till the first frosty weather. The area is vast, so to find the birds is always a challenge. The first part of the walk was easy but later on we had to make a few detours to avoid the small pools, where Red-throated Pipits were plentiful. Arriving to the location we found a range of waders, including Grey and Little-ringed Plovers, but there were no sign of Dotterels. A Eurasian Hobby passing through was a nice addition to our list. Patience paid off as after half an hours waiting we heard the distinctive call of the Dotterel and we quickly spotted the 50 strong flock, which gave us eventually nice views. From here we drove to a nearby wetland south of the Hortobágy where we had our picnic lunch while admiring at least a dozen eagles – White-tailed and Eastern Imperial - as they were hunting over the habitat. The wetland was full of birds and we added Northern Pintail, Bar-headed Goose (Cat C obviously), Pied Avocet, Spotted Redshank and a local scarcity, Ruddy Turnstone to our list. For the evening we drove back to the vicinity of our lodge, where we headed to the biggest crane roost around. We saw no less than 40.000 Common Cranes flying in to the pond. The sunset was beautiful, the cranes flew nearby us making the atmosphere of the evening outstanding.



Eurasian Dotterels in flight and flocks of wildfowl (Gábor Simay)

8th October (Tuesday)

On our last full day in the Hortobágy we concentrated on the few species we hadn't found yet, especially Saker, which – sometimes – is tricky to find in autumn. We checked many places to find this rare bird, but annoyingly we had no luck. We visited a big pond with some mudflat which held a few birds, including a nice adult Yellow-legged Gull, which gave us good views to compare with the more abundant Caspians. While visiting the different habitats in search of the falcon, we counted no less than 30+ White-tailed and 20+ Eastern Imperial Eagles. The grasslands held a few Eurasian Curlews and Linnets while around the wet areas we saw big flocks of Eurasian Wigeons. We had lunch in a traditional restaurant after which we visited a reed bed habitat with lots of willows where we tried to find Eurasian Penduline Tit, which had eluded us so far. Here we saw a nice flock of white-headed (*europeus*) form of Long-tailed Tits, a few Pygmy Cormorants and eventually a very obliging Penduline Tit. In the evening, one part of the group intended to watch once again the Crane spectacle where they were lucky enough to see – beside the huge number of cranes, of course - a locally scarce Alpine Swift, while with the other part of the group we had excellent views of a Syrian Woodpecker in a nearby town.



Immature Eastern Imperial Eagle, Penduline Tit and Common Cranes against the setting sun (Gábor Simay)

9th October (Wednesday)

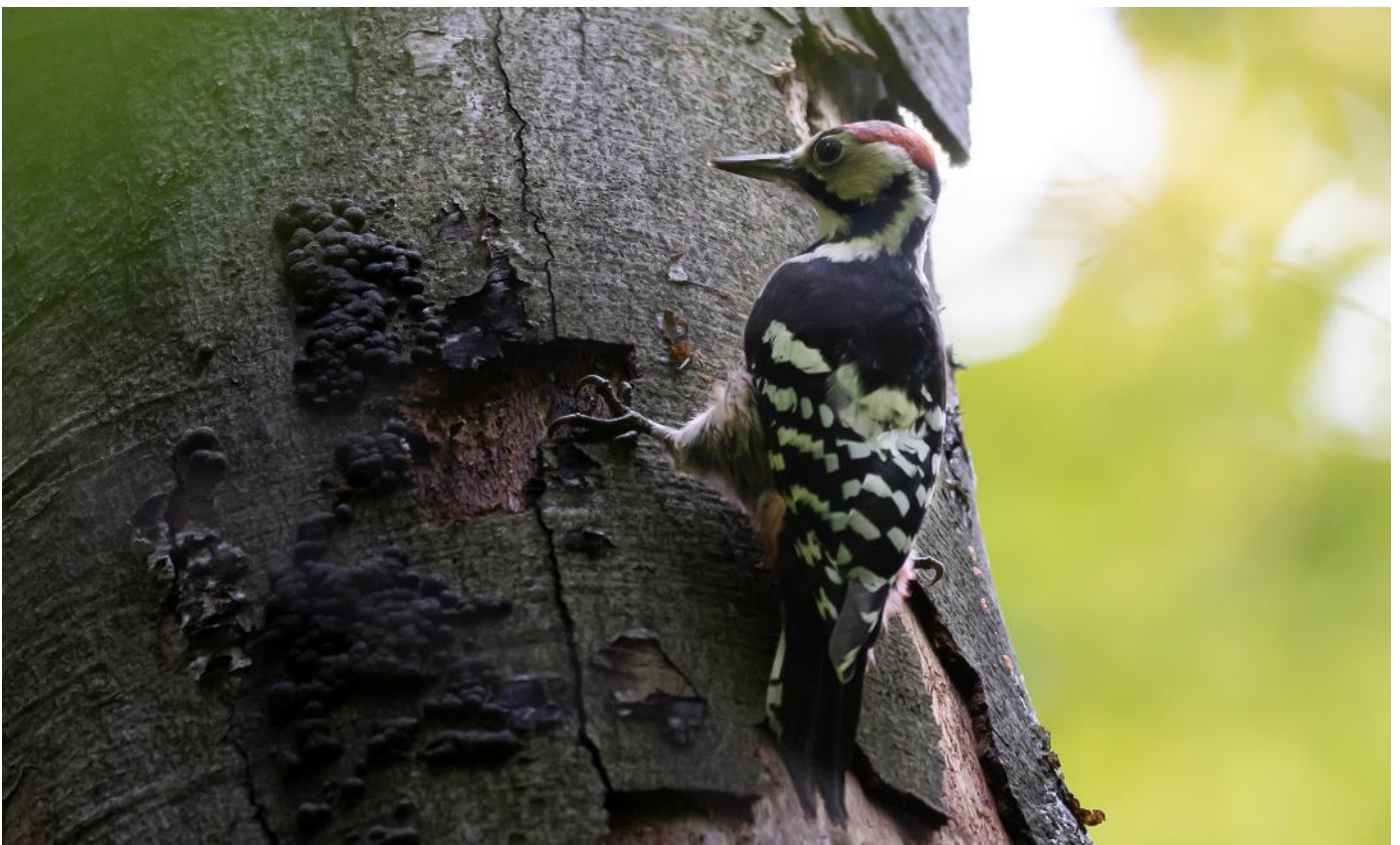
Today we had to leave our lodge and the Hortobágy area too and after breakfast we started our drive towards the Zemplén-hills. But first we stopped by another spot for Saker Falcon and this time we found a pair of which we had nice scope views in good lights. The weather turned to rainy but fortunately it didn't last long so it didn't affected our birding at the next spot in an old oak forest near the town of Debrecen. Here we added Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreeper and Hawfinch to our list. Not long after we had a picnic lunch we arrived to the forest covered hills where we met our local guide, Zoli. First we checked a cliff for Eurasian Eagle Owl, and it took a while till we found the bird in the shade, but with our scope we had great view of this magnificent bird. After a little drive we got to the location where we tried to come across another owl species, the Ural Owl. The clouds were very low and the fog was creeping in among the trees. We walked in forest trails in the fading lights but we had no sign of the owl. We kept trying and took another side trail where eventually we heard the call and soon we could locate the bird. We had amazing and long scope views of this beautiful creature. By this time it was almost dark, so we drove to our small hotel in a nearby village.



Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Tawny Owl and Eurasian Eagle-Owl on their day roost (Gábor Simay)

10th October (Thursday)

We started our last full day with a pre-breakfast walk in the vicinity of the village. First the birding was a bit slow, but later woodpeckers appeared and we soon enjoyed scope views of a nice Grey-headed Woodpecker, and just a few minutes later a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker as it shared the same branch with a calling Great-spotted Woodpecker. After having a nice meal we drove to a beech forest where after a bit of a walk we soon found what we had come for, an absolutely obliging White-backed Woodpecker, of which we had stunning walk-away views. In a small village we saw two Syrian Woodpeckers and as there were a few Great-spotted around as well, we could compare the plumage and call of these two similar species. We had lunch at a nearby restaurant and at the parking plot we added European Serin to our list. In the afternoon we tried to find Black Woodpecker so we visited some forests where we saw Willow Tits beside the more common woodland birds, and eventually we managed to see - though a bit distantly - a Black Woodpecker: the no. eighth and last woodpecker species of the trip. In a village we spotted a roosting Tawny Owl in one of the house's chimney which gave us some nice photo opportunity. In the evening we visited a small vinery where we had a nice meal and tasted the famous local white vine.



Male White-backed Woodpecker (Gábor Simay)

11th October (Friday)

On the last morning we took a short walk along a gallery forest where we saw a few woodpeckers and commoner forest species, while we had good views of a Common Kingfisher. A nearby wetland held a few Eurasian Spoonbills and Caspian Gulls. In a nearby rocky area we tried to find Rock Buntings which were present but were quite shy. Eventually we managed to see one, though only in flight. Our last new bird for the trip was a Grey Wagtail jumping on rocks by a small lake. Late morning we started our drive to the Budapest airport where we said goodbye after a really successful trip.

BIRDS – list of bird species recorded on the 2023 tour

C = Commonly seen, more than 10 individuals

'Numbers' = Actual number seen on the tour

H = Heard only

| | | | |
|----|------------------------|-------------------------------|----|
| 1 | Greylag Goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | C |
| 2 | Bar-headed Goose | <i>Anser indicus</i> | 1 |
| 3 | Mute Swan | <i>Cygnus olor</i> | C |
| 4 | Northern Shoveler | <i>Spatula clypeata</i> | C |
| 5 | Gadwall | <i>Mareca strepera</i> | C |
| 6 | Eurasian Wigeon | <i>Mareca penelope</i> | C |
| 7 | Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | C |
| 8 | Northern Pintail | <i>Anas acuta</i> | 30 |
| 9 | Eurasian Teal | <i>Anas crecca</i> | C |
| 10 | Common Pochard | <i>Aythya ferina</i> | C |
| 11 | Tufted Duck | <i>Aythya fuligula</i> | 20 |
| 12 | Ferruginous Duck | <i>Aythya nyroca</i> | 8 |
| 13 | Common Pheasant | <i>Phasianus colchicus</i> | C |
| 14 | Little Grebe | <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> | C |
| 15 | Great Crested Grebe | <i>Podiceps cristatus</i> | C |
| 16 | Red-necked Grebe | <i>Podiceps grisegena</i> | 2 |
| 17 | Black-necked Grebe | <i>Podiceps nigricollis</i> | 37 |
| 18 | Eurasian Spoonbill | <i>Platalea leucorodia</i> | C |
| 19 | Squacco Heron | <i>Ardeola ralloides</i> | 3 |
| 20 | Grey Heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | C |
| 21 | Great Egret | <i>Ardea alba</i> | C |
| 22 | Little Egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> | 2 |
| 23 | Pygmy Cormorant | <i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i> | C |
| 24 | Great Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | C |
| 25 | Eastern Imperial Eagle | <i>Aquila heliaca</i> | 32 |
| 26 | Eurasian Sparrowhawk | <i>Accipiter nisus</i> | C |
| 27 | Western Marsh Harrier | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> | C |
| 28 | Hen Harrier | <i>Circus cyaneus</i> | 1 |
| 29 | White-tailed Eagle | <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i> | C |
| 30 | Common Buzzard | <i>Buteo buteo</i> | C |
| 31 | Great Bustard | <i>Otis tarda</i> | 43 |
| 32 | Water Rail | <i>Rallus aquaticus</i> | H |
| 33 | Eurasian Coot | <i>Fulica atra</i> | C |
| 34 | Common Crane | <i>Grus grus</i> | C |
| 35 | Pied Avocet | <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i> | C |
| 36 | Northern Lapwing | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | C |
| 37 | Grey Plover | <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i> | 5 |
| 38 | Common Ringed Plover | <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> | 5 |
| 39 | Little Ringed Plover | <i>Charadrius dubius</i> | 2 |
| 40 | Eurasian Dotterel | <i>Charadrius morinellus</i> | 50 |
| 41 | Eurasian Curlew | <i>Numenius arquata</i> | C |
| 42 | Black-tailed Godwit | <i>Limosa limosa</i> | 7 |
| 43 | Ruff | <i>Calidris pugnax</i> | C |

| | | | |
|----|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|----|
| 44 | Dunlin | <i>Calidris alpina</i> | C |
| 45 | Common Snipe | <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> | C |
| 46 | Spotted Redshank | <i>Tringa erythropus</i> | 3 |
| 47 | Common Greenshank | <i>Tringa nebularia</i> | 5 |
| 48 | Ruddy Turnstone | <i>Arenaria interpres</i> | 1 |
| 49 | Little Gull | <i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i> | 1 |
| 50 | Black-headed Gull | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | C |
| 51 | Common Gull | <i>Larus canus</i> | 2 |
| 52 | Yellow-legged Gull | <i>Larus michahelis</i> | 1 |
| 53 | Caspian Gull | <i>Larus cachinnans</i> | C |
| 54 | Whiskered Tern | <i>Chlidonias hybrida</i> | 1 |
| 55 | Feral Pigeon | <i>Columba livia f. domestica</i> | C |
| 56 | Stock Dove | <i>Columba oenas</i> | C |
| 57 | Common Wood Pigeon | <i>Columba palumbus</i> | C |
| 58 | Eurasian Collared Dove | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> | C |
| 59 | Eurasian Eagle-Owl | <i>Bubo bubo</i> | 1 |
| 60 | Tawny Owl | <i>Strix aluco</i> | 1 |
| 61 | Ural Owl | <i>Strix uralensis</i> | 1 |
| 62 | Little Owl | <i>Athene noctua</i> | 4 |
| 63 | Long-eared Owl | <i>Asio otus</i> | 9 |
| 64 | Common Kingfisher | <i>Alcedo atthis</i> | C |
| 65 | Alpine Swift | <i>Tachymarptis melba</i> | 1 |
| 66 | Middle Spotted Woodpecker | <i>Dendrocoptes medius</i> | 3 |
| 67 | Lesser Spotted Woodpecker | <i>Dryobates minor</i> | 1 |
| 68 | Syrian Woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i> | 3 |
| 69 | Great Spotted Woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos major</i> | C |
| 70 | White-backed Woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i> | 1 |
| 71 | Black Woodpecker | <i>Dryocopus martius</i> | 2 |
| 72 | European Green Woodpecker | <i>Picus viridis</i> | C |
| 73 | Grey-headed Woodpecker | <i>Picus canus</i> | 1 |
| 74 | Common Kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | C |
| 75 | Red-footed Falcon | <i>Falco vespertinus</i> | 2 |
| 76 | Eurasian Hobby | <i>Falco subbuteo</i> | 2 |
| 77 | Saker Falcon | <i>Falco cherrug</i> | 2 |
| 78 | Peregrine Falcon | <i>Falco peregrinus</i> | 2 |
| 79 | Great Grey Shrike | <i>Lanius excubitor</i> | 2 |
| 80 | Eurasian Jay | <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> | C |
| 81 | Eurasian Magpie | <i>Pica pica</i> | C |
| 82 | Western Jackdaw | <i>Coloeus monedula</i> | C |
| 83 | Rook | <i>Corvus frugilegus</i> | C |
| 84 | Hooded Crow | <i>Corvus cornix</i> | C |
| 85 | Northern Raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | C |
| 86 | Marsh Tit | <i>Poecile palustris</i> | C |
| 87 | Willow Tit | <i>Poecile montanus</i> | 1 |
| 88 | Eurasian Blue Tit | <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i> | C |
| 89 | Great Tit | <i>Parus major</i> | C |
| 90 | Eurasian Penduline Tit | <i>Remiz pendulinus</i> | 1 |
| 91 | Bearded Reedling | <i>Panurus biarmicus</i> | 25 |

| | | | |
|-----|------------------------|--------------------------------------|----|
| 92 | Eurasian Skylark | <i>Alauda arvensis</i> | C |
| 93 | Crested Lark | <i>Galerida cristata</i> | C |
| 94 | Sand Martin | <i>Riparia riparia</i> | 2 |
| 95 | Barn Swallow | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | C |
| 96 | Long-tailed Tit | <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i> | C |
| 97 | Common Chiffchaff | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | C |
| 98 | Common Firecrest | <i>Regulus ignicapilla</i> | 1 |
| 99 | Goldcrest | <i>Regulus regulus</i> | C |
| 100 | Eurasian Wren | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> | C |
| 101 | Eurasian Nuthatch | <i>Sitta europaea</i> | C |
| 102 | Eurasian Treecreeper | <i>Certhia familiaris</i> | H |
| 103 | Short-toed Treecreeper | <i>Certhia brachydactyla</i> | 2 |
| 104 | Common Starling | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | C |
| 105 | Common Blackbird | <i>Turdus merula</i> | C |
| 106 | Song Thrush | <i>Turdus philomelos</i> | C |
| 107 | Mistle Thrush | <i>Turdus viscivorus</i> | C |
| 108 | European Robin | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | C |
| 109 | Black Redstart | <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i> | C |
| 110 | Common Redstart | <i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i> | 3 |
| 111 | Lesser Whitethroat | <i>Curruca curruca</i> | 1 |
| 112 | Eurasian Blackcap | <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i> | 2 |
| 113 | European Stonechat | <i>Saxicola rubicola</i> | C |
| 114 | House Sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | C |
| 115 | Eurasian Tree Sparrow | <i>Passer montanus</i> | C |
| 116 | Dunnock | <i>Prunella modularis</i> | 1 |
| 117 | Grey Wagtail | <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> | 1 |
| 118 | White Wagtail | <i>Motacilla alba</i> | C |
| 119 | Red-throated Pipit | <i>Anthus cervinus</i> | C |
| 120 | Common Chaffinch | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | C |
| 121 | Hawfinch | <i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i> | 2 |
| 122 | Common Linnet | <i>Linaria cannabina</i> | C |
| 123 | European Goldfinch | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> | C |
| 124 | European Greenfinch | <i>Chloris chloris</i> | 10 |
| 125 | Eurasian Siskin | <i>Spinus spinus</i> | C |
| 126 | European Serin | <i>Serinus serinus</i> | 2 |
| 127 | Corn Bunting | <i>Emberiza calandra</i> | C |
| 128 | Yellowhammer | <i>Emberiza citrinella</i> | C |
| 129 | Common Reed Bunting | <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> | C |
| 130 | Rock Bunting | <i>Emberiza cia</i> | 1 |



Common Cranes above their roost site (Gábor Simay)



Sakertours Eastern Europe
Hungary, Slovakia and Romania birdwatching and bird photography tours

www.sakertour.com and www.ultimatesakertours.com

sakertour.office@gmail.com



Sakertours Eastern Europe: Hortobágy – Zemplén Autumn Tour 2024
sakertour.com & ultimatesakertours.com