



*Mixed flock of geese (Dániel Balla)*

## RED-BREASTED GOOSE SPECIAL TOUR with **SAKERTOURS** 2<sup>nd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> November, 2024

**Leader: Dániel Balla**

Red-breasted Goose is thought to be one of if not the finest looking wildfowl on our planet. Unfortunately, it is far from common, furthermore it is also a vulnerable species on the red list and could be tricky to observe if someone is not on the right place at the right time. This year we felt that seemingly we are in the perfect place in the vast open grasslands and wetlands of the Hortobágy National Park, but we might be in the wrong time of the year to search for our main targets as unusually low number of wild geese from Siberia were present in the region when the tour was running.

Usually on this tour we take the challenge to see more and more Red-breasted Goose amongst the huge flocks of many thousand Greater White-fronted Goose, but this year we were struggling to even find them and were far from playing the game of who is hitting the higher number. Fortunately, all our effort paid back when we finally found two adult Red-breasted Goose in a more remote spot, not breaking our string of success with this tour lasting for several years now.

On the other side of our struggles, we did very well with finding our other main target and we had fantastic views of Lesser White-fronted Goose not just one time during the few days spent in the region.

Besides the two main targets we found some other great species while birding including Great Bustard, Ferruginous Duck, Red-necked Grebe, Pygmy Cormorant, Greater Spotted Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle, the last staging Eurasian Dotterels, a good number of roosting Long-eared Owls, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Syrian Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Saker Falcon, Short-toed Treecreeper and Wallcreeper to end.



## 2<sup>nd</sup> November (Saturday)

As usual we kicked off our tour visiting the Kiskunság National Park after meeting each other at Budapest Airport. Though days are short this time of the year we still had plenty of time to search for the local targets. It did not take too long to find the flock of Great Bustards feeding on a fallow field; this time we counted 52 of them together including some huge males in the flock. After enjoying our time with the 'heavies' we spotted a Saker Falcon as it just crossed the area rapidly but still providing a longer view to observe its smooth but powerful flight. Checking Hen Harrier, a few Northern Lapwings and Eurasian Curlew around and we decided to leave the area.

While crossing the nearby village a Syrian Woodpecker was spotted on the top of a walnut tree from the car making it worth to stop for and being the last bird for our first day before we continued in the fading lights towards our accommodation some two and a half hours driving away at the edge of the Hortobágy National Park.



*Great Bustards in the Kiskunság National Park as a start (Dániel Balla)*

## 3<sup>rd</sup> November (Sunday)

We started investigating the seemingly endless wetland and grassland systems of the Hortobágy National Park in search for larger flocks of wild geese. Visiting the main fishpond system in the centre of the national park we found some impressive number of wildfowl including several hundred Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Mallard and Eurasian Teal complemented with fewer Northern Pintail and Shoveler on the best pond, the definite highlight were a pair of Ferruginous Duck, a very late Garganey and the Pygmy Cormorants which were hanging around in good numbers.

Taking a quiet road further into the park we found the first flocks of Greater White-fronted Goose but after several careful scans nothing interesting were spotted between them. Spotting a few Western Cattle Egrets feeding between the majestic Hungarian Grey Cattle were appreciated and we also had good views of Little Owl on an abandoned building. Walking around a smaller patch of grassland to investigate another flock of geese feeding on it made good space for a nice lunch in the nearby inn but was not rewarding us.

After lunch we took our chance visiting a specially managed wetland close to our lodge where good number of Greater White-fronted Goose came to spend the afternoon. With patience we spotted two Barnacle Goose

between them before finding a pair of Lesser White-fronted Goose showing well on the closer edge of the flock. While enjoying the great views of the Lesser White-fronts another pair was spotted little behind the first ones all together providing an extraordinary view of the species.

To end the day, we moved to another fishpond system on the eastern edge of the national park. A comfortable walk on the always welcome flat terrain took us to point where we had good view on three ponds. The one with deeper water had more than a dozen Black-necked Grebes, a single Red-necked Grebe and a Black-throated Loon as a surprise. Several smaller flocks of geese were moving between the other two ponds and mainly landing on the drained one with shallow water but nothing interesting was spotted between them. However, we were enjoying the waterfowl around and some Pied Avocets, Dunlins, Curlews, Caspian Gulls and a single Yellow-legged Gull with quite a few White-tailed Eagles perched around the pond on the trees. While walking back to our vehicle an adult Greater Spotted Eagle perched in the fantastic afternoon light made our visit here memorable.



*The golden eyering of Lesser White-fronted Goose is a splendid feature of the species (Dániel Balla)*

#### **4<sup>th</sup> November (Monday)**

We left the Bibic Lodge in dark and had a short drive to the fishpond system close to the town where we had could still enjoy the miracle of the Common Cranes as they wake up and leave their roosting site. The mild weather this year were not forcing them to leave, thus we still had more than 30.000 of them gathering together on this roosting site.

Back for a rapid breakfast and we were on the way to our next birding location on the northern edge of the Bihar Plains. At our arrival to the observation tower we had a perfect position overlooking several thousand wildfowl including more than 4000 wild geese. Doing our best, we spotted a pair of Lesser White-fronted Goose on the water and had nice views but sadly still no Red-breasted ones around. Our stay was galvanized with several Eastern Imperial and White-tailed Eagles flying and staying around.

We gave up the site in the middle of the day and started driving back to the Hortobágy stopping at the southern patches of the endless open grassland habitat where we had a picnic lunch in the tranquil surrounding. Driving further into the grassland we managed to find the last staying Eurasian Dotterels, surprisingly a flock of 10 individuals were still hanging around probably thanks to the unusually mild weather.



To finish the day we visited the eastern fishponds from yesterday and found again the Greater Spotted Eagle but this time we had better looks at the wild geese on the drained pond and managed to spot an adult male Lesser White-fronted Goose between them – frustratingly still no Red-breasted.



*Western Cattle Egret with Hungarian Grey Cattle (Dániel Balla)*

## 5<sup>th</sup> November (Tuesday)

On our last full day of the tour, we decided to concentrate on the centre zone of the Hortobágy National Park and drove further in to the open areas finding several smaller flocks of wild geese. Our first flock of almost 2000 Greater White-fronted Geese gave another Lesser White-fronted one before trying our luck again around the main fishpond system. As almost no geese were coming in to drink at the fishponds, we left the area and spotted a very distant and but larger flock of geese flying.

We started driving closer where we thought they disappeared and after driving off road for a while we managed to spot a few hundred birds grazing on the grassland. As scanning the flock, a larger flock on the other side of the nearby wetland was flushed by a White-tailed Eagle and we realized that we have to find a spot with a good view on that flock. After some rapid planning we had to completely drive around the area and find a viewpoint from the other side which we reached in 20 minutes but had good views on a few thousand geese. After a painful 30 minutes we could only point out a single Lesser White-fronted Goose when a charging White-tailed Eagle made all the wildfowl airborne in a second. To the luck of all of us Dennis somehow spotted a flying Red-breasted Goose in the flying crowd which he lost soon but our hope just returned with his few second long sighting. After another painful 20 minutes the bird was found on the ground feeding in the tall grass and soon, we realised that actually there are two of them together. Despite the haze but supported with great light we had quite nice views of the birds for a prolonged time.

Probably relieved is the proper word to use describe everyone – especially the leader – after almost three days struggle to locate these magnificent birds. A well-deserved pudding to finish the following lunch was enjoyed by every single one of us.



As we had a late and longer lunch all we had time in the afternoon was to visit another fishpond which we haven't checked yet previously. We reached the site late afternoon and only had half an hour birding here finding a Black-throated and a Red-throated Loon on the pond before visiting the local day roost of Long-eared Owls where we easily counted at least 25 individuals this time. We finished the day scanning the grassland from the terrace of our Lodge where a Peregrine Falcon was the last bird for the day.



*Syrian Woodpecker is always special (Dániel Balla)*

### **6<sup>th</sup> November (Wednesday)**

As our main targets were all packed, we had time to search for some birds of other habitats than open areas. After breakfast we said goodbye to the Bibic Lodge and the endless Hortobágy and drove to the woods north to the nearby city of Debrecen. A rapid visit in the old Oak Forest was enough for us to locate Short-toed Treecreeper and Middle Spotted Woodpecker.

Leaving Debrecen, we drove to the Bükk Hills where we visited the calcareous rocky formations near Bélapátfalva. An easy trekking up to the best spot and it took less than 20 minutes for us to locate our main target here, the fabulous Wallcreeper. Having great views of actually two individuals definitely made our efforts reaching the site worth. To complement our birding experience, we spotted Grey-headed Woodpeckers on the wall as well probably coming to lick the minerals. On the way walking back to our vehicle we bumped into a flock of Long-tailed Tits of the white-headed form.

Just when we started driving, we spotted a Woodpecker from the car which we thought would be worth stopping for and after a few minutes it was spotted again and turned out to be a Middle Spotted Woodpecker a great bird and fantastic looks to end our tour.

Breaking our journey with a late lunch we reached Budapest Airport where we said goodbye to each other knowing we finished again a successful tour in the heart of Eastern Europe.





*Long-eared Owl sunbathing in the afternoon lights (Dániel Balla)*



*Record shot of the Red-breasted Goose we saw (Dániel Balla)*



# BIRDS – list of bird species recorded on the 2022 tour

C = Commonly seen, more than 10 individuals

'Numbers' = Actual number seen on the tour

H = Heard only

LO = Leader only

NL = Non-leader

1	Red-breasted Goose	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>	2
2	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	2
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	C
4	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	C
5	Lesser White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser erythropus</i>	8
6	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	C
7	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	C
8	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>	1
9	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	C
10	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	C
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	C
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	C
13	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	C
14	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	C
15	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	C
16	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	2
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	C
18	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	C
19	Red-throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	1
20	Black-throated Loon	<i>Gavia arctica</i>	2
21	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	C
22	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>	1
23	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	C
24	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	C
25	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	1
26	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	16
27	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	C
28	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	C
29	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>	C
30	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	C
31	Greater Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga clanga</i>	1
32	Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	15
33	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	C
34	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	C
35	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	C
36	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	C
37	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	1
38	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	C
39	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	52
40	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H
41	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1

42	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	C
43	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	C
44	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	25
45	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	C
46	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	4
47	Eurasian Dotterel	<i>Charadrius morinellus</i>	10
48	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	C
49	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	14
50	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	C
51	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	C
52	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	70
53	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>	1
54	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	C
55	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	14
56	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	C
57	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	1
58	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia f. domestica</i>	C
59	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	C
60	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	C
61	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	C
62	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	4
63	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>	25
64	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	5
65	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>	2
66	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	1
67	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2
68	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>	2
69	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H
70	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	C
71	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>	1
72	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2
73	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	4
74	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	C
75	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	C
76	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	C
77	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	C
78	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	C
79	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	C
80	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	H
81	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	C
82	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	C
83	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	1
84	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	H
85	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	5
86	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	6
87	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	15
88	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	3
89	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	C
90	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	5
91	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	2



92	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	1
93	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	1
94	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	C
95	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	C
96	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	2
97	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	H
98	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	H
99	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1
100	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	C
101	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	C
102	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	H
103	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	6
104	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	C
105	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	1
106	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	H
107	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	H
108	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	H
109	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	C
110	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	12
111	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	C



*Greater White-fronted Goose (Dániel Balla)*



*Lesser White-fronted Goose pair on the bank of the water (Dániel Balla)*



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