

HUNGARY
18TH -25TH MAY 2013



ORIOLE BIRDING
TOUR REPORT

TOUR LEADER
Rolland Kern

PARTICIPANTS
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DAY ONE

We met in the early afternoon at Budapest Franz Liszt Airport. It was a warm 24 °C and there was a slight wind. We soon set off eastwards towards the Zemplén Hills. Our first stop at a peaceful farmland site by the motorway gave us the first views of a Red-backed Shrike perched on top of the white blossom of an acacia tree, White Stork and Marsh Harriers. A bit later, our second stop at a service station provided opportunities to take close studies of breeding White Wagtails, road-running Crested Larks and a confiding Lesser Grey Shrike. We also had our first encounter with an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle. Further on, along the way, many Hooded Crows, Common Buzzards and Common Kestrels were seen, while the occasional Roe Deer was spotted out in the fields by the motorway. Upon arrival at our hotel, we received not only a warm welcome, but a generous Hungarian dinner.

DAY TWO

Before a rich Hungarian-style breakfast, we set off to explore the environs of our village. This was a bright, lovely morning with fresh air and quickly warming temperature. During the walk, loads of Tree Sparrows, many Black Redstarts, and a splendid Golden Oriole were seen, while Turtle Doves were purring and Common Nightingales were singing along the way. After breakfast, we started our journey for the day, but the car was soon stopped for watching five circling Black Storks. Common Buzzards, Common Kestrels, Marsh Harriers and Roe Deers were all around, as well. Just a few hundred yards away, we had our first lovely views of singing Corn Buntings and Blue-headed Wagtails and more Red-backed Shrikes on a stretch of grassland, when a pair of adult Eastern Imperial Eagles suddenly appeared to hunt the site, so enabling us to study these magnificent raptors at a closer range. The same site had also a small pond with some reed around that held a few Great Reed Warblers that were also subject to close-range studies. Arriving to the beech woodland proper in the west of the hills, we had lovely albeit somewhat short views of a White-backed Woodpecker, and also had our first encounter with a singing male Collared Flycatcher. Later in the afternoon, we had a good look at the Eurasian Eagle Owl chicks in a nearby quarry, where a close and prolonged study of a singing Lesser Whitethroat was also possible. On our way back to our hotel, we saw further Trees Sparrows, Black Redstarts and Red-backed Shrikes. A few European Bee-eaters and a flying Common Nightingale were also seen by the roadside.

DAY THREE

After an overnight thunderstorm and rain, the day started brightly, but with quite a strong wind. Even so, fluting Golden Orioles, raspy-singing Black Redstarts and a cool Spotted Flycatcher were all around in our part of the village. Our pre-breakfast walk went on around an oxbow lake, where Common Nightingales and Marsh Warblers were singing close-by and flying Common Cuckoos kept our spirits high. Out in the field, Hooded Crows and a Blue-headed Wagtail could be studied more intimately. After breakfast the wind was stopping down, and we had another go at the Eagle Owl quarry site to see the parents of the chicks there. Even though they still did not show up, a Black Stork did appear flying close above the quarry.

Then, we ventured into the centre of the Zemplén Hills, making regular stops on the way for the occasional Hawfinch and Red-backed Shrike. During our woodland walks woodpeckers stayed elusive, but a party of Grey Wagtails and a lovely female Collared Flycatcher moving and perching around its nest hole brightened up the afternoon, not to mention a well-deserved coffee break at a woodland café. On our way back, Turtle Doves, European Bee-eaters, Red-backed Shrikes and *rubicola* Stonechats were all enjoyed, just as a rich dinner at our hotel afterwards.

DAY FOUR

Before breakfast, the Eagle Owl site was checked again for the mother bird, and this time successfully. On the way there, a Great Spotted Woodpecker was also seen on a telegraph pole, while upon leaving the quarry, a Grey-headed Woodpecker showed up. A close study of a Red-backed Shrike with a singing Barred Warbler around kept us busy still. After breakfast, we set off to explore some more spots in the Zemplén hills in the morning. The weather was now warming up and the sun came out soon, though it was still windy. First, a short walk in and around the ruined castle of Boldogkőváralja provided not only views of European Bee-eaters, Turtle Doves and a party of Common Ravens, but also an insight into Hungarian history. Crossing the hills, a lovely pristine woodland meadow with wild strawberries, and then a woodland pasture with ancient oaks was checked before a welcome coffee-break at a restaurant at Erdőbénye where some light was shed on local folklore. Going onwards, we stopped to marvel at the extensive grasslands where not only carpets of colourful flowers but also its avian inhabitants were intimately studied - Corn Buntings, Red-backed Shrikes and a small party of European Bee-eaters. Leaving the Zemplén Hills, in the Great Plain *en route* to the Hortobágy, we checked a shallow lake near Tiszavasvári. At the lake, Whiskered Terns were flying over, Greylag goslings were led by parents, and among many water birds there were quite a few Black-necked Grebes, Great White Egrets and Ferruginous Ducks, too. Particularly welcomed were a fly-by Common Cuckoo and a flittering Common Hoopoe above the reed beds. Late in the afternoon, we arrived at our next base in the north of the Hortobágy, in a birdsong-filled place by the River Tisza.

DAY FIVE

After having a sleep-in and a really delicious Hungarian breakfast, we started our day in the Hortobágy in rainy weather. Without being disheartened, we visited the National Park's Visitors' Centre in Hortobágy village, and then we walked around in the Herdsmen's Museum, where an authentic image of the former lives of the different types of herdsmen became distinct to all. The famous nine-hole bridge over River Hortobágy was also visited, just as the old tavern of the settlement for some refreshment. In the afternoon, the rain continued, but spirits were kept high by a picnic with sausage-filled croissants and real-sweet Hungarian strawberries. After a drive deep into the southern grasslands of the Hortobágy, the rain had finally stopped and the sun broke through. Suddenly all the birds started to appear and sing. Besides countless Blue-headed Wagtails, Corn Buntings, Reed Buntings, Sky Larks and Sedge Warblers, Common Quails were also calling close-by and there were many Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzards, Common Kestrels and White Storks flying all over the place. A couple of Common Hoopoes were flittering over the grasslands, then a European Roller sat out prominently on a perch, and finally, a few Red-footed Falcons came low overhead. Driving on, the northern grasslands were also checked; where we came across Great White Egrets, Purple Herons, further European Bee-eaters and Common Hoopoes, and a few parties of fly-by Common Cranes. Over a marshy area, White-winged and Whiskered Terns were hunting, while a Little Owl was spotted on one of the traditional thatched-roof barns.

Of the perching birds there, we enjoyed close views of Crested Lark, Northern Wheatears and Lesser Grey Shrikes. The highlight of the evening was a delicious dinner made of local fish from the River Tisza.

DAY SIX

Our early morning walk in and around the misty riverine forest by our accommodation produced close-up views of Spotted Flycatchers, Sedge Warblers, Black Redstarts, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Eurasian Serin among many other species. After another excellent breakfast, we drove to the 2,000 ha fishponds area of 'Hortobágy-Halastó'. On the way there, we studied a flock of wooly sheep of the traditional Hungarian type 'Racka' [with long and twisted horns], at a very close range. At the fishponds, the weather slowly started to improve, but with still a strong wind. Even so, a Penduline Tit and its artistic nest were observed. Then, a White-tailed Eagle was spotted over a pond giving breath-taking views to admire its huge size. Pygmy Cormorants, Purple Herons, Great White Egrets, Black-crowned Night Herons, Eurasian Spoonbills, Greylag Geese, Ferruginous Ducks and Marsh Harriers were all over the place! Caspian Gulls were flying overhead and Great Bitterns were booming. In a marshy, half-dried pond there was a herd of Water Buffalo [used to graze the marshes], and the trees there held a considerable colony of Common Kestrels in nesting boxes. Flying Common Cuckoos and a Squacco Herons kept us entertained. After retiring from the fishponds, we started our journey towards another part of the Hungarian Great Plain, the Kiskunság. However, before leaving the Hortobágy area, we stopped not only for Whiskered Terns, a Long-eared Owl and stunning female Red-footed Falcons, but also for a typical Hungarian lunch with authentic goulash soup and cottage cheese filled pancakes in a traditional tavern. Late in the afternoon, we reached our high-standard Kiskunság hotel, where a delicious dinner was waiting for us.

DAY SEVEN

After a well-deserved sleep-in and another exquisite breakfast, we started off in beautiful and quickly warming weather. We just drove a very few miles to a shallow marshy lake that held many pairs of breeding Black-winged Stilts, Black-necked Grebes [with their chicks around], Ferruginous Ducks, Garganey and a seemingly endless supply of fly-over Purple Herons and Whiskered Terns. At a roadside stretch of water we had lovely views of fishing Black-crowned Night Herons. Driving on to a nearby sodic lake, we frequently had to stop for European Rollers, Bee-eaters, Red-footed Falcons, a flying Green Woodpecker and a stunning male Bluethroat of the white-spotted race *svecica*. Hardly arriving to the salt lake, the sheer beauty of Pied Avocets was admired as they were feeding just a few yards away from the car. At the lake, small flocks of Common Shelduck, breeding-plumaged Grey Plovers and Eurasian Spoonbills were seen. On our way back from the lake, we had the chance to see a slightly elusive Syrian Woodpecker and a couple of Lesser Grey Shrikes. After a picnic lunch, we checked a breeding colony of Common Terns, Black-headed Gulls and Mediterranean Gulls on one of the gravel pit ponds in the northern part of the Kiskunság. Mediterranean Gulls were also studied at close ranges, when we found them feeding together with Black-headed Gulls on a piece of arable land by the roadside. On our way back to the hotel we were crossing extensive grasslands in beautiful late-afternoon light that made us appreciate not only the countless fields of wild poppies but also many other colourful spots of different wild flowers. Regular road-side stops produced two Grey Partridges, a Northern Wheatear and a flock of White-winged Black Terns besides the usual White Storks, Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards.

DAY EIGHT

An early start after breakfast provided a few bonus hours *en route* to the Budapest airport. Just after parking the car at our second stop in the northern grasslands of Kiskunság, two immature Eastern Imperial Eagles were noticed hunting over the field. Hardly were we watching them for long when they did flush two Great Bustards! Both species could be enjoyed at relatively close ranges for quite long. Then, we moved on to check a grassy field among the arable when a Collared Pratincole was coming overhead. Hardly were we watching the Pratincole for long, when a third Great Bustard – this time a cock – did appear flying close overhead, giving us real breathtaking views! Back on the road, we had a stunning view of a European Roller perched up on a roadside bush and another Red-footed Falcon sighting. Before finishing our tour, we stopped to watch a few Common Susliks on fields near the airport, where Crested Larks were once again studied at a close range, too.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

- 1/Red-necked Grebe
- 2/Great Crested Grebe
- 3/Black-necked Grebe
- 4/Great Cormorant
- 5/Pygmy Cormorant
- 6/Grey Heron
- 7/Purple Heron
- 8/Great White Egret
- 9/Little Egret
- 10/Squacco Heron
- 11/Black-crowned Night Heron
- 12/Great Bittern [H]
- 13/Black Stork
- 14/White Stork
- 15/Eurasian Spoonbill
- 16/Greylag Goose
- 17/Gadwall
- 18/Mallard
- 19/Garganey
- 20/Northern Shoveler
- 21/Common Pochard
- 22/Ferruginous Duck
- 23/Marsh Harrier
- 24/Common Buzzard
- 25/Eastern Imperial Eagle
- 26/Common Kestrel
- 27/Red-footed Falcon
- 28/Grey Partridge
- 29/Common Quail [H]
- 30/Common Pheasant
- 31/Common Crane
- 32/Common Coot
- 33/Great Bustard
- 34/Black-winged Stilt
- 35/Pied Avocet
- 36/Collared Pratincole
- 37/Northern Lapwing

38/Grey Plover
39/Caspian Gull
40/Black-headed Gull
41/Mediterranean Gull
42/Yellow-legged Gull
43/Common Tern
44/Whiskered Tern
45/White-winged Black Tern
46/Black Tern
47/Feral Rock Dove
48/Wood Pigeon
49/Collared Dove
50/Turtle Dove
51/Common Cuckoo
52/Eurasian Eagle Owl
53/Little Owl
54/Long-eared Owl
55/European Bee-eater
56/European Roller
57/Common Hoopoe
58/White-backed Woodpecker
59/Great Spotted Woodpecker
60/Syrian Woodpecker
61/Green Woodpecker
62/Grey-headed Woodpecker
63/Crested Lark
64/Sky Lark
65/Sand Martin
66/Barn Swallow
67/House Martin
68/White Wagtail
69/Blue-headed Wagtail
70/Grey Wagtail
71/Tree Pipit
72/Blackbird
73/Song Thrush
74/Savi's Warbler [H]
75/Sedge Warbler
76/Reed Warbler
77/Marsh Warbler [H]
78/Great Reed Warbler
79/Icterine Warbler
80/Common Chiffchaff
81/Wood Warbler [H]
82/Blackcap
83/Common Whitethroat
84/Lesser Whitethroat
85/Barred Warbler
86/Spotted Flycatcher
87/Collared Flycatcher
88/European Robin [H]

89/Common Nightingale
90/Bluethroat
91/Black Redstart
92/Common Stonechat
93/Northern Wheatear
94/Whinchat
95/Coal Tit [H]
96/Great Tit
97/Blue Tit
98/Common Nuthatch
99/Penduline Tit
100/Golden Oriole
101/Red-backed Shrike
102/Lesser Grey Shrike
103/Eurasian Jay
104/Black-billed Magpie
105/Eurasian Jackdaw
106/Rook
107/Hooded Crow
108/Common Raven
109/Common Starling
110/House Sparrow
111/Tree Sparrow
112/Chaffinch
113/Greenfinch
114/Goldfinch
115/Linnet
116/Eurasian Serin
117/Hawfinch
118/Yellowhammer
119/Reed Bunting
120/Corn Bunting
121/White-tailed Eagle
122/Common Shelduck