

**HUNGARY
STEPPES, RAPTORS &
BUSTARDS
14TH-21ST MAY, 2011**



**ORIOLE BIRDING
TOUR REPORT**

TOUR LEADERS

Rolland Kern

István Tábor [driver]

Participants:

Ashley Field

Christine Lindon

Jennifer & Ian Milne

Fiona & Mike Shanks

14TH

We met in the late afternoon at Budapest Franz Liszt Airport. It was a warm 25 °C, humid and there was a slight breeze. We soon set off eastwards towards the Zemplén Hills with our excellent driver István. Our first stop at a service station gave us our first views of White Wagtails, Crested Larks and *rubicola* Stonechats. At another stop, we had lovely views of a singing Common Nightingale. Along the way, countless Tree Sparrows, Hooded Crows and many Common Buzzards were seen, while the occasional Roe Deer, Brown Hare and Red Fox was spotted out in the fields by the motorway. A fly-over Common Cuckoo and a rather distant Common Crane were appreciated, too. Though a little late, we recieved a warm welcome at our guesthouse base, with a delicious Hungarian dinner awaiting us.

15TH

After heavy overnight rain [and before a rich Hungarian-style breakfast], some of us set off to explore the environs of our village. During the walk, Black Redstarts, European Serins, Golden Orioles, Wrynecks, Hawfinches and Eurasian Turtle Doves were all seen very well. A Short-toed Eagle was also shortly sighted circling overhead. After breakfast, we had a good look at a Eurasian Eagle Owl nesting in a nearby quarry, then studied the White Storks nesting in the nearby villages. In the beech woodland proper in the north of the hills we had lovely views of a Wood Warbler and a few singing Collared Flycatchers. During our picnic lunch in the woods, a calling Black Woodpecker was seen flying overhead. In the afternoon, we visited a forested valley near the village of Háromhuta. Perhaps, due to the strong wind, woodpeckers were elusive, but a party of Grey Wagtails, a few more Collared Flycatchers and other woodland songbirds kept us busy, not to mention a well-deserved coffee break at a woodland cafe!

16TH

The day started with rain and a quite strong wind. Even so, fluting Golden Orioles, calling Wrynecks and singing European Serins were all around. Red Squirrels also entertained us before breakfast. Unfortunately, we had to give up exploring the woodlands because of the heavy rain but not too disheartened, we visited a wine cellar in the nearby famous vine region of Tokaj. A professionally guided wine tasting with excellent wines such as 'Tokaji Aszú' [with home made cheese and fresh pastries] proved a cheering lunch. Later the rain stopped and the sun came out, giving us a chance to explore some of the habitats along the river Bodrog. First, a Lesser Spotted Eagle was seen, then a pair of Eurasian Hobby was observed trying to catch a Common Swift. In the foothill meadows of the Zemplén, we heard loudly calling Corncrakes and came across Blue-headed [Yellow] Wagtails, Marsh Harriers, Whinchats and Corn Buntings which all made the early afternoon enjoyable.

But the real prize of this post-rain birdwatching was a pair of Barred Warblers which we watched in a bushy area near Erdőbénye. Later we saw nicely perched Red-backed Shrikes and Eurasian Turtle Doves, and a Mistle Thrush chasing a Common Cuckoo. At other stops on the way back to our guesthouse, Hawfinches, Common Ravens and a Great Spotted Woodpecker were seen. As we ended the day, the Eurasian Eagle Owl nesting site was checked again, and an adult and two quite big chicks were observed.

17TH

After breakfast, we said good-bye to our cheerful hosts at the guesthouse and set off to explore some more spots in the Zemplén hills in the morning. The weather was now clear, sunny and warm, though still a bit windy. First, a short walk around the ruined castle of Boldogkőváralja produced good views of more Barred Warblers, Golden Orioles and Red-backed Shrikes. Our second stop at a picturesque stony, place spot [locally called the 'Sea-of-Stones'] produced two Wood Larks and quite a few Barred Warblers, some doing songflights. Some nice butterflies were also seen here. By now the wind had largely dropped. We checked the wooded pasture again and this paid off as two immature White-tailed Eagles circled very close overhead. Leaving Erdőbénye, we stopped at another raptor site where we picked up a pair of European Honey Buzzards and a few fabulous butterflies like Scarce Swallowtail. Near Tokaj, a perched Lesser Spotted Eagle right by the roadside gave us prolonged and stunning views. At another stop by the floodplain of the River Bodrog, we had lovely views of Hawfinches and a Middle Spotted Woodpecker in a patch of woodland. Entering the Great Plain *en route* to the Hortobágy, we checked a shallow sodic lake near Tiszavasvári. The lake was swarming with all three marsh terns: Black, Whiskered and White-winged Tern. Perched and flying birds could both be easily studied here at close range. The lake had Black-necked Grebes and Ferruginous Ducks, too. Late in the afternoon, we had arrived to our next base, in the north of the Hortobágy, in a birdsong-filled place by the River Tisza.

18TH

Our early morning walk in and around the riverine forest by our accommodation turned up a Tawny Owl sitting in a tree with its chicks, a singing male Black Redstart and a couple of European Serins both in display flight and on the ground. We also saw more Crested Larks and a Red-backed Shrike. After an excellent breakfast we drove to the 2,000 ha fishponds area of 'Hortobágy-Halastó'. As we got out of the bus, a perched Lesser Grey Shrike welcomed us with stunning views. Sedge Warblers, more Blue-headed Wagtails, Red-backed Shrikes and Golden Orioles also gave very good views in the shrubs that edged the ponds. Savi's Warblers and Penduline Tits were also observed and enjoyed. Great White Egrets, Ferruginous Ducks, Greylag Geese, Marsh Harriers were all over the place! A White-tailed Eagle was spotted circling overhead. By a herd of Water Buffalo that are used to graze the marshes, Squacco and Purple Herons were seen, both hunting on the ground and flying. Plenty of dragonflies and some very lively-coloured butterflies also graced our walk. The hot and sunny weather [+27°C] encouraged us to retire to a shady picnic area to have our lunch, but not before two confiding and lively singing Icterine Warblers were found. The afternoon started with some ice-cream and coffee in a 'pub' on the 'puszta' [grassy steppe] and continued with birding in a marshy place where all three marsh terns were once again closely observed. Then we set off for Nagyiván to meet a local park ranger. After a walk across the typical Hungarian puszta, we watched some Great Bustards from atop a Bronze Age tumulus. Four or five cock birds were seen walking around and then in flight.

Then a male Montagu's Harrier appeared and then a male Marsh Harrier of the rare melanistic form. On the walk back, we came across a cute Red Fox cub. A longer walk to the Aquatic Warbler breeding site turned up some stunning singing Bluethroats [white-spotted race] and flying Great Bitterns and Black-crowned Night Herons, but unfortunately not the target species as, after arriving some days before, they had sadly gone from the site this year.

19TH

The day started with a stunning male European Honey Buzzard flying over the car-park of our guest-house. We then went back again to the Hortobágy-Halastó fishponds, this time to explore the very north end of the area. The weather was clear and sunny and it soon started to warm up again. From the first observation tower we saw many Pygmy Cormorants, perched and in flight, and Little Egrets, Purple Herons, Eurasian Spoonbills and Black-crowned Night Herons were numerous, too. Two Great Bitterns were seen flying above the reedbeds for a prolonged time and then a flock of Common Cranes flew close overhead. A selection of the more common wildfowl were also enjoyed from this great vantage point. From another hide, we watched breeding Caspian Gulls at close range. Reed-dwelling passerines such as Reed Warblers, Great Reed Warblers, Bearded Tits and Bluethroats were all found, too. The willow trees and bushes had more singing Icterine Warblers and a little later on, lovely views of Marsh Warbler, two or three Penduline Tits and quite a few Red-backed Shrikes were obtained. As we walked back to the bus all the various heron species were seen over and over again as well as a flying Glossy Ibis; quite a rare bird here. It had been a long but successful and bird-filled day.

20TH

Golden Orioles, Red-backed Shrikes, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a distant-flying Common Hoopoe were enjoyed during our walk before breakfast. Later in the morning, we checked a Red-footed Falcon breeding colony and got some exceptional views of both male and females, in flight and perched. We then watched a perched Common Hoopoe, a female European Honey Buzzard overhead and a colourful, European Roller flew by. The nearby shallow marshy lake hosted a Great Bittern which was first seen flying before it landed in the open to give great views. There were also Eurasian Spoonbills feeding here and many Greylag Geese with goslings. At a nearby farm, confiding Crested Larks and Northern Wheatears were present. We then stopped at a breeding colony of European Bee-eater, where we had wonderfully close views of these beautiful birds. As it was now quite hot again, we sought shade in the visitors' centre of the National Park and then had a picnic in a shady wooded area nearby. The vast grasslands in the northern part of the National Park turned up more shrikes and larks and two male Montagu's Harriers and a roadside stretch of water had Black-winged Stilts and handsome male Garganeys. At the end of the day we found a flock of around two-hundred Common Cranes which we watched at quite close range.

21ST

The bonus birds on our last pre-breakfast walk was a circling Black Stork and then a perched Black Woodpecker! After a full breakfast, we departed for Budapest and the airport. *En route* we had stunning views of European Roller and a few Common Hoopoes, both enjoyed from the roadside, as well as a few Black Woodpeckers in flight.

Before finishing our tour, we stopped to watch some Common Susliks on fields near the airport.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Eurasian Wigeon
Gadwall
Eurasian Teal
Mallard
Garganey
Northern Shoveler
Common Pochard
Ring-necked Duck
Ferruginous Duck
Tufted Duck
Common Quail
Common Pheasant
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Black-necked Grebe
Cormorant
Pygmy Cormorant
Bittern
Night Heron
Squacco Heron
Little Egret
Great White Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Black Stork
White Stork
Glossy Ibis
Eurasian Spoonbill
European Honey Buzzard
White-tailed Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
Western Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Common Buzzard
Lesser Spotted Eagle
Kestrel
Red-footed Falcon
Hobby
Water Rail
Corncrake
Moorhen
Eurasian Coot
Common Crane
Great Bustard
Black-winged Stilt

Northern Lapwing
Snipe
Black-tailed Godwit
Eurasian Curlew
Common Redshank
Black-headed Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Caspian Gull
Common Tern
Whiskered Tern
Black Tern
White-winged Tern
Feral Pigeon
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Cuckoo
Eagle Owl
Tawny Owl
Common Swift
Kingfisher
European Bee-eater
Roller
Hoopoe
Wryneck
Green Woodpecker
Black Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Middle Spotted Woodpecker
Crested Lark
Woodlark
Skylark
Sand Martin
Barn Swallow
House Martin
Blue-headed Yellow Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Northern Wren
European Robin
Common Nightingale
White-spotted Bluethroat
Black Redstart
Whinchat
Stonechat
Northern Wheatear
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Savi's Warbler
Sedge Warbler

Marsh Warbler
Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Icterine Warbler
Barred Warbler
Lesser Whitethroat
Blackcap
Common Chiffchaff
Wood Warbler
Willow Warbler
Goldcrest
Spotted Flycatcher
Collared Flycatcher
Bearded Reedling
Marsh Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Common Nuthatch
Common Treecreeper
Penduline Tit
Golden Oriole
Red-backed Shrike
Lesser Grey Shrike
Jay
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
European Serin
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting
Corn Bunting

Mammals

Brown Hare
Red Squirrel
European Squirrel
Muskrat
Brown Rat
Red Fox
Stoat

Weasel
Beech Marten
Roe Deer

Reptiles

European Pond Turtle
European Green Lizard
Water Snake
Amphibians
European fire-bellied toad
European green toad
Common tree frog
Edible frog

Butterflies

Scarce swallowtail
Black-veined White
Large White
Small White
Orange Tip
Clouded Yellow sp.
Large Copper
other Copper sp.
Common Blue
other Blue sp.
Duke of Burgundy Fritillary
Camberwell Beauty
Peacock Butterfly
Queen of Spain Fritillary
other Fritillary sp.
Ringlet sp.
Meadow Brown
Heath sp.
Speckled Wood
Skipper sp.