

Hungary & Transylvania May 10th – 21st 2011

Trip Report

May 10th

The group consisting of Peter & Dot Kitching, Keith Deacon & Nadine Hodson, Brenda Seaton, Ann & Graham Johnson, Dick & Jan Brown and Maurice Jones along with tour leader Stuart Meredith met at Manchester Airport for our flight to Budapest.

On arrival at Budapest we'd soon cleared the immigration formalities and had met up with our Ecotours Wildlife Holidays guide András and our driver Tibor.

The first bird of the trip was a singing male Black Redstart outside the terminal building and as we made our way to our first accommodation at Tiszafüred we logged Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Marsh Harrier, Skylark, Starling and Magpie.

May 11th

The hotel grounds held an abundance of birdlife and before breakfast Serin, Greenfinch, Swallow, House Martin, Chaffinch, Black Redstart, House Sparrow, Great White Egret, Spoonbill, Green Woodpecker, Greylag Goose, Golden Oriole, Long-tailed Tit, Cuckoo, Song Thrush, Blackcap, Goldfinch, Syrian Woodpecker, Nightingale, Wryneck and Hooded Crow had all been seen in or around or flying over the hotel.

After breakfast we made our way to the Little Hortobágy where we had scope views of a Saker at a nestbox. The views were not satisfactory and we decided that we'd return to the site again. Also in the immediate area were Stonechat, Lapwing, Common Buzzard and Corn Bunting.

In a nearby area of the Little Hortobágy we enjoyed fantastic views of at least three Eastern Imperial Eagles of which at least one was an adult and another was a second or third year bird. Also seen were Black Tern, White Wagtail, White Stork, Coot, Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard, Turtle Dove, Yellow Wagtail, Great Crested Grebe, Common Tern, Mallard, Nightingale, Great Reed Warbler, Whitethroat, Bee-eater, Crested Lark, Northern Wheatear, Lesser Whitethroat, Little Owl, Great White Egret and Hoopoe with a few singing Quail being heard.

After lunch we carried on to the world famous Hortobágy National Park. Before meeting our local guide at Nagyván we stopped at a colony of Red-footed Falcons. A sizeable population breeds here and we had great views of an estimated 40 birds.

A nearby wetland held Garganey, Pochard, at least three Purple Herons, Hoopoe, five Ferruginous Ducks, Whiskered Tern and White-winged Tern.

Perhaps the highlight of a fantastic first day in Hungary was being escorted onto the Hortobágy by Dr Gábor Kovács who knows the area better than anybody. He was to guide us to Great Bustards – something he has done successfully for us on many previous trips. Today was no different and we were soon watching seven individuals that included a couple of displaying males. A lone in flight Common Crane added to the entertainment as did four Montagu's Harriers and numerous Marsh Harriers that included a rare melanistic individual. Whinchat and a Spotted Flycatcher were also here as were singing Quails that frustratingly could not be seen.

May 12th

After breakfast we returned to the Saker site on the Little Hortobágy. There were now two birds present and they obviously a pair with the female being noticeably larger than the male. The views were better today. While watching the falcons five Common Cranes flew by,

Common Buzzards displayed, three Cuckoos flew past and a Common Whitethroat sang from nearby vegetation.

Our day continued at a couple of different sites in the Hortobágy National Park and was centred around a series of wetlands and fishpond systems.

As we enjoyed a pre walk coffee a few different warblers were in song close by and eventually views of Wood, Willow and Icterine Warblers were obtained by some of the group.

Amongst the highlights of our afternoon were excellent views of a singing Savi's Warbler, Penduline Tit, Golden Oriole, Nightingale, Ferruginous Duck, Squacco Heron, great views of two Bitterns, fabulous views of adult and juvenile Bearded Tits, a white spotted Bluethroat, an immature White-tailed Eagle, many Spoonbills, dozens of Great White Egrets, eighty or so breeding plumaged Ruff, Spotted Redshanks, Garganey, Black-winged Stilt, Red-necked Grebe, Little Gull, Yellow-legged Gull, eight Glossy Ibis, many White Storks, many Purple Herons, a few Pygmy Cormorant, Red-footed Falcon, Long-eared Owls in falcon nestboxes, Hooded Crow, Night Herons and Wood Sandpiper as well as the more familiar Spotted Flycatcher, Reed Bunting, Swallow, House Martin, Tree Sparrow, Marsh Harrier, Shoveler, Pochard, Mute Swan, Moorhen, Black-headed Gull, Redshank, Dunlin, Reed Warbler and Sedge Warbler.

As we arrived back at the hotel in the late afternoon a Wryneck and a Serin both sang from the same tree and a Black Redstart was singing nearby.

May 13th

Pre breakfast at the hotel produced a fly over Spoonbill and singing Black Redstart, Wryneck and Serin.

Today we headed to Transylvania in Romania. As we passed through the Hortobágy NP we noted an immature White-tailed Eagle, Bittern, Great Egrets, Marsh Harriers and Black, Whiskered and White-winged Terns.

Our morning coffee stop resulted in singing Nightingale, Golden Oriole, Whitethroat and Tree Sparrow.

We crossed the Romanian border and asked for our passports to be stamped (to the amusement of the border guards) and then carried on to the Lugasi Reservoir near Orvend. Our target bird here was Ortolan Bunting and before the minibus had stopped we'd seen and heard the first of half a dozen of these attractive birds. Also here were Little Ringed Plovers, Yellow Wagtails, Skylark, Raven and a fly by Black Stork along with a few butterflies.

Our next coffee stop produced Corn Bunting, Whinchat and Whitethroat and a Smooth Snake that Tibor found and displayed in a cardboard box for all to see.

As we carried on to Torocko village a couple of Short-toed Eagles and Common Buzzard were noted. In the village that evening Scops Owl could be heard calling in the distance.

May 14th

The first birding stop today was to be at a quarry near to the village of Torocko. This is usually a reliable site for Rock Bunting but it wasn't today. Birds seen here included a couple of Hobbies, two Alpine Swifts, two Crag Martins, Great Tit, Robin, Common Buzzard, two Ravens, Black Redstart, Whitethroat and Mistle Thrush. Interesting butterflies included Granville Fritillary, Clouded Yellow, Swallowtail, Speckled Wood (orange morph) and Green Hairstreak.

At Turda Gorge the hoped for Golden Eagle was absent but compensation came in the form of a male Rock Thrush, singing male Rock Bunting, a couple of Tawny Pipits, Northern Wheatear, two Alpine Swifts, two Ravens, Linnets and Chiffchaff.

Stock Dove, Green Woodpecker and a rat catching Fox were seen near to Torocko.

After dinner we went back to the area where we'd seen the Fox in the hope of finding a Corncrake. One briefly sang but didn't show. As Great Reed Warbler sang nearby a Great Grey Shrike was seen in pursuit of a Skylark. Soon the in flight Shrike flushed a Quail and, leaving the lark to go on its way pursued the gamebird across the width of a field before it dived into cover leaving the Shrike perplexed perched on a post.

Another four Great Grey Shrikes were also in the vicinity but there were still no Red-backed Shrikes reflecting the fact that this species was very late arriving into Europe this spring. Also seen were Fieldfares and Common Buzzard.

We returned to the village where some of the group went for a drink in the 'local'. As darkness fell a minimum of three Scops Owls started calling in the village square and thanks to a powerful torch borrowed from a fellow tourist great views were enjoyed by most of the group. As pre arranged earlier in the evening András appeared at 10pm with his torch and Scops Owls were again enthusiastically enjoyed.

May 15th

This morning we continued our journey towards Zetea, further into Transylvania.

The day started with good birds in Torocko village and these included three Hawfinch, Green Woodpecker, Blackcap, Nuthatch, Song Thrush, House Martin and Chiffchaff as well as Red Squirrel.

On the drive out of the village towards Ludas a Honey Buzzard showed quite well with a Common Buzzard for comparison.

We stopped for coffee at a fishpond near Ludas and were rewarded with a pair of Ferruginous Ducks, three Great Reed Warblers, Little Bittern, three Night Herons, fifteen Black Terns and two White-winged Terns as well as Great-crested Grebe, Marsh Harrier and Cuckoo.

As we passed Tirgu Mures airport excellent views were had of at least eight migrating Lesser Spotted Eagles.

At our lunch stop Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Lesser Whitethroat and White Wagtail were logged and a short stroll after arriving at our hotel in Zetea produced great views of an adult Golden Eagle being mobbed by two Ravens, male and female Redstart and Hooded Crow. Perhaps the highlight of the day was our evening visit to see European Brown Bear.

We met up with our local guide who was called Peter and made our way into a forest about a fifteen minute drive away. As we made our way up a track through the forest there was a clearing ahead of us and Peter suddenly stopped and pointed out a male Brown Bear that was directly in front of the hide that we were heading for. We stood still and silent and watched the bear for about fifteen minutes.

Every so often he would sniff the air but fortunately we were too far away for him to see us. The fact that the bear was so close to the hide meant that we couldn't go any further without causing disturbance so we retreated and decided to return again, a little earlier tomorrow evening. We walked back to the vehicle through the forest noting singing Firecrest and Red-breasted Flycatcher along the way as well as roding Woodcock.

Peter pointed out tracks of various mammals such as Wild Boar, Brown Bear and Wolf. Pools of water along the forest track had Fire-bellied Toad spawn in them.

May 16th

The day started in the grounds of our excellent hotel with a couple of Nutcrackers, Willow Tit and a pair of Common Redstarts.

Our main target today was to be found in the Bikaz Gorge but to reach that site we had to drive through a part of the Harghita Mountains where we stopped and noted a light passage of Honey Buzzards, a distant Golden Eagle and Grey Wagtail and a few interesting plants for the keen botanists in the group.

We soon reached the very impressive Bikaz Gorge and began searching the sheer walls for our quarry. It didn't take too long before, one by one, all the group managed to get good views of the fantastic male Wallcreeper that performed at quite close range as he searched every nook and cranny for spiders and other invertebrates. It's amazing how difficult such a bright bird can sometimes be to see, even when you know where it is, as they have a habit of disappearing into crevices and not reappearing for some time or even sneaking off unseen. We managed to see a minimum of three individuals today and for some Wallcreeper would be the best bird of the trip.

Also in the gorge were Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Common Buzzard, Kestrel and a few Common Swifts.

As we made our way back to Zetea we noted Whinchat and Meadow Pipit in a meadow and White Storks by the dozen.

After an early dinner we returned to the bear hide. This evening we would be at least half an hour earlier than our previous attempt to reach the hide. There had been rain on and off during the day and as we had dinner it was raining quite heavily. However, as we neared our set off time the rain was easing off and we got the go ahead for the hide visit from our local guide. We retraced our steps of the previous evening and as we again made our way up the path through the forest our guide stopped suddenly. The bear was again in the clearing. This was where the inclement weather worked in our favour. Our guide felt that if we moved silently and out of view of the bear we could approach and enter the hide without the bear detecting us. The leaves in the trees were being rustled by the rain and the wind and as the air was damp our scent wouldn't be picked up by the huge foraging Ursine beast. After a manoeuvre that the SAS would have been proud of, the group were safely installed in the hide enjoying fantastic and prolonged views of this magnificent animal. After a while something spooked the bear and he ran off into the woodland. A while later he, or another bear, reappeared and continued to forage for food. After ninety minutes or so we left him to it. What an experience!

May 17th

Pre breakfast birds in the hotel grounds included Nutcracker, Willow Tit and Redstart. Stuart had to leave the tour today to return to the UK and then carry on to another tour in Bulgaria. The group were left in the very capable hands of András.

The group carried on into the Harghita Hills and followed a forested track to a ski resort. Excellent views of two female Capercaillies were enjoyed along with a Black Kite. Black Woodpecker and Three-toed Woodpecker were also seen as well as Ring Ouzels, Water Pipits, Nutcracker and Tree Pipit. Butterflies included Camberwell Beauty and there was also Alpine Newt.

May 18th

Today we visited the Sanpaul Fishponds. En route there were two Whinchats, two Lesser Spotted Eagles, Hoopoes, Lesser Grey Shrike and a singing Quail.

At the fishponds the birding was good and the haul included several Little Bitterns, a few Night Herons, eight Ferruginous Ducks, twenty White Storks, forty or so Black Terns, five Whiskered Terns, Great Grey Shrike, Black headed Wagtail, three Purple Heron, Bearded Tit, Great White Egret, ten Great Reed Warblers, four Turtle Doves and a booming Bittern. The return journey through the Harghita Hills produced a pair of Red-backed Shrike, a male Goshawk and a Corncrake.

May 19th

Today was spent driving back from Romania to the Bükk Hills in Hungary.

At our lunch stop we noted Black Stork and Peregrine and there were four Souseliks on the lawn of the Fauna Hotel.

May 20th

At our accommodation at the Nomád Pension in the Bükk Hills a Grey Wagtail was noted on the ponds. A few different Woodpeckers including Black and Syrian were seen by some of the group and there was also Collared Flycatcher and Long-tailed Tit.

The botanists in the group had some notable records that included Toothwort, Sword-leaved Helleborine, Birds-nest Orchid, Lady Orchid, Whorled Solomon Seal and there was also Stag Beetle and Lesser Horseshoe Bats.

May 21st

There was time for a little birding this morning before our departure to the airport at Budapest. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker and Wryneck were all seen or heard along with Nightingale and Collared Flycatcher. Beautiful Demoiselle and Great White Helleborine were also seen.

The group then departed for Budapest and said their farewells to András and Tibor and then checked in at departures for the flight back to Manchester.