

The Travelling Naturalist & Ecotours Wildlife Holidays

HUNGARY IN WINTER – GEESE AND RAPTORS IN HORTOBÁGY 5-9 March, 2010

TRIP REPORT

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Day 1

Shortly after landing John came out from the arrivals gate, followed by John and Nadine. We greeted each other, and introduced myself and Istvan, Ecotours co-guide. All the luggages were loaded to the minibus and we left the airport at 2:30 pm.

Having a quick sight-seeing in outskirts of Budapest, we were heading East on M3 motorway. Rooks, Hooded Crows were recorded. M3 is located in between the Northern Hills and the Great Plain, creating excellent viewpoint for raptors lingering around. Several Common Buzzards were seen as we were approaching the plain. Our first stop was at village Tura. We turned right to a secondary road, and looked for raptors. It was not cold with a temperature around 8 degrees Celsius, however, the strong wind made birding not easy. Warmed up by a two-in-one Capuccino and refreshed by fancy Duran sandwiches we tried to find the pair of Imperial Eagle breeding there. Only Buzzards were there all of them perched on trees and pilons because of the wind. A flock of Bramblings was flying above the fallow, together with Goldfinches. A huge nest of the single big tree nearby was definitely the sign of Imperial Eagle present in the area.

Another 50 km driving led us to the Hortobagy area. Crossed Lake Tisza and wetlands along it we arrived at Tiszafüred where our hotel Nadas Panzion is located at 6 pm.

Exhausted by the flight and travelling, our tasty 3-course dinner was enjoyed by all of us.

Day 2

Our breakfast was scheduled at 7:30, but before it everybody was already outshight looking for birds. After a few minutes a Syrian Woodpecker landed to a bare Acacia tree and we had a good view of it. As a starter, it was an excellent species.

We left our hotel at 8:30 and were driving to explore the world-famuos grasslands of Hortobágy Puszta. Covering some ninty thousand hectares, it includes a variety of habitat types from marshes and fishponds till wooded habitats in the Northern part. Geese, ducks were flying everywhere as we entered the territory of the park. We met our local guide Dr. Gabor Kovacs, warden of the Hortobagy National Park. Upon his advice, we started our birding in southern pusztas where we could get to the better places by car without long walks.

Therefore we were driving to Nádudvar and pulled out from the van. On the top of trees several Great Grey Shrikes were seen, flocks of Greater Whitefronts and Greylag Geese were seen. Following a muddy path walked up to a mound called 'kurgan' watchplaces used by ancient tribes. From a 10-12 meter hight a good amount of land can be checked. By telescopes we carefully explored the grassland.

A group of animals was firstly thought as Great Bustards, but as they moved they turned to Roe Deers. Skylarks were singing everywhere, Rooks and Geese were flying, Brown Hares fighting each other. As we turned back and approached to the minibus, two female Great Bustards raised from the ground. We had a good view on them, but later a Red Fox turned up and a flock of 12 Bustards were flushed and they flee some 200 meters. With a better light now we head and excellent view on them! Driving further we passed an abandoned farm building, where a nice Little Owl was quickly seen.



Turning back, we stopped at Nádudvar, where roosting site of Long-eared Owls was visited. Some 20 individuals were seen on a spruce sitting above pedestrians walking. This a typical habit of this species troughout the Carpathian Basin.

We had a coffee break and the self-prepared sandwiches were finished and we dropped Dr. Kovacs at home. We continued to explore the Hortobagy natural assets. We stopped at Great Fishpond, where reedbeds, willow bushes are present. At the first pond Black-headed Gulls, Yellow-legged Gulls were flying, Great Grebes, Mute Swans, Coots were having rest. A flock of Goldeneye together Pochards were actively feeding in the middle of the water. Teals,

Gadwalls, Great Cormorants were against the reed, and later Marsh Harriers appeared chasing away the Coots. In the far willow bush a huge White-tailed Eagle was sitting, and a few minutes later left the tree. All the Great White Egrets and Grey Herons were alarmed by the flying eagle.



As the time passed, we moved to the next pond. A nest of Penduline Tits was glimpsed by Istvan, later we heard the owners calling.

We climbed up to watchtower, and had a beautiful sunset. Although it was windy, we could hear the shy Moustached Warbler singing, and Bearded Reedlings calling. Filled with pleasant experiences of the puszta, we returned to our hotel. An hour later we again had a hearty meal to digest.

Day 3

The morning was a bit chilly, sometimes it was snowing. We had our breakfast at 7:30 and we left around 8:30. We drove back to a wetland site in western part of Hortobágy. The shallow water was frozen partly, and the Greylags were standing on the ice. Marsh Harriers, Great White Egrets were seen.

After an hour scanning we turned to the hills. We stopped at Kétútköz, and Szentistvan, but the strong wind made all the raptors settled and perched on trees. Later on, before Mezőkövesd, a pair of Imperial Eagles enchanted us with landing, circling, drifting and chasing each other.

A group of Corn Buntings was landed to a tree calling and signing actively.



On the way to the hills we stopped at a fishpond where waterbirds and sometimes otters can be seen. White Wagtails, Linnets, Fieldfares were seen, Mallards, Teals and Gadwalls were sighted on the pond. We had coffee and tea & sandwiches there.

The Bükk Hills are compact limestone hills having a plateau and long valleys. We started to explore the area with one of the nicest part, the Hor valley. We left the van at the first quarry, but suddenly a large brown bird flew from one side to the other. An Eagle Owl was it and we were lucky that she perched on an oak tree!!

We watched her for more than a quarter of an hour as she turned her head and blinked sleepy.

At the quarry we heard Blackbird signing, and saw signs of the non-native species Mouflon on the rocky grasslands.

Later a Sparrowhawk was glimpsed.



We were driving further, and left the minibus at a meadow. The plant life has just began in these days, nice Snowdrops and Purple Hellebore were found in the mixed Beech-Hornbeam woodland.

Blue Tits, Great Tits were singing, a few pairs of Nuthatches were making loud noises as early breeder they have already started the breeding season.

Later in the afternoon we arrived to our next hotel, Nomad located in the outskirts of Noszvaj village.



Day 4

Our breakfast was scheduled at 8:00 so we had a long pre-breakfast birding opportunity.

It was well well deserved to get up earlier have a walk around the hotel.

All the woodland passerine species were very active. Tits, nuthatches, thrushes, woodpeckers were sighted. A Great Spotted Woodpecker was the starter than Middle Spots, later Lesser Spotted followed. Green Woodpecker was flying across the small pond, and Grey Woodpecker started to call.

As his calling was imitated, a few minutes later he came and flew to a tree quiet close to us. Finally the chunky Hawfinches appeared and we had a very good view on them.

After the fairly rich breakfast, we were driving to the northern part of Bükk hills. At Bélapátfalva we stopped at a 12th century old Cistercian Abbey where sometimes rather good species are seen.

We thoroughly explored the rock surfaces looking for Wallcreepers and Alpine Accentors.

Tough the species had records a few days ago, we were unlucky to find them.



On the way back to the minibus, two Mouflons were sighted and watched for a few minutes.

Later Yellowhammers and Greenfiches were recorded.



In the afternoon we tried another excellent wood stand above the village of Felsőtárkány. Again, Tits, Nuthatches and woodpeckers were glimpsed at a tourist hat. Due to the snowing at night, we were walking in the woodland in a 15 cm snow cover. Wild Boars were seen and signs of their digging was clearly observed.

Great Spotted Woodpeckers were lingering around, Jays calling. As we imitated calls of White backed Woodpeckers, the male immediately replied. In a few seconds a pair of White-backed Woodpeckers flew to us, and we had a very good view of them.

In dusk we were looking for owls in a nice old Beech wood, but with no success.

Day 5

Based on the previous day's experience, we again tried the pond. Goldcrests, Coal Tits were present, Jays, and Siskin. After packing we were driving to Szentistván again, just to check some raptor's area. We stopped and scanned the agricultural fields nearby. Suddenly a large raptor started to fly towards us from a distance. A nice Saker Falcon was it, flying very close to the ground due to the strong wind. It crossed the road and we had a brilliant view on it!

Finally we had to leave the area and travelled back to Budapest to reached the 4:30 pm flight to London.