

Sarus Birdtours

Slovakia: 21st - 25th April 2007

Trip Report

Preliminaries:

- i) Whilst I have tried to give a fair report of the trip it is inevitably written from a personal angle, reflecting my highs & lows. Any lack of objectivity I trust will be more than offset by sharing the emotions brought out by birdwatching.
- ii) In giving the names of people & places I have missed off the many accents that occur in Slovak & Hungarian. You seem to spend all your time watching the accents so you forget the words!
- iii) It was agreed at the outset that, for any species to be added to the Trip List, it must be seen by at least two of the party excluding leaders & guides.
- iv) Target species when seen are always written in **RED**. Other species are in **Blue** when seen for the first time.

Reason for going on this Trip: Jill & I had gaps in our European Birdlists - mainly Owls & Woodpeckers. After discussing this "Euroshort" tour with Sarus at the Birdfair we decided such a trip would remedy the situation - & be a great deal cheaper than longer tours. It would also let us experience, to quote Neville Chamberlain, "a far away country . . . of whom we know nothing".

The Trip itself

Saturday 21st April: From Stansted we flew on a 1pm flight by SkyEurope, arriving on time at Poprad in NE Slovakia at 4pm local time. Poprad is a ~~small~~ very small airport with panoramic views of the snow-covered Tatras Mountains to the north, under a clear blue sky. Having passed quickly through the formalities we met up with everybody in the airport carpark. There were seven of us, & two leaders from Ecotours Wildlife Holidays - Balazs & Csaba, with two minibuses. (Unlike on some previous trips lack of space was not going to be a problem.) Balazs was optimistic that we would see most or all of our target species as local guides had already sussed out nest sites etc.

After enjoying the **Fieldfares**, **White wagtails** & **Serin** in the carpark trees we set off west on a good road towards our first overnight stop at Bobrovnik by the lake Liptovska Mara. We stopped to scope a **Lesser-spotted eagle** soaring over the road before picking up on a **Black-throated diver** (winter plumage) on the lake. Another stop on a side road by the lake produced only **Mallard**, **Teal**, & **Tufted ducks** but with several (a suitably vague quantity word) **Little gulls** fluttering over the surface. Another stop produced a singing **Lesser whitethroat**, whilst our final bird of the day, spotted while we drove, was a very early **Honey buzzard**. Our hotel was on a bluff above the lake with stunning views across to the mountains & very cheap drinks.

Sunday 22nd April: Another bright blue sky day. Most folk were up early, birdwatching around the hotel. There was a good deal of birdsong - Lesser whitethroat, **Blackcap**, **Chiffchaff**, **Linnet**, & **Songthrush**. The latter were far less timid than the birds at home & would allow a reasonably close approach. After breakfast we set off to pick up our first local guide, Dusan, from the village of Oravsky Podzamok. Here on a high crag is the castle Oravsky hrad, used as the location for the first "Dracula" film, & where Dusan, a zoologist, has his local museum. We set off for our first target species - White-backed woodpecker. Just a few yards on the track we had good views of several **Hawfinches**, both in the trees &

on the ground. Then the track entered the wood & steepened. For us it was steep, for Dusan, all two metres of the man, it appeared level. After a climb of a few hundred feet we drew a blank. We set off along forestry roads to another site where we parked the buses & walked on near level roads (Ah bliss!). A White-backed woodpecker was drumming nearby. We approached slowly & Dusan spotted it. Jill got on it & expertly directed me to it. My first **WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER**. It really did exist after all! Unfortunately, before other people had got onto it, off it flew. A walk along the forest track produced no Hazel grouse so time for dinner - hot coffee & packed lunches that we had made up ourselves - delicious. We set off along another forest road, walked a kilometre or so further up it & then set off up another steep slope. Dusan showed us a dead tree, broken off about five metres from the ground. In the cavity at the top we could see the back end & one eye of a **URAL OWL** incubating eggs. It flew off & perched nearby giving tremendous views in the scope. We set off down the slope & came across a double surprise - a male **Ring ouzel**. The first surprise was that it was singing in a pine tree in the middle of the forest, a habitat so different to that in the UK. The second, which accounted for the first, was that it was the Central European subspecies *alpestris*. Its breast was pale-scaled in a most attractive manner, quite unlike any other bird I can remember. It was certainly a candidate for my bird of the trip. Watching this bird & then a **Woodcock** which flew in meant we were behind the others up a slope. When we arrived we were informed we had just missed two close **THREE-TOED WOODPECKERS**. They could not be relocated. Total gloom!

We next ventured to a woody inland crag above pasture. Dusan set off up on to the crag to check an Eagle owl's nest. As we watched, the huge **EAGLE OWL** took flight across the crag, a truly magnificent bird. Dusan reported that there was one egg & one young bird in the nest. Finally we drove up another forest track for a few kilometres stopping twice before a **PYGMY OWL** responded to our calls & flew from tree to tree above us. We had great views as it peered down. Its presence also brought out a number of small birds to mob it. These included **Coal tits** & a **Crested tit** with a quiff John Travolta would be proud of. We dropped Dusan off, with profuse thanks, under his castle & returned to the hotel. (Target Bird Tally for the day: 3 Owls; 2 Woodpeckers)

Monday 23rd April: Another sunny day. After pre-breakfast birdwatching giving **Tree pipit** & **Black redstart** we set off for the village of Valaska Dubova from where a track led through a meadow into a pine wood (up a steep slope). On the way only distant views of **NUTCRACKERS** in flight were obtained. Attempts in the wood to attract Hazel hen to a whistle failed. After some coffee & food we set off SE on the drive to the Karst country, picking up our next local guide, Istvan, a ranger from the Slovensky Karst National Park, in the town of Roznava. We drove into the hills above Stos where we picked up the local "local" guide Samu. We set off up another steep slope through the woods to where a pair of Three-toed woodpeckers had been excavating a nest hole. Although they had been at work that morning there was no sign of them. Double total gloom - they were my "last on the list" of European woodpeckers. We continued (slowly) up the slope to a ridge along which Istvan had set up nest boxes for Tengmalm's owls. If a box is scratched it is thought that the owl thinks it is a pine marten, & will come out to investigate. Istvan scratched two boxes but no owls appeared. As we walked on the ridge to the bus Balazs again whistled but no Hazel hens appeared. We set off for our hotel about five kilometres down a narrow road. (Target Bird Tally for the day: 0 Owls; 0 Woodpeckers; 0 Hazel hen; Nutcracker - but distant - Balazs spoke of suicide but was told "Tomorrow is another day.")

Tuesday 24th April: A dry morning but cloudy & breezy. Up & off just after 5:30am to the nest box ridge. As we walked along the track a male **HAZEL HEN** came out & was seen clearly by one person & fleetingly by some others. Several metres further on turning a corner more people saw a pair of **HAZEL HENS** on the path, but they disappeared straightaway. A search & whistling failed to relocate them so we went on to the first owl nest box. Scratching the box produced nothing but when Istvan knocked the bottom of the box with a long stick out popped a **TENGMALM'S OWL**, giving us a quizzical look for several minutes before

popping back in. Things were looking up. We then descended the path to the Three-toed woodpeckers' hole but there was no sign of the birds. Istvan & Samu descended further & saw the birds fly across but when we got there - nothing. Istvan then went back up to the nest hole & called out that both birds were there. We hurried up the slope as if it was level, & there on the tree was the male **THREE-TOED WOODPECKER** pecking away at the hole. He was joined by the female & both birds flew to trees nearer to us where we had good views in the scope. What a turn round. My joy was full & breakfast was sweet.

After breakfast we parked by a large pond with two **Common sandpipers** & set off up a near level road through the wood. A **Black stork** flew over, & a **Lesser-spotted woodpecker** flew in the trees around its nest hole. A male **Collared flycatcher** was also spotted - another little beauty! After just over a kilometre it was time for another climb into a beech wood, then down & up again until we were looking from a safe distance at the nest hole of a **White-backed woodpecker**. Scopes & bins were trained on it & the **WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER** appeared at the side of the hole, stopped & then popped in. After a while it stuck its head out & flew off. This time everybody there saw it. We waited but it didn't return. These woods were very impressive & a joy to be in, consisting of very tall beech trees, with no low branches, together with the usual lack of plant groundcover. We saw & heard **Wood warblers** & watched a **Nuthatch** pretending to be a warbler, fluttering to take insects from leaves, as well as a Fire Salamander.

In such vast woods finding our target birds would have been impossible without local knowledge, & I would like to record a big thank you to Dusan, Istvan, & Samu for their help. Not only did they find the sites, but their enthusiasm for their woods, & general knowledge of their areas, was obvious.

On our way back it clouded over with the wind getting up. Once down to the road a **MIDDLE-SPOTTED WOODPECKER** was seen, followed further on by a male **GREY-HEADED WOODPECKER**. It began to rain but soon stopped as we set off for the Suslik Meadow under the hill on which was the ruined castle of Turna nad Bodvou. Two **Crested larks** & a **Treesparrow** were seen in the farmyard next to the meadow. In the meadow several Susliks - large ground squirrels, popular with raptors - were spotted. Over on a pylon a pair of **Ravens** had a nest with full grown young. No Target Raptors were seen so we set off to another small village at the entrance to a spectacular limestone gorge. We walked through the village to bushy scrub where a Rock bunting was heard but not seen. By now it was dark & threatened rain. After one peal of thunder however the sky brightened. A walk back through the village produced our target a **SYRIAN WOODPECKER** which gave good views as it flew from tree to tree. Also in the stream through the village a **Dipper** of the black-bellied race was viewed as it stood quite still for several minutes. We then went to a quarry on the Hungarian border for good views of a male **Rock bunting** before spotting a **Little owl** on old farm buildings.

After dinner Istvan, who had earlier shown us a Lesser horseshoe bat roost in an old roadside cottage, set up a mist net by the hotel lake in which he caught a number of bats. These we were then able to observe closely. They included Pipistrelle (really small), Daubenton's, & the rare Barbastelle - a most interesting end to a full day. (Target Bird Tally for the day: 1 Owl; 4 Woodpeckers; Hazel hen)

Wednesday 25th April: A windy, cloudy day. Most folk went about 6am to the ridge to look for Hazel hen. Unfortunately they failed to connect. At 8am Jill & I went with Csaba for a stroll up the path from the hotel where another male Collared flycatcher showed itself. A large, black shape suddenly flew past through the trees - **BLACK WOODPECKER**. Back at the hotel we were able to get a good look at a Hawfinch in the hand which had stunned itself flying into a window. It later flew off somewhat unsteadily.

After breakfast & packing we went to the Suslik meadow for a final session. We were not disappointed. Two **Common Buzzards** mating, one **Marsh harrier** flypast, a **Goshawk** spectacularly diving down to its mate in the trees. A number of raptors came up over & along the ridges including one **SAKER**, & finally one **IMPERIAL EAGLE**. This was deemed a suitable point at which to head to the airport for an uneventful flight to Stansted.

(Target Bird Tally for the day: 1 Woodpecker; 2 Raptors)

Not from every birdwatching trip do you return with a folder of information, nor even less with a DVD of photos taken on the trip. We did. Yes Slovakia is hilly. Yes it was somewhat strenuous, but we have to record our thanks to Balazs & Csaba for their planning, help, enthusiasm, expertise & patience. They come highly recommended.

Personal Footnote: We also saw several Greater Spotted woodpeckers throughout the trip. Add to these the Green Woodpecker outside our room near Cambridge on the morning of departure & we saw all nine European woodpeckers between leaving & returning home. With owls & raptors to boot. Consider it "Mission successful".

John Wheeler
Huddersfield, Yorkshire
29 April 2007