

Hungary

27 July-3 August 1998

Participants:

Peter & Judith Cuff

Terry Elborn

Tony & Maggie Goddard

Peter & Eileen Knight

Tony Morris

Leonie Selwyn

Robert Tushingham

Doug Wood



Leaders:

Gerard Gorman & Vaughan Ashby

Picture: Barred Warbler

Day 1: Morning departure from London Heathrow and after being met by Gerard and our driver Zoltan at Budapest airport, we drove for several hours in a north-easterly direction to the small town of Tokaj, our base for the next three nights. En-route, we saw a number of White Storks, Common Buzzards, Common Stonechats, and Red-backed Shrikes, with three Western Marsh-harriers & four Crested Larks. After checking into our rooms, we went for a short afternoon stroll across the road to the banks of the River Tisza. Quite a number of species were seen during this walk with the highlights being a single Purple Heron and nine Black-crowned Night-herons, six European Bee-eaters in the distance, two Black Redstarts and four Golden Orioles. A Black Woodpecker was seen briefly by a few lucky members of the group but the rest of us had to make do with a Great Spotted Woodpecker!

Day 2: A productive pre breakfast walk resulted in excellent views of a couple of Barred Warblers and more Golden Orioles, together with Eurasian Nuthatch and Tree Sparrow. After breakfast we headed up into a disused quarry behind the town where despite an extensive search, we were unable to locate the roosting Eurasian Eagle-owls. There were however, plenty of other good birds in the area however, with much better views of European Bee-eater, two Eurasian Wrynecks and a superb Short-toed Eagle drifted overhead. The Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush in the quarry also failed to show (we heard it) but the Black Woodpecker gave an excellent show, even flying over our heads to have a better look at us! Moving on to the beautiful Zemplen Hills to look for more of the specialities of the region, we started to note raptors soaring as the day heated up. Several Eurasian Honey-buzzard were seen together with a Northern Goshawk, Eurasian Hobby and two more Short-toed Eagles. Unlike Britain, European Turtles-doves were very common and everyone was impressed with the numbers of butterflies in this unspoilt mosaic of forest and unimproved pastureland. As we moved from site to site, additional species included Hawfinch, Eurasian Jay and Common Raven whilst our continued scrutiny of the numerous White Storks was rewarded with the splendid sight of two Black Storks soaring over the forest. Our lunch stop was very impressive; at the old castle perched on a hill at Boldogko, with wide views over the surrounding countryside. Whilst eating our picnic lunch in the warm sun, a large raptor was spotted over the plains which gradually drifted closer and gave superb views, an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle! With two other birds seen, this was the highlight of the day for most. In the afternoon, we worked our way slowly back towards

Tokaj, stopping at several sites overlooking the vast unspoilt Tisza-Bodrog floodplain, and adding a few waterbirds including Great White Egret and Grey Heron.

Day 3: Torrential rain overnight put paid to our visit to the usual site for Ural Owl, with most footpaths resembling mudbaths! Carrying on to another disused quarry therefore, we immediately saw at least two European Serin. This was not the main purpose of the visit however and shortly Gerard found what we were really looking for, European Eagle-owl. We had superb prolonged views of a pair of these magnificent birds roosting on a ledge, keeping a wary eye on us! In high spirits, we set off to another Ural Owl site but realistically knowing that the chances were now low. Scouring all the known roosting trees proved unsuccessful but just as we were about to give up we found adequate compensation (especially for Doug as this was his only potential lifer) in the form of a White-backed Woodpecker! Butterflies were prolific in the woodland and glades with several species of fritillary including Silver Washed, Camberwell Beauty and Dryad. We ate our lunch in a beautiful little forest glade with Grey Wagtails nearby and in the afternoon we visited another Ural Owl site but luck was not with us as Gerard had brief views of a bird flying through the trees. Despite extensive searching however, we were unable to relocate it on the steep wooded slopes, finding just a Willow Tit as compensation. As we drove out of the Zemplen Hills for the last time we had brief views of a Lesser Spotted Eagle. As we drove back around the edge of the floodplain we saw single Black Stork, Purple Heron and Black-crowned Night-heron together with plenty more Great White Egret.

Day 4: As a couple of the group had seen a Syrian Woodpecker on a nearby hillside the previous evening, we returned there before breakfast and had excellent views of two birds. After breakfast we revisited the disused quarry and almost immediately found the Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush. Another brief stop at an ancient hillfort and a nearby small wetland bird reserve added Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Little and Great Crested Grebes, two more Barred Warblers and lots of Golden Orioles. With a relatively short drive to our final destination, The Hortobagy, we set off in high spirits. As soon as we reached the plains all eyes were on the lookout for a very special bird, Long-legged Buzzard and it didn't take us long to find it sat on a bush close to the road. This species is at the very edge of its range here and this is probably the most north easterly pair. We decided to celebrate with our picnic lunch in the glorious sunshine! Moving on into the Hortobagy, we stopped at a large shallow lake where we found a lone summering Common Crane together with about 20 Garganey and five Yellow (Blue-headed) Wagtails. After checking into our new hotel just outside the town of Tiszarfured, we went for an afternoon walk out onto the "puszta" (steppe). It was quite hot but the birds made it worthwhile! Within the first few yards we had seen our first Lesser Grey Shrike and the proliferation of butterflies was amazing with Short-tailed Blue, Lesser Fiery Copper, Glanville and Queen of Spain Fritillary, being the highlights. It didn't take us long to find both our first Red-footed Falcon and European Roller and everyone was wondering how it could be this easy (had someone done their homework beforehand?)! Common Quail was heard but not seen and several Tawny Pipits seen well before we returned for our evening meal, a typically excellent Hortobagy dish.

Day 5: Today we had an early breakfast before heading out into the Hortobagy to meet with a National Park warden and friend of Gerard's, Dr Gabor Kavacs. Such was his dedication to the job that he had cycled on to the plains to locate the birds we were looking for, principally Great Bustard, at 5.00 am. As we saw 11 birds feeding in the fields at relatively close range almost immediately, we were all very grateful to him. The Hortobagy is a National Park and is thus farmed sensitively, a policy which appears to work as we also saw Northern Wheatear, Stone Curlew, Montagu's Harrier and Common Quail, all birds sensitive to intensive agriculture. Moving on a short distance to another site we spent some time looking for Aquatic Warbler but despite hearing the bird we only saw Sedge Warbler. With lots of fishponds to explore and the day warming up, we moved on again. When we arrived at the first fishpond, we were amazed to see up to 500 Eurasian Spoonbills together with large numbers of Great Cormorant, Greylag Geese, Eurasian Curlew and Black-tailed Godwit. Best of all however were several Pygmy Cormorants seen flying around and then later perched in a tree and an adult Great Black-headed Gull seen together with Western Yellow-legged Gulls. A number of other ponds in the area were visited where Gadwall, Northern Shoveler and Ferruginous Duck, Black and Whiskered Terns in good numbers

and both Bearded and Penduline Tits were seen whilst Great Bittern was heard. Good numbers of waders were present and these included Ruddy Turnstone (annual but rare), Pied Avocet, Ruff, Northern Lapwing, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers and Common and Spotted Redshanks. After a picnic lunch and an ice cream stop, we returned to the fishponds where we found up to three Caspian Terns. Careful scrutiny of the Black-headed Gull flock revealed single Little and Mediterranean Gulls whilst a real surprise was a second Great Black-headed Gull. As the heat was still very intense (unusually hot), we returned to the hotel and after a rest some of the group walked onto the puszta again. Red-footed Falcons gave a dazzling display in large numbers and both European Rollers and Lesser Grey Shrike obliged again. A pleasant find however, was a Hoopoe watched for quite a while as it fed.

Day 6: Today was our eagerly awaited day searching for arguably what is the star bird of the region, Saker Falcon. These rare birds have undergone a dramatic decline, partly due to their value as falconer's birds, but in Hungary they have a stronghold with approximately 100 pairs and increasing. The usual site drew a blank but Gerard had seen a possible bird a couple of miles away on a pylon. Driving closer we were delighted to find a juvenile Saker Falcon about 600 metres away. Gerard assured us that the juveniles were quite tolerant of humans so we walked closer and closer until we were about 50 metres away which with telescopes gave stunning views. All of a sudden the bird took off and we were concerned that we had disturbed it until it flew directly towards us, circled, had a look at us and then settled on another pylon, it was just curious! With most of our target specialities seen, we then spent a very pleasant day checking all the fishponds in the area again. There had obviously been an increase in both numbers and variety of waders since yesterday as Common and Little Ringed Plover, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Common Snipe and Whimbrel were now present together with most of those already seen. Because of the heat haze and light direction, some of the waders needed closer inspection but the only surprise was the brief visit of a Gull-billed Tern (quite rare in Hungary). With the heat now quite intense, we took some time out for a lunch stop and wiped out the stock of ice cream of virtually every café in the area. In fact, Zoltan the driver, thought that we ought to rename the group ice cream finders! We again returned to the hotel late afternoon for a rest followed by another pleasant walk out on to the puszta.

Day 7: Our last full day and we again checked out the fishponds. Both Tufted Duck and Common Goldeneye were new but a most interesting find was a hybrid Ferruginous Duck x Common Pochard. A single Black-necked Grebe was found whilst looking at the hybrid. Turning our attention to the terns (no pun intended!), careful scrutiny of the large numbers of juvenile Black and Whiskered Terns was eventually rewarded with a juvenile White-winged Black Tern, complete with distinctive 'saddle' and a Common Tern. Whilst warblers are always hard work at this time of year, both Great Reed and Savi's both showed well and two Common Cuckoos were quite late. After a leisurely picnic lunch and the obligatory ice cream stop, we returned to the hotel a rest and evening stroll.

Day 8: No time for birding today as we had to return to Budapest for the flight home. En-route we kept our eyes out for a Mute Swan or Common Swift to boost our lists! We did have time for a brief city tour however, with Gerard pointing out the key historical sites (his knowledge of the history of Eastern Europe is amazing). This bonus tour was extended by a leak in the minibus, radiator although a relief bus arrived quickly and took us to the airport in plenty of time for our flight home. A total of 153 birds and at least 28 of butterfly were recorded on the tour and although it was unusually hot for the time of year, nearly all the specialities were seen well.