

Hungary

19–26 May 2007

Participants:

**Graham Beevor, David Bentell,
Michael Bentell, Phil Brown,
Marilyn Edyvean, Terry Foxton,
Helen Heyes, Harry Jefferies,
Barry Matthews John Pullen,
Ian Shepherd, Geoffrey White,
Andrew Wilson, Graham Woods,
Brian Workman**

Leaders:

Gerard Gorman and Peter Basterfield



Ural Owl

Day 1 Bring a mixture of clothes they said. Something suitable for chilly as well as warm weather they said. And I'm sure that in 99 years out of 100 that's sound advice. However, in this year of freak weather we left miserable London temperatures of 9 °C to arrive in sunny Budapest, where things started out in the high 20s and climbed steadily to 35 °C by the end of the week. Somehow the jumpers and waterproofs seemed a little out of place! We set off towards our hotel, stopping at several birding stops cum motorway services on the way. Surprisingly, given the number of cars and people, these turned out to be pretty decent sites. The first stop gave us our first Tawny Pipits of the trip – two scratching around on a dry patch of earth – followed by nice views of a Yellow Wagtail (blue-headed) on a fence, several Crested Larks and a flyover Saker Falcon. Another gave us great views of Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes, but despite much scanning we didn't connect with Eastern Imperial Eagle. A third, slightly longer, stop produced several Tree Sparrows, Black Redstarts, a couple of Northern Wheatears, some of the local race of Long-tailed Tit and our first few Common Cuckoos of the trip. This was to be a bird we couldn't escape from – they were everywhere – and after a couple of days we resorted to ticking it on the trip list! En route the posts were filled with Common Buzzards and many of the fields contained quartering Western Marsh-harriers, with one Montagu's Harrier thrown in for good measure. Given the temperature it was a relief to arrive at the hotel – a small, family-run guesthouse with grounds containing Black Redstarts, Spotted Flycatchers, Song Thrushes, etc. – and change our clothes. Dinner that evening (and the next) was an experience I don't think I'll ever forget. It was little short of a banquet. After the soup came the beef (probably enough to feed a group twice our size), then came the chicken – one for each table – then the pork. For anyone on the Atkins Diet it was a dream; for anyone on any other diet it was a nightmare! Still, you couldn't refuse – it was lovely. We fell asleep that night with full stomachs and ears ringing to the sounds of croaking insects.

Day 2 I defy anyone to oversleep here – the dawn chorus was deafening. We were up early to scour the local area, specifically for woodpeckers but we also picked up a party of Collared Flycatchers, nice views of Wood Warbler, Hawfinch, umpteen Eurasian Nuthatches and a family party of Marsh Tits. Our woodpecker hunt successfully tracked down Middle Spotted at the nest, but only one lucky person managed to see the White-backed. Still, we had more species to come later. We returned to the hotel for

breakfast and carried on where we'd left off the night before. A hotplate to cook your own eggs and bacon appeared, alongside fruit, cereal, cake, the usual cheese and ham, bread, tea and coffee. It was difficult to drag ourselves away, but we had an appointment to keep in the village. A local resident had agreed to let us come into her garden and stare at a small tree near her gate. We filed in and waited. In no time at all, a Syrian Woodpecker arrived at its nest hole and sat on the branch of the tree for a while before disappearing for more food. An unbelievably easy lifer, but they all count! We spent the rest of the day at various sites in the Bükk Hills and our tally mounted considerably. New birds of note included our first Eurasian Golden Orioles of the trip, a lovely Short-toed Snake-eagle, two Grey-headed Woodpeckers, a couple of flyover Black Woodpeckers and stunning views of a Rock Bunting at the top of an old quarry, a couple of European Honey Buzzards, four River Warblers, two Barred Warblers and two Red-breasted Flycatchers. On top of all that we had incredible views of a wonderful Staghorn Beetle on the ground behind us at one site and arguably the best bird of the trip, which was kept until the very end. With insider information from a contact of Gerard's, we set off in the van. As we rounded a corner towards a picnic/barbecue area (thankfully empty as we arrived) there, sitting on top of a telegraph post looking down at us, was the most beautiful Ural Owl. Hardly daring to breathe we decamped from the van, only to see it fly silently around the corner. Creeping forward we relocated it – sitting on the corner of the tiled roof of the barbecue area, where it stayed for a little while before flying off into a distant tree. We scoped this magical bird for some time before setting off into the forest to check out a nest box (unsuccessfully) and then head back to the hotel for another incredible feast.

Day 3 We tried again for the White-backed Woodpecker this morning but to no avail. Sadly, the good weather meant most had bred early and dispersed, so yesterday's was probably a chance encounter. Still, it was lovely to be able to wander up the road from the hotel and see Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Collared Flycatchers and Hawfinches. One of the highlights of today was undoubtedly the Lesser Spotted Eagle stop. When we arrived, a pair was sitting in a small tree some distance away – viewable well in bins, but great in a scope. As we watched and discussed the identification features that should be visible in flight, low and behold the birds took off, flew around for a while and then came back and landed in the same tree. It was a real treat to be able to watch these birds for some time, and I'm sure that without the Ural Owl these may have been the birds of the trip. Also today we had lovely views of Wood Lark, a flyover Northern Goshawk and our only Eastern Imperial Eagle of the trip – also a flyover at the same site and within a few minutes of the Northern Goshawk. Another site produced our only seen Eurasian Wryneck of the trip, although this proved a bit elusive, hiding in a small tree for some time. As we neared our next hotel in Tokaj, which faced the Tisza River, the White Stork numbers began to increase (Barry and Graham had a nest relatively close to the window of their room!). House Martins were also much in evidence – many of our rooms had pairs building nests on the balcony walls. I suppose it was too much to expect meals like the first hotel again, and these were back to normal (probably no bad thing for the waistlines!), although we did get complimentary glasses of the local white wine.

Day 4 Breakfast was a little more limited here too, although we did have some gorgeous home-made jams and coffee cups the size of small soup bowls – great for anyone, like me, who needs a bit of a kick-start in the morning! Our target bird today was Eurasian Eagle-owl and we spent much of the morning visiting various local quarries to hunt for one. Sadly our efforts were in vain, so Gerard phoned a friend. In very little time we had driven to another quarry, been met by Gerard's friend and escorted to a site from where we could view an adult bird and several young (counts varied between three and four, and given how well hidden they were it's not really surprising!). With another owl on our list and some nice views of European Bee-eaters drifting over the quarry, we thanked Gerard's friend and set off to a local village to indulge in a well-earned ice-cream break. We sat in a tiny shop and slurped copious scoops of pineapple, which was heavenly in the heat – why does nobody seem to make it in the UK? After a lunch break featuring one of Phil's epic and much-envied concoctions (onto which went paté, two flavours of crisps, ham, cheese, tomato, slices of pepper and pretty much anything else on the table), we spent the rest of the afternoon trying in vain to catch up with the White-backed Woodpecker. The last stop of the afternoon was in a glorious dappled woodland with the light streaming through the leaves. The bird life was a bit thin on the ground – sadly no target woodpeckers – but we did find a beautiful Fire Salamander.

Day 5 And so we set off for our final hotel of the trip via Lake Tisza. Not surprisingly our tally of water birds really started to rise, although better views of some species would come in the next few days. We added a Little Bittern, numerous Black-crowned Night-herons, a couple of Ferruginous Ducks, both Whiskered and Black Terns and three Great Reed Warblers. The motorway stops were still turning up the goods too. At one, we stopped for a quick raptor scan and instead picked up a really obliging (although not to photographers) pair of Lesser Grey Shrikes and a flyby flock of nine Rose-coloured Starlings. Also on the juicy list for today (apart from a second ice-cream stop!) were our first Red-footed Falcons and a great site at which we scoped a distant Saker Falcon's nest on a pylon, seeing three birds altogether. After watching the falcons for a little while, we stumbled across a tree in the same area with six European Rollers flying in and out and occasionally displaying. In the same tree was a nesting Long-eared Owl, stretched out almost flat to guard the chick (glimpsed occasionally) from the heat of the sun. It was a great little spot and we were reluctant to leave, but the hotel was calling. This hotel was also ideally situated for birders, with a lake and reedbed around the back and the River Tisza just a stone's throw from the front. Much happy birding was had by all in the mornings and evenings. Our stroll before dinner tonight turned up the first couple of Purple Herons, a pair of Syrian Woodpeckers nesting in one of the trees by the river, an overhead Black Kite and the ubiquitous Eurasian Golden Orioles, Common Cuckoos, Red-backed Shrikes and Tree Sparrows. Just one final, much appreciated surprise tonight – a delicious bowl of chilled peach soup to start our meal. I could gladly have forgone the main course and polished off several bowls of that!

Day 6 The last two days were probably the most bird-filled, in terms of species seen, of the whole trip. The Hortobagy is a wonderful mixture of wet areas and open grassland and we spent time exploring both. At our first wetland stop today we added Great Bittern, Water Rail, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Ruff (including one nice black-ruffed male), Wood Sandpiper and a big flock of the local race of Greylag Goose to our ever-growing list. It was a lovely little site teeming with butterflies along the grassy tracks and again we were a little reluctant to leave, but more gems awaited. Next we visited a wonderful site that began with a small European Bee-eater colony (sadly the birds were not really settled in yet and spent much of the time flying around the general area rather than landing in the holes). Also flying over our heads were numerous Red-footed Falcons. Walking further up the track we began to see our first water birds – flying Eurasian Spoonbills, Great Egrets, Purple Herons, White Storks, Black Stork, Squacco Heron and our first views, albeit distant, of Pygmy Cormorant. Stopping to try and get better views of the cormorants, we stumbled across another new bird for the trip, and a lifer for some – Savi's Warbler. A couple of further stops today helped us to add two slightly frustrating species: heard Moustached Warbler (with possible brief sightings of small birds flitting from one spot to another) and visual sightings of Common Quail – albeit in chick form! Last, but by no means least, was a longish walk out into the grassland. By now, in the heat, most people were wilting and it was a struggle to force ourselves out of the van and make the effort, but we strode on valiantly. Our prize, again a lifer for some, was a group of eight Great Bustards. As usual, we were hammered by heat haze and the first views were very fuzzy to say the least. We ventured a little nearer and eventually had pretty reasonable views. We celebrated this bird-filled day with a big bowl of traditional Hungarian goulash at the hotel (note, I now know to my cost that it is advisable to avoid a white shirt!)

Day 7 Sadly our last full day of the trip had arrived. However, we began the day with a real leg-saving treat – a mini train ride out into a wonderful reserve teeming with birds. First up, while waiting for the train, were a couple of Icterine Warblers in a small tree behind the information centre. Shortly after leaving the train, came a beautiful Bluethroat, which we watched for some time as it flew between two distant areas of reed. Next was a somewhat frustrating tower, from which the front members of the group managed to see a Red-crested Pochard and another flypast flock of Rose-coloured Starlings. Unfortunately the platform was not big enough for all members of the group to look in the right direction and those at the back missed out. Still, the rest of the reserve turned up some great stuff, including Red-necked and Black-necked Grebes, Garganey, about fifteen Common Cranes, Black-tailed Godwits, two Caspian Gulls, Bearded Tits and Eurasian Penduline-tits, to name but a few. On the return train ride we scanned the flock of Water Buffalo carefully, as there was meant to be a Cattle Egret in the area, but all we saw were numerous Little Egrets. Other highlights today were a couple of Long-legged Buzzards (the

only non-orangey ones I've seen), a flock of five Common Cuckoos in flight (!) and a great watery site that gave us Collared Pratincoles and lovely views of White-winged Terns. Finally, just as the sun was being replaced by grey clouds for the first time on the whole trip, we drove to Nagyivan. Here we had arranged to meet a ranger to take us out looking for our final target bird of the day – apparently you can't do this trip without being accompanied. The drive through the town was amazing; every telegraph pole seemed to have a White Stork's nest on top of it – there are 39 pairs in the town apparently! When the guide arrived we walked out into a seemingly empty vast stretch of grassland, listening and looking intently. After what felt like a relatively short space of time, the guide located our target – Aquatic Warbler. Everyone had good views through scopes and it was only after some consultation that we discovered half the group was looking at a different individual! With the clouds looking ominous, we decided to try and scan for Short-eared Owls, which apparently had been seen in the area. However, just after we stopped walking and started to scan, the heavens opened and we made a run back to the van, pitying the poor souls just arriving for the Aquatic Warblers (what an apt name!)

Day 8 Today was effectively a ride to the airport, but we did stop en route at several of our previous sites and picked up our only Eurasian Hobby of the trip. With a little time in hand, we drove into Budapest to drop off Brian and Harry, who were staying on for a few days, and to say goodbye to Gerard, who left us to get some laundry done before starting his next trip! The temperature was a boiling 35 °C as we drove past some stunning architecture and headed to the airport for our flight home (sadly it was back down to single figures as we arrived at Gatwick!). It had been a lovely trip and I was sorry to come home, but tucked away for posterity are memories of some stunning birds, lovely people and some quite unbelievable meals!