

# Hungary Oct 11-18 2018

## Shoreham Birders on Tour



### Day 1: Thursday 11/10

It was not an auspicious start to our birding adventure. The Lancing taxi driver overslept (as did Sue's), then the boarding gate was changed due to a technical fault on the original aircraft. After a long wait in the departure lounge and a circuitous bus ride to our plane, we eventually got settled only to be told there would be a 50 minute delay due to military activity over Central Europe! As a slightly nervous traveller, this was not exactly filling me with confidence.



Fortunately, we eventually got underway and arrived in Budapest to warm temperatures and beautiful sunshine. We were met by our guides for the week Gabor and Andi and although our birding opportunities were curtailed due to the late

arrival, we were delighted with a break in our journey to see a beautifully plumaged Long-eared Owl roosting in a tree at Kerekegyhaza, the owl's face initially obscured from view but eventually rewarding us with a tweak of his ear and a long hard stare with his amber gold eyes.

We moved on to our accommodation at Kondor Lodge in the Kiskunsagi National Park, where we were to stay for our first two nights and located a few finches and tits darting amongst the trees, but it was generally still and very quiet in the fading late afternoon light. A warming drink in the garden was followed by a short foray outside the grounds where we found a pair of Tawny Owls calling, catching brief glimpses before they melted silently through the trees.

## **Day 2: Friday 12/10**



Many of us started the day with a pre-breakfast walk. We sampled the hides overlooking the ponds at Kondor Lodge, positioned to allow viewing at water level, and were serenaded by a vibrating Wren in full throttle just feet from our faces. We then proceeded along the sandy woodland track, before arriving at an open glade full of birds flitting from tree to bush, but frustratingly these proved extremely difficult to identify in the poor early morning light. Phil then got us on to a Great Spotted Woodpecker, and a Sparrowhawk also showed itself well in a tall tree.

After a tasty breakfast we piled into the minibus and headed off to Kun hill where we scoured the landscape for Great Bustards. There was a small group at some distance, but this combined with heat haze made viewing difficult. Simon located a group of Curlew; Kestrel, Hooded Crow and Skylark were also present. A flock of Lapwing flew over and soon sharp-eyed Bernie spotted a distant raptor which was quickly identified by our resident experts as an Eastern Imperial Eagle. We proceeded along the road in search of closer Great Bustards. Jenny called 3 in a field, but it turned out to be a small group of clearly similar (?!) roe deer - briefly known as 4 legged Bustards.

A little further along the road another Eastern Imperial Eagle was spotted and we all clambered out for superb scope views, noting its diagnostic white shoulder markings. A White-tailed Eagle, huge in comparison, also circled above us, until landing on a distant water tower. On the other side of the road

we found another group of Great Bustards this time at close range, although heat haze again prevented real clarity until some flew off in a powerful cloud of white fluffiness.

Our next stop was of particular delight to Tim - a local cake shop, full of delicious temptation in the town of Bugyi, apparently this name meaning Knickers! A few Sparrows and a single Black Redstart accompanied the coffee and cake, until satisfyingly replete we set off for Apaj fish ponds.

The first pond was full of water and relatively bereft of birds, although a number of Grey Heron stood on sentry duty. The next pond had been drained and was far more productive, yielding a number of waders including Avocet, Ringed Plover, Snipe, Grey Plover and Greenshank feeding on the rich, exposed mud. We were treated to Marsh Harrier and more White-tailed Eagles flying low over the water. Great Egret were everywhere and with some persistence we were pleased to track down Reed Bunting and Bearded Tit amongst the reed beds, the latter feeding on fluffy seed heads. Gabor explained that as the lake is drained, the fish get trapped in the remaining water and we were able to observe the fishermen catching huge thrashing fish from the corner of the lake and loading them into a lorry for transportation.

As we returned to our accommodation across the grasslands we stopped at Boszorzpuszta scouring the fields unsuccessfully for Stone Curlew, instead adding a tail-flicking Stonechat and a line of Corn Buntings resting on the wire, silhouetted against the late afternoon sun. Finally a detour to Szabadszallas gave us a splendid Saker Falcon perched on a pylon before launching into rapid flight across the fields and out of sight in pursuit of a small flock of birds.

### **Day 3: Saturday 13/10**

Our early morning perambulation was once again delightful, with the autumn gold treetops glowing magnificently in the early morning sunlight, whilst elsewhere wisps of mist lingered across the valley. The bird life was as elusive



as yesterday, but we eventually managed to pick out Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Great Tit, whilst Bernie highlighted the calls of Brambling and Woodlark indicating their presence. Several Jays were seen in flight and a Buzzard sauntered lazily in the



distance. However, the highlight of the morning was a sleek Black Woodpecker which flew rapidly across the valley.

This was our last morning at Kondor Lodge, so after loading the minibus we set off, driving through the historic town of Kecskemet with its wealth of interesting buildings before arriving at Toserdo, translated as forest walk. We quickly came upon a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker which was uncharacteristically showy, giving incredible views at every angle, demonstrating its wing bars, streaked underparts, small size and, of course, red head so everyone had a chance to clearly note all features. Moving on, we encountered a Middle-spotted Woodpecker at a junction of footpaths, less showy but seen by all. Further along the path Nuthatch and Short-Toed Treecreeper were heard, and the Treecreeper was seen briefly by some in the party. Finally, a Black Woodpecker was persuaded to visit, flying in and clinging to the tree trunk for a few moments before continuing on its way. An impressive collection of Woodpecker sightings, we left the woods happy.

Our next destination was Tiszaalepar where we picnicked above an oxbow lake. Here we added Greylag Goose, together with Pygmy and Great Cormorant, posing well for comparison purposes, as well as Wigeon, Gadwall and Mallard.



Little and Great-crested Grebe were also present as well as many gulls. Skittish Tree Sparrows were abundant on the grassy slopes below our picnic spot, whilst snowy white-headed Long-Tailed Tits of the race *caudatus* which passed through the path-side bushes were an interesting addition to our tally. We took a short walk between the lakes and scanned the banks and islands, adding Spotted And

Common Redshank to our list of waders. Leaving the lake we stopped at the village square where we noted a flock of Siskin feeding acrobatically in the treetops and finally a Syrian Woodpecker which, although mobile, afforded good views of its distinctive head markings and pink underbelly. Our guides also shared some of the interesting history of Hungary and we were able to see memorials and a map showing modern day Hungary together with the much larger area which had existed in the past, before the creation of new countries following the War.

This was our last stop for the day, but as we approached our accommodation at Patkos Csarda, distant lines of Cranes could be seen flying over the treetops coming in to roost on the Hortobagy pools. In the hotel grounds before dinner, some observed more Cranes flying in and also saw a Little Owl sunbathing on the stable roof. Unfortunately other members of the group were somewhat disgruntled to have **not** been advised of this garden meander and had headed to the bar for coffee instead. (Let's hope we get another Little Owl before the trip is out)!

### Day 3: Monday 14 /10



Another glorious pre-breakfast event, with the sun low and golden on the horizon chasing away lingering swathes of mist as skeins of Greylag Geese and rows of Common Crane flew semi-silhouetted across the open fields. House Sparrows chattered in the trees, accompanying the cacophony of sounds from overhead. We

headed a short way along a track finding a flock of noisy Tree Sparrows and a single Goldcrest in a shrub and heard a Green Woodpecker yaffle but did not manage to locate this.

After breakfast we headed out to the vast open steppe grasslands of the Hortobagy National Park, accompanied by our park ranger Atilla, calling first at the visitor centre in order to collect our permits, where we explored the wildlife exhibition and noted the statues reflecting historic roles and hierarchies of the Hungarian people. A stroll across to look out over the river alerted us to a White Stork's nest which was surprisingly still occupied.

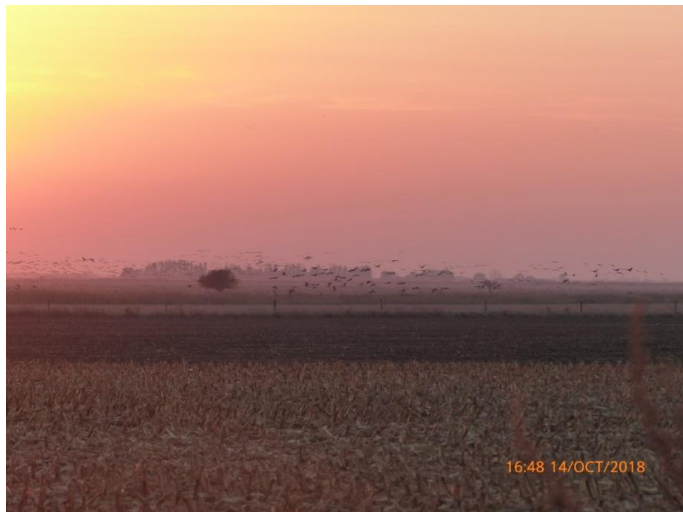
Next we detoured to Balmazyvaros to check for more roosting Long-eared Owls. Although well camouflaged, once we got our eye in we were able to locate at least 8 birds in a group of trees, providing good photo opportunities. We returned to the steppe and scoped a large group of ducks whilst we waited for an additional ranger, but there was little of note, although Bernie identified a single Pintail in eclipse plumage. Then we set off across the open steppe in search of Dotterel. We drove for what felt like hours across rough open terrain



with scarcely a bird in sight. Sue and Simon got very excited when they saw a Moorhen in an irrigation channel. We stopped for lunch when the bus would go no further on the rutted track. The

additional ranger accompanying us failed to notice our absence and carried on happily out of sight. Eventually he returned advising the target birds were no longer there! After our picnic we drove for another relatively birdless eternity, with just a Kestrel, a few scattered Rooks and a small flock of Lapwings to be seen. Eventually our spirits were restored when we were guided to a flock of over 60 Dotterel. We all managed to view these through the telescopes, then crept a little nearer and had some very satisfying views of these attractive plover-like birds. We took a slightly different, but equally bumpy route back across the grassland and came to a grinding halt shortly before a bridge which was our way out but deeply rutted. Gabor and Attila the ranger got out to check the lay of the land whilst the rest of us pondered on whether the bus would survive the day or whether we would need to get out and push, and then a bemused local cyclist appeared. There was much Hungarian discussion and pointing which resulted in a small detour and we were finally out and back on a tarmac road. Hats off to our driver!

We paused next at Naichidvar and had further views of Great Bustard strutting across the field. A small blue-flowered plant smothered in butterflies, including several varieties of Blues and Clouded Yellow also generated a lot of interest and another good photo opportunity. By now it was late afternoon so we headed



towards a pond at Elap where Gabor knew the Cranes often came to roost in large numbers. We set off down the track but were soon attacked ferociously by ravenous mosquitoes. Undeterred, we pushed on and were rewarded with thousands of Cranes arriving against a crimson sky, their melodic trumpeting filling the air as they landed, then rose again in

a tremendous grey cloud before finally re-settling.

### **Day 5: Monday 15/10**

Our early morning stroll was enjoyable although less fruitful today as well as somewhat delayed by the non-appearance of our illustrious Leader, who eventually emerged shortly before we returned for breakfast. (I do recall a similar occurrence on our trip to Lesvos so it appears there is a pattern around mid week - travellers to Aragon take note...□)!

Today's itinerary was the Hortobagy fish ponds and after the long hours spent

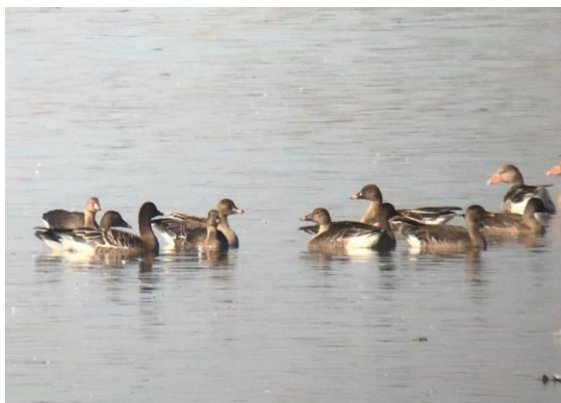


travelling on the bus yesterday we were all rather excited at the prospect of a walk. We stopped at the visitor centre to collect permits once again, and were treated to two Crested Larks showing well in the car park. From here we started at a muddy scrape in a field of Water Buffalo, where we found our first Little Egret of the trip, together with a few regular ducks

and waders, some Water Pipit, four Black Redstart hawking for insects on the fence line and a showy Stonechat perched atop a small shrub. A White-tailed Eagle sat in a tree but did not move. A rather mangy Golden Jackal was also seen.

We proceeded next to a large weed-filled pond where we located the common ducks seen previously and added a splendid chocolate flavoured Ferruginous Duck and a cluster of Pochard, their chestnut heads gleaming like conkers in the sunlight. After a break for lunch we climbed a tower to scan another area of the ponds. We were struck by the incredible numbers of Great Egret present and delighted by fantastic views of jaunty Zorro-masked Penduline Tit looking like miniature Shrikes in the reed beds below us.

A little further on and another tower was equally rewarding with a number of juvenile White-tailed Eagles circling hungrily, sporadically spooking the many water birds into a frenzy of flight before settling back on the water. One Cormorant had a lucky escape by literally diving underwater just as the Eagle reached for him with his sharp talons.



There were good numbers of geese, predominantly Greylag, but super-spotter Simon picked out some White-fronted Geese and then some Bean Geese, earning great admiration from us all, and after much research and debate it was concluded they were of the Tundra rather than Taiga race. Other highlights of the walk included a stunning Kingfisher, the perfect weather conditions

highlighting his iridescent turquoise back as he sped across the water and Carina spotted a grass snake, head held aloft as he swam across a channel. A Great Grey Shrike perched in a tree was another good find and Bernie called a



ringtail Hen Harrier which showed extremely well as it hawked low over the reeds.

It was late afternoon as we headed towards the final viewing tower. There were many water birds present, including a variety of waders, with Black-tailed Godwit being new to the holiday 'diary' and a Black-winged Stilt, although these were at some distance making identification difficult. A pair of Spoonbill gave themselves away by their distinctive feeding action. The sun was sinking towards the horizon and the distant fields were full of Cranes and eventually they began to arrive at the lake to roost – long, streaming ribbons flying in from every direction, their evocative calls softly distant at first but rising to a tremendous crescendo as they drew nearer and as their numbers increased. A truly spectacular finale to the day.

We returned through the fish ponds on the narrow gauge railway, a somewhat clunking experience, but quite magical with the pink- hued sky reflected in the pools and cold grey trees standing lonely and dark against the still, pale waters. Robbie revved up to leave the car park and Gabor joked 'Is everybody here?' At which point we realised Phil and Helen were missing!!! They very nearly had a cold, dark night locked in the Park!

### **Day 6: Tuesday 16/10**

Another change of location today as we transferred from the flat steppe plains to the scenic wooded slopes of the Bukk hills.

Our pre-breakfast stroll was largely unproductive except for Simon who wandered along the road adjacent to our accommodation and located the Little Owl sunbathing on the back of the roof where others had previously found it. He ran to alert Tim and Jenny, but sadly by the time we returned it had disappeared.

As we traveled along the road in the direction of Little Hortobagy Ann located another Little Owl, but we had passed by before she was able to alert those still missing this bird. We stopped at a tower at Okat to scan the area for raptors and finally, there on the barn roof in front of us was the elusive Little Owl. Phew!

A further stop elicited a probable Rough-legged Buzzard squatting in a field, obscured by heat haze but with a noticeably pale head. Our patience was rewarded when it rose up to confirm its identity revealing the pale head, white tail and dark carpal patches as it soared and circled upwards. A Common Buzzard then helpfully came into view, allowing comparison of key features.





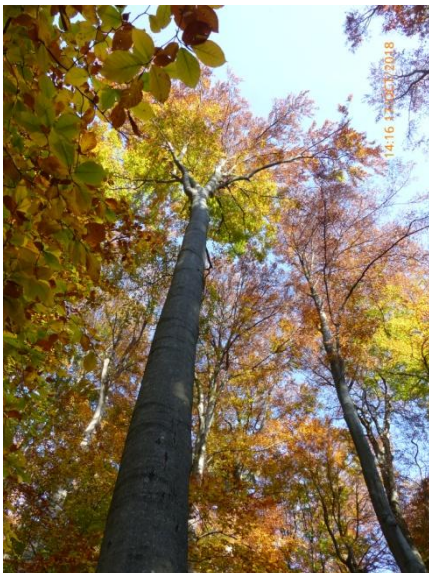
From here we drove to the River Tisza where we searched again for woodpeckers. We had good views of Nuthatch and a Great-spotted Woodpecker and indistinct views of a Green Woodpecker. We ate a scenic picnic in the shade of the trees overlooking the river, a beautiful, tranquil setting, before crossing on a quaint paddle ferry decorated with colourful geranium boxes. We arrived in the Bukk Hills late afternoon and headed straight for a

Quarry in the Hor valley, where we hoped to find Eagle Owl. We had no success with this but a sneezing Marsh Tit was some consolation. Finally, we drove to our next and final accommodation, the Hotel Sikokut at Noszvag.

### **Day 7: Wednesday 17/10**

The sun was shining once again in the early morning as we gathered outside the hotel before breakfast. Having arrived in the dark last night, it was only now we were able to appreciate the serene beauty of our hotel setting, overlooking a small lake with open lawned parkland beyond and surrounded by tall beech trees resplendent in their autumn glory. We were quickly rewarded with Crossbill then Hawfinch posing right at the top of a tall conifer tree across the lake. A flighty Grey Woodpecker was seen by some, but it quickly disappeared from view.

After breakfast we set off in the minibus to explore the woodlands and search for woodpeckers, stopping at various picturesque locations with the leaves painted hues of fiery orange and crimson-red, contrasting with brilliant blue sky in the autumn sunshine. We had some good views of Hawfinches at our first location where we strolled down a woodland valley, and numerous Great-spotted Woodpeckers were also seen. We then relocated to a tree covered range of hills where a White-backed Woodpecker was heard, but despite intensive searching we were unable to locate it.



We stopped at a picnic area, unfortunately strewn with rubbish, where we ate our lunch to the accompaniment of croning ravens overhead. A short stroll along the road produced Black Woodpecker, Marsh Tit and Goldcrest, in addition to the ubiquitous Great-Spot.

In the afternoon we drove further through the wooded hills and walked along a track to some deeper woodland away from the main path. This was an area Gabor knew to be good for the elusive White-backed Woodpecker but again we were unsuccessful. While we waited hopefully, Bernie kept us entertained with his usual range of groanworthy jokes and setting bird knowledge challenges (e.g. What is a Thicknee?). Eventually we began to retrace our steps towards the minibus when Bernie suddenly called with great excitement "Ural Owl!" What a magnificent bird! It sat on a low branch, a huge grey fluffy thing, nonchalant about our presence as he looked away from us towards the grassy slope where his dinner may be found. Twice he silently swooped a short distance to resettle



on another branch for a refreshed view. We were all able to get the most amazing scope views of this incredible creature, its beady black eyes and glossy yellow beak showing clearly. Definitely the bird of the trip, he seemed to change our luck with Black Woodpecker, Mistle Thrush and Brambling all showing well as we returned contentedly to the bus and headed for home.

### **Day 8: Thursday 18/10**

An extra early start for our last day's pre-breakfast walk was worthwhile, as many of us added a new bird to our weekly collection with a gorgeous Grey Woodpecker feeding on the grass alongside a Green Woodpecker in close



proximity, allowing a great comparison of the differing facial markings and also the smaller size of the Grey species. A Treecreeper and Jay and yet another Great-spot were also seen.

Following breakfast and packing our belongings we returned to the Hor Valley quarry, this time walking along the track in search

once again of the White-backed Woodpecker, but it was not to be. We returned to the hotel for lunch and then it was time to leave for Budapest. Gabor and Andi guided us in the minibus through this fascinating city, pointing out many of the interesting and historic buildings and explaining more of the history and culture of the region. We drove across a bridge which was apparently based on the original Georgian Norfolk Bridge in Shoreham and stopped briefly to view

the Danube flowing through the centre of the city. Then it was time to head to the airport and say our goodbyes.

Our thanks go to Bernie, Gabor and Andi for their knowledge, enthusiasm, patience and humour in leading this enjoyable trip with great company and wonderful birds.

Jenny Holter & Bernie Forbes