

BIRDWATCHING TRIP REPORT: HUNGARY – May 2008

DAY 1 – Saturday 24th May

We flew into Balaton Airport from London Stanstead arriving on time. Our first major problem was on getting the car and finding that the SATNAV did not have any maps for Hungary. After trying to hire one from Hertz we had to settle for a map book of Hungary which was a little out of date as far as new roads were concerned. I instantly became SATMAN. Our second problem was encountered when we left the airport – we did not know which way to go as the airport was not marked on the map. First we turned left then decided to go right before the lady from Hertz signalled us and pointed us in the right direction. This 30 minute diversion however did produce a few good birds. **Several Great White Egrets** were in the fields and we had two **Common Buzzards**, a **Black Stork**, **White Stork**, **Grey Heron** and numerous **Hooded Crows** fly over the car. This was not unusual as we found later that we were on the border of the Kis-Balaton Reserve.

We found the M7 and proceeded to head to Bucharest. The journey produced **numerous Buzzards, Marsh Harriers, Great White Egrets, and Grey Herons** but the big bonus was in the shape of a **Long-legged Buzzard** which flew over the car. I had planned a stop at Lake Valence (some 100km) from Balaton as our first stop. Access to the lake and fishponds was difficult, but an hours birding produced as well as most of the above mentioned birds, new birds in the shape of a **Red-backed Shrike and a Lesser Grey Shrike** (on the same bush), **Night Heron, Black-headed Gull, Sedge Warbler, Nightingale** and on one of the fishponds which we could see from the road about **50 Black Terns and a few Common Terns and two Black-winged Stilts**.

We decided to try our luck in the Vertes Hills as mentioned in both Gosney and Gorman, and I managed to navigate our way to Csakvar. This proved a little disappointing with only large raptor seen being a single **Buzzard**. Other new birds seen **were Kestrel, Linnet, Yellow Wagtail and Corn Bunting**. The best bird in this area was a **female Red-footed Falcon** sitting on a tree on the way back to Lake Valence. A second bird – a male was seen hawking after insects near our hotel at Lake Valence, where we stopped for the night.

DAY 2 – Sunday 25th May

We were up early and set off east at 6.00am in an effort to get across Budapest and onto the M3 before the build up of traffic. I managed to negotiate our way across the city using my little map with only one minor mishap which only cost us 5 minutes in time. Once on the M3 we stopped at McDonalds for breakfast. Birding from the car on the road east from Budapest produced a lot of **Common Buzzards and Marsh Harriers** hunting either side of the road. I did spot what I considered to be a larger bird of prey sat on top of a tree but we were going a bit fast to identify it. We had decided to firstly go to the Hotel Nomad before birding but as I took us off at one junction early and we got lost going through the town of Eger, we went to plan B and decided to go straight into the Bukk Hills and try the area around Repashuta as mentioned in trip reports. We found the birding difficult and apart from a few **Buzzards, one Golden Oriole, a Great Spotted Woodpecker, Magpie, Hawfinch, Chiffchaff, Corn Bunting, Yellowhammer, the odd Cockoo and numerous Red-backed Shrikes and Starlings**, the morning was something of a disappointment. We stopped at a clearing and Wayne made an attempt to photograph **Hawfinches** feeding on the ground but there was too much disturbance. The morning brightened a little when by chance we came across the Education Building a little north of Repashuta where we had **Collard Flycatcher** breeding in the garden in front, **more Hawfinches**, another **Great Spotted Woodpecker, Chiffchaff**

and Willow Tit just behind the main building. Just down the road we stopped at another clearing and had a party of **Marsh Tits** to add to our list. As the day was getting on we decided to have something to eat in the restraint in Repashuta, where I can personally recommend the mushroom soup. As we ate, parties of **House Martins and Swallows** continually hawked above and the odd **Buzzard** drifted past.

After lunch we decided to make our way back to Noszvaj and check in at the Hotel Nomad and then make a decision as what to do. Just by chance we turned off the main road and took a narrow road that ran through the woods. This turned out to be an inspired decision. We followed the road for a few kilometres stopping every now and then, until we eventually came to a spot that overlooked large areas of the valley. An hour and a half birding here produced some of the highlights of the week. Within minutes a large raptor drifted over and started displaying overhead – an **Eastern Imperial Eagle**, and two **Buzzards** circled with it to give a nice size comparison. A **Goshawk** appeared above the trees in front of us, and drifted towards us – again passing over-head, and a number of **Cuckoos** called or flew past. **Jay, Red-backed Shrike, Chiffchaff and Yellowhammer** were continually in view and much too late I picked up what looked to be a large falcon, but this disappeared before we could identify it. Within minutes a **Honey Buzzard** appeared over the trees to our right and after circling for a number of minutes actually settled on the top of a not too distant tree to give excellent views. We decided to push on to our hotel and further down the same road just north of the village of Bukkzserc we had our second piece of luck of the afternoon. Passing a wet wooded area a loud noise stopped us as we drove passed. In a large hole in a tree some 20m from the road – a **young Black Woodpecker** was calling to be fed. We stopped the car and Wayne positioned himself to photograph the young and hopefully the adult as it came back to feed its almost full grown chicks – there were at least two, possibly three birds. After an hour and ten minutes the adult appeared and settled on the tree next to the nest hole, giving me my best ever view of this species and Wayne the opportunity for photographs. Moving on we picked out a **Middle-spotted Woodpecker** a little further on in the same area of woodland, and a couple of singing **Wood Warblers**.

The road brought us out of the woods just north of the village of Bukkzserc and following the map we headed to Noszvaj and the Hotel Nomad, where we were greeted by Gerard Gorman himself. Wayne set about photographing the nesting **Black Redstarts** by the main entrance, while I set about booking us in and sorting the following day with Gerard. It was during this time that he had a **Middle-spotted Woodpecker** on the fir tree next to the entrance and a possible fly by **Grey-headed Woodpecker**. A walk around the grounds before our meal produced the **Middle-spot again, Serin, Golden Oriole, Swallows and House Martins, Cuckoo, White Wagtail, Magpie, and Song Thrush** in the grounds but no sign of any Grey headed woodpeckers. We called it a day as far as birding was concerned and enjoyed an excellent meal and refreshments at the hotel.

Day 3 – Monday 26th May

A pre-breakfast walk around the grounds produced much the same birds as the previous evening with the addition of **Great Spotted Woodpecker and Buzzard**. We had planned to go along with the group Gerard Gorman was leading but due to circumstances we were unable to do so. Gerard kindly gave us a more detailed map of the Bukk area and showed us potential sights for two of our target birds – Ural Owl and Grey-headed Woodpecker, both of which could be found on a gravel track/road north of the village of Cserepfalu and signposted to Hollosteto. He also informed us that a pair of **Lesser-spotted Eagles** had been seen regularly around 9.00am just outside Noszvaj village limits. That was our first stop and sure enough at 9.01am the birds got up from the field and circled round for ten-fifteen minutes giving excellent views. We drove on to Cserepfalu and found the gravel road. Our first stop was about a kilometre up the road at a clearing where Grey-headed Woodpecker were supposed to frequent. We tried for

about 45 minutes to call a bird from the forest but with no success, with only **Hawfinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Swallows, Linnet** and the inevitable **Cuckoo and Buzzard** showing. We pushed on another kilometre or so to the first marked area for Ural Owl. Driving very slowly and stopping and listening every now and again we did manage to find some birds – **Great and Middle Spotted Woodpecker, more Hawfinches** amongst our sightings but no success with our targets. We drove further up the narrow gravel track to the second area for the Owl – near a large clearing. A large bird flew in front of us from the trees to raise our hopes but it only turned out to be a **Buzzard**. We stopped at the clearing for ten minutes and to our surprise a **Long-eared Owl** called from the back of the nearby woods. We pressed on to a third area but again with no success and finally headed for the Education Centre where we had been the day before. Gerard had told us that by following a path down into the wood from the centre it would bring us to an area where Ural owls had been seen in recent weeks. We parked and set off and met Gerard and his party returning from the site. They explained that a group of youngsters on an educational exercise had passed them making a lot of noise and they had decided to return. Undaunted we pressed on for about a kilometre deeper into the woods but to no avail. Returning to the car we drove to Repashuta for lunch.

Afterwards we followed the road we had taken the previous day and from the viewpoint we had **Buzzard, Goshawk, Cuckoo, a fly over Black Woodpecker and two Common Swifts** (the only two birds we saw in the area). Not quite as good as yesterday but it was later in the afternoon. We drove on to the Black Woodpecker nest site but the young had fledged and the hole was empty. Before going back to the Hotel Nomad we went back to the quarry as Gerard had told us his group had seen Rock Bunting in the morning. We went into the quarry and tried calling the bird out but with no success although there were several **Nightingales, Blackcaps, White Wagtails, Wren and Chaffinches** in the area. There were also several **Cuckoos** flying continually across the quarry, regularly being mobbed. (Apparently we learned afterwards we should have stayed on the track and not entered the quarry). On the way back to the hotel we had an unidentified woodpecker fly into a row of trees but it disappeared before we got out of the car. We did have some consolation with a male **Golden Oriole** sitting on the top of the same row of trees, which Wayne managed to photograph.

Day 4 – Tuesday 27th May

We were up again before breakfast in another effort to get Grey-headed woodpecker – this time around the pond area near the hotel. As you can guess we failed again but we did have some success in the 2 hours we tried, with several **Middle-spotted Woodpeckers, Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker, Golden Oriole, Lesser Whitethroat, Short-toed Treecreeper, a Buzzard being mobbed by a Sparrowhawk, Hawfinch, Nuthatch, Golden Oriole, Turtle and Collard Doves, Wood Pigeon, Magpie, Hooded Crow, Jay, and Tree Sparrow**. Apparently a Wryneck had been seen but we failed with that as well.

We had discussed the rest of the week with Gerard Gorman the previous evening and instead of heading for the Zemplen Hills as planned, (and the possibility of Eagle Owl in a quarry near Tokaj) we decided to head for the Hortobagy a day early. However prior to heading south we went back to the quarry we visited yesterday evening and armed with the new information of staying on the road, we called out a male **Rock Bunting** within minutes – a lifer for me. En route to the Hortobagy, Gerard had given us a Saker nest box site on pylons near the village of Szentistvan. That was our first stop but we could not see any nest boxes. We did find a nice track that ran alongside a ditch which gave us **Great Reed, Reed and Sedge Warbler, Kestrel, numerous Marsh Harriers and Buzzards, Crested Lark and Skylark and Yellow and White Wagtails**.

We pressed on towards the Hortobagy region and birds we saw en-route were **White Storks and a single Black Stork, Great White Egret, Marsh Harrier, Buzzard, Spoonbill and two Red-footed Falcon**. We were amazed at the vastness of the place and after a cup of

coffee and a brief discussion we arrived at the Halasto Fish Ponds late afternoon. After a quick discussion with a group of Dutch birders who had just alighted off the train we followed their advice and caught the train ourselves alighting at one of the furthest observation towers. Birds were everywhere – **Grey, Night, Purple and Squacco Heron, Great White Egrets, Pygmy Cormorants, Marsh Harriers, Cuckoos, Golden Orioles and Ferruginous Duck** to name a few. As this was the last train out we did not have a great deal of time but 30 minutes scanning one of the last ponds (rather lake) gave us additional birds in the form of **Cormorant, Whiskered and Common Tern, Pochard, Red-crested Pochard, Great Crested Grebe, Bearded Tits, a single Penduline Tit, Savi's Warbler, Bittern and a single flyby Collard Pratincole.**

We got the train back and decided to make our way to our Hotel – The Vas-Kasteley (the Hungarian equivalent of Fawlty Towers) in the village of Kasteley. When we arrived nobody was to be seen, so we spent an hour on the northern road between Tiszacsece and Balmazujvaros but despite seeing good numbers of **Buzzard and Marsh Harriers**, failed to produce any new birds. We returned to the Vas-Kasteley where we were met by the owner Sandor who showed us our room and then took us to the stables (converted to an eating area) where we again encountered Gerard and his party. We went to bed with the sound of **Little Owl** calling nearby.

Day 5 – Wednesday 28th May

We were up at 5.30 to bird in the large garden area of the Vas-Kasteley. Wayne had thought he had heard a Grey-headed Woodpecker calling – played its call so many times he must be hearing it in his sleep. However it was not to be, but we came up with an impressive garden list in the next couple of hours – **4 Bee-eaters, nesting White Stork, House Sparrow, Starling, flyover Night Heron, Marsh Harrier, Song Thrush, Red-backed Shrike, Blackbird, Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Hawfinch, Golden Oriole, Collard Doves, Wood Pigeon, House Martins, Swallows, Hooded Crow, Jay, Magpie, a single Sand Martin, and we heard Wryneck and Green Woodpecker in the wood behind the hotel.**

After breakfast we decided to try the northern road again for a couple of hours before moving on to the fishponds. Turning from the hotel approach road towards Tiszacsece we noticed a track leading to some small fishponds. There was not a great deal on the ponds – **Great White Egret and 2 Little Egrets** but driving down a track beside the ponds we had **Skylark, Crested Lark and Corn Bunting** and heard calling **Quail.**

On the northern road, **Buzzards and Marsh Harriers** were numerous and it was not until we were near Balmazujvaros that we had our first new birds a **male Montagu's Harrier and two Lesser Grey Shrikes.** After getting bottles of water in Balmazujvaros, we travelled back along the road and noticed good numbers of large birds land in the distance to the north of the road. Travelling down a farm track we scoped the birds which turned out to be a party of **40+ Common Cranes.** (Gerard's group had a pair of Long-legged Buzzards mating just off the road the same morning).

We drove to the Halasto Fishponds with the plan to walk out and get the train back later in the afternoon. This allowed us to bird more comprehensively and have access to the observation towers on the way out. Birds seen yesterday were all again in evidence but the most productive sight was from the 2nd tower. Birds were everywhere and it was difficult to know where to focus. The second tower overlooks the "pond" that has a large breeding colony of **Black-headed Gulls (and apparently a few Mediterranean Gulls),** and from here we had exceptional views of **Bearded and Penduline Tit.** I managed to scope a **Penduline Tit** at about 20m collecting nest material from a bush behind the tower. New species also added were **two White-winged Terns and Little Bittern,** and we also had good views of **Savi's Warbler and Great Reed Warbler.** It was from here that we had our only **Little Egret** (apparently not so common) seen at the fishponds. After an hour or so two other birders made

their way to the tower, one was a hired guide and the other a gentleman we had met in Poland last year – small world. I talked to the guide – an extremely knowledgeable man who is involved in the Bustard project and was enquiring about the possibility of **Moustached Warbler**, when one started singing in front of us. Sadly despite singing several times we were unable to get a sighting. We walked to the last observation tower as we had been told that both Red-necked and Black-necked Grebe were breeding on the last “ponds” but we only managed to see good numbers of **Great-crested Grebe and a distant pair of Black-necked Grebe**. Birds on the last lakes and those flying overhead were numerous but we did not add any other new species. We caught the last train (16.20) back.

It was now around six o'clock in the evening and we decided to try our luck south of road 33 and took the road opposite the entrance to the Halasto Fishponds. After a kilometre or so we passé two smaller fishponds on either side of the road, and turned left by some silos onto a track that ran along the bottom end of one of the ponds. Down this track we found a hare sitting out in the open and Wayne spent the next 45 minutes photographing it. During this time the usual suspects of **Marsh Harrier, Great White Egret, Hooded Crows, Red-backed Shrike and Cuckoo** were seen and we managed to add a new bird to our list in the form of a **Hobby**, which apparently is not a common bird in the Hortobagy region. At around 7 pm we headed back to the Vas-Kasteley and on the way had **5 Red Footed Falcons** hawking for insects at the Ohat Fishponds **and 2 Spoonbills** flying over quite near the hotel.

Day 6 – Thursday 29th May

We had a lie in this morning and after breakfast we headed to Hortobagy village to meet our guide for the day – Zsolt, one of the Hortobagy park rangers. We discussed plans for the day and it seemed that the best idea was to be a form of “mop up” in trying to get the birds we had not seen in the area. Our first port of call was back to the Halasto fishponds in an attempt to get Moustached Warbler. Birds in evidence were much the same as previous but walking out to the second observation tower Zsolt stopped by the water buffalo area and picked out a singing **Bluethroat** and standing on the bank was a single **Common Crane** (according to Zsolt this was an unusual bird to be seen around the fishponds). We also had a flyover **Glossy Ibis** (one of the few in the area) and two more **White-winged Terns**. At the tower the **Penduline and Bearded Tits, and Savi's and Reed Warblers** were again in evidence, but there was a strong breeze which made things difficult. The net result was that **Moustached Warbler** was heard again but like yesterday, not seen. On the walk back we picked out a singing **Savi's Warbler** at the Buffalo area.

We headed east and turned off the 33 Road towards Stentistvan. After a couple of kilometres we pulled off the road and observed the **Saker** nest box on a nearby pylon. The nest box was occupied by two chicks and the female was also sat at the side of the box. The male paid one visit during our time there and was harassed by two **Kestrels**, giving a nice size comparison. Just before we left the female took off and flew directly over our heads.

We then went back to Hortobagy village for a coffee at the inn next to the visitor centre. Just before we were about to set off again Zsolt heard a **Syrian Woodpecker** call from the area of open land opposite and the bird gave us obliging views at the nest site in one of the trees.

In the afternoon Zsolt took us to a **Bee-eater and Sand Martin** colony and in the same area was a large **Red-footed Falcon** colony in a small wood just to the west. On route to the wood was a hide that overlooked a dried up marshy area which gave us **Lapwing and Redshank, and a Roller** which was sat on a nearby post. Wayne spent about 45 minutes photographing the falcons in flight before we set off south on the road opposite the Bee-eater colony to the protected areas for Great Bustard and Aquatic Warbler. It was late in the afternoon when we drove down a farmland rack to a raised mound which overlooks grassy plains where we had distant sightings of **3 Great Bustard** heads and necks (the grass had grown too high), and a hunting male **Montagu's Harrier**. Driving further south we added two **Lesser Grey Shrikes**,

before we again drove down farm tracks to the Aquatic site. Within minutes here an obliging singing and displaying **Aquatic Warbler** at a distance of some 30 metres appeared in front of us. This gave exceptional views and although several other birds were heard or seen in our time here they were all more distant. Walking back to the car we added a new bird – **Curlew** and driving back disturbed a **Purple Heron** from a ditch which flew in front of the car, and also had two more flyover **Spoonbills**. We dropped Zsolt off in Hortobagy village, had a cup of coffee and headed back to the Vas-Kasteley for our evening meal.

Day 7 – Friday 30th May

In my pre-planning I had not decided upon a definite plan of action for this our penultimate day. Both Wayne and I need Grey-headed Woodpecker to complete our set of European woodpeckers. We had debated going back to either the Bukk Hills or trying the Zemplen area but Gerard Gorman had advised us over our evening meal to try Lake Tata. This made sense for two reasons – one it would get us west of Budapest giving a shorter drive to Balaton and two, the wooded areas around the southern and eastern sides of the lake were more accessible for birding. He had also given us information which turned out in my opinion to be the highlight of the week – a site for both Eastern Imperial Eagle and Saker on the M3 motorway. We set off a 6.30 in the morning and following Road 33 soon hit the M3 and travelled west. Near the village of ADALS is an OHM petrol station situated on both sides of the carriageway, and it was here where he had advised us to stop. We had a cup of coffee and were leaving the café when right on cue I noticed a large shape drift by over the opposite side of the carriageway. It landed on the first pylon south of the motorway – **Eastern Imperial Eagle** and by walking to the end of the car park area we were treated to views of the bird at less than 100m. Wayne got a little nearer by climbing the bank of the crossover road and managed to get several good photographs of the bird – brilliant!! The saker site we were told, is on the opposite side (north) and although a large bird was sitting on the seventh pylon from the road it was too distant and we were looking directly into the sun to correctly identify it.

Extremely pleased with the early morning work we set off for Tata and although we hit Budapest at the wrong time I managed to navigate our way onto the M1 with no real problem and we were on our way north west. We arrived at Tata at around 10.30 and firstly found somewhere to stay for the night. Our first stop afterwards was to bird what we thought was the southern end of the lake. However, we actually were birding the fishing lake south of the main lake, which we later discovered by accident. This was no great problem and a 90 minute walk produced 5 species of woodpecker – **Great-spotted, Middle-spotted (the most common), Lesser-spotted, Syrian and Black**. The views of the **Black Woodpecker** were even more exceptional than in Bukk. Wayne spotted a single bird on a tree trunk at the southern edge of the lake and called it out. It flew to the edge of the trees and then over our heads to sit for some 30 seconds or so on a dead tree (10m from us) in the water on the edge of the lake, before flying back into the woods – the second brilliant experience of the day. We walked around the whole of the pond but sadly no Grey-headed woodpecker, but we did add **Wren, Short-toed Treecreeper, and Nuthatch** to our day list. Having completed a circuit of the pond we were sat outside a café having a drink when another **Black Woodpecker** flew over our heads.

We returned to our accommodation (a very nice pension) and took a couple of hours break before deciding on our next course of action. Around 5 O'clock we decided to try the Gerecse Hills north of the lake. After a few minutes we drove past a large body of water (different from the fish pond) and realised that this was actually Lake Tata. We continued on the road into the hills for a few kilometres but on having a flyover woodpecker, (we differed on identification!!) we returned to Tata. We parked somewhere near the middle of the lake on the east side and walked south. Again we had **Great-spotted and Syrian Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Cuckoo, our first Spotted Flycatchers, and heard a Black**

woodpecker calling and drumming but still no sign of Grey-headed Woodpeckers. We made our way back in the late evening and a few **Night Heron** flew overhead, **Mallard** were on the lake and **Swallows and House Martins** were over the lake, but we were still missing one of our main target birds.

Day 8 – Saturday 31st May

This was our last chance for grey headed woodpecker. We were up at 5.30 and walking through the woods on the south-east shore of the lake, but despite getting similar birds as the previous evening with the addition of **Common Tern**, and two more **Common Swifts**, we had no luck. After breakfast we set off south across country to hit the M7 and then onto Balaton for our flight home. The drive was not as far as we thought and took just over 90 minutes. No new birds on journey.

SUMMARY

Hungary was something of a surprise – we both had envisaged it to be similar to Poland which we visited last year. However the infra-structure is much better with major motorways across the country allowing for ease of travel. In retrospect, we could have flown into Balaton (in the west) and made our way directly to either the Bukk Hills or the Hortobagy on the first day. This could have been done in 4-5 hours depending on the time taken to get across Budapest.

The ease of birding in the Hortobagy compares with the difficulty in the dense forests of the Bukk. It is probably better to visit the Bukk Hills and Zemplen for that matter in April or early May when woodpeckers and owls would be easier to see. My advice to anyone visiting Hortobagy and the Halasto fishponds in particular is to take a minimum of two days. The area is expansive and the “ponds” are actually big lakes, apart from a few near the centre. The distance from the centre to the last pond is 6-7 kilometres. In my opinion, the best way to bird the area is to walk out to the train drop off one day – this will allow you to take in the first 3 or 4 observation towers and Buffalo area, and get the train back, and then on the second day get the train out and bird the furthest lakes and catch the train back. (or visa versa)

Birds of prey are very prominent - the sheer numbers of both Buzzards and Marsh Harriers is impressive - they are everywhere, but even these are outnumbered by Great White Egrets. We did quite well with Woodpeckers – definitely saw 5 species and heard 2 others but failed with our main target bird – Grey Headed Woodpecker and also another of our targets – Ural Owl. We were successful with other targets and all gave quality views – Eastern Imperial Eagle, Saker and Aquatic Warbler and although Moustached Warbler would have been a lifer for Wayne he did have the compensation of hearing them.

Our many thanks to **Gerard Gorman** for pre-trip assistance and invaluable advice during the week, and to **Zsolt** who was an expert guide. Also thanks to the members of Gerard’s official group – we felt like honorary members towards the end of the week.

Number of Species for Trip -141

Ken Musgrove and Wayne Geater

For more information and records of recent trips to Poland and the Pyrenees, visit Wayne’s website: www.wondersofwildlife.co.uk and my email is mussies@supanet.com