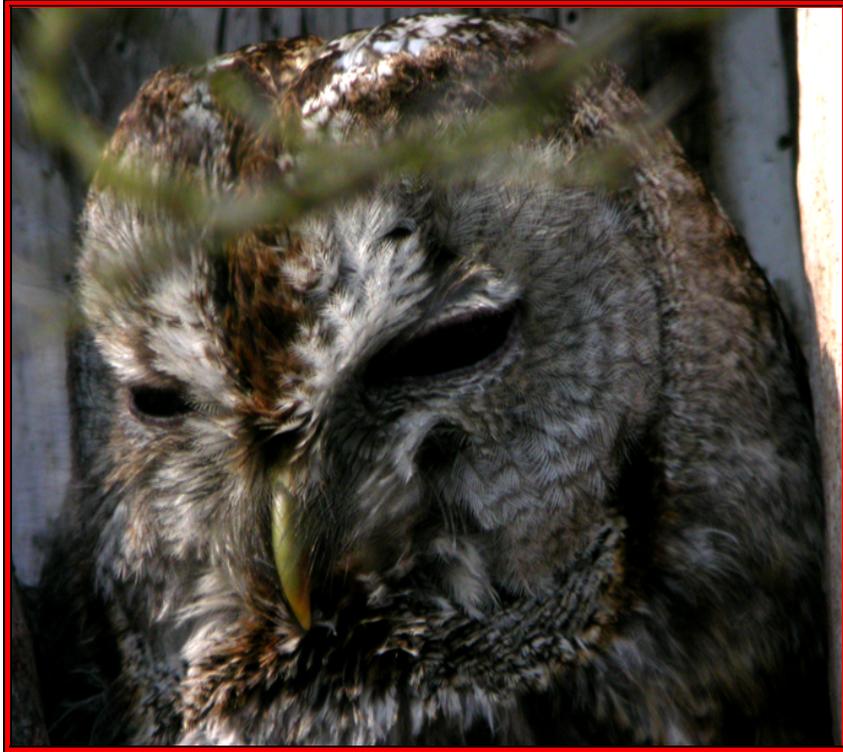


CZECH REPUBLIC - APRIL 2005



The Owl and Woodpecker Tour Led by Gerard Gorman

Day 1 - 31 March 2005

Clear, dry and sunny with a low of 6°C and a high of 9°C

We assembled at Newcastle International Airport at 07.45am for our 08.00am check in. It gave a few members of the group their first chance of meeting Roger Howell who had flown in the previous day from Southampton. With the introductions complete, we proceeded to check in and were quickly enjoying a coffee in the departure lounge. Our EasyJet flight number 6495 was announced over the tannoy and soon we were boarding the plane for our departure at 10.10. The flight was incident free and we landed safely two hours later at 13.25 local time.

On arrival at Prague Gordon, Iain and Tony made their way to the hire car centre to pick up the vehicles for the trip. Again the process went smoothly and soon we were driving two nine seater Mercedes Vito's back towards the arrivals lounge where the rest of the boys were patiently waiting.

Our guide for the trip Gerard Gorman had arranged to meet up with us at 14.00pm. Gerard had travelled up by train to Prague from Budapest in Hungary a journey of 5-6 hours. We all met up in the arrivals hall and soon we were loading up the vehicles and we were off on another adventure to try to catch up with some very special birds.

We drove down to E48 highway to the Strakonice region and onwards to the Sumava National Park. We were heading to a small town called Volary, which was to be our base for the next two nights. The Sumava area is 130 km (81 miles) south west of Prague in Southern Bohemia, which had wonderful scenery, beautiful old historic towns and real Czech pilsner alehouses.

Birding en-route we soon got our trip list kicked off with Feral Pigeon, Magpie, Common Buzzard, and Mallard. The birding highlight of the journey down was a fabulous fly over male Marsh Harrier, which afforded good views to everyone. Other less glamorous highlights were Common Coot, Starling, House Sparrow, Great Tit, Carrion Crow, Yellowhammer, Greenfinch, White Wagtail and lots of winter Thrushes.

There were lots of Roe Deer in the roadside fields together with the odd Hare. Hunting platforms appeared to be erected in every field and the "sport" was evidently a huge draw to the local population.

We arrived at the Apartmany u Jichu in Volary and checked in to our rooms. We decided to go out for an hour to check out a site close by. In the hotel car park we picked up the first of many Black Redstarts with both Male and Female showing well. Goldfinch and Lesser Redpoll were also bagged, together with Chaffinch and Fieldfare.



Black Redstart

We headed off to an area called Soumarsky and spent 45 minutes from 6.00pm to 6.45pm searching the river and forest fringes. We ticked off Crested, Marsh and Coal Tits, Redwing, Waxwing, Jay, Mistle Thrush, Firecrest and Crossbill. Four Bullfinches were spotted and showed nicely. We searched the river area for Black-bellied Dipper but were out of luck. A quick walk through the trees to a peat-filled bog was not very productive but we did find plenty of evidence of Wild Boar activity. We moved off back to Volary stopping en-route at a Pygmy Owl site. Back on the track, Gerard gave a fabulous impression of the Owl (complete with a Scouse accent) to try and draw the bird in. Tony Crilley believes that he had the bird fly overhead but it frustratingly perched out of view. A Tengmalms nest box was checked but the hoped for occupant was not at home.

We called a halt to the proceedings and made our way back to the town for our evening meal. Our meal was enjoyed in a local inn with the added bonus of the Czech beer being only 30p a pint. Fantastic!!!!!!!!!!!!

Day 2 - 1 April 2005

Clear, dry and sunny with a low of minus 4°C and a high of 8°C

Today we met up at 7.00am for breakfast. Gerard had arranged for a local Czech Ranger called Slavek to join us for our trip to the Sumava Mountains. Slavek had gained permission for us to enter the former military area, now a strict reserve that was depopulated and closed off under socialism as it lay close to the Austrian and German borders. Most of Sumava is covered in spruce, with some impressive tracts of primeval forest and deciduous plantations. There are also vast tree-less plains covered by numerous peat bogs.

First bird of the day was the male Black Redstart who preferred the area around our hotel. We drove off towards the spruce forest at Mount Bourbin with Slavek leading the way in his 4x4 Hyundai. At 8.00am, we reached an area of the park where we parked up. We set off for a trek up the higher paths of the mountain and forest. Gordon remained behind, nursing his poisoned toe, as it became obvious that this was going to be a tough walk. It proved to be a good decision as we were soon up to our knees in deep snow. During the ascent, we had Firecrest, Nuthatch, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Stock Dove, Raven, Treecreeper and Crossbill. A Tengmalms Owl box was checked and again it was empty.

We reached an area of the forest perfect for White backed Woodpecker. We stood in silence as Gerard and Slavek tried to entice the bird out into the open but we were out of luck and the bird failed to show. White backed Woodpecker is notorious for not responding to taped calls. Disappointed we headed further up the tracks, the snow became deeper, and the temperature plunged. After an hour we finally reached an area of which Slavek informed us was very good for Three-toed Woodpecker and bingo right on cue a female showed and afforded fabulous views just above our heads. Everybody was delighted as it was a lifer for everybody there. It was a fantastic bird and it made the journey back down all the easier. During the descent, we tried again for the White backed Woodpecker but again we were to be frustrated in our quest.

We reached the car park at 13.00pm and stopped for lunch of fresh bread and cooked meats and cheese. A Common Buzzard displayed over the ridge and at one point was joined by a Kestrel. Whilst in the car park there were two or three splendid White Wagtails, which were busy foraging the freshly revealed ground as the snow begun to melt.

After lunch, we headed off to the Dubra area to check out another forest site. We stopped off at a clearing, overlooking some fields where Slavek directed us to a site, which he knew which was good for Adder. We approached and discovered four Adders basking quite contently in the winter sunshine that is until we showed up and disturbed the peace. An early Swallow flew by and distantly Iain picked up a Great Grey Shrike perched on a conifer tree. We eventually reached the forest which we learned from Slavek was a good area for Hazel Hen. We spread out and walked through the forest hoping to flush the bird. After about 45 minutes, we were well spread throughout the forest. Then suddenly Slavek managed to flush a Hazel Hen and it flew off in front. Two of the group managed to see the bird as it flushed and Iain Robson and Tony Wales now proudly have Hazel Hen on their lists.

A Black Woodpecker was heard calling and Gerard played a CD of the call and drew the bird in. It gave fabulous views as it flew over head another Black Woodpecker was seen further over. Black Woodpecker was a lifer for three off the group. A Sparrowhawk and four Siskin went over together with another Bullfinch.

Slavek took us to another Tengmalms box but again it was empty. We suspected that the severe winter had led to the late arrival of the Owls. A very large Wood Ant nest was located and the occupants were very active in the winter sunshine.

Walking back along the track, a suspected wolf thing was spotted by Iain disappearing into cover. Sadly, Iain was the only member of the group to observe it.

We then headed back to the vehicles to travel to another site. Whilst mobile, a fly over Black Woodpecker perched on a tree so we stopped to have a look. Outside the vehicle, Gerard heard a Grey-headed Woodpecker calling. He immediately produced the CD and called the bird in. It performed superbly and was a lifer for eight members of the group.

We motored off to a village called Stuvece for an evening excursion to a prime Owl site. Slavek left us for an hour so that we could enjoy a break and a swift pint in a local inn. At 7.00pm, he returned and directed us into the woods a short distance from the village. During the walk, we picked up Great Grey Shrike, Marsh Tit, Yellowhammer, Bullfinch, Meadow Pipit, White Wagtail, Fieldfare and Mallard.

About 45 minutes into the walk, we stood and scanned an open area, which was known to be good for Ural Owl, but again our hopes were to be dashed and the Owl failed to show. Moving on, feeling rather deflated, we arrived at the main woodland edge and Slavek informed us that this was the place for Pygmy Owl. Slavek and Gerard gave their Owl impressions and within a couple of minutes a superb Hawfinch sized Pygmy Owl was there in front of us, perched prominently in front of us. It was a brilliant sight and an unforgettable moment. It certainly lifted our spirits and it set the scene for a good atmosphere later at dinner together with lots of 30p pints. The beer was served in some fantastic ornate glasses.

Day 3 - 2 April 2005

Clear, bright and sunny with a low of minus 7°C and high of 15°C

We decided to have an early start and we assembled at 06.45 for a trip back to the Bourbin Mountain and a pre breakfast excursion for the elusive White-backed Woodpecker. This was to be our last chance of this woodpecker before we had to head off east for our next base.

Again, we trudge off through the snow to the site and again we were to be disappointed. Two or three Great Spotted Woodpeckers and a few Nuthatches responded to the White-backed Woodpecker call. Disappointed we made our way back to the vehicles. The walk back had us pass a small pond and we managed to catch up with Black-bellied Dipper, Firecrest and a pair of Grey Wagtails. The journey back to the hotel brought our second Owl of the trip - Little Owl, although not everyone managed to see the bird.

After a quick breakfast, we packed our bags and made ready to leave Volary. Today Slavek was to leave us but not before he took us to Fwky Forest a site he knew for our last chance of Tengmalms Owl in this area. We moved off into the forest and walked quite a distance (again) to the owl site...you know the rest - EMPTY!

The walk was reasonably productive with Goshawk, Crested Tit, Crossbill and Siskin. A few Redpolls were also in the treetops and a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers tapped away at the top of a Beech tree. We returned to the vehicles and it was time to say goodbye to Slavek. It was good having him with us.

We moved off east to the Trebonska area for a two-night stay. This area lies adjacent to the border with Austria, at an elevation of 410-450 metres. The attractive old town of Trebon is the centre of the region. The Trebon basin is mainly a flat plateau, surrounded by rolling hills. There are few places in Europe to match this bird-rich and famous complex of over 500 ponds and lakes created and linked by channels in the middle Ages. Alder woods, reed beds, marshes and peat bogs, surround many of the ponds. Pine and Spruce plantations

enclose some. En-route we had a stop at a site, which was a nesting area for Black Woodpecker. We set off through the forest and found a Black Woodpecker nest site and in the distance the bird was calling. Another Tengmalms box was checked, another Tengmalms box was empty. There were Crested Tits and Jay in the wood and there were three species of butterfly - Camberwell beauty, Brimstone and Comma. We motored off and the rest of the journey was fairly uneventful with common species such as Kestrel, Coot, Pigeon, Buzzard, Magpie and Carrion Crow spotted from the van.



Garganey

A large colony of Black headed Gulls had made their homes on the many islands and on the water were Mallard, Coot, Moorhen, Black - necked, Great - crested and Little Grebes, Common and Red - crested Pochards, Gadwall, Teal, Goldeneye, Greylag Goose and on the fringes were Little Ringed Plover, Lapwing, Cormorant, Grey Heron and Redshank. Iain thought he had caught a glimpse of a crake species on the far bank disappearing into the reeds but he didn't get enough on it to be able to identify it. Reed Bunting called from the lakeside and a Raven flew over. A couple of Marsh Tits explored the shrubs on the path and a Pheasant was spotted in the undergrowth. Whilst scanning for Garganey Iain managed to pick up the Crake in his Scope and lo and behold it turned out to be a Spotted Crake. Everybody present turned their attention to the bird and it gave good views to everybody there. Paul and Tony hastily assembled their digiscoping kits to try for a shot of the bird. Although distant one or two decent shots were had.



Spotted Crake

It later transpired that Spotted Crake was a rare visitor to the Czech Republic, so Iain had found a cracker. Well done to him.

We moved off along the track and scanned the lake from different angles adding nothing new for the list. We did however discover a Penduline Tits nest delicately suspended from the thinnest of branches.

There were several Great Tits in the trees and whilst walking along the track we came across a "dog" walker accompanied by her pet WOLF (this time it was a wolf thing) and a strange looking mutt reminiscent of the dogs painted on the walls of the pyramids during Cleopatra's reign.

We moved off back to the vans but not before stopping to admire the Male Red-crested Pochard. It was busy showing off its plumage in the afternoon sun.



Red Crested Pochard

We drove off, leaving the lake behind and headed towards the Hotel Regent in Trebon. On the road there we spotted Jackdaw, Rook, Kestrel, Collared Dove, Lapwing and Skylark. We arrived at the Hotel at 17.30pm and completed the formalities of checking in. One member of the team was only in his room a matter of seconds before he demolished an ornate wooden shelf straining to see a Black Redstart out of the window. But worse was to follow later. We arranged to meet at 19.00pm and were due to dine out a fish restaurant that Gerard had recommended. After a beer we made our way to the restaurant which was fairly lively with a local band playing their own cheesy versions of such classics as "Yes sir i can boogie" by Baccara. Some of the lads sampled the local Carp and Pike and all had a good night.

Day 4 - 3 April 2005

Clear, bright and sunny with a low of 0°C and high of 16°C

After our breakfast we made our way to one of the many fishponds in the area. We drove for about twenty minutes and arrived at a sight that looked pretty unremarkable. We arrived at 08.30 and were greeted by

several Tree Sparrows. This turned out to be an excellent site as within minutes we had three 'Peckers in the bag. Middle Spotted, Lesser Spotted, and Great Spotted Woodpeckers all put on a show for the lads. The Middle Spotted Woodpecker was a lifer for several of the group but it was the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker that took the honours. It was particularly enjoyable as it was out in the open, showing superbly.

This area also had Nuthatch, Yellowhammer, Grey Wagtail, Jay, Raven, Hooded Crow and Short-toed Treecreeper. We had almost forgotten about the lake but we soon scoped Black-necked Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Greylag Goose and Cormorant.



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker



National Nature Reserve

Our next port of call was at another National Nature Reserve called the Maly Tisy State Reserve. Here we had our first Common Gull of the trip and another welcome addition to the trip list was our first Willow Warbler. Distantly a couple of large birds were spotted in the sky, although very distant they turned out to be a Black Stork and a White tailed Sea Eagle. A number of Common Buzzards were over the woods on the other side of the field. We made our way towards a pond where we soon discovered at least three Marsh Harriers quartering the reed beds. A Water Rail called from deep cover and it eventually showed itself. The water was fairly quiet with only Goldeneye on the surface. A brief burst of song revealed the presence of a Savi's Warbler but we

could not locate the bird. There were Reed Buntings and Yellowhammers around the margins and a Swallow flew across the field in front of us. A Hare skipped across the recently ploughed field and a Small Tortoiseshell fluttered by.

Lunchtime approached so we made our way to the small town of Luznice for a supermarket stop to pick up a selection of fresh breads, cheese and cold meats. Near to the supermarket there was a field with fifty plus Woodpigeons. It was an unusual sight because we had not encountered a group this size and presumed that they were a valued item for the cooking pot during the many hunts.

The local Carp farming industry managed the huge arrays of fishponds in the area. From time to time they are systematically drained allowing the farmers to sort the big ones from the little ones. We stop at one pond, which was slowly being drained, and eagerly devouring the floundering fish were thirty Great White Egrets and at least seventy-five Grey Herons. The freshly revealed mud fringes had Black tailed Godwit, Ruff, Dunlin, Redshank, Lapwing, Little Ringed Plover and Green Sandpiper. There was a pair of Shoveler on the water and dozens of Black-headed Gulls noisily went about their business as only Black-headed Gulls do.



Great White Egret

We moved onto the Klec fishpond where Red-crested Pochard, Black-necked Grebe, Great-crested Grebe, Common Pochard, Goldeneye and Tufted Duck were all showing. The fringes revealed the presence of a pair of 'Caudatus' race Long-tailed Tits. These birds had gorgeous white heads and were moving quickly through the lakeside trees.

Our next stop was at the Stara Reka meaning Old River reserve, a prime site for River Warbler but it was too early in the season for the birds. We explored the River Banks and it was clear that until recently the area had been in heavy flood. Roger spotted a White-tailed Sea Eagle as it glided lazily into view granting its admiring audience some fabulous views. It was particularly pleasing for Roger as it was the first Adult he had ever seen. Maurice spotted a couple of Pintail but nobody really took any notice as all eyes were skyward concentrating on the Eagle. A singing Blackcap eventually showed itself and there were a couple of Middle Spotted and Black Woodpeckers. A flock of northern race Long-tailed Tits went through stopping to give some excellent views, all of which were gratefully received.

Gerard guided us to a White Storks nest near Trebon and sure enough the bird was at home posing beautifully in the sun. Just below in the garden a Black Redstart was busy feeding and a Sparrowhawk went through.



White Stork

After that we moved onto another fishpond, this one had a Green Sandpiper, Goldeneye, Common Pochard and a pair of Garganey. In the nearby trees a Linnet was picked up together with a Grey - headed Woodpecker.

It was late in the afternoon and Gerard guided us to the town park. It was in immaculate condition in the evening sunshine. The Czechs obviously took a lot of pride in their local environment. There was a distinct lack of litter and dog shite at the places we visited. We strolled through the trees and soon saw a Middle- spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Blue Tit and Chaffinch. We searched in vain for Hawfinch but couldn't find any. We decided to call a halt to the day and make our way out of the park and head back to the ranch for a wash and scrub. As we made our way to the vans Roger, who had lingered in the park, picked up the call of a Hawfinch and soon located the bird at the top of a tree. As it called another flew in, as the lads hurried back into the park get an eyeful of the birds.

Happy with the Hawfinches we climbed aboard the vans and were about to motor off when we were suddenly hit by a dose of the sightseeing bug. Gerard commented that the town square was worth a visit for the beauty of the architecture. We made our way to the square much to the disbelief of Gerard who jokingly commented that he was with a group of Geordies, who wanted to see a little bit of culture.

We returned to the digs and reconvened for our evening meal, which was considered by many to be the best of the week.

Day 5 - 4 April 2005

Clear, bright and sunny with a low of 0°C and high of 19°C

Today we moved off further east into Southern Moravia to our third base in Mikolov. It gave us easy access to the Palava Hills Biosphere Reserve. We headed off down the E551 - 34 roads and a three hour drive was ahead of us. The town was located in the heart of the Moravian wine-growing region. This is an area of about 83km²

and situated close to the Austrian border. The main geological feature of the Palava Hills is the limestone outcrops, with the highest hill, Devin, at 550m (1804 foot), which is topped by a ruined castle. The whole region is warm and dry and the lower slopes of the hills are covered in vineyards. There is broad-leaved woodland with Oak and Hornbeam; there are scrub areas, grassy steppe-like habitat and higher up, rocky crags. Lowlands with intensive farming, vast wetlands and reed beds surround the area.

The journey was quite eventful with the first Osprey of the trip flying over the vans. A male Marsh Harrier, 2 Common Buzzards and a Raven were also seen. Our first main stop of the day was at a small town called Jarsva Vice (pronounced vitch-say). The town surrounded a towering Bavarian type castle which sat proudly on the hill. Three Kestrels performed in the thermals around the ramparts. We moved to another fishpond picking up a pair of Black Redstarts close to the shore. Scanning the lake fringes a pair of Common Sandpipers was located together with a Garganey, 2 Wigeon, Black-necked Grebe and Black-headed Gull. A leucistic Black-headed Gull provoked some debate. On the far shore three Ospreys, Common Buzzard, White Stork, Male Marsh Harrier and a White-tailed Sea Eagle were observed. It was getting close to lunchtime so we headed off to the vehicles. A Green Woodpecker was spotted together with two Serin. Lunch was taken at 12.30, enjoyed with a backdrop of 2 Marsh Harriers, White Stork and a pair of Great Crested Grebes.

Gerard suggested that we move off and visit a winter roost site, which was home to an exceptionally large amount of Long-eared Owls. It has been known that there have been over 90 of these birds roosting in two or three trees. We motored off eventually reaching the site but we were to be out of luck again however we discovered thousands of Owl pellets beneath the roost. Two Serins were singing from a nearby tree. We moved off heading for the Nove Mlyny Reservoir arriving at about 13.45. In the scrub close to the road a Black Woodpecker was located together with Blackcap, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Linnet, Tree Sparrow, Goldfinch and a Yellow - legged Gull. Raptor sightings included three Kestrels and three Buzzards. An Edible Frog was heard calling from the muddy fringes but couldn't be located. A Penduline Tit's wistful call was heard and soon we were onto the bird in a small patch of reed growing from the reservoir. The Penduline showed brilliantly in the afternoon sunshine. Tiring of the bird (how could we!!!) we moved off along the waters edge hoping to add a few new birds.

There was plenty of evidence to support the presence of European Beaver and soon we discovered felled trees, dam building and eventually found the beaver's lodge.

Paul Stewart was moving slightly ahead and flushed three Pipit type birds as they lifted one called and gave its identity away as a Red -throated Pipit. The birds flew ahead and went to ground; sadly we were unable to relocate them. The Red - throated Pipit is a regular passage migrant to the Czech Republic.

Time was getting on and we returned to the vehicles and headed off for Mikolov and our hotel. On arriving at Mikolov Gerard directed us to the local park in an attempt to see Syrian Woodpecker. A beautiful setting greeted us upon arrival and we set about trying to locate our target species. We were out of luck with the woodpecker but got five Hawfinch, two Serin and a Blackcap. As we were about to leave Paul Stewart spotted a Syrian Woodpecker fly into the park Frantically we strained to see it and it eventually showed affording great views.. One more stop to make before going back to the hotel and this was to an Eagle Owl site in a disused quarry. We scanned every nook and cranny but could not find the birds. We gave up and headed back to the Hotel

That night we dined in the hotel and afterwards met Josef a respected local birder and friend of Gerard. Josef had arranged for an excursion to a local wine cellar. Many villagers in this part of the world cultivate grapes for wine production, which is enjoyed by their families. Occasionally they allow in visitors to sample their wares. We were lucky enough to be invited to a wine cellar for an evening of culture. On arrival our host who quickly shoved a glass in our hands and armed with a pipette charged our glasses greeted us.

I suppose the idea was to gently sip the wine allowing the flavours to explode and graphically explain your sensations in the style of Oz Clarke and Jilly Goolden. Well we hadn't read the script and soon the Czech waiter was scurrying from bottle to bottle to refill his pipette. As the evening degenerated and the noise levels increased it was realised there were no toilets. Cue a quick trip to the Hosts front garden!!!!

We eventually made it back to the hotel - well served.

Day 6 - 5 April 2005

Clear, bright and sunny with a low of 8.5°C and high of 22°C

We awoke for breakfast seriously worse for wear. Breakfast was quietly enjoyed before we headed off to the Navčna Stezka Breclav Pohansko reserve. A long walk into the reserve was ahead of us and soon we were on the march to find the birds. This turned out to be a fantastic reserve and with hindsight was for me my most enjoyable place. As we walked through the trees the reserve opened out and soon several Black and Red Kites were observed together with Black and White Storks

Following the tree line, a roosting Tawny Owl was spotted in a tree hole (cover photo) and as we moved on Middle Spotted, Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers were seen. Further on Hawfinch, Great Grey Shrike and Hooded Crow were seen. We reached an embankment, which gave us a fabulous view of the reserve in all directions. We patiently sat and waited for the raptors to show. At about 11.30 Roger Howell bagged a Saker Falcon and those people sleeping off the wine fest were soon on their feet watching the bird. Then a White tailed Eagle flew by just above our heads and two Common Buzzards and White Stork soared in the Thermals and a hundred yards further on there were two Black Storks, White Stork and a Black Kite performing for the lads. A large herd of Red Deer thundered through the trees and Stonechat with its characteristic call was found. Gerard heard a distant calling Wryneck and soon we spotted the bird calling loudly from a dead tree, our Ninth 'pecker of the trip. A flyover Grey Heron adds to the day list and a White Wagtail and our first Wheatear were added. Further on a second out in the open Wryneck was eagerly watched. They are fantastic little birds. The wetlands of this reserve absolutely teemed with life and a cacophony of amphibians called which included Tree Frog, Common Frog, Common Toad, Edible Frog and Fire-bellied Toad. Gerard managed to catch a Fire-bellied Toad and a couple of photos were taken of these remarkable little creatures. The underside of the Toads secretes an irritant so careful handling was in order.



Fire-bellied Toad

We spent quite a while in this area before heading back along the track. Black and Green Woodpeckers, Great Grey Shrike and two Tree Pipits were observed. Whilst walking back a large raptor flew into land above the

woods. This bird was identified as an Eastern Imperial Eagle. We patiently waited for the bird to once again show but it didn't give itself up. As the sun shone the reserve went quiet so we headed off to the café for a cool drink, ice cream and a regroup. At the café some of us decided to return to the Eagle point in the hope that it would show. There is probably only one pair of Imperial Eagles in this part of the world, so we would be lucky to see one. We disciplined ourselves by allowing one hour for the quest.

The hour soon went with only White tailed Eagle and Black and Red Kite being added. We finally gave up and headed back to the vehicles. En route a Hoopoe was a welcome addition to the list. It buried itself in the wood as we approached. Birder Pete piled into the wood, spooking a deer in the process, but he managed to kick out the Hoopoe at the other end.

The Pataka Reserva was our next port of call and upon arrival Two Green Woodpeckers were found "anting" on the ground close to the car park. The reserve was quiet with only Red Crested Pochard and Common Snipe. This was a good area for Water Pipit, but again we were to be frustrated in seeing one.

Opposite this reserve was the Zamecky Chateau at Lednice. The locals were out in force enjoying the warm spring sunshine. A Kingfisher sat by the riverbank as we walked through the park. We were heading for a well known Heronry and the chance to encounter summer plumaged Night Herons. With luck the Night Herons were at their nests and we enjoyed the spectacle. A large mammal was spotted swimming in the nearby lake and at first we thought it might be a beaver. It was swimming towards a small island, once ashore we realised it was in fact a large Musk Rat. I think the Czech Budvar was beginning to pickle our brains!!!

We were to try for the Eagle Owls again tonight but we were a little early. It was decided to have a look a good sight for Crested Lark, which was a lifer for Birder Pete. It was late in the day and we couldn't find any Crested Larks. We were to try again tomorrow.

After the excitement of the Crested Lark search (eh!!!) Gerard directed us back to the Quarry and took our positions. Quietly we listened for any sound of the Owls. A Kestrel patrolled the Quarry but little else. After Forty-five minutes the Eagle Owl was heard calling and eventually flew in from its roost and showed well above us favouring an area of mature Pine trees.

Spirits were high after the Eagle Owl and we skipped back to the vans pausing only to watch a Noctule Bat hawking insects close to the path.

Dinner was once again enjoyable and the local brew was consumed in volume (again & again & again).

Day 7 - 6 April 2005

Overcast and slight drizzle in the morning c/w sunny intervals during the afternoon with a low of 11°C and high of 15°C

After breakfast we had a look around the exquisite town square in Mikolov to take some photos and stock up on grub for the next stage of our adventure. We left early for the next stage of our trip, but first we tried again for the Crested Larks and this time we were lucky. Two singing birds were found and represented lifers for Birder Pete.

There are only two places in the Western Palearctic where you can see genuine wild Reeve's Pheasants. One is in France and the other is the Czech Republic. In the Czech Republic there are between 200-400 individuals from a remnant population released during the first half of the 19th century. So it was a Three-hour drive to the town

of Hulin, which is situated in Central Moravia and our next stop at the Motel Jerry, and after signing-in, headed off to the Navcna Stezka Zamec. We arrived at the car park and immediately ticked off two Ostrich, Twelve Chukka, fourteen Turkeys and six juvenile Reeves Pheasants - all caged of course.

We walked along the path close to a fishpond system and headed towards the forest. We picked up the first House Martin of the trip together with a Lesser Pecker, Middle Spot, Syrian, Greater Spot and a flock of twenty five waxwings. Silence descended as we entered the forest. Well not quite, to the annoyance of Gerard, Peter was still chirping away in the background. Iain and Roger, who were lagging behind heard a call and out flew a Nutcracker above them. Gordon managed to get onto it before it disappeared into cover.

We searched a promising Reeves area without luck and at one point were challenged by an officious looking warden resplendent in his military style uniform. He was helpful though and pointed to an area further down the woods, which in his opinion gave us our best chance of the Pheasant. We searched for a long time eventually giving up. We agreed that an early morning search was needed for these skulking birds comparing their habits with the Golden Pheasants of Norfolk. We headed back to the fishpond to find 4 each of Marsh Harrier and Osprey hunting the reed beds and pond. A scratchy sounding Serin was singing loudly from cover and at 13.40 a Great White Egret flew in. Along the path we found a tail feather belonging to a male Reeves Pheasant. This was picked it up, to be carefully transported home. Walking back to the vans we were accompanied by a flock of Tree Sparrows, Yellow-legged Gull, Blackcap and two Noctule Bats.

Back at the vehicles an irate farmer's wife who had the audacity to accuse us of releasing her Chukkas met us. They were scattered all over the farm. It was a bit of a blow because a couple of the lads had ticked a Chukka, which was spotted on approach to the farm, myself included!

After the excitement of the farm we made our way back into the hills for one last crack for the elusive White backed Woodpecker and an area known to be good for Nutcracker. But despite a long arduous walk no birds were found. We did however find evidence, which indicated the presence of the White-backs in the form of tree damage. Two Ring Ouzels of the race *alpestris*. A huge flock of Brambling's were on the move North through the Beech forests with several dozen Siskins. As the rain started to descend we decided to head off to the digs. A male Crossbill took the honours as last bird of the day.

Another good night was enjoyed and as we headed off to bed we agreed a 06.30 start for another crack at the Pheasant.

Day 8 - 7 April 2005

Bright and Sunny with a low of 8 °c and high of 19 °c

We assembled bleary eyed a 06.30, leaving Cass behind in bed. He had heard that there was a sale on at the local retail park and he wanted to be first in the queue when the doors opened. We drove the short distance to the site and remarkably within five minutes of arriving had bagged five Woodpecker species -Black, Green, Lesser, Middle and Greater. An early Osprey was fishing the pond as we marched past. At the site the group were spaced out with Paul and Tony Stewart out in front. Suddenly Paul singled that he had the Pheasant up ahead. TS got onto the bird sitting proudly on a small mound. The rest of the group were frantically signalled but the Pheasant slowly walked from the mound and disappeared into the thick undergrowth. Only Paul and Tony had managed to connect.

After an initial search of the surrounding area the pheasant was heard to give off an alarm call from the thick undergrowth. An organise Pheasant beat was hastily arranged and after a while we flushed the male for all of

the party to witness. That is all except Roger who was on the other side of the thicket and missed the bird as it flew. Cass by this time was at the sales, also missed it. Another tramp through the trees brought the bird back into the air for Roger to see and eventually add to his list. This bird was especially pleasing for Gordon as it was the only tick he could get on the trip.

A singing Golden Oriole was traced to a mimicking Starling and a couple of Black Woodpeckers gave the group some cracking views oblivious to our presence. Several Roe Deer were seen and a dark phase Red Squirrel (almost black) was seen chasing a "normal" coloured Squirrel.

Breakfast time fast approached and we made our way back to the Motel for breakfast adding Marsh Harrier to the day list on the way.



Reeves Pheasant

After breakfast we packed up our kit and prepared for our journey back to Prague. We assembled in the car park and loaded up the vans. Overhead five Taiga Bean Geese flew north back to their breeding grounds and a couple of Black Redstarts hunted for insects around the motel.

The camera was mounted onto the tripod for the now customary group photo complete with the ancient county flag of Northumberland. Gerard insisted on calling it a tablecloth. It turned out the lads had more chance of seeing the flag than they did of seeing the mythical Ural Owls and White-backed Woodpeckers.

Disappointingly for Cass he had missed out on a couple of bargains at the sales but with the promise of more shops in Prague he quickly cheered up.

We made our way towards Prague stopping en-route to drop Gerard off at a train station so that he could undertake the long journey back to Budapest. We said our goodbyes and thanked him for the tremendous effort he had put into the trip.



The Czech Mates

We arrived in Prague and checked into our Hotel. Several of the group decided to visit the city to sample the atmosphere and see all of the wonderful buildings and architecture. Whilst there we saw the tribute to Jan Palach and Jan Zajic who stood in defiance of communism back in 1969 and so bravely gave up their lives. Who knows without their sacrifice we might not have had the opportunity of visiting this wonderful country.



Summary

This trip was by its very nature going to be very difficult. The wish list included all of the European Woodpeckers and the majority of its Owls. Sadly we were hampered by the severe winter whose stranglehold on the Czech Republic was very much in evidence.

It was a memorable trip with the group managing to see nine of the Woodpeckers and four of the Owls including the magnificent Eagle and Pygmy Owls. Other amazing highlights included White tailed Eagle, Reeves Pheasant, Saker Falcon, Imperial Eagle and of course the amazingly abundant Woodpecker family. These fascinating creatures were everywhere and totally at home in the primeval forests of the region.

Despite being in each other's company constantly the group got on well. Gerard's in depth knowledge of the birds and the geography of the region paid off with some fabulous species bagged. We visited some exceptional habitats along the way. The forests were stunning, but as I have said before the reserve at Navčna Stezka Breclav was for me truly remarkable. Storks, Kites, Eagles, Sakers and Wrynecks. The sound of the marsh from the many thousands of Frogs and Toads will stay with me for a long time.

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On behalf of

Maurice Hepple Tony Crilley
Iain Robson Paul Stewart
Tony Wales Peter Griffin
Paul Cassells Gordon Wilson

And last but not least *Gerard Gorman*