

Hungary - Led by Gerard Gorman

With Muriel & Tom Cadwallender, Jenny Holland, Gordon Wilson, Andy McLevy & Tony Stewart



Introduction

After two successful birding trips during 2004, one to the Pyrenees in early March for four nights and the second taking in Andalucía, Coto Donana and Extremadura in Southern Spain during April for eight nights, it was suggested that we look at Eastern Europe for one of our trips during 2005.

I produced a list of selective species of birds to target in Eastern Europe from Scandinavia through Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Romania and down to Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.

As well as the more common species were some which would be more difficult to observe, including Owls, Woodpeckers, raptors and grouse which occur in varying numbers throughout this vast area. It was also important to keep the costs down and try to see as many species as possible during six-day break.

Cost was also an important factor to consider, but with Easy jet now operating from Newcastle to many of the cities and capitals of eastern European countries, this option offered a relatively low cost solution as well as ease of accessibility from home. To maximise our chances of seeing as many as possible of the more difficult species, it became obvious that we would need some local expert help.

I met and became acquainted with Gerard Gorman some twelve years ago and knew him to be the resident expert on Eastern European birds and in particular woodpeckers.

I approached him about our desire to visit Eastern Europe and after many emails and discussions about our target species Gerard suggested we visit Hungary in late April early May. By visiting in late March early April we would maximise our chances of seeing all ten European woodpeckers when they would be calling and drumming.

It would also be the optimum time to see some key species provided the conditions were right in particular Aquatic Warbler. There would be an important supporting cast of other species available at this time including Eastern Imperial Eagle, Saker Falcon, Great Bustard and White-backed Woodpecker and Hungary offered all this in a relatively close proximity of habitat.

Gerard kindly agreed to arrange the accommodation, meals, local warden and access to protected areas and agreed to lead us at a discounted rate.

I circularised an outline of the proposed trip with the estimated cost, and the trip quickly filled-up with six participants. I then set about organising the flights, transport and finances and kept the participants informed with Newsletters.

Gordon Wilson – May 2005

Day 1 -Tuesday 24 May 2005

We assembled at Newcastle International Airport at 14.30pm for our 16.30pm flight to Budapest. The check in went smoothly and there was just enough time for a swift pint before our flight was called. The weather was a little unsettled on departure but we quickly forgot about it as we departed Newcastle bound for another birding adventure. The flight out was very good and on board was the same flight attendant that catered for our needs on our easy Jet flight to Prague a few weeks earlier.

It was a beautiful spring evening as we made our approach to the airport with the Danube in full view and both Buda and Pest showing well from the window of the Boeing 737. A smooth journey ended with the plane arriving half an hour ahead of schedule. Following our safe landing and a quick transit followed through the customs and saw us assemble at the baggage reclaim in no time at all. Safely reunited with our luggage we made our way through the International Arrivals to meet up with Gerard Gorman who was to lead our little adventure in his adopted homeland. Gerard was patiently waiting for us, we quickly renewed our acquaintances, and it gave Muriel, Tom and Andy their first chance of meeting our illustrious leader. The introductions over we headed off to the car hire desk and with the formalities quickly completed, we made our way out of the airport to pick up our transport for the duration of the trip. Thankfully the vehicle, a nine seater VW Transporter, appeared to be in excellent condition and soon we were loaded up and ready for the off.

We quickly kicked off the trip list with the local specialities – Magpie, Wood Pigeon, Swallow and White Wagtail. The light was closing fast and Gerard informed us that the estimated journey time would be approximately two hours to the hotel. The Journey to the Noszvaj region of the country, took us along the M3 Motorway. An uneventful journey saw us arrive at 22.30.

The Hotel was called the Nomad and was situated on the border of the Bukk National Park. We had pre booked an evening meal and soon we were enjoying a superb array of local dishes, which were washed down with a few beers and a bottle or two of red wine. Afterwards we sat with Gerard who outlined the expectations and format of the remainder of our tour. A couple of bottles of wine later we called it a day at about 00.45, with Andy and Tony agreeing an early start for the dawn chorus.

Day 2 -Wednesday 25 May 2005

We rose at 05.00 with the dawn chorus belting out. It was a glorious start to the day with sun shining brightly. We stood at the hotel window and quickly kicked off our bedroom list with an impressive cast. Grey-headed Woodpecker, Wryneck, Common Cuckoo and numerous Tree Frogs were heard calling and Black Woodpecker flew past the hotel. In the garden were Black Redstart, Song Thrush, and Goldfinch. At the edges of the Hotel, we added Hawfinch, Jay, Swallow, House Martin and Common Buzzard. A short walk away from the Hotel saw us at the local pond, which bordered a fantastic broad-leafed wood. More Hawfinches were located along with Green Woodpecker and Great Spotted Woodpecker. A Raven flew over the wood and a party of White headed Long-tailed Tits moved through. Two Collared Flycatchers were observed at the edge of the wood and we watched them go in and out of a nest hole. Two more flycatchers were seen to visit another tree hole close by.



Collared Flycatcher

At 07.45, we headed back to the hotel for breakfast and another selection of great grub. By 09.00, we were en route to explore the Noszvaj region. Gerard guided us to the outskirts of the town, which was covered with vineyards and allotments. At 09.10, we stopped at a vantage point and before long, we had male and female Golden Orioles on the list, Nightingale and Icterine Warblers sung loudly from the undergrowth and soon Syrian Woodpecker was added. At 09.30, we arrived at an area of reed beds bordering a sewage farm for a fifteen-minute stop. Two River Warblers showed and we added Barred and Great Reed Warbler. The Barred Warbler showed particularly well. A Marsh Harrier quartered the reed beds and at this site we had good views

of Wryneck, Red backed Shrike, Cuckoo, Nightingale, Turtle Dove, Mallard and Three Hawfinches. A fox was spotted walking along the track.

The day was to be made up of short drives, to take in plenty of bird habitat. At 10.00, we arrived at another roadside site in the Hor Valley and we added two Short-toed Eagles, Pheasant, Jay, Red-backed Shrike, Nightingale, Great Reed Warbler and Marsh Harrier were also seen. We arrived at our next stop the beautiful wooded Bogacs Village at 10.15, Wood Warblers belted out their distinctive shivering song and there were plenty of Collared Flycatchers present. This was an area known to be good for White backed Woodpecker and we soon saw Great and Middle Spotted.,Gerard played a brief snatch from the CD hoping to entice the White back to show. Before long, one bird flew in, and perched just above our heads. It briefly stayed on the tree before flying past us and over to the opposite side of the bank. Result!

We moved on until we reached a clearing a known spot for Corncrake but despite our better efforts, we were out of luck. Three Red-backed Shrikes sat sentinel like at the top of bushes and there were plenty of Wood Warblers and the occasional Collared Flycatcher. We searched areas of woodland, which were good for Ural Owl, but again we were out of luck with no birds being located.

By this time, the hunger pangs were kicking in so we stopped at 13.00 for our packed lunch. Afterwards we moved off to another Ural Owl site, which we again dipped. There was however, River and Wood Warblers a common bird in this area were seen well. A quick stop at a quarry later on that afternoon saw the group adding Rock Bunting more Red-backed Shrikes (they were everywhere!), Corn Buntings, Stonechat, Hawfinch, Skylark and Yellowhammer were all in the area.

At 16.10, we arrived at the first of many fishponds but we only added Coot and Mallard. The fringes had Goldfinch, 3 Red-backed Shrikes, Reed Bunting, Stonechat and Hooded Crow. A large raptor was spotted in the distance sitting on a pylon; we drove closer about a kilometre up the road and in a state of excitement slowly approached the pylon, taking tentative steps along the track praying that we would not spook the bird. We had found a stunning adult Eastern Imperial Eagle. The bird sat on the pylon for several minutes, ignoring our ever-closer moves towards it before taking flight and moving off west allowing crippling views.



Eastern Imperial Eagle

How do you follow that? Well it was now late afternoon and Gerard guided us to a Bee-eater colony not far from the Eagle site, and we spent the next twenty minutes watching these colourful birds hawking insects around their colony. We returned to the bus and made our way back to the hotel. We arrived safely and before our evening meal, there was enough time for a walk around the village. More Hawfinches were seen together with Collared Flycatcher and Grey-headed Woodpecker.

Day 3 -Thursday 26 May 2005

We woke to another fabulous sunny day and already the temperature was rising fast. Tom had heard a Scops Owl calling during the night in the woods close to the Hotel and we planned to check this out later that evening, according to Gerard Scops Owl is fairly scarce in this area. We set off and drove through a village called Eccer and at about 09.10 reached our first destination, which was the Quarry Belapatifalva. We scanned the quarry sides in the searing heat for our main target – Rock Thrush. We had no luck locating any birds and Gerard informed us that the species was in decline in Hungary. We did however locate a couple of Turtle Doves and a Red-backed Shrike.

We motored off from the Quarry and headed for the National Park and specifically the Valley Szilvasvarad where our target species was to be Red-breasted Flycatcher. Again, we were to be disappointed as we were unable to locate any birds. The main birds that we managed to pick up were Collared Flycatchers and a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers and a overhead Raptor was quickly identified as a Honey Buzzard.

Giving up on the RBF we pulled up and parked at around 11.45 and almost immediately, we were on to a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker the bird showed brilliantly. Also in the area were Blackcap, White Wagtail, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Chiffchaff, Stonechat and Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Later we moved to a more open area through the Bukkszerc Tard Village, where we could enjoy our lunch and scan for raptors. We stopped at a vineyard in the Bogarc area where we rested up for a while noting among other Black Redstart, Linnet, Corn Bunting, Starling and Tree Sparrow.

After lunch we moved off to another reed bed site hearing more River Warblers and Nightingales; also in the scrub were Barred Warbler, Wryneck, Golden Oriole, with Cuckoo and Hawfinch overhead. Across the way there was a huge flock of Bee-eaters. Moving on we came across one or two Quail calling from the cover of a Barley field whilst overhead there were several Common Buzzards. We drove around this area for most of the afternoon trying to locate our target bird – Lesser Spotted Eagle, but we were out of luck. At one vantage point we found a Woodlark and a Red-backed Shrike, but no Eagles. Time was getting on and a decision was taken to call it a day and head back to the Hotel for our last night at the Nomad. After another great meal at the Hotel we were relaxing with a drink when we decided to check out the Scops Owl. We had been reliably informed that the bird regularly calls during the night, so much so it drove the Night Porter up the wall. Outside we heard the bird calling close to the hotel and we tried to tape lure the bird without much success. The Scops flew in but disappeared into thick cover. After a while we gave up and retired to the bar to enjoy the local produce.

Day 4 - Friday 27 May 2005

This morning, we had breakfast early and said goodbye to our hosts before leaving at 07.45 for the Tokaj region and the journey to the Hortobagy National Park a famed reserve in Eastern Hungary. We dove for around 80 minutes before stopping at a quarry site. We negotiated a route into the quarry through a local's garden complete with rabid dogs snarling and spitting at us. This site was known for a pair of Eagle Owls, after a ten minute search an adult was located crouching low against the wall of the quarry. Good views of the bird were gained through the telescope before we quietly made our way past the dogs back to the bus. Continuing our journey to the Hortobagy, we motored steadily along the road picking up Crested Lark, Montagu's Harrier, Red Footed Falcon, Rook, Red backed Shrike and three Golden Orioles. Gerard was constantly on alert for anything that called and suddenly he shouted that we stop the van, he had heard a Corncrake calling from the fields. We pulled over safely and went to the field to attempt a sighting. After ten minutes or so Gerard had the bird pinpointed to a section of undergrowth and a mini flush was hastily arranged and as we walked towards the undergrowth bingo! - Up popped the bird and Jenny had her hoped for lifer. At 14.15 we came to a wetland where we stopped for our lunch against a backdrop of about a dozen Whiskered Terns, Hooded Crow, Blue headed Wagtail, Cormorant and a Short toed Eagle and two Black Storks were soaring over the wood to the rear of the wetland.

After lunch we stopped briefly at a fish pond. The pond was barely visible from the road due to the construction of high surrounding dykes. Walking up the path to the pond we disturbed a Bittern which flew off to the far side of the pond giving excellent flight views, Black Terns hawked the pond and a fabulous White tailed Eagle came into fish to the annoyance of a pair of Marsh Harriers, overhead we noted a Little Egret and a couple of Spoonbills. Further along the road we witnessed the vast flood plain caused by the convergence of two rivers and exceptional rainfall, water seemed to stretch for miles and there were Great White Egrets and various Herons almost everywhere. We eventually arrived at the Hotel Nadas Panzio at Tiszafured, close to the Hortobagy, a first class hotel and would be our base for the next few days.

Day 5 - Saturday 28 May 2005

An early start as we were heading out on the plains to search for Great Bustard at 06.00 we met for a simple breakfast before departing at 06.30. Today Gerard had arranged to meet one of the head wardens of the Hortobagy region, a guy called Zsolt Vegrvari. Zsolt had arranged the necessary passes for the group to access the off limit parts of the reserve. Our rendezvous was scheduled for 07.00 at a car park on the outskirts of the reserve. The introductions over, we headed for a place called Nagynan and drove to an area bordering a vast grass plain a likely area and sure enough we were soon onto a group of 9 young male Bustards and two others flew by alerting the group to their sheer size in flight. A group of approximately thirty Rose coloured Starlings flew past at high speed and it was here that we had our first Lesser Grey Shrikes, Yellow Wagtails appeared common and we also saw Golden Oriole and several Marsh Harriers.

Zsolt then led us away towards a wetter area of short grasses and sedge. The sun was getting hot and the temperature began to soar and this led to the presence of lots of biting mozzies trying our best to ignore the blighters we searched the area for our next target Aquatic Warbler, whilst searching Purple and Squacco Herons flew into a nearby ditch. After several false alarms and Sedge Warblers we eventually got onto a male Aquatic which was soon joined by a female bird. This was the result the group wanted however poor Andy was

beginning to suffer having been bitten on his calves by the mozzies over 150 times. The Grasslands were home to lots of Skylarks and Corn Buntings and one or two Grasshopper Warblers were reeling from cover. The plains are strictly managed by the authorities and a rotation policy is in place for the local herdsman who allow their livestock to graze certain areas. Heading back to the bus Savi's and Great Reed Warbler were seen, as well as a Wheatear and several smashing Bluethroats were calling from deep cover, in the distance two Bitterns were booming.

We then went off to an orchard complex where recent sightings included Rose- coloured Starling but our search revealed nothing. Next up Zsolt took us north to Darassi and onto Nagy-Szik along the M33 turning off at junction 89 and heading towards Halasto. We parked to view a field with a line of electricity pylons. On one of the pylons we saw another Saker Falcon. It sat for a while and then flew down the line of pylons to a nest box and another adult Saker. Changeover revealed the presence of two lily white Saker chicks. Next stop was the famous fish pond system of the Hortobagy. It was baking hot as we disembarked and headed off along the footpath with every very patch of reed holding calling warblers. First up, were a couple of singing Marsh Warblers supported by Reed, Great Reed, Savi's and Sedge Warbler, Penduline Tits were seen and heard and a couple of Kingfishers flew along the ditch. Golden Oriole and Cuckoo were both seen along the margins of the various dykes together with a couple of Red back Shrikes and on the various ponds were Whiskered Terns, Black Terns, Grey Lag Geese, six Pygmy Cormorants and our first two Ferruginous Ducks which flew from the lake in front of us. Ferruginous Duck was a welcome lifer for Tony.

Day 6 - Sunday 29 May 2005

Another hot and sunny day awaited us, as we met for breakfast at 07.00. A Bittern had been booming loudly during the night and as usual ADMc had been out for his early morning walk picking up three Wrynecks in the hotel garden. After breakfast we headed for the Fenves fish ponds and Gerard informed us that today we would be exploring the wetlands of the Hortobagy National Park. We set off for our first stop and en route we saw 8 Marsh Harriers, 6 Spoonbill and 1 Night Heron. Arriving at the first fish pond Gerard soon picked up 3 singing Bluethroats and all these ponds were teeming with life and Herons in particular.



Night Heron

There were lots of Night Herons, Squacco's, Little and Great White Egrets present, together with Pygmy Cormorants and the usual selection of very vocal Warblers. At 09.00 we moved off to the Derzsi fish pond system. At this fish pond there was a breeding colony of Spoonbills residing on the main island. On the water there were plenty of Ferruginous Ducks and Little Grebe and a handful of Great White Egrets. Whilst the group was at rest a Little Bittern flew into view and Tony managed to see another further up the track.

We decided to head away from the fish ponds for a change of scenery and headed for a site a few miles from the main fish pond systems one of Gerard's special sites which he had held back for us. Gerard requested that we scan above the nearby trees and sure enough into view came a Long-legged Buzzard here we also added Wheatear, Barred Warbler, Red back Shrike, Stonechat and Marsh Harrier. Gerard heard a Tawny Pipit calling and the bird put in an all too brief appearance on the track before disappearing and suddenly a second Long-legged Buzzard flew in behind us this bird was certainly different from the first bird as it was missing one or two primaries. We stopped for a break at a nearby village and enjoyed a cool drink. Outside the café were Crested Lark and a Starling with a brilliant mimic song, a mixture of Golden Oriole and Wryneck! After our drinks we headed off back to the fish ponds, first birds up were 8 Curlews, Squacco Heron, Gadwall and Common Sandpiper.

We headed off up the track to two huge lakes. The park authorities had erected a fantastic raised viewing platform which allowed us to see over the vast reed beds and onto the water. A gull colony on the Island revealed the presence of eight pair of Caspian Gulls and the reeds below us held Great Reed, Reed and Sedge Warblers and lots of showy Bearded Tits. In a nearby willow tree we observed an Icterine Warbler and nearby two Golden Orioles. During a more sedate moment Gerard briefly heard a call he recognised and he quickly sprung into action with the CD and he managed to entice into the open a Moustached Warbler. At this point Gerard managed to come up with something very unusual – a funny joke. He quipped that the viewing

platform was named the barbershop view point because of Whiskered Tern, Bearded Tit and Moustached Warbler. Well it was funny at the time!!

It was now late in the afternoon and we were all beginning to feel tired mainly due to the unrelenting heat we therefore decided to head back to the hotel for a cool beer and a wash and brush up before heading out on the town for our last night together.

Day 7 - Monday 30 May 2005

After our breakfast we packed up and begun our journey back to Budapest for our flight home. The plan was to stop at a couple of sites as we travelled back to the capital. The first stop by a river system gave us the chance to scan for Montagu's Harrier but we dipped out with no birds showing although we did get decent views of Great Reed and River Warbler and a couple of Purple Herons.

The rest of the journey was uneventful to say the least as the countryside switch to a more urban setting. We arrived safely in Budapest and Gerard kindly gave us a guided tour of the city before we stopped of for lunch at a café on the banks of the Danube. After lunch we headed for a local park before driving to Gerard's home to drop him off and say farewell. The drive to the airport and check in went smoothly and the flight home arrived spot on time.