



## *Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club*

Registered Charity No. 517641

### Hungary – June 2002

#### **DAY ONE - Saturday 1st June 2002:**

John Hollowell, Les Robson, Stewart Sexton and I leave Newcastle Airport on a KLM mid-morning flight to Amsterdam. On arrival at Schiphol Airport we meet up with my brother Tony, who has flown in from Heathrow. Together we board a flight on the Hungarian Malev airline to Budapest. Travel time is less than two hours and we arrive at 4pm local time (one hour ahead of the UK). A sweepstake for the total number of bird species seen in Hungary on this trip is taken. John opts for a rather pessimistic 132, Stewart has 149, Les 154, Tony 161, and I go for 155. The three-man rule applies, that is three of the five must see or hear the bird before it is added to the list.

The rep from vehicle hire firm Avalon is there to greet us at the arrivals area. He has a Toyota Hiace nine seater mini-bus waiting outside. Completion of paperwork is swift and we pay the balance in pounds sterling as pre-arranged. As we will drop the vehicle off next Sunday at 8.30am we only have to pay for eight days hire instead of the anticipated nine. Total cost is £266. Not bad considering the best quote we got from a British firm was £425. (Avalon was found on the Internet at the Hungarian Tourism site).

Outside it is warm, dry and sunny. After loading the gear aboard we are off negotiating the outskirts of Budapest heading north. First birds recorded are House Sparrow, Swallow, Magpie, Feral Pigeon and Greenfinch. Our destination for tonight is the town of Vac. En route we note Starling, Blackbird, Goldfinch, Kestrel, Woodpigeon, Stonechat, House Martin, Stock Dove, Collared Dove, Buzzard, Turtle Dove and Crested Lark (by the roadside). A briefly seen falcon is either a Hobby or a Red-footed Falcon.

We reach Vac after about an hour and drive into the centre. For this trip we have no pre-booked accommodation, as the itinerary is flexible. The Rough Guide to Hungary offers a few tips but for the moment an ice cream parlour is too good to miss, so we stop and buy a round. Wandering round the streets looking for somewhere to stay draws a blank although a couple of Black Redstarts are noted. We ask at a bar for directions for accommodation and in broken English get told of a motel along the road. Unfortunately it is full but the (German?) manager rings up another place and manages to show us on a map where to go. The panzio (bed and breakfast type accommodation) run by a German couple has a couple of rooms and fits the bill nicely. There is a bit of a panic when Stewart rings Andrea Sos, the local birding guide we have pre-booked for tomorrow, and gets no answer. After settling in we drive back to the town square and visit a very pleasant pizza joint in an underground cavern. Another call to Andrea is successful and we arrange to meet him outside of town tomorrow morning.

#### **DAY TWO - Sunday 2nd June 2002:**

The dawn chorus, heard while in bed, includes Blackbird, Cuckoo, Nightingale and Serin. Bad news when it transpires Stewart has been regularly vomiting through the night and is still very rough. The rest of us have breakfast and we all board the mini-bus. Stewart has another couple of bouts of sickness (into a carrier bag). Food poisoning is suspected, perhaps from the ice cream?

Andrea is waiting in a lay-by and we exchange greetings before driving up in to the well-wooded Borzony Hills (only about a half an hour away). We park when the road ends and get kitted up for a lengthy all day walk through the mainly deciduous forested hills. It is advised to leave nothing valuable in the van as break-ins are apparently frequent. Our main reason for hiring a guide was for local knowledge on key species such as Ural Owl, Saker Falcon and White-backed Woodpecker. Andrea tells us that Ural Owl is present in this area - he heard calling birds earlier in the season but was unable to locate a nest. Not great news but we'll give it a shot. An area of dense scrub near the car park has two singing (but not showing) Barred Warblers and several Hawfinches are quickly noted. Not far into the forest we begin to hear various songs and calls, and stop to look for a Collared Flycatcher. While doing so a flitting bird shows briefly and looks like a Red-breasted Flycatcher. After a short while it gives better views and is indeed a female of that species. A male (with a red breast) also appears briefly but then quickly disappears. The female performs well however and surprises us all when it settles on a nest in an open tree cavity! This is the scarcer of the flycatcher species as Andrea explains, with only a few pairs in the area, and this is the first time he has seen them in this particular spot.

In trees behind a small ravine Stewart and I glimpse a large, pale owl as it flies away. Ural Owl is suspected but not confirmed. Andrea thinks it is possible but expects them further up in the hills. At this point the wood gives way on one side to a quarry where Saker Falcon breed (one of 120 breeding pairs in Hungary). The site is guarded during the breeding season and the young may have fledged by now. Whilst scanning the area a 'Black Kite' is called but quickly changed to Saker, as a fine adult bird flies in and lands on a crag above an empty nest. Great views are had in the 'scope but John's battery runs out on his video camera and he misses some potentially fine footage. Behind us one or more Middle Spotted Woodpeckers call. After taking our fill of the Saker we continue hiking upwards. Stewart has stopped vomiting but is feeling weak, although the Saker has perked him up.

Singing Blackcaps are numerous and are probably the commonest bird recorded up here, followed by Chaffinch and Nuthatch. Smaller numbers of Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Wrens, Robins, Blackbirds and Chiffchaffs are also noted, together with one or two Treecreepers and Jays. As we ascend the make up of the forest changes. Oak and Hornbeam give way to some impressive stands of pure Beech (planted). There are spells with few birds mixed with bursts of activity. At one point we happen across one of the 'wanted' birds, a female White-backed Woodpecker. It comes down to ground level to pick at some fallen timber and gives good views. A striking male Collared Flycatcher also appears. Further up again a family party of Collared Flycatchers includes three very recently fledged juveniles being fed by a female.

The search is on for Ural Owl when we reach a spot where Andrea had heard one earlier in the spring. Despite fairly intensive checking there is no sign so we continue a steep climb upwards, reaching an open area with a small café and an excellent vista. Visibility is good although the sun is largely hidden and there is a moderate breeze. We stop for a round of teas and Andrea tells us he works as a vet at Budapest zoo, only occasionally acting as a birding guide when time allows. He is also a member of the Hungarian Records Committee. Recent highlights for the country were Least Sandpiper and Subalpine Warbler, both national 'firsts'.

A couple of Black Redstarts, including a singing male, flit around the building, as does a White Wagtail. The map indicates that we have reached a height of 850m (over 2,500 ft). It is time to get moving again so we head back into the trees. The walk back along a different route is largely quiet for much of the time, although a couple of Red Deer, a dead Slow Worm, several more Collared Flycatchers, and a second female White-backed Woodpecker keep the interest up. Further down the slope are several Yellowhammers (including singing birds) in an area of fairly dense woodland. Very unlike the habitat expected back home.

A family party of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, including a male and at least one juvenile, move through some small oaks, giving reasonable views after a time but a calling Black Woodpecker stays hidden. Other birds noted include Buzzard, House Martin, Cuckoo, Spotted Flycatcher, Great, Coal, Long-tailed and Marsh Tits, Goldfinch and Greenfinch. A pair of Red-backed Shrikes overlook a scrubby area and two fly-over Black Storks cause a stir. Back at the vehicles (thankfully they haven't been broken into) much water is drunk. The walk was approximately 12km and well worth it, although it was a shame that Ural Owl wasn't clinched. Andrea asks if we want to visit a Bee-eater colony at a small disused quarry on the outskirts of Vac so we head for it.

A hospital car park right next to the colony (containing about 20 pairs) allows excellent views. A few Tree Sparrows also appear to be nesting in the sandy bank, and two Sand Martins may also be. One or two Crested Larks and Black Redstarts hop around the area. While there we 'tap' Andrea up for sites for other target birds and he provides much useful gen which will be used later in the week. The sun is shining now, we bid farewell to Andrea, and head back to our digs. Stewart is still feeling below par and skips dinner. After freshening up a short drive back into the centre of Vac brings the rest of us to a restaurant on the riverside. A bloke and a keyboard banging out some nifty little numbers provides ambience.

### **DAY THREE - Monday 3rd June 2002:**

Today we had planned to head over across to the Bukk Hills area but decide it is worth re-visiting the site where Ural Owl was possibly seen yesterday as it is only about a 45 minute drive away and so head back up to the Borzony Hills.

A Barred Warbler is again singing as yesterday and is only glimpsed when song-fighting. The trees where the owl was previously sighted are scoured. Again a large, pale owl is briefly seen but only by myself and not adequately. Needless to say it doesn't reappear. However, all is not lost as a Middle Spotted Woodpecker shows in a treetop above. John also sees a calling Black Woodpecker when it flies past but it eludes the rest of us. Back at the car park further attempts are made to see the Barred Warbler, while a Golden Oriole sings in the background, a Raven calls out of sight, and several Hawfinches fly over. A large hornet attracts attention and butterflies include Queen of Spain Fritillary. A black and white butterfly, not identified at the time, turns out to be a Clouded Apollo when a photograph of it is later scrutinised.

John sees a probable Grey-headed Woodpecker fly past but with traffic behind we don't stop. By now we're getting peckish so pull in at a less than scenic, rubbish strewn corner next to some arable land. There is a fair selection of butterflies on view, including Marbled White and Queen of Spain Fritillary, and some Blues and Skippers. Heading east on the M3 major road, the holiday compilation tape gets it's first airing (a mixed bag of songs from a wide range of artists, such as Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band, Bad Manners, Motorhead, Bob Marley, Death in Vegas and Babes in Toyland). En route at least six Red-backed Shrikes, several Buzzards and a Stonechat are noted.

Andrea had tipped us off about an Eastern Imperial Eagle site viewable from the roadside. We duly pull in at the given bus stop and begin scanning the largely arable area. Four or more Buzzards, including some very dark individuals, cause a commotion before we 'get our eyes in'. Before long two eagles fly in from behind and reveal themselves as two adult Eastern Imperial Eagles. They soar and circle at close range giving some great views. After a time one lands in a tree and a large nest containing a single large young is discovered.

Les and Stewart see a distant Lesser Spotted Eagle. Also in the area are a Marsh Harrier, one or two Kestrels, Crested Lark, 'Blue-headed' Wagtail, Whitethroat, Tree Sparrow, Golden Oriole and a Lesser Grey Shrike, while Pheasant and Quail are both heard. After further views of the Imperial Eagles it is back on the road towards the Bukk Hills, driving through a torrential thunderstorm at one point. The village/town of Nozvaj looks popular as a stop over. A number of Turtle Doves are gathered along the roadside and at least 18 are counted along a length of about one kilometre, a nice sight. We pass a large hotel and decide to check it out. A room for all five is available and is booked for the night. A stroll out of the grounds to a small stream/fields produces two singing River Warblers, one of which is out in full view. Red-Backed Shrike and Serin are also noted before another thunderstorm ends birding for the day. Dinner at the hotel restaurant is tasty but Tony has to leave and is sick.

### **DAY FOUR - Tuesday 4th June 2002:**

Stewart and I get up at 5am for a pre-breakfast stroll and walk to a nearby vineyard on a slope. Two displaying Barred Warblers show better than they did in the Borzony Hills. After exploring this area we head back down to the River Warbler site, where the singing bird is again on the same perch as yesterday. Other birds this morning include Buzzard, Great Spotted Woodpecker, White Wagtail, Nightingale (heard), Black Redstart, Stonechat, Red-backed Shrike, Marsh Tit, Nuthatch, Jay, Raven, Linnet and Tree Sparrow, with three Hares also noted. I hang back to photograph the River Warbler but Stewart continues up a lane where he finds numerous Barred Warblers, several more River Warblers and a fly over Honey Buzzard. Back at the hotel room the others are stirring. Tony is feeling rough but has not vomited again. Who will be next we wonder? Several English people at dinner last night and again at breakfast this morning turn out to be birders on an organised trip with a Hungarian guide. They have been here several days and are heading to the Hortobagy next. I ask the guide about Ural Owls and he reveals a potential site where the group tried but failed. They are going to the Borzony Hills on their last day for another attempt at this elusive critter.

We square up the bill, which at about £9 each, including breakfast, is very reasonable. Once on the road it is only a few kilometres before stopping - to look at another Bee-eater colony, with about 15 birds in attendance. A smart male Golden Oriole adds more extra colour, as if it were needed. A singing Corn Bunting is the first of the trip (lots more are recorded hereafter). Marsh Harrier, Turtle Dove and Red-backed Shrike are also noted before hitting the road again. Next stop is the Bukk Hills. On the way the likes of Buzzard, Turtle Dove, Golden Oriole, R B Shrike and a Lesser Grey Shrike enliven the journey. A White Stork, at a nest on a tall tower chimney, is the first of the week, and like Corn Bunting is the first of many. At the Bukk Hills things are fairly quiet (not the best time of day). The woodland here is fairly dense and viewing not so easy. I try walking into the forest for a time while the others follow the single road and on emerging find a Honey Buzzard had flown over. Hawfinches are fairly conspicuous and include one on the ground, under the canopy, cracking seeds open.

Doubling back down the slope another stop is made at a comparatively open area with scattered trees and lots of wild strawberries. An adult and a juvenile Middle Spotted Woodpecker and three Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers are seen, as well as Nuthatch and Marsh Tit, and various butterflies but a singing Nightingale at very close range stays hidden. When everyone has finished lunch we get going again in the direction of Saraspatak, stopping at a lake near the road that we noticed on the way up. Heat haze is fairly bad. Whilst scanning the edges a Fox (with a thin-looking tail) appears, scattering the Mallard, Lapwings and Redshank.

It has evidently caught something, which it takes back into the undergrowth. A couple of small Charadrius plovers feeding on the mud are difficult to make out clearly but are likely Little Ringed. Not much else except a couple of Marsh Harriers so we get going again.

About 30 Rooks are seen in one spot, the first of the trip of what seems to be quite a localised species, at least in this part of Hungary. A heavy thunderstorm is driven through in the Tokaj area but it is dry when we reach Saraspatak. The Rough Guide mentions some accommodation down by the river Bodrog. The side street is found but at the panzio there is no response. A passing neighbour shakes his head indicating that the place is no longer open or maybe that the owners are away (perhaps on their own holiday). Undeterred we cruise the streets until finding another panzio. This place is basically a large house with several bedrooms for hire. I make some enquiries and find the owner speaks no English but she calls for her teenage son who acts as an effective interpreter. Two very comfortable rooms are available, and are quickly taken. We learn that the mother is a teacher and has to be away at seven tomorrow, with her kids, leaving us alone in the house. Extremely trusting, especially towards a party of scruffy, foreign strangers, which is effectively what we are! An added bonus is that one of the rooms looks directly out on to a White Stork nest on top of a telegraph pole! The Bodrog river looks like it could hold some good birds so between about six and eight we check it out, taking the van on a minor road alongside the river, pulling up at a convenient spot. A thunderstorm passes over at one stage forcing John and I back to cover, after first seeing a Whiskered Tern. The session in this area proves to be something of a 'purple patch' with plenty of interest. Over a distant marsh (not visible) a party of about 20 Black Terns hawk, some of the more distant ones looking almost Pratincole like. A Black Stork flies over, followed by two more later on but more unexpected is a Black Woodpecker which does a lengthy flight right out in the open, heading for some cover behind us, and causing a bit of excitement. On what we take to be a large ox-bow lake rather than the river, a few Coot (some with young), Moorhen and a Great Crested Grebe feed while up to three Whiskered Terns rasp overhead. Other birds flying by include three to four Night Herons and a Great White Egret. On the other side of the water a couple of Corncrakes begin calling and a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker is found in nearby trees. Red-backed Shrikes and White Storks are plentiful and a couple of singing Nightingale add to the atmosphere, as do one or two Turtle Doves, Yellow Wagtails and Corn Buntings.

Evening is closing in so we head in search of a restaurant. Half an hour later and still no luck. The town centre is fairly lifeless. We find a bar by the river, which is open. John goes and asks and is given directions to what appears to be the only place open. Eventually we find it and park up. While we are eating one of the waiters asks if the mini-bus outside belongs to us and says that one of the side doors is wide open. Luckily, it is has not been broken into, just left inadvertently left open!

#### **DAY FIVE - Wednesday 5th June 2002:**

A fine and sunny morning. A sumptuous breakfast is laid out downstairs, the family having already left for school. A Serin sings in the back garden while the mini-bus is loaded with the gear. Before leaving I get a couple of snaps of the two young White Storks in the nest visible from the upstairs bedroom. After locking up the house and popping the key through a grating in the garage door, we head off. Things are a bit cramped in the back of the van now that we are carrying a three-piece suite (only joking!). The plan today is to briefly cover the north side of the Zemplen Hills. When driving up the east side of the hills a Lesser Spotted Eagle flies over close by, and other species seen while on the road include Marsh Harrier, Buzzard, Golden Oriole and the ubiquitous Red-backed Shrike.

At the town of Fuzer, along the north side of the Zemplen Hills, we follow a road until it narrows virtually to a stop nest to some houses. A 'pied' woodpecker flies into a garden and gets 'grilled' when it lands. It is the hoped for Syrian Woodpecker, a personal 'target', and shows well in Stewart's 'scope. This is a species I had expected to see in Bulgaria last year but failed (a possible was briefly seen but not confirmed). Most of the Great Spotted/Syrian Woodpeckers turned out to be the former when seen well, a scenario repeated again here in Hungary.

While watching the woodpecker a woman comes out from the house in which garden the bird is. Speaking in German no sense is made. Does she object to our presence? Not long after an elderly man comes out. He speaks English and is interested to find we are birding, so much so that he invites us into the garden and shows us a Syrian Woodpecker nest, complete with a juvenile popping it's head out of the nest hole and another already fledged!

There is a disused vineyard on a hill behind the house and he lets us through a gate on to it. The hilltop gives a good vantage point; four Buzzards and a Hobby are noted. A Barred Warbler, one or two Golden orioles and a couple of Red-backed Shrikes are amongst the few other birds seen. A party of about ten Crossbills flying over is less expected. Tony and I head back to the bus to join the others but find they are on the veranda of the house, chatting to the owner, watching Syrian Woodpeckers at the nest and drinking apple juice! The amiable host tells us he worked in England for several years some time ago. This house is his summer home, his other home being back in Germany.

After saying our farewells we move on a few kilometres and check some woodland with open glades. Butterflies divert attention for a while, with Comma and Map being found. A loud calling from nearby trees is probably from a Black Woodpecker but it fails to show. Whilst waiting for it to appear a Buzzard flies over and is soon followed by a Honey Buzzard. Several Hawfinches and a Jay are also seen, while a large insect, looking Hummingbird-like, flits around at canopy height (a probable Stag Beetle). On leaving Stewart finds a Mole Cricket, which living up to its name, quickly disappears below ground.

Back on the road we drive along the northern flank of the Zemplen Hills and then down the west side, making occasional stops. A Tree Pipit singing from a telegraph wire proves to be the only one of the trip (perhaps representing a lack of being in the 'right' areas rather than a general dearth). Other birds noted while travelling include Buzzard, Turtle Dove, Yellow Wagtail, Ravens (including a party of six), Serin and a couple of Bee-eaters.

A stop to photograph a rather scenic castle coincides with a chance to stock up on bait at a village store. Now on the southwest side of the Zemplen, we pull off the road amongst some woodland near Sima and have some lunch. An attractive looking butterfly catches the eye and is duly photographed. It is one of the Purple Emperors, probably Lesser. Some of the group hear a Willow Tit, another 'new' trip tick. Suitably refreshed and heading east, another stop is made when the woodland opens out into a nice wide vista, overlooking wooded hills. There is little bird activity but for Buzzard, Hoopoe and Red-backed Shrike. While standing out of the warm sun in the shade of a large oak I notice something fall from above and land on the ground. On inspection it proves to be an impressive looking Stag Beetle. We are close to a Scops Owl site that is cited in one of the trip reports. The information is quite a few years old but it is decided to take a quick look. The place is an old farmstead, now abandoned. A bumpy track leads to the ruined house and some trees. John negotiates the mini-bus right to the end and we get out to search. The small copse is very dense and impenetrable. There may well be Scops Owl here but without knowing a roost site would be difficult to find. The place is not without interest however, with Buzzard, Turtle Dove, Bee-eater, Stonechat, Nightingale, Golden Oriole, Linnet (three - an uncommon species we find), Serin and Corn Bunting all in the immediate area. A Corncrake begins calling loudly only a few metres away but in the long grass stays well out of sight. When driving away John yells out as a Corncrake crosses the track in front of the vehicle but it is too swift for the rest of us to see alas.

Earlier in the week Andrea had pointed out an Eagle Owl site at a quarry in this area near Tokaj and it is there we next head. We find a working quarry at the required area of the map but struggle to find the minor road leading to it. Eventually it is located and the rough track leads up to the quarry. The verbal instructions said to go to the second quarry but it isn't obvious where that is. Some large trucks rumble by and we decide not to go any further as this may not be the right spot. A scan of a cliff edge through the scope produces nothing but a Nightingale shows briefly in the open near the van, and a Barred Warbler sings.

Another apparently disused quarry is visible once back on the main road but again there is no obvious road leading to it. After a couple of aborted attempts to get there it is decided to give up. Owls are proving tricky 'quarry' on this trip!

Next destination is Tiszafured near the Hortobagy. The drive down involves an unexpected river crossing on a small ferry, the operator of which amusingly wears a sea captain's hat. A Night Heron flies over as we cross. Another brief stop later next to a river produces Great Crested Grebes, three more Night Herons, several Marsh Harriers and a singing Great Reed Warbler, as well as several dragonflies (hawkers and darters).

Eventually we arrive at Tiszafured and spend some time looking for somewhere to stay for the night. On the outskirts of the town, near an agricultural merchant, is a building entitled 'Viagara Klinica'. What exactly goes on here is open to question but sounds funny, as does a sign advertising the 'Romantic Bubblegum Cosmic Groove House!' Stewart finds directions for the Hotel Hableany. The place is well sited, being right next to a large, sleepy river, a reedbed and some woodland. While Tony, Les and I check in, Stewart and John wander out front and see a Little Bittern (a 'lifer' for Stewart) which bodes well.

After offloading the gear Tony and I take a stroll and note Purple Heron, Marsh Harrier, Whiskered and Black Terns, Golden Oriole and a couple of Great Reed Warblers. Tony picks up a Penduline Tit moving through some reeds but it disappears from view. Something to look out for tomorrow.

#### **DAY SIX - Thursday 6th June 2002:**

The selection on a short stroll outside the hotel includes Night Heron, Whiskered Tern, Great Reed Warbler, Golden Oriole, and Serin, a nice little opener before breakfast. Afterwards we take the mini-bus a couple of kilometres along the river to a campsite in search of Grey-headed Woodpecker. Fairly constant rain doesn't help things. A family of Black Redstarts, a Spotted Flycatcher and a White Stork feeding next to some football posts are amongst the birds seen. We decide not to spend any more time here and drive along an earth track alongside the river. The rain has made it extremely slippery and much sliding and veering ensues until we stop again. A Kingfisher is the first of the trip, and also noted are Purple (1) Heron, Squacco (1) and Night (8-10) Herons, Black and Whiskered Terns, one to two Barred Warblers, two Golden Orioles, and a Water Rail (heard). Several of the Night Herons fly back and forth looking down over the water almost in the style of a feeding tern.

After negotiating the still treacherous track we get back on the road and head east to the Hortobagy. It is a little cool and cloudy, with some occasional rain. Heading for Ohat fish ponds, various birds are seen from the vehicle such as Great White Egrets, Purple Heron, Marsh Harrier, Lapwing, and a couple of Rollers. One particular area has a number of Red-footed Falcons and a stop is made to get a closer look. About 15 are in the general area, along with three or four Kestrels. A Marsh Warbler sings from cover close by, four Bee-eaters hawk over, while a Crested Lark hops about on the road. Nine Greylags, two Spoonbills and two Yellow-Legged Gulls all fly over a large area to the north which is part of the reserve which has no access.

At Ohat fishponds it is still cloudy, with a moderate breeze, but the rain has stopped. The next couple of hours turn out to be one of the high points of the trip. Literally after stepping out of the van there is rarely a quiet moment. On one large pond numerous Pochard and Coot are gathered, along with smaller numbers of Greylag Geese (with young) and Mallard, and several Great Crested Grebes, at least four Ferruginous Ducks and two Garganey. Herons and egrets are well represented. Perhaps most numerous/conspicuous are Great White Egrets, compared with only a couple of Little Egrets. About ten Purple Herons and a few Grey Herons, along with several Night Herons and Little Bitterns are logged. Each of a block of much smaller ponds seems to hold a Squacco Heron, most of which give good views feeding round the edges. To top it off a Bittern 'booms' from some phragmites. Two Glossy Ibises and about seven Pygmy Cormorants are amongst the scarcer species. Widespread panic among the wildfowl over the back is traced to an immature White-tailed Eagle, which is later followed by an adult.

Marsh Harriers are numerous with six or seven one view at most times, hunting over the reeds. More distant are two Lesser Spotted Eagles, together with one or two Buzzards over some trees on a rise. Walking alongside one of the reed fringed larger ponds an unfamiliar call is eventually traced to a Savi's Warbler. Back near the van two juvenile Reed Warblers are regularly fed by an adult. Tony again gets his eyes on a Penduline Tit, which flies into a nearby willow. This one is a bit more obliging although John manages only flight views.

A Swallowtail and a Clouded Yellow (sp.), and Golden Oriole are also noted. Following this entertaining spell we drive back a few km to another area of ponds. A large, open expanse of water is crammed with birds. Most numerous are Coot, with perhaps a thousand, and many Pochard, with about 35 Ferruginous Ducks scattered amongst them. Another pond on the other side of the road also has plenty of Pochard and Coot, together with two Gadwall, single Little and Red-necked Grebes, and more Purple, Night and Squacco Herons, G W Egrets, one Little Egret, and a couple of Pygmy Cormorants. Landbirds include Cuckoo, Yellow Wagtail ('blue-headed' carrying a large dragonfly), Stonechat and Lesser Whitethroat. Eight Black-tailed Godwits fly over and a Short-eared Owl quarters an open area. A pair of Penduline Tits catches the attention. One of them is followed and is found to be constructing a nest on the end of a willow branch. Every few minutes it comes in with a bill-full of fibres (reed?) and forms a loop by weaving them round and round. Entertaining stuff.

Another party of birders turns out to be the English group we met a few days ago. Their trip is going well and the Hungarian guide gives us a site where they had Moustached Warbler yesterday. It is there that we next head for the final session of the day. The sun is out as we overlook a small reedy pool. A sweep of a nearby fish pond reveals about 110 Black Terns hawking over the surface. Today is John's birthday so some bottles of Kobanyai Sor beers, bought earlier in the day for about 30p each, are opened. A Savi's Warbler sings from some reeds and climbs up into view occasionally. Another song, somewhere between Reed and Sedge (nearer the former), is followed down to the hoped for Moustached Warbler. It sits atop a bulrush and gives good views in the scope. Bearded Tit and another Penduline Tit add to the scene, with more of the herons already seen today.

A Dutch couple stop and have a chat, telling us that they had an Eleonora's Falcon elsewhere on the Hortobagy today. A satisfying day's birding, which also included a couple of Wheatears (the only ones of the trip) and Jackdaws (a scarce species we find).

#### **DAY SEVEN - Friday 7th June 2002:**

A cloudy start this morning with a little light rain but not enough to prevent an hour walking out from the hotel before breakfast. Quite a decent list including Little Bittern, Night Heron (3), Marsh Harrier (2), Whiskered Tern (2), Turtle Dove, Savi's, Great

Reed and Barred Warblers, Golden Oriole, Serin, and Hawfinch (2). A small falcon dashes over but isn't seen well enough to be sure of its identity (perhaps a Hobby).

After another canny breakfast we take the mini-bus along a track which follows the river, heading towards the campsite visited yesterday. The rain has muddied the area and it doesn't take long before we're bogged down. Much pushing is needed to get free and a quick decision is made to double back towards the hotel! Heading east back to the Hortobagy a stop is made at a Shell garage to fill up. A woodpecker in some trees behind the forecourt turns out to be a Syrian and is worthy of setting up the scope for. John is even tempted into getting some video footage.

Travelling through the Hortobagy I count a total of 17 Great White Egrets along a short stretch. Three Red-footed Falcons, three Rollers, and a few Marsh Harriers, Purple Herons, and two Pygmy Cormorants are also seen while on the move. Our destination for today is the Hortobagy-Halasto, a large area of well-vegetated lakes and reedbeds. When we arrive at 10.30am it is dry, the cloud is giving way to sunny spells and there is a moderate to fresh breeze. Most of the day is to be spent walking around the various pools so lunch is packed.

Like the Otah fishponds yesterday, this place is packed with interest. The first lake, viewed from a tower hide, is teeming with birds. Several hundred Mallard and Pochard make up the bulk, with a fair few Coot also. There are also a scatter of Great Crested Grebes, Cormorants, Mute Swans, Greylag Geese, four+ Ferruginous Ducks, a couple of Gadwall and Wigeon, and single Garganey and Tufted Duck. About 15 Pygmy Cormorants include a party fishing together as a pack. Over the far side of the lake a White-tailed Eagle flies over heading this way. The wildfowl scatter but the eagle drifts off to the left. A second bird appears at the same time but is fairly distant.

We walk up the right hand flank of the lake complex. Tall phragmites border the water and on the other side of the track are open fields, containing some long-horned cattle. A Cuckoo, of the 'hepatic phase' flies past. Two singing Moustached Warblers are heard but not seen, and one or two Savi's Warblers and a Penduline Tit are noted. Bearded Tits regularly flit by, perching out in view on occasion, and Sedge, Reed and Great Reed Warblers make up the bulk of the song. Suddenly a male Bluethroat flies out from the reeds and breaks into a song flight before disappearing back into cover. It keeps up this performance for a good 15 minutes or so, sometimes perching on a reed stem and allowing scrutiny of the plumage (white-spotted race). Part of the song contains a remarkably Common Sandpiper like phrase. The heard only 'Common Sandpiper' noted a little earlier is struck from the list! Another singing male is seen further on, as is a recently fledged, heavily spotted juvenile.

Marsh Harriers are very plentiful and a single male Montagu's Harrier glides over the open steppe. A party of Curlews contains a single Whimbrel (although it takes some time to confirm due to the distance involved). Black-headed and Yellow-legged (mostly immature) Gulls rest out on the grass amongst the cattle.

The next couple of lakes hold very few birds compared to the first. Various herons are regularly seen, some feeding and others in flight. A Purple Heron disturbed on the footpath appears to have been about to eat a dead lizard that is left in a puddle. Great White Egrets and Purple Herons are most numerous. About ten Night Herons, about ten Little Egrets and about six Little Bitterns (all in flight) are also seen, and Squacco Herons are frequent.

Another large tower hide overlooks an island of thick vegetation, which holds a Spoonbill colony, although the denseness of the plants covers most of the activity. Two Common Terns are the first seen. Another lake on the north side of the hide contains very little. According to the Gosney guide we should be watching White-winged Black Terns here, a target species for Les. There are none on view. Further back still is another lake with a hide, perhaps that has more birds. A Red-footed Falcon zooms over the track as a Hobby did earlier, and a smart Swallowtail settles down in full view, while a Clouded Yellow species isn't fully identified.

Looking from another tower hide yields wide views. Four distant Cranes are picked up as they soar round and come down to land. The height of the tower allows some good views of the likes of Little Bittern and Whiskered Tern as they fly at head height or below. A party of birders move on ahead. By the time we reach the next hide it is full and we watch from the boardwalk. This pool is much shallower than all the rest and consequently has a lot of waders etc. The large hide empties enough for us to get in and absorb the mass of birds outside. Tony does a rough count of Black-tailed Godwits and comes up with 550. There are also about 25 Avocets and 25 Lapwings, 21 Spotted Redshanks, four Curlew Sandpipers (identity debated until we look through someone's Swarovski scope with x60), three Black-winged Stilts, two Redshanks, several Curlews and a Whimbrel. Stewart sees a small wader 'spinning' round on the water. The distance is too great to make out any plumage but the size, jizz and actions all add up to a Red-necked Phalarope.

About 25 Spoonbills feed out front, and the wildfowl selection includes a few Wigeon, Gadwall, Teal and Pintail. Amongst the roosting Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls (probably cachinnans) is a sub-adult Lesser Black-backed Gull (probably intermedium) and two Mediterranean Gulls in stunning breeding plumage. The shout goes up for a Caspian Tern, which suddenly appears amongst the gulls. Surely must have just dropped in unnoticed? Whatever, it is a fine looking bird and the next in a growing list of favourites. About 20 Little Gulls feed over the surface, along with several Whiskered Terns, which come within a few feet of the hide.

This pool, and the first one this morning, are the most productive (but holding a different array of species). The lengthy trek back to the van takes over an hour without any stops (except to look at a Mole Cricket). Stewart reckons we have walked a round trip of about nine miles today. Some much welcome drinks and snacks are had back at the mini-bus, where some time is taken to cool off. A Lesser Grey Shrike is again in the same spot as it was this morning, and a Black Redstart hops about on a fence.

We leave at about 6.30pm and are back at the hotel in about 45 minutes. Some talk of going back out to look/listen for possible Little Crakes is dropped. The exertions of the day have left everyone fairly knackered. After showering we descend to the hotel restaurant for a good meal and a beer. The food here has been very good. Cold blackberry soup (tasted like cherry and perhaps was cherry) was tasty. 'Pancakes with brains' or 'goose liver cooked in his own drippings' have not tempted anybody however.

## **DAY EIGHT - Saturday 8th June 2002:**

Our last full day, so I decide on a last look out around the hotel from 6.30 until the agreed breakfast time of 7.30. Instead of turning right, as done on previous times, I go left and look at a band of trees running parallel to the river. Two Barred Warblers are pick of the bunch. None of the Barred Warblers seen on this trip have anywhere near as much heavy barring on the underparts as depicted in some field guides. Other birds seen include a few Purple and Night Herons, a Great White Egret, two or three Marsh Harriers, a Great Spotted Woodpecker, two Great Reed Warblers, three or four Red-backed Shrikes and a Kingfisher. On the way back a calling Wryneck grabs the attention. In fact there are at least two, probably three (a family party?). Stewart arrives and gets on to them before they disappear from sight. One of the surprises of the week has been the complete lack of Wrynecks - these are the first. Considering the range of other woodpeckers recorded, this was one that was expected to fall easily.

Over breakfast we decide to alter the days plans and instead of heading straight off go back and look for the Wrynecks instead. The bill for the three nights stay (breakfast included) is 50,000 forints (about £140) - again very good value for a place ideally suited for birders, especially when John, Les and Stewart were moved into a spacious upmarket suite for the final evening. At the desk are

photographs of anglers holding up some huge catfish, some probably over six feet long. Outside there are no sings of the Wrynecks and as only Stewart and I saw them they can't be counted for the holiday sweepstake (the three man rule applying). A Barred Warbler is watched feeding a juvenile.

Leaving Tiszafured behind we head south in search of Great Bustards at a site given to us by Andrea earlier in the week. We have until about mid-afternoon before it will be time to move on to Budapest. Near Karcag it is noted that we haven't seen any Collared Pratincoles. Within a few minutes one appears in a roadside field. A case of subconsciously 'reading the habitat' perhaps. We pull up and watch five of the Pratincoles, sitting on the cropped grass or in flight. All are checked in case there is a Black-winged amongst them (there isn't). In the next field we see why the grass is so short - a colony of Souseliks, at least four of which are above ground. Also in the area are Lapwings, Red-footed Falcon, Stonechat, couple of Lesser Grey Shrikes, and Golden Oriole.

A reedy pond/lake next to the road near Ecsegfalva looks worthy of a look. There are lots of Coot and Pochard out on the water, along with a few Great Crested Grebes with young. The now expected (but none the less appreciated) Night and Purple Herons are present. A party of Black and Whiskered Terns are scanned in search of White-winged Blacks but we have to accept that we have dipped on that species. Tony shouts out as a Bittern flies over. A second Bittern is also seen in flight from the van further down the road as we leave.

The trip total creeps up another species when three people see Grey Partridge. Some Rooks, and a few Buzzards and Yellow Wagtails are noted as we drive towards the Devavanya area. A Stone Curlew in flight alongside the road briefly creates that 'what the \*\*\*\* is that' sensation induced by such relatively unfamiliar birds (especially when seen in the air).

The Great Bustard site apparently has an enclosure with some captive birds in it. The area marked on the map is a bit vague and we spend some time going back and forth, looking at a couple of wrong pens, before doubling back to what looked like a tower hide seen earlier. This is the right spot and the hide overlooks an enclosure, which does indeed contain two Great Bustards. We later learn that injured birds are rehabilitated here and released back into the wild. However, we really want to see some wild birds so walk down to another tower hide which looks out on to some open semi-agricultural land.

There is a fair breeze up as we settle down to scan the area. One of the group, scanning with binoculars, shouts out when he finds one sitting down. The rest of us get on it with some difficulty. Through the 'scopes we can see a tan coloured shape, half hidden by some vegetation. It might be a Great Bustard but then again..... Continued watching increases doubts and it is suggested that it might be a cow. The finder is adamant that it is a Bustard, telling the rest of us that we will know better when we 'get a bit more experience'. After a few more minutes the mystery object raises its head and is confirmed as a cow (in fact a calf)!

Descending the tower, we continue up the track in search of some real Bustards. Before long, four unequivocal Great Bustards are located in a field. Scanning from a discreet distance they give some good views, and later fly across from the right to land on the left, and are joined by a fifth bird. Content with the main quarry we return to the van for some lunch. A grassy area behind our parking spot looks worth a look. While the others are still eating I pop across and stumble on a Tawny Pipit, which begins song flighting, coming down to land on a telegraph wire. Also in the general area are three Lesser Grey Shrikes, two male Red-footed Falcons, a Roller, a Stonechat, and a few Kestrels, Skylarks, and Corn Buntings. About 200 Rooks is the largest flock of that species seen so far, this terrain being more to their liking.

Once we've grilled the above birds we head off towards Budapest, which is a few hours away. A brief stop at a river yields little except some dragonflies and some attractive Banded Demoiselle damselflies. The holiday tape gets a final airing as we near the city outskirts and then we discuss where to stay for the night. Should we stay near the airport and take a taxi/bus into the city centre or find a hotel near the centre and drive out to the airport tomorrow morning? It is decided to get quite close to the centre and stop at the first suitable looking place. A large hotel looks rather plush but undeterred we go in and ask what the rates are but are quickly back on the street. At £100 per night for a double room it's a little bit more than expected! Not far away is another smaller hotel. A couple of pleasant rooms are booked for 15,000 forints (about £80 total for the five of us). Luggage is off-loaded, and after a quick wash we book a couple of taxis and head to the heart of Budapest - one of the bridges linking Buda and Pest across the Danube. Over the next few hours we do the tourist thing and enjoy some of the impressive buildings on this sunny evening. We cross over the river to the Buda side, where the Royal Palace overlooks Pest. At the Matthias church, a concert, with choir and orchestra, is about to take place and for the next half-hour we sample the music. Could have stayed longer but we haven't eaten and hunger pangs move us on. Back over the Danube on the Pest side we look for a suitable restaurant.

We settle on a fair looking place and order some dinner. Afterwards we take a stroll around before taking a couple of cabs back to the hotel, being royally overcharged for the privilege.

#### **DAY NINE - Sunday 9th June 2002:**

We are due at Budapest airport at 8.30 this morning to drop the mini-bus off. One or two wrong turns on the way cause a slight delay. A Serin heard singing from some scrub is one of the last birds recorded. The rep from Avalon is there at the airport to meet us. He quickly checks it the vehicle for damage, passes it as ok and cancels the \$1000 bank order. A very efficient company that we'd certainly use again. Check-in is slightly delayed. The trip list sweepstake is checked on the flight to Amsterdam. It is a close run thing with a total of 155 species recorded by three people or more, plus another four by less than three people. At Amsterdam Tony leaves for his flight back to Heathrow while the rest of us board a plane bound for an overcast Newcastle.

#### **SUMMARY**

A very enjoyable birding trip, high on the 'crack' value. Some great birding, in the hills and on the Hortobagy. Three 'new' birds personally: Saker Falcon, Eastern Imperial Eagle and Syrian Woodpecker. Good to see many of the birds that are on the decline in Britain in good numbers, species such as Turtle Dove, Red-backed Shrike, Tree Sparrow, Hawfinch and Corn Bunting, and high densities of, for example, herons and egrets on the Hortobagy. At a touch under £500 per person (all in - flight, accommodation, bus hire, guide hire, diesel, food and drink) equalled good value. The standard of accommodation was higher than Bulgaria and generally most things were of a similar standard as Britain, although some of the villages and smaller towns have few shops. All in all a highly recommended country for birders.

(note: 355 forints to one pound sterling when buying in Newcastle)