

Hungary For Birds

G Smith & T Millington June 4th to June 12th 2006

If you have to consider a non-bird watching spouse/partner when booking a holiday, but still want to get in some quality birding, interspersed with some cultural sightseeing, then Hungary is worth well consideration in your planning. While trying to decide where to take a holiday I read an article in the Sunday Times about Western Hungary, Somewhere that I hadn't considered, but seemed to offer excellent places of interest, together with varied habitats & of course somewhere different to the usual European *hotspots*.

A quick "Google" & I had the Hungarian Bird watching Website (www.hungarianbirdwatching.com) – not by luck it later transpired, as the Web designer, who was to be one of our Tour Leaders, had an insight on the criteria used by Google to put Web addresses higher up the search results. By luck they had a tour on the dates of our holiday & having looked at the itinerary together with a few trip reports from the surfbirds.com website, decided to book. The tour offered a real taste of Hungarian culture, sightseeing, visits to the spas & the Puszta (*steppes*) as well as great chances to see **Great Bustard, Black Woodpecker, Grey Headed Woodpecker, Imperial Eagle, Saker Falcon & Collared Flycatcher**, birds I had highlighted on my wish list.

Flights were arranged with Easyjet but it may worth trying one of the new Budget Airlines as Wizz were advertising flights to Budapest for £29.95 one way. We also took the opportunity to add an extra day at the beginning & end of the trip, as the cheaper flight returning on a Monday offset the cost of hotels & gave us more time for sightseeing in Budapest. We were met at the airport by Karoly our Tour organiser & taken to our hotel via our first tour of Budapest, it's beautiful architecture & of course the Danube. This was to be one of many enjoyable talks by Karoly who had an in depth knowledge of the history, geography & politics of Hungary. On this brief trip we were shown the Parliament building, the largest in Europe & looking resplendent having undergone an intensive cleaning operation, The fabulous new Concert Hall, an architectural masterpiece amongst one of the many regeneration sites which will also include new shopping malls & the castle on the Buda side of the city. At the hotel we were briefed on the tour programme which was to commence in the evening of the following day & after that, we were left to explore the city & have our first experience of the superb cuisine, noted for its richness of flavour & presentation.

The next day we had earmarked a trip to Heroes Square, the art galleries, Vajdahunyad Castle & City Park & having got to grips with the complicated transport system we tentatively found our way via foot, tram & Metro to our destination. Not without a slight scare when we were stopped twice in quick succession by ticket inspectors on the Metro, no doubt having been identified as tourists. Rather strangely, while we religiously followed the instructions of punching our ticket on boarding, we did not see anyone else do this & it transpired many locals seemingly travel ticketless. The castle is particularly interesting, in that it was originally built as a prop for the Millenary Exhibition, but proved so popular that it was built in permanent form & is in fact a copy of the fairytale, Transylvanian Hunyadi Castle. The castles, museums & art galleries were all free apart from specific exhibitions & were all excellent.

In the evening we were picked up at our hotel & taken for a walk around the “Down town” area of Buda being shown many stunning facades high up on the buildings that would perhaps have otherwise gone unnoticed. This also had the added bonus of seeing a Peregrine which we later learnt had nested on the Basilica of St. Stephen. Earlier in the day we had visited the Basilica which is 96 metres high – they have a lift! - & holds 8500 people. Had we known about the peregrine we could have looked for the nest, but more about the peregrine later! One of the most memorable sights of this glorious city was a visit to the rear of the Synagogue in the Jewish area. In the garden is a tree made from steel & each crafted leaf on the tree represents Hungarians killed in the holocaust during WW2.

A sumptuous meal of extra ordinary quality at the Spoon restaurant followed our walk. This was a delightful boat moored on the Danube overlooking the Chain Bridge; an exact copy of the bridge, albeit on a smaller scale, over the Thames at Marlow & was designed by William Tierney Clark. We also met the second half of the team, Janos & learnt that both he & Karoly worked for KPMG & had been involved in tourism projects, which lead to their involvement personally in bringing bird watching to Hungary. The evening was topped off literally, with a trip to the Gellért – Hegy (Hill), some 235 Metres directly above the Danube & affording stunning views of the city by night. The Citadel which crowns the hill was built by the Hapsburgs after the 1848 Revolution & was once a German observation post in WW2. Our return to the hotel took in a drive along the Andrassy Promenade, modelled on the Champs-Élysées running dead straight from the inner city to City Park & houses many of the Embassies & the State Opera house, to which Karoly & his wife are frequent visitors

Birding Day 1 commenced early with a drive to the North Western village of Sarród where we checked into an exquisite pension with wonderfully manicured gardens, leading down to a small holding. This was the first day for the binoculars & we were soon treated to a female Black Redstart, Golden Oriole, Nightingale & Woodpeckers calling in the surrounding trees, as well as views of White Wagtail & Reed Warblers. Shortly after arrival our guide for the next two days Lazlo joined us for a short drive to Lake Fértő – Nightingales seemed to call from every bush so the anticipation grew as we approached the lake & climbed an observation tower. Marsh Harriers quartered the fields & reedbeds in every direction & the waters seemed covered with Red Crested Pochard. From the tower & a subsequent walk along a track to another vantage point we had 42 species including, 3 Kentish Plover, Avocet, Great Reed Warbler, Black Winged Stilt, Great White Egret (Lazlo told us that 2800 had been counted in the area the week before), Purple Heron, Crested Lark, Red Backed Shrike, Med Gull & a Little Tern which was a good bird for Lake Fértő. Just a short drive to see some sheep, only found in Hungary, produced Quail calling & in a fenced off area we were shown the reintroduced Souslik (Ground Squirrel), a small mammal that stands very much like a Meercat & is the favoured food of the Saker Falcon. More of that bird tomorrow! We finished the birding with a walk around the woods & gardens of the Esterhazy Palace adding Spotted Flycatcher & Great and Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Karoly checked the Palace & decided we had time to join a guided tour & were shown around some 25 rooms including the Music room where Haydn composed & performed many of his works. In the evening we were driven further North towards the Austrian border. Passing through little villages, each having Storks on nests, to the Rozi Rozi a small Csárda (restaurant) in the village of

Fertőszéplak & where we had yet another wonderfully tasty meal preceded by a tour of the wine cellar cut deep into the mountainside. A special tasting was arranged so that we could choose our wine to have with the dinner; sadly none for Karoly as the Hungarians have a 0% policy when it comes to drink driving.

Birding Day 2 was again led by Lazlo, along with Karoly as photographer & we visited the Fertő-Hanság Nemzeti (National) Park where Lazlo works in his spare time & which gave him access to many areas not open to the public. On the way we went through a small village, Acsalag that remarkably sported 7 stork nests with chicks. Most of the other villages we had passed through had one sometimes two. Fertő-Hanság is a poorly drained flood plain consisting of open meadows, alder woods & lakes & was once part of Hungary's biggest marshland. On the entrance track Lazlo braked quickly for what I assumed was a Red Backed Shrike just ahead but he pointed to the sky where three Black Stork were circling on the early morning thermals. We first visited a colony of some 20 Bee-eaters affording great photo opportunities & then drove along tracks, where the star bird was Penduline Tit, sat above a beautiful crafted purse hanging on two gossamer threads. The other nests encountered later on our trip were like small rugby balls with a side entrance & we learnt in the early part of the century were collected after the birds had fledged & used as slippers for the children in the winter. Whilst driving along one track we followed a Honey Buzzard that would fly a few metres before continuing its walk, frustrating Karoly's attempt to get a decent photograph. Red Backed Shrike were seemingly around every corner & during a brief stop a Hoopoe was seen flying between two trees.

Our journey continued along the banks of a drainage canal, an important wintering site for Red Crested Pochard & Swans until we reached the recently renovated Andau bridge. The bridge is a border crossing into Austria & was where many people crossed into Austria during the 1956 revolution. Whilst manned by two soldiers we were free to cross over & climb an observation tower to check for Great Bustard & Montagues Harrier but only managed a Yellow Wagtail. Back on the road in Hungary we continued along the track & in the hedgerows heard Savi's Warbler, River Warbler & eventually located an Icterine Warbler that Lazlo had picked up on call. Before we had reached the end of our trip around the park, including a drive through grass that almost dwarfed Lazlo's 4x4 we had added Black Kite, Night Heron & the only Grey Partridge seen on our entire visit. Lazlo himself added Little Bittern which he flushed while locking one of the gates, but despite efforts we were unable to relocate. We finished our days birding with a visit to a large cornfield in which there was a solitary oak tree. Lazlo set up his telescope & as we watched the chosen spot in the tree were rewarded with views of a juvenile Saker Falcon jumping up & down in the nest testing its wings. Sadly in our time there the adults were not seen & Lazlo had to get back to his own juvenile having recently become a proud father. A lifer all the same.

To soothe away some of the previous days walking we visited a thermal bath in Sárvár a small town in Transdanubia which has a small picturesque castle. The waters were excellent & you could choose differently heated pools of the enriched waters; 2 hours of pampered luxury & fully recharged for the days ahead. On our return for our last night in our lovely pension Karoly prepared a wonderful Hungarian goulash with

beef, goose fat, celeriac, potatoes, onions, carrots, tomatoes & the Hungarian speciality, paprika. Yet another truly delicious meal to end our satisfying day.

Birding day 3 started with a drive back South to Tata, a baroque town, where we checked into our Hotel, the Casablanca, for the next two nights. Our next Guide Norbert, who took over from Karoly, was waiting for us & took us on a tour around the Hotel grounds which were on the shore of Lake Tata. A small lake 7km in circumference with a castle situated at one end. In our brief walk Norbert attracted a Grey Headed Woodpecker by tapping on a tree with a stick, the second lifer of the trip & shortly after two more were added with Short-toed Treecreeper & a stunning male Collared Flycatcher. This was also the only place we heard or saw Wryneck. Later in the afternoon we took a short drive to Ferenmajor fishponds in the hope of also making our way to a meadow containing a number of rare orchids, but regrettably the recent May rain made the path to boggy. We contented ourselves with Penduline Tits, Marsh Tits, Savis displaying in bushes a solitary Wood Sandpiper & a flock of some 20 Long - tailed Tits "*pished*" within a few feet by Norbert. The day was completed with a pleasant meal & an early night ready for a 6:00AM start the next day, with our list on 112, plus a confiding Hedgehog which seemed much paler than the British species.

Birding day 4 commenced with the early start to look for Black Woodpecker having dipped the day before & within 10 minutes Norbert's trusty stick lured first a male & then the female of this stunning species giving excellent views around the hotel grounds. A quick breakfast & we were off to our next site in the Gerecse Mountains. Having parked in a the village of Augustyn, we took a rough track to a small hill & sat down by the radio mast giving good views of the mountains, for our target species of Imperial Eagle. Norbert said the best time was between 8:00AM & 9:00AM & at 8:55 we spotted the Eagle sat in a tree. A magnificent creamy headed male in after a short while it was up looking for thermals displaying the distinctive white patch on its upper side. Norbert advised us that the size & shape of the white varies considerably from bird to bird & was a different one to two others he had seen recently, one of which also had a central tail feather missing. We had also hoped to add Short-toed Eagle & Booted Eagle had also been seen, but we had to be content with lone Goshawk, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel & the ubiquitous Common Buzzard as well as a party of Bee-eaters.

Descending the hill we met up with Janos who was joining us for the rest of the tour & he had prepared a delightful lunch & introduced us to our first taste of Palinka a fruit brandy taken as an aperitif. Meant to be very good for the constitution it certainly warmed on the way down & should be kept away from naked flames – over the next two days we "enjoyed" further flavours! After lunch we hiked deep into a forest seeing many more Collared Flycatchers, a few Hawfinch & heard a Wood Warbler that would not give itself up. The strange noises from deep in the woods were we were told Wild Boar & we came across their mud hole with footprints around the edge. By now the Mosquitoes were attacking in force despite the Jungle Formula, so we decamped to an old stone quarry where there was a very slim chance of Wall-creeper & possibly Rock Bunting but alas had no luck. The Wall-creeper we learnt fed very early, then laid low during the day & was best seen in the Winter months. The day finished with the list increasing by only 8 to 120 but some quality birds among the 8, including 2 lifers with Black Woodpecker & Imperial Eagle offsetting the "dip" on Wall-creeper.

Birding Day 5 started with a drive to the Kiskunság in pouring rain & on route we picked up our final guide, Bence a Horticultural student. During a brief break in the weather we visited a site on the outskirts of Budapest where Bence had been monitoring a nest box on the pylons, that a few days before had 3 Saker Falcon chicks. “Sadly”, for us not the birds, they had fledged & could not be located & with the weather pushing in again we set off for the Puszta (*steppes*). The morning was almost a washout, but despite the heavy rain we saw 5 Lesser Grey Shrike all favouring the hale bales in the fields & a pair of exotic Rollers. The forecast was not good, but undeterred we made our way up to a small man-made hill, one of only two on the Puszta, to scan for Great Bustard. The wind & rain was however even too much to find this enormous bird, so we made away to a Tanya (farmhouse/horse farm) where we watched a display by the famous Csikós (horseman) in their traditional dress. The highlight of an enjoyable interlude from birding was the “Puszta 5” where the Horseman “rides” standing astride the two rear horses, behind a further team of three at break neck speed around the circular corral. An amazing feat of bravery & agility as well as horsemanship evidencing the skill & training learnt over many years.

With the strong wind having blown away the rain, we cancelled plans to return to the city & on our small look out hill we eventually picked out two distant, but hugely satisfying Great Bustards; lifer number 7 & all target species, along with Short-toed Treecreeper, made with a day to spare. We drove to our accommodation deep in the Puszta at the Somodi Tanya, a picturesque “guest house” & riding stables 5km from the next nearest settlement. After a pleasant, typically Hungarian meal, we went for a stroll in the surrounding countryside where the only sounds were, Golden Orioles, Bee-eaters, Woodlarks, Hoopoes & a possible Long-eared Owl which defied detection. The list had progressed to 130 when we called it a day ahead of our last days birding tomorrow.

Birding Day 6 commenced with another walk around the inviting grounds of the Tanya on a bright morning with two Hoopoes being the star attraction, although Bence did manage to spot Tawny Pipit after I had unwisely headed off for breakfast! We returned to the main area of the Puszta to check out a salt marsh & on the way Bence located a Little Owl perched in it’s favoured spot on top of a farm building. Around the marsh were good numbers of Whiskered Terns a small group of Bearded Tits, as well as Avocets, a group of 28 Great White Egrets, Fudge Duck & booming Bittern. After lunch, with Savis & Great Reed Warblers competing for background sound we drove back to the marsh as a friend of Bence had ‘phoned to say he had just had two Stone Curlew land in a grassy area. The birds could not be relocated but during our search a Bittern flew across the road in front of us before descending into the reeds. The birding finished on 134 for us, with, in addition, Little Bittern, Tawny Pipit & Kingfisher seen by the guides.

During our days in the field numerous Butterflies & Dragonflies were seen & Hungary is considered one of the best places in Central Europe for these as well as birds. The Puszta, Limestone Hills & Aggtelek valleys can produce up to 100 butterflies alone. Surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains, within the Carpathian Basin, the diverse habitat of wet meadows limestone slopes & volcanic hills, Oak & Beech woods are a haven waiting to be explored. Next time the Butterfly & Dragonfly field Guides will be added to the bag.

After a relaxing day shopping & further sightseeing the next day we returned to our hotel for an early flight back to England with some wonderful memories. The tour was excellently organised, superb value for money & the two tour leaders & three expert guides only enhanced the experience. If you get the chance we thoroughly recommend a visit via Hungarian Bird watching.

Species list

Great Crested Grebe
Little Grebe
Cormorant
Bittern
Little Bittern
Night Heron
Great White Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Spoonbill
Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Gadwall
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Garganey
Pochard
Red-Crested Pochard
Ferruginous duck
Tufted Duck
White-Tailed Eagle
Imperial Eagle
Black Kite
Marsh Harrier
Common Buzzard
Honey Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Goshawk
Kestrel
Red-Footed Falcon
Hobby
Peregrine Falcon
Saker Falcon
Grey Partridge
Quail
Pheasant
Moorhen
Great Bustard
Avocet
Black-Winged Stilt
Little Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover

Lapwing
Wood Sandpiper
Redshank
Curlew
Black Headed Gull
Mediterranean Gull
Yellow Legged gull
Little Tern
Common Tern
Black Tern
Whiskered Tern
Feral Pigeon
Stock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Turtle Dove
Cuckoo
Little Owl
Swift
Hoopoe
Kingfisher
Bee-eater
Roller
Black Woodpecker
Green Woodpecker
Grey Headed Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Middle Spotted Woodpecker
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
Wryneck
Skylark
Crested lark
Woodlark
Barn Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Tree Pipit
White Wagtail
Yellow Wagtail
Robin
Nightingale
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Blackbird
Blackcap
Whitethroat
Sedge Warbler
River Warbler
Savi's Warbler
Reed Warbler

Marsh Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Icterine Warbler
Willow Warbler
Wood Warbler
Chiffchaff
Spotted Flycatcher
Collared Flycatcher
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Marsh Tit
Long Tailed Tit
Bearded Tit
Penduline Tit
Nuthatch
Treetreeper
Short-toed Treetreeper
Red Backed Shrike
Lesser Grey Shrike
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
Golden Oriole
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Serin
Hawfinch
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer
Corn Bunting