

North East Hungary, 5th-19th May 2005

by Ian Kinley & Dave Thexton

Team members: Fred Gould, Ian Kinley, Derek McAlone and Dave Thexton

Introduction

As most of our previous birding trips had been to the Mediterranean, we felt it was time to venture a bit further north and east in search of a different range of birds. After discussing several options, we eventually decided on North East Hungary. It proved a good choice with highlights including stunning views of a pylon-perching Eastern Imperial Eagle, several hundred dancing and trumpeting Cranes, a huge Eagle Owl silhouetted atop a quarry at dusk and a dazzling flock of almost 1000 White-winged Black Terns as well as eight species of woodpecker, regional specialities such as Saker Falcon and Aquatic Warbler and much, much more. In addition, it was a pleasure to find that species such as Cuckoo, Tree Sparrow and Corn Bunting were still very common, in stark contrast to the situation back home.

Trip reports found on the internet were our main source of information on the birds of the area (the Eurobirding site www.eurobirding.net is a good starting point though trip reports now appear at <http://www.travellingbirder.com>). The one we found of most use was the account of a trip to Eastern Europe in Summer 2003 by Kasper Hendriks and Rob van Bemmelen on the Birdtours website <http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/poland/eurotour/e-europe-sum-03.htm> We also used Gosney's *Finding Birds in Hungary* and Gerald Gorman's *Birdwatching in Eastern Europe*, plus the Michelin Motoring and Tourist Map of Hungary (no.732 at a scale of 1/4000000).

Few British birders seem to travel independently to this area, though many tour groups include Hungary in their itineraries. However, with the advent of cheap flights to Budapest and a plentiful supply of good quality accommodation at very reasonable prices, there really is no reason not to travel independently and tailor your trip exactly to your own requirements. Car hire is still rather expensive, especially compared with, say, Spain, but that is largely offset by the low price of accommodation, food and drink. Though English was not widely spoken, the people were invariably friendly and helpful. Not all hotels, restaurants or garages accepted payment by credit card. In contrast to last year's trip to Greece, the police and the military kept a very low profile and we had no dealings with either, despite birding quite close to the Slovakian border at times and despite driving around for a week before finding out that the use of dipped headlights is compulsory in Hungary, even in daylight!

As is the case in several other Eastern European countries, Hungary's recent entry into the EU raises concerns that changes in agricultural practice will have a detrimental effect on the country's birdlife. For how much longer will visiting birders see horse-drawn ploughs and grass-cutting by hand, as we did? In retrospect, we might have been better going a week or two earlier. Passage wader numbers were obviously past their peak and woodpeckers were difficult to locate with little drumming and a lot of foliage on the trees. It's a difficult balance though, as going too much earlier means missing out on some of the later arriving summer visitors. You pays your money and you takes your choice!

Weather

The weather was mixed though mostly ideal for birding with many cool days, breezy on occasions, interspersed with some warm spells that were never too hot. Showers occurred most days and two mornings were very wet indeed. Though the rain did little to directly hamper our birding it did seriously affect the off-road tracks on the Hortobagy, making them impassable to all but 4x4s for most of the time we were there.

Travel

We flew from Manchester to Budapest with Jet2.com (£66 per person return). The flight was comfortable and cheap though slightly delayed both ways but we were less than pleased when Jet2 cancelled our original flight on 10th May and charged us an exorbitant £70 to change one passenger name after an original party member dropped out. At Budapest airport, we picked up a hired Opel Astra from Avis (£480 booked with Going Places). There were no problems with Avis or the vehicle but Going Places cocked up the paperwork, causing us needless hassle.

Accommodation

We pre-booked our first stay in the Hortobagy (5 nights) and our first two nights in the Bukk Hills. Having arranged guides for two days we had a more fixed itinerary than usual on our trips. As it was a Bank Holiday when we were in the Zemplen Hills, Barbara Balogh at the Nomad Hotel in Noszvaj very kindly phoned ahead and booked accommodation for us. There seemed to be a decent choice of accommodation in most areas and several people told us that there ought to be no problem finding places on a nightly basis. All three hotels provided an excellent breakfast that also served to provide us with a packed lunch. None of the places we stayed at appeared to have air conditioning in the bedrooms, which, though no problem while we were there, could make things uncomfortable in hotter weather.

We stayed at the following: -

Kerekes Pension at Balmazujvaros The hotel doesn't have its own website but details can be found at <http://es.ase.net/servlet/DisplayHotel/2140135> Tel: 36-52-370-993, 36-52-240-333, 36-30-314-0519 Fax: 36-52-370-993 Eight nights in total at 5,500 forints per night per twin-bedded room. Comfortable and excellent value. Super restaurant with very cheap, tasty food in ample quantities. The staff didn't bat an eyelid when we asked for breakfast at 05.30 on the day we were guided by Janos or even 05.00 the day we left for the airport; early starts seemed very much the norm here. Handily situated for much of the Hortobagy region. We pre-booked our first stay here but on returning to the Hortobagy later in our trip we had no difficulty just turning up and getting in. The town centre location meant a bit of traffic noise though this was not much of a problem for us but might prove annoying when windows need to be left open in hot weather (no air conditioning in our rooms). Wouldn't accept payment by credit card despite having a Visa sign in the window and understaffed at times during our visit but still recommended. Despite the main street location, the hotel had nesting Black Redstarts as well as Serin and Syrian Woodpecker in the private parking area on occasions.

Nomad Hotel at Noszvaj. www.nomadhotel.hu email nomad@nomadhotel.hu Tel. 00 36 36463-363 Fax. 00 36 36563-008 Three nights at 8200 forints per night for a twin-bedded room. Breakfast 1100fts. Dinner 2100fts. Very comfortable, full of

character and beautifully situated in woodland in the Bukk Hills. Excellent home-cooked food in huge quantities. Family owned and run, with fluent English spoken by very friendly and helpful staff who fully understand the requirements of birders and for whom nothing is too much trouble. The delightful setting ensured some good birds in and around the hotel grounds that included Black, Grey-headed, Green, Middle and Great Spotted Woodpeckers as well as Wryneck, Collared Flycatcher and Hawfinch. Highly recommended.

Borto Panzio near Mad (Zemplen Hills). Situated about 12km northwest of Tokaj just off the road to Mad. Details can be found on http://belfoldiutazas.hu/szolgalatas_reszletes.html?id=123642&lang=en Tel. & fax. 00 47 369-475 Three nights at 6800 forints per night per twin-bedded room. Comfortable, chalet style accommodation in a rural setting. Very good breakfast at 900 forints with a bar but no restaurant, though there were plenty in nearby Tokaj. Open country location with a small reservoir produced some decent birds in the immediate vicinity including calling Corncrake, Great White Egret, Goshawk, Whiskered Tern, Wryneck, Golden Oriole and Red-backed Shrike.

Guides

For the first time on any of our birding trips, we employed the services of professional guides. Having read through a number of trip reports, it seemed we would need such help to give us the best chance of finding some of the country's specialist birds, especially Aquatic Warbler, woodpeckers and owls. In advance, we booked via the internet the services of a guide in the Hortobagy for one day with Saker Tours http://www.sakertour.hu/home_f.html and one day in the forests of the Bukk Hills with Gerard Gorman www.birdinghungary.com The results were mixed.

On 7th May, we were guided in the Hortobagy by Janos, a Hortobagy Park Ranger contracted by Sakertours, who picked us up at our hotel at 06.00 in his 4x4. We had initially been advised that Saker Tours did not have a 4x4 available but there would be no problem accessing all the sites in our hire car. However, heavy rains had made many of the tracks impassable to ordinary vehicles and we had no hesitation in accepting the offer of the 4x4 suggested by Janos on the day. It proved invaluable. Janos spoke good English, was friendly, helpful and a very good birder with an intimate knowledge of the Hortobagy. He drove us to sites for Great Bustard, Saker, Aquatic Warbler (out of bounds without a professional guide) and Moustached Warbler - all of which we saw - as well as driving us around the Halasto Fishponds (otherwise inaccessible except on foot) and showed us two Red-footed Falcon colonies, a nesting Long-eared Owl and a dazzling flock of 940 White-winged Black Terns virtually on the doorstep of our hotel but which we might easily have otherwise missed. The day was not cheap at 150 Euros plus 50 Euros for the use of the 4x4 but we deemed it well worthwhile.

On 11th May we were guided in the Bukk Hills by Andres who travelled up from his home in Budapest that day to meet us at our hotel at 07.30. The day failed to meet our expectations on several counts. We had expected, and indeed been led to believe in e-mail correspondence with Gerard Gorman, that he would personally guide us and we were not advised otherwise until the guide arrived. Whilst Andres was friendly, helpful and undoubtedly a knowledgeable and experienced birder, he did not live locally and therefore in our view he lacked the up-to-date local knowledge required to meet our needs. Though he worked hard and was quite happy to stay out

in the field as long as we wished, he was “cold searching” for birds whose whereabouts we had expected would already be known. We expected to be guided to occupied woodpecker territories, if not nests, and not just search areas that were considered “good”. We could do this for ourselves and indeed did so with more success. The sum total of woodpeckers for the day was one Lesser Spotted, one Middle Spotted, one Black (heard only) and a few Great Spotted. We subsequently found our own White-backed and Grey-headed Woodpeckers as well as many more Black and even a Middle Spotted’s nest with young within a few hundred yards of the hotel though he did recommend the area to us for that species. However, he did have recent information regarding a Ural Owl site which the use of the 4x4 enabled us to reach but even then we only heard the bird call (fortunate in daylight!). Surprisingly to us, Andres did not appear to know of any Eagle Owl sites in the Bukk Hills though we later found our own in Zemplen simply by searching likely spots. To us, at a cost of £120 for the guide plus £50 for use of the 4x4 and £20 for fuel, the day represented poor value for money.

Itinerary

5th May Budapest Airport to Balmazujvaros. A few hours’ birding in the Hortobagy en route. *Highlights: White-tailed Eagle. Daily total 42 species.* Overnight at Balmazujvaros.

6th May Birding in the Hortobagy concentrating on the road from Balmazujvaros to Tiszacsege and the Ohat Fishponds. *Highlights: Pygmy Cormorant, Little Bittern, Honey Buzzard, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Saker, Corncrake, Common Crane, Kentish Plover, White-winged Black Tern, Syrian Woodpecker, Bluethroat, Collared Flycatcher. Daily total 93 species.* Overnight at Balmazujvaros.

7th May Birding in the Hortobagy, guided by Janos from Saker Tours and visiting specific sites for Great Bustard, Saker, Aquatic Warbler and Moustached Warbler plus several areas of puszta, Halasto Fishponds and the Balmazujvaros area. *Highlights: Red-necked Grebe, Black-necked Grebe, Pygmy Cormorant, Saker, Hobby, Great Bustard, Common Crane, all three marsh terns, Long-eared Owl, Roller, Tawny Pipit, Aquatic Warbler, Moustached Warbler, Collared Flycatcher, Penduline Tit. Daily total 110 species.* Overnight at Balmazujvaros.

8th May Birding in the Hortobagy. Morning spent along the banks of the Tisza near Tiszacsege followed by afternoon along road from Balmazujvaros to Tiszacsege and the Balmazujvaros area. *Highlights: Pygmy Cormorant, Common Crane, White-winged Black Tern, Syrian Woodpecker. Daily total 90 species.* Overnight at Balmazujvaros.

9th May Birding in the Hortobagy, covering the road from Balmazujvaros to Tiszacsege and the Ohat Fishponds. *Highlights: Pygmy Cormorant, Saker, Common Crane, White-winged Black Tern, Roller, Bluethroat. Daily total 94 species.* Overnight at Balmazujvaros.

10th May Travelled from Balmazujvaros to Noszvaj in the Bukk Hills. Birding early morning around Balmazujvaros then en route to Noszvaj including the Saker site near Poroszló (see the previously mentioned trip report by Kasper Hendriks and Rob van Bemmelen for directions) and finally a few hours around Noszvaj itself. *Highlights: Honey Buzzard, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Saker, all three marsh terns, Long-eared Owl, Black Woodpecker, Collared Flycatcher. Daily total 83 species.* Overnight at Noszvaj.

11th May Birding in the Bukk Hills with guide provided by Gerard Gorman. *Highlights: Eastern Imperial Eagle, Ural Owl, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, River Warbler, Collared Flycatcher, Red-breasted Flycatcher. Daily total 77 species.* Overnight at Noszvaj.

12th May Birding in the Bukk Hills concentrating on the minor road east of Eger around Repashuta. *Highlights: Goshawk, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Black Woodpecker, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, White-backed Woodpecker, River Warbler, Collared Flycatcher, Red-breasted Flycatcher. Daily total 61 species.* Overnight at Noszvaj.

13th May Morning birding in the Bukk Hills around Noszvaj and then en route to Zemplen. Evening along Bodrog floodplain. *Highlights: Black Stork, Honey Buzzard, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Corncrake, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, River Warbler, Collared Flycatcher. Daily total 72 species.* Overnight at Borto Panzio.

14th-May Birding in the Zemplen Hills, concentrating in the southern area, including the road between Abaujazanto and Erdobanya. *Highlights: Black Stork, Honey Buzzard, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Goshawk, Corncrake, Black Woodpecker, Icterine Warbler. Daily total 73 species.* Overnight at Borto Panzio

15th May Birding in the Zemplen Hills, concentrating on the Northern Zemplen towards the Slovakian border. Also visited Bodrog floodplain. *Highlights: Black Stork, Honey Buzzard, Lesser-spotted Eagle, Corncrake, Eagle Owl, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker, White-winged Black Tern, River Warbler. Daily total 74 species.* Overnight at Borto Panzio

16th May Travelled from Borto Panzio to Balmazujvaros with little birding en route. Afternoon birding in Hortobagy including Southern Fishponds, Halasto Fishponds (FG only) and Balmazujvaros area. *Highlights: Pygmy Cormorant, Marsh Sandpiper, White-winged Black Tern, Long-eared Owl, Bluethroat, Penduline Tit. Daily total 102 species.* Overnight at Balmazujvaros

17th May Birding in the Hortobagy covering the road from Balmazujvaros to Tiszacsege, the Southern Fishponds and the Balmazujvaros area. *Highlights: Pygmy Cormorant, White-winged Black Tern, Long-eared Owl, Roller, Black Woodpecker, Bluethroat, River Warbler, Rose-coloured Starling. Daily total 90 species.* Overnight at Balmazujvaros

18th May Birding in the Hortobagy including the Southern Fishponds and the Nagyivan area. *Highlights: Pygmy Cormorant, Hobby, all three marsh terns, Syrian Woodpecker, River Warbler, Great Grey Shrike. Daily total 90 species.* Overnight at Balmazujvaros

19th May Journey from Balmazujvaros to Budapest airport. No birding done.

Main Sites Visited in chronological order

Hortobágy National Park

The Hortobágy is the most famous bird site in Hungary and rightly so. The region comprises 100000 hectares of very diverse bird habitats including the unique puszta (lowland steppe grassland often surprisingly - to us anyway - wet), extensive areas of

cultivation with woods and copses as shelterbelts and more than 6000 hectares of fishponds. We spent more than half our time birding this area and were rewarded with species that included Pygmy Cormorant, eight species of egret and heron (Great White Egrets were especially common), White-tailed Eagle, Imperial Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Saker, Red-footed Falcon, Common Crane, Great Bustard, Marsh Sandpiper, all three marsh terns, Lesser Grey Shrike, Roller, Bluethroat, Aquatic, Savi's, Moustached, River, Great Reed and Barred Warblers, Penduline and Bearded Tits. You can't expect to cover the whole of the Hortobagy in one birding trip (indeed some areas are out of bounds to visiting birders) but you're sure to see lots of good birds virtually anywhere you stop and look. To make the most of your visit though, you probably do need to hire a guide, at least for a day, both to take advantage of expert local knowledge and to gain access to some otherwise out-of-bounds areas. Water levels in all the fishponds vary according to activity at the time and their attractiveness to birds varies likewise; you need to keep checking them all. Do take an effective insect repellent; we were eaten alive by mosquitoes in our final few days. A detailed map, as mentioned in several trip reports, would have been useful but we just never got round to buying one. Areas that we visited included

- - the road from Balmazujvaros to Tiszacsege and tracks leading north from this road when accessible to our vehicle, including the "Steppe Eagle track" referred to in the trip report by Kasper Hendriks and Rob van Bemmelen. We had no access problems with any of these tracks and were almost invariably met with a cheery wave, even when in a farmer's front yard when chasing a Rose-coloured Starling. We were turned away from just one private fishpond and even then politely so. However the condition of the tracks following recent heavy rain made driving them impossible in a normal vehicle until they had dried up later on in the trip. This is one of the best open access areas for raptors and cranes, plus a range of other species including Lesser Grey Shrike. There are several observation towers along the south side of the road.
-
- - the Ohat Fishponds. Large areas of open water and reedbeds good for Pygmy Cormorants, herons, Ferruginous Duck, Moustached Warbler and Bluethroat.
-
- - the Southern Fishponds Two areas of ponds on the south side of the 33 near the Halasto turn-off. Some, alongside the road to Szasztelek were quite deep, surrounded by reedbeds, and good for Pygmy Cormorant and herons. Others, just off the 33, had been drained and were suitable for waders - this was where we saw our one and only Marsh Sandpiper.
-
- the Balmazujvaros area including wet grassland on the southwest edge of the town favoured by marsh terns, a small Red-footed Falcon colony near the rubbish tip that also had nesting Long-eared Owl and an area of puszta beyond the rubbish tip where there were lots of Susliks and so is hunted by Sakers. Another good area for Saker is the vicinity of the roundabout junction of the 33 to the south of the town. Check the big high-voltage pylons and surrounding fields. We also had Eastern Imperial Eagle here. The town itself has Syrian Woodpecker and while we were there, a strip wood near the rubbish tip played host to Hungary's first Great Spotted Cuckoo (which we dipped on).
- the Halasto Fishponds are perhaps the best-known of the fishpond complexes on the Hortobagy with numerous ponds of varying depths and

large areas of reedbed. However, the access details given in Gosney are out of date and the area can now only be accessed on foot (unless guided by someone with a key to the locked barrier), necessitating a very long hike - the trail is 13.5km long - to cover the site properly. For this reason, we visited it just once; with our guide Janos who had a key to the locked barrier, though FG did also spend a couple of hours here on his own on foot. Even the limited time we spent here produced the likes of Red-necked Grebe, Black-necked Grebe, Pygmy Cormorant and Penduline Tit.

Bukk Hills

These heavily forested hills lie 130km northeast of Budapest. The mixed deciduous woodland is extensive and dense and we found it especially hard work searching for woodpeckers. Some tour companies, and individual birders, use tape-luring to attract woodpeckers and other scarce species; we consider this an unacceptable practice where breeding birds are concerned. Concentrating on the minor road east of Eger around Repashuta, we did manage to locate all eight breeding species of woodpecker - though not all gave satisfactory views - as well as Ural Owl (heard only), Collared Flycatcher (really common) and Red-breasted Flycatcher. More open areas at lower levels were good for raptors and we saw Eastern Imperial Eagle and Goshawk as well as a range of other species including Black Stork and River Warbler. A trip earlier in the year would no doubt be more productive for woodpeckers but then species such as Collared and Red-breasted Flycatchers would not have arrived. The track from Repashuta to near Bogacs, though still driveable for much of its length in a 4x4, was blocked by fallen trees midway so it was not possible to get right through. We were told it may well not be cleared and that it was deliberate policy to allow the track to deteriorate, perhaps to the extent that it eventually becomes impassable to all vehicles.

Zemplen Hills

Famous as one of the best sites for raptors in Hungary, the Zemplen Hills are situated in the far northeast of the country close to the Slovakian border. The hills are bounded to the west and south by the floodplains of the Bodrog and Hernad Rivers and the lower slopes and valleys have vineyards and orchards. Further up the slopes there are mixed deciduous woodlands with pure beechwoods and conifers at higher levels. We found the woodland not particularly rewarding (a very wet morning on one of our two full days there did not help!) and of the woodpeckers found only Grey-headed, Black and Great Spotted. Amazingly we failed to see Collared Flycatchers here. More open areas and farmland at lower levels proved more productive with species such as Black Stork, Corncrake, Honey Buzzard, Eastern Imperial and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Icterine, Barred and River Warblers. A speculative dusk visit to a small quarry yielded Eagle Owl. The floodplain of the Bodrog proved very flooded indeed with high water levels right up to the retaining embankments. We found the area difficult of access and, apart from reasonable numbers of Whiskered Terns and the odd White-winged Black Tern, not particularly rewarding.

Species List

We recorded a total of 173 species, listed below. The figures in brackets represent the number of days each species was recorded e.g. (4/14) means that a species was seen on four days during our 14 day trip (bearing in mind that the first day involved just a few hours birding and disregarding the last day when no birding at all was done) and gives a crude indication of how easy each species was to see. More details are given of the rarer or more interesting species.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (2/14)

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* (8/14)

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena* (1/14) 2 at Halasto Fishponds on 7/5.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* (1/14) 2 at Ohat Fishponds and 2 at Halasto Fishponds on 7/5.

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* (9/14)

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus* (7/14) Fairly common and easy to see in the Hortobagy, particularly at the Ohat and Southern Fishponds. We regularly recorded up to 25 in a day, most often in flight, but birds roosting in trees and at the edge of reedbeds in the Southern Fishponds gave good views.

Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* (3/14) Heard booming at several sites on the Hortobagy.

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* (1/14) 1 in flight at Ohat Fishponds on 6/5 was our only sighting.

Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* (9/14) Quite common in the Hortobagy and also seen along the Bodrog near Tokaj.

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* (5/14) Seen regularly but in small numbers on the Hortobagy.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* (5/14) Scarce with just a handful seen on the Hortobagy and by the Tisza.

Great White Egret *Ardea alba* (12/14) Very common on the Hortobagy - it was difficult to scan anywhere and not see at least one. Seen in small numbers in the Tokaj area.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* (12/14)

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* (8/14) Seen in small numbers in the Hortobagy. One feeding on a large Newt in a roadside ditch gave particularly stunning views at very close range.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* (3/14) All our sightings involved birds in flight - 1 south of Bogacs in the Bukk Hills on 13/5; 1 in the Southern Zemplen Hills on 14/5; 4 (1+1+2) in the Northern Zemplen Hills on 15/5.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* (12/14) Widespread though in relatively small numbers. Often seen on nests as many of the villages had specially erected nesting platforms.

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* (9/14) Seen regularly but usually in small numbers on the Hortobagy. Maximum was c30 near Balmazujvaros on 16/5.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* (4/14)

Greylag Goose *Anser anser* (9/14)

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* (1/14) 1 at the Southern Fishponds on 16/5.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* (8/14)

Teal *Anas crecca* (2/14)

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* (13/14)

Garganey *Anas querquedula* (8/14) Frequent sightings of small numbers on the Hortobagy.

Shoveler *Anas clypeata* (4/14)

Pochard *Aythya farina* (8/14)

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* (7/14) Quite common on the Hortobagy especially at the Ohat and Southern Fishponds.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* (1/14)

Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* (5/14) Seemed to be still migrating. Sightings consisted of 1 on the Hortobagy on 6/5; 1 near Noszvaj on 10/5; 1 at Tokaj quarry on 13/5; 4 together in the Zemplen Hills on 14/5; 2 singles in the Zemplen Hills on 15/5.

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* (14/14) Very common in the Hortobagy and also seen in areas bordering the Bukk and Zemplen Hills.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* (3/14) We saw surprisingly few in the Hortobagy with no more than 3 in any one day.

Goshawk *Accipiter gentiles* (2/14) 1 in flight near Noszvaj on 12/5 and 1 near Borto Panzio on 14/5.

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* (1/14)

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (13/14)

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina* (3/14) 2 between Balmazujvaros and Tiszacsege on 6/5 (one of which gave good prolonged views perched on a stick); 1 at the Saker site near Poroszlo on 10/5; 2 singles in the Northern Zemplen Hills on 15/5 (one gave super flight views and the other perched at close range on top of a roadside tree).

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* (5/14) 1 just off route 33 near the roundabout south of Balmazujvaros on 10/5; 1 at the Saker site near Poroszlo on 10/5; excellent flight views of 1 near Noszvaj on 11/5; stunning, prolonged, scope-filling views of 1 perched on a pylon near a fishing lake south of Bogacs on 12/5 (one of the highlights of the trip); 1 in flight near a fishing lake south of Bogacs on 13/5; 1 in the Southern Zemplen Hills on 14/5.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* (1/14) We were slightly disappointed to see just a single immature bird near Nadudvar in the Hortobagy on 5/5.

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* (1/14) 1 at the Saker site near Poroszlo on 10/5.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (9/14)

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus* (10/14) Common in the Hortobagy. Hunting birds can be seen virtually anywhere but we had especially good views in the vicinity of two colonies where birds were using nestboxes provided in woods with Rookeries. The first, containing c50 pairs, is found near kilometre signs 52/53 on route 33 opposite a sign on the south side of the road showing *KAPARO SCARDA 600M*. A small wood just behind a white farm north of the road hosts the colony, which seems very well known. The second much smaller colony is just outside Balmazujvaros close to the track that leads past the rubbish tip. For birders such as ourselves with limited experience of this species, being able to enjoy super close range views of these stunning and confiding falcons was a real highlight.

Hobby *Falco subbuteo* (2/14) Singles in the Hortobagy on 7/5 and 18/5.

Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* (4/14) As this was a lifer for all of us, we were pleased to see several quite easily. Prolonged though slightly distant views of 1 soaring from an observation tower up a track north of the road between Balmazujvaros and Tiszacsege on 6/5; 1 mobbing a Buzzard just off route 33 near the roundabout south of Balmazujvaros and 1 hunting Susliks over the puszta near Balmazujvaros rubbish tip on 7/5; 1 at same site as previously off the road between Balmazujvaros and Tiszacsege on 9/5; 1 again at the site just off route 33 near the roundabout south of Balmazujvaros on 10/5; also on 10/5 we saw a pair at the pylon nestbox near Poroszlo (see the previously mentioned trip report by Kasper Hendriks and Rob van Bemmelen for directions but note that the box is on the 4th pylon away from the road not the 3rd) with at least one downy young visible at times at the nestbox entrance. This site is well known but don't expect great views here, the nesting pylon is a long way from the road.

Quail *Coturnix coturnix* (7/14) Several heard most days in the Hortobagy.

Pheasant *Phasianus colchacus* (14/14)

Corncrake *Crex crex* (4/14) 1 heard in the Hortobagy near Egyek on 6/5; 1 heard en route from Noszvaj to Zemplen on 13/5; 2 heard in the Zemplen Hills on 14/5; 2 heard in the Zemplen Hills (including 1 outside Borto Panzio at night) on 15/5.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* (6/14)

Coot *Fulica atra* (10/14)

Common Crane *Grus grus* (5/14) Flocks of up to 500 at several sites on the Hortobagy (marshes and areas of puszta alongside the road between Balmazujvaros and Tiszacsege being especially favoured) provided one of the highlights of the trip. Though the majority were not fully adult, display was quite frequent with birds dancing and calling. Apparently there has been an increasing tendency for birds to summer in recent years and it is hoped that breeding will take place in the near future.

Great Bustard *Otis tarda* (1/14) 8 (7+1) on the puszta near Nagyivan on 7/5. Some display. We would not have reached this site without our guide and his 4x4, though we could perhaps have tried searching other areas.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* (5/14) Small numbers, including breeding birds, at several sites in the Hortobagy.

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* (8/14) Small numbers, including breeding birds, at several sites in the Hortobagy.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* (1/14) A pair in a quarry in the northern Zemplen Hills on 15/5.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (1/14)

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* (1/14) A female on a small pool alongside the road from Balmazujvaros to Tiszacsege on 6/5 was apparently a good find, being something of a local rarity.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* (2/14) 2 at the Southern Fishponds on 16/5 and 1 there on 18/5.

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* (9/14)

Little Stint *Calidris minuta* (1/14) 8 at the Southern Fishponds on 16/5.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* (2/14) 4 at Halasto Fishponds on 7/5 and 2 at the Southern Fishponds on 18/5.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (3/14)

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* (8/14) Flocks of up to 200 at several sites on the Hortobagy with some display seen but numbers had fallen by the end of the trip.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* (5/14) Low single figures at several sites on the Hortobagy with some display seen.

Curlew *Numenius arquata* (5/14)

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* (5/14) Maximum of 20 at Halasto Fishponds on 7/5.

Redshank *Tringa tetanus* (7/14)

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* (1/14) 1 at the Southern Fishponds on 16/5. We were obviously too late for the peak passage of this delightful wader so we were very pleased to find one.

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* (3/14) Low single figures at several sites on the Hortobagy.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* (6/14) Flocks of up to 30 at several sites on the Hortobagy though most had moved on by the end of the trip.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* (1/14)

Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus* (4/14) An adult associating with Black-headed Gulls between Balmazujvaros and Tiszacsege on three days and a second-summer at Halasto Fishponds on 7/5.

Little Gull *Larus minutus* (4/14) A first-summer at Halasto Fishponds on 7/5; 14, mostly first-summers, at the Southern Fishponds on 16/5; 12, mostly first-summers, at the Southern Fishponds and 1 first-summer near Balmazujvaros on 17/5; 16, mostly first-summers, at the Southern Fishponds on 18/5.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* (13/14)

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans* (7/14) We were informed that the breeding birds on the Hortobagy belong to the race *michahellis* while most of the loafing first-summers are *cachinnans* and this seemed to be borne out by our own observations.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* (9/14)

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* (13/14) Common on the Hortobagy with smaller numbers on the Bodrog floodplain and the small reservoir at Borto Panzio.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* (4/14) Apart from a breeding colony of c50 pairs near Nagyivan, seen in just low single figures among other marsh terns on the Hortobagy.

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* (9/14) One of the undoubted highlights of the trip was the amazing flock of 940 (counted by our guide Janos, we were too busy enjoying the spectacle!) on the outskirts of Balmazujvaros on 7/5. Though numbers declined gradually to 200 or 300, these birds remained in the area for the rest of our trip and showed signs of settling to breed (not an annual event apparently). Elsewhere, we saw just low single figures at other sites on the Hortobagy and the Bodrog floodplain.

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia* (14/14)

Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* (14/14)

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (14/14)

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* (12/14)

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* (14/14)

Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* (1/14) We visited one small quarry in the Bukk Hills but were told by the quarry worker that, although occupied in the past, there were no birds this year. Daytime visits to a large quarry in the Northern Zemplen Hills and to Tokaj Quarry proved unproductive; the latter was a bit hairy with huge lorries whizzing by and clouds of dust everywhere (though amazingly we were not asked to leave). On returning to Tokaj Quarry at dusk we were confronted by locked barriers and no possibility of entry so we were delighted that a speculative visit that same evening, 15/5, to a small quarry near Borto Panzio paid dividends. A bird seen flying from the quarry face at 20.10 landed on a pole on top of the quarry where it remained silhouetted, calling frequently, until we beat a hasty retreat at 20.40 when confronted by a snarling guard dog!

Little Owl *Athene noctua* (3/14)

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis* (1/14) 1 heard calling in daylight in the Bukk Hills from the track between Repashuta and Bogacs on 11/5. We were disappointed not to do better as this was one of our main target species.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* (5/14) Janos showed us a nest in a Rook/Red-footed Falcon wood near Balmazujvaros on 7/5. Initially one of the adults was brooding. On subsequent visits up to three large young could be seen in the nest and we also saw one of the adults roosting nearby.

Common Swift *Apus apus* (6/14)

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* (2/14) Surprisingly just two seen; singles by the Tisza and at Halasto on 16/5.

Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* (8/14) Birds were still arriving during our trip. Seen at a number of sites in small numbers, the most being a flock of 10 by the rubbish tip south of Noszvaj on 11/5.

Roller *Coracias garrulus* (3/14) Singles seen at the Red-footed Falcon colony near kilometre signs 52/53 on route 33 on 7/5 and 9/5 and 1 in wood with nestboxes by "Steppe Eagle track" on 17/5.

Hoopoe *Upupa epops* (9/14) Widespread.

Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* (9/14) Widespread and quite common though much more often heard than seen; indeed we saw only 2 or 3 all trip.

Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus* (3/14) 1 seen and heard near the Nomad Hotel, Noszvaj on 11/5 and 13/5; 2 heard (1 of which also seen in flight) in the Northern Zemplen on 15/5.

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* (6/14)

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* (7/14) Much easier to hear than see with most views brief and fleeting. 1 seen near the Nomad Hotel, Noszvaj on 10/5; 1 heard near Repashuta on 11/5; 5 or 6 heard, 2 of which were seen, in the Bukk Hills on 12/5; 1 heard near the Nomad Hotel, Noszvaj on 13/5; 1 seen in flight in the Southern Zemplen Hills on 14/5; 1 seen briefly on the ground in the Northern Zemplen on 15/5; 2 seen briefly in a strip wood near Tiszacsege on 17/5.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopus major* (9/14)

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopus syriacus* (3/14) Seen regularly in Balmazujvaros, most often in the small town park where observed drumming on a lamp shade at the top of a lamp post on a couple of occasions.

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopus medius* (3/14) 1 seen near Repashuta on 11/5; 1 seen near the Nomad Hotel, Noszvaj on 12/5; super views of a pair feeding young in a nest-hole just a few hundred metres from the Nomad Hotel, Noszvaj on 13/5 - surprisingly in view of the location next to a boating lake close to the hotel no-one else seemed aware of it.

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopus leucotos* (1/14) 1 seen and heard in the Bukk Hills after many hours of searching on 12/5 though even then only one of us got good views.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopus minor* (1/14) 1 in the Bukk Hills on 11/5.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* (11/14)

Woodlark *Lullula arborea* (1/14) Several singing in the Southern Zemplen Hills on 14/5.

Skylark *Alauda arvensis* (14/14)

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* (7/14)

Swallow *Hirundo rustica* (14/14)

House Martin *Delichon urbicum* (13/14)

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* (1/14) Fairly common out on the puszta near Nagyivan on 7/5 with 1 seen at the Saker site just off route 33 near the roundabout south of Balmazujvaros the same day.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* (1/14)

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* (13/14) Widespread and quite common. All the birds that we positively identified were of the race *dombrowskii*.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* (3/14)

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba alba* (13/14)

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* (2/14)

Robin *Erithacus rubecula* (5/14)

Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* (14/14) Abundant.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica* (4/14) 1 at Ohat Fishponds on 6/5; 4 at Ohat Fishponds on 9/5; 3 at Southern Fishponds and 4 at Halasto Fishponds on 16/5; 1 at Southern Fishponds on 17/5.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* (13/14) Widespread and common, especially in hillier areas.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* (5/14)

Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* (14/14)

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* (8/14)

Blackbird *Turdus merula* (10/14)

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* (9/14)

Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* (3/14) Uncommon with just a few heard in the Hortobagy.

River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* (6/14) Quite widespread once we learned not to look for them in reedbeds. Heard in the Hortobagy, Bukk Hills and Zemplen Hills areas. Up to half a dozen a day recorded without trying and often heard while driving along. Just a couple actually seen but no doubt with patience and perseverance we could have seen more.

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides* (9/14) Very common in the Hortobagy and other areas with reedbeds. Usually just heard but one seen very well at Halasto Fishponds on 7/5.

Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* (1/14) A singing bird seen very well from an observation tower at Ohat Fishponds on 7/5.

Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* (1/14) Several mostly brief views of 2 or 3 birds near Nagyvivan on 7/5. The blustery conditions were not ideal and the wind direction prevented us hearing the song. This was in an area of wet grassland with low tussocky vegetation to which there was no access without an official guide. Well worth the wet feet!

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* (9/14)

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* (8/14)

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* (13/14) Numerous wherever habitat was suitable

Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina* (1/14) 1 heard singing in the Southern Zemplen Hills on 14/5.

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* (11/14) Widespread and quite numerous. Recorded in all areas, occasionally giving very good views.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* (9/14)

Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* (9/14)

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* (11/14)

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* (6/14)

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* (7/14)

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* (2/14)

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* (2/14)

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa sriata* (10/14)

Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva* (2/14) Seen only in the Bukk Hills with 3 (pair + a single) from track south of Repashuta on 11/5 and 3 from road above Repashuta on 12/5.

Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis* (6/14) 2 migrants seen in the Hortobagy; a female near Hortobagy-Halasto on 6/5 and a male at Halasto Fishponds on 7/5. Very common in the Bukk Hills with some wonderful views. Surprisingly we saw none in the Zemplen Hills.

Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* (1/14) 2 migrants near Nagyivan on 7/5.

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus* (4/14) Quite common in the Hortobagy reedbeds.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalus caudatus* (2/14) Two sightings of small flocks of white-headed birds in the Bukk and Zemplen Hills.

Marsh Tit *Parus palustris* (5/14)

Coal Tit *Parus ater* (1/14)

Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus* (6/14)

Great Tit *Parus major* (10/14)

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* (6/14)

Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* (2/14) Nice close views of birds at a partially built nest at Halasto Fishponds on 7/5 and 16/5.

Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* (14/14) Widespread and very common wherever there was the smallest scrap of woodland. Mostly heard but we had plenty of sightings

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius colluria* (12/14) Widespread and numerous in places, especially at higher altitudes where every clearing in even the densest woodland seemed to have a pair.

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* (10/14) Widespread and easily seen in the Hortobagy where it was not difficult to see half a dozen in a day without trying. Favoured sites included the road between Balmazujvaros and Tiszacsege and the Rook/Red-footed Falcon wood near Balmazujvaros. Less common in upland areas.

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* (1/14) We were surprised to find an adult on wires near Szasztelek in the Hortobagy on 18/5. We scrutinised it closely to be certain of the ID.

Jay *Garrulus glandarius* (6/14)

Magpie *Pica pica* (13/14)

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* (7/14)

Rook *Corvus frugilegus* (9/14)

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* (12/14)

Raven *Corvus corax* (3/14)

Common Starling *Sternus vulgaris* (14/14)

Rose-coloured Starling *Sternus roseus* (1/14) We found an adult by the farm buildings at the end of the "Steppe Eagle track" north of the road between Balmazujvaros and Tiszacsege on 17/5. This was the first of the year in Hungary, we were told.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (14/14)

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* (14/14) Abundant compared to Britain.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* (14/14) Beware of birds in forest areas ending their song with a surprisingly realistic woodpecker-like "tsick". Not that we would be fooled and waste our time chasing non-existent woodpeckers of course!

Serin *Serinus serinus* (14/14) Most common in upland areas.

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* (14/14)

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* (14/14)

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* (7/14)

Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* (1/14)

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* (7/14) Very common in the Bukk and Zemplen Hills. Some lovely views including 6 feeding together on the ground near the Nomad Hotel, Noszvaj on 13/5.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* (11/14)

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoenicus* (9/14)

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* (14/14) Pleasingly abundant compared to back home.