

ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO HUNGARY
Crane Spectacular & Wild Goose Chase

04 - 10 November 2016



Leader: Gábor Simay

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A Personal Diary

Friday, 04 November

This classical autumn trip started in good and mild weather, although a little bit cloudy, so everyone was optimistic as the news had reported that the first huge flocks of northern geese had arrived and many Common Cranes were still lingering around after an almost record breaking season.

Just after 1 p.m. we started our drive from Budapest Airport eastwards along the northern (M3) motorway. We interrupted our drive at a petrol station where we had our sandwich lunch and coffee. Common Buzzards were numerous and far away on the top of a huge pylon an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle was spotted. Despite the distance the white shoulders and the contrasting dark body with a golden head were obvious. While we were eating our lunch, a Crested Lark was also feeding only a few metres away from us.

We had another one-and-a-half hour of drive ahead of us and as we reached the Hortobágy region, the first small flocks of Common Cranes appeared by the road. While we were driving beside the steppe, on a short grassy, green field we spotted about a thousand-strong goose flock. We pulled over and started to scan the flock. Most of them were Greater White-fronted Geese, which is far the most numerous species in this season, but Greylag Geese were also present. However, it didn't take us long to find our first Red-breasted Geese, which are becoming more and more regular in Hungary, both in late autumn and in early spring. We counted eight of them, and though the distance was great, the light was not good and we needed to change our position to get the sun behind us. So we drove back a little way and we set our scopes by a small road. We soon found the Red-breasted Geese grazing busily, this time in beautiful evening light. Surprisingly, just in front of them, we found a Ruddy Shelduck - a local rarity.

We were not far from our lodge, located near Balmazújváros, but as the days are quite short, it was almost dark when we arrived at our accommodation. From the garden of the lodge and also from the rooms and restaurant we enjoyed the view of a beautiful, wet grassland. In the fading light we had sight of about 20,000 geese roosting nearby. This was a very promising as we were to spend the next six nights here.

Saturday, 05 November

We met in front of the dining room half an hour before breakfast. The view from this place was remarkable as we could see a vast grassland with small and large shallow pools, which makes this area suitable for feeding and roosting geese at this time of the year. The grassland is grazed by local breeds of different livestock, so beside birds, there are other things to watch. There was a big herd of Hungarian Grey Cattle, many donkeys and a cute looking Woolly Pig. As the daily routine of the geese starts very early and at dawn they fly out to their - usually arable - feeding grounds, there were only two smaller flocks of geese around. However, we easily found a few Red-breasted Geese and also a Barnacle Goose which is a scarce migrant here. A nice adult Peregrine and our first, though very distant White-tailed Eagle were also spotted. Probably best of all was a Black Woodpecker that turned up flying close by and gave good flight views for everyone.



After a good start we had breakfast and then we drove to the southern part of the park, to look for Great Bustards. It was important to try to find them on the very first occasion as according to the weather forecast heavy rain was forecast, which can make dirt roads undrivable. Unfortunately, close to tarmac roads there were obviously no bustards, despite thoroughly searching for them. On the grassland we found our very first Hen Harrier, a nice Rough-legged Buzzard and two Great Grey Shrikes. We took a small dirt road which led us well into the “puszta” – the local name of these vast grasslands. After a few kilometres we spotted a small flock of Great Bustard on the horizon... miles away. Because of previous rains the fields were too wet to walk, so we decided to find a road which might take us closer. Driving along a track eventually we reached the other end of the field where we found the bustards. We walked for a few hundred metres behind some reeds which led us to a point where we could enjoy fabulous views of 17 males and one female in a flock. We kept just the right distance to get as close as possible without disturbing them. Though we had to work a bit more than usual for this species this time, it was well worth it, as one seldom gets so close to these beautiful birds. While walking back we saw a flock of European Golden Plover together with Fieldfares on a field.



We still had time before lunch to check a place where Long-legged Buzzard had been recorded recently. This species is a regular breeder in the Hotrobágy, but scarce in late autumn. The field was great for raptors, and though we couldn't find the buzzard, we were rewarded by excellent views of two Saker Falcons chasing a Common Kestrel. On a nearby tree a first-year Eastern Imperial Eagle provided great views, while a bit further away five White-tailed Eagles entertained us as they were fighting over a carcass. On the way towards the restaurant we saw hundreds, if not thousands of Common Cranes feeding beside the road on recently harvested maize fields and also a small flock of Corn Buntings.



At the restaurant, we had a good lunch of the famous local fish soup and then we took a short walk in the nearby forest where among others we had good views of several Eurasian Nuthatches, Common Treecreepers, Goldcrests and a Great Spotted Woodpecker.

The days are rather short this time of the year, so we went directly to a watch point. From this point we hoped to see the spectacular roost flight of the Common Cranes. When we arrived we just had a few minutes before the first smaller flocks appeared flying towards their night-time roost. Common Crane number staging in the Hortobágy has increased a lot in recent years, so there is now a very good chance to see large number of them during autumn migration. They spend the day out in the fields, but at the night, they gather at certain roost sites where their numbers sometimes reach tens of thousands. The most spectacular sight is when they leave the fields and fly in small and large flocks to the roost site. The main thing is to find the right spot to get close enough to enjoy their daily flight. While waiting for them we saw another Black Woodpecker flying and we also spotted our first Little Owl on a barn's roof. Soon after we saw the first small flocks of cranes, much bigger flocks appeared on the horizon. Soon we were watching line after line of cranes appearing and suddenly thousands of them were flying left and right with many of them just above our heads. Literally, we were surrounded by Common Cranes, sometimes more than 1,000 in one flock. It was a truly magical moment – a long moment as it lasted for almost an hour – as their loud calls filled the air.

We estimated that at least 20,000 Common Cranes passed above us. The only thing we missed was the red, setting sun for the background as the sky was covered by thick clouds, perhaps a warning regarding the next day's weather...

Sunday, 06 November

As was expected the morning was wet and windy with thick cloud cover. However according to the weather forecast most of the rain had already gone through. After breakfast we drove to the central area of the national park, where a big fishpond system is located, which is a well-known birding area. We had time to check some of them of the smaller ponds and managed to find our first Black-necked Grebes and Ferruginous Duck. Both are much commoner in the breeding season and become scarce by mid-autumn. Also this was the first site, where we had fine views of a few Caspian Gulls. The next stop was a shallow, grazed wetland, where we had good views of our dabbling duck species, such as nice drake Northern Pintails among the more numerous Eurasian Wigeons and Northern Shovelers. Not far away was the little train station where we took the small tourist train which goes to the far end of the ponds and saves the birders from a long-long muddy walk. At the station we found a Black Redstart which is far less common this time of the year than earlier. From the train we spotted our first Pygmy Cormorants flying above the reeds beside us. Later we had excellent scope views and we counted well over 100 of them. The weather was improving and it was dry but still very cloudy and a bit windy when we arrived to a broadwalk which led us to a hide with an overview of a huge pond. There were a few hundred Common Cranes around, and no less than 13 White-tailed Eagles, along with an immature Eastern Imperial Eagle. The latter perched together with seven other eagles on a tree. From the hide we had



good views of a very close Grey Plover and a Common Snipe, quick views of a Water Rail and many of the ducks which we had seen previously. The reedbeds held Penduline Tits which gave us incredibly close and prolonged views. On another pond, we found a first year Red-necked Grebe, another Ferruginous Duck while plenty of Western Marsh Harriers were flying around. From the reeds, we heard Bearded Reedling at more than one location, but despite trying hard, they remained invisible. Later we took our train back and we had our lunch at the picnic site which was sheltered so the unpleasant weather didn't bother us.

We decided to spend the short afternoon around our lodge, where – we were informed – there were plenty of geese around. After checking several of them, we eventually found a place where we could get really close to them. From this location, among the closest Greater White-fronted Geese we managed to find the first Lesser White-fronted Geese of the trip. Sometimes it is quite challenging to find this species in the big flocks, but this time we had such close view of two grazing adults, that no one had any trouble finding these threatened geese in the scopes. As a supporting cast we counted 13 Red-breasted Geese in the flock, some of them much

closer than on the previous days. Dark came soon due to the thick cloud cover, so after a successful day the group retreated to the restaurant to have a coffee or tea, which was very pleasant after a rather windy day.

Monday, 07 November

The weather this morning was much better without any wind, and it was a bit less cloudy as well. The geese had already flown out to the surrounding farmlands, so only a few ducks and a Peregrine were seen in the surroundings of the lodge. After breakfast we returned to the site where we had seen plenty of raptors and also the place where we had failed to find the Long-legged Buzzard previously. It was now – after seeing many other specialties – high on the wish list. So we tried.... again, there were plenty of raptors: a few Hen Harriers with a nice adult male gliding above the grassland; most probably the same two Saker Falcons, which gave us this time even better and closer views; another Eastern Imperial Eagle perched on a hay ball; a Merlin was also seen by some of us. But no Long-legged Buzzard...

We visited a nearby fishpond which was drained and there were plenty of ducks, but too far away to really enjoy them. We added Common Shelduck and Yellow-legged Gull to our list (we could compare the latter side-by-side with the more numerous Caspian Gulls) and also we saw a few Eurasian Curlews, White-tailed Eagles, Western Marsh Harriers and a Great Grey Shrike here.

This time we had our lunch back in our lodge. The plan was to check the geese more thoroughly here from a comfortable hide. This resulted in good views of three Lesser White-fronted, about ten Red-breasted and two Barnacle Geese. Eventually we managed to spot a Tundra Bean Goose as well. This species has changed its flyway route considerably, and as a result, has become much scarcer than it previously had been.

After lunch we visited a nearby town to see a Long-eared Owl roost. We saw more than 20 of them and a few gave us really close and clear views. Unfortunately the light was dull again, but we were still happy with these cute looking birds. We also heard the distant call of a Syrian Woodpecker which, after a short walk, was tracked down as it was feeding on a walnut tree.



Everybody had so much enjoyed the Common Cranes two days before that we definitely wanted to give it a second chance, so we arrived well in time at the same spot. The scene that greeted us was very different and for a while we only managed to see a few dozen cranes. We were building theories as to what could have

happened to the many thousands of cranes, when in the distance, eventually they appeared. Roughly the same number of cranes passed overhead as previously, but what lasted for about 45 minutes last time, now happened in 15 minutes. The air was filled with masses of cranes and their sound literally filled the air. It was a shorter but even more impressive and fantastic experience. What one could miss was only a nicer sky with the setting sun...

Tuesday, 08 November

Beside some of the forest birds we were missing two species, Bearded Tit and Long-legged Buzzard. The latter had tricked us twice already so we decided to change the plan and visit another site for this species. This habitat was a bit further away, so after a longish drive, which produced good, close views of a Little Owl sitting on a chimney, we were all happy when we found a Long-legged Buzzard on a nearby bush. We had good views and then it decided that we were too close and flew on top of a nearby tree, where we had prolonged scope views in good light and everybody agreed that it was worth the drive. On the way back we stopped by

a nice wetland but as it was rather misty and the birds were rather far away we couldn't really enjoy the number of geese and ducks and other wetland birds around. However, a Green Woodpecker and a Mistle Thrush were new trip birds here. In the reeds we tried hard for Bearded Reedling but despite hearing them call, we couldn't get a glimpse, as they remained in thick cover. It is interesting how these cute little birds can change their habits and, while in most season behave fairly obliging, in others they become real skulkers...

After lunch we visited a completely new habitat. In the western edge of the Hortobágy lies a huge reservoir along the Tisza River. The southern, deepest part of it is usually the best for diving birds. Though the date was a bit early as most of the northern birds arrive only for the winter, we gave it a chance. We scanned the lake from a few different spot and we found plenty of Common Pochards, Tufted Ducks and about 15 Greater Scaups. In a flock we found a Common Scoter which is a rather rare visitor to this part of



the country. Two Black-throated Divers were also located from a different watch point. The rest of the day was spent around the lake where some other common birds were seen, like Eurasian Siskins. We took the drive back to our lodge in the dark where the magical noise of the thousands of roosting geese greeted us.

Thursday, 09 November

Today was our last birding day, so we had to plan our itinerary carefully to visit some new type of habitat but on the other hand to pick up some of the species we hadn't managed to come across previously (Bearded Reedling was high on this list). However it was rainy, which reduced our optimism. The rain was not heavy so bird watching was not impossible but slow. We started our birding by a small nearby reedbed, where we failed to see or hear any Bearded Reedlings, but we were cheered up by a lively flock of white-headed Long-tailed Tits (mixed in one flock with the nominate form) and a perched Syrian Woodpecker.

The next stop was an old oak forest near the town Debrecen. We wanted to spend the rest of the morning here, especially to find some woodpecker species. The wet conditions didn't support birding and the forest was pretty silent. The first hundred metres didn't produce anything besides some tits and a few Eurasian Nuthatches. Great-spotted Woodpecker and Mistle Thrushes were also found, but despite this, our optimism remained at a low level. We didn't give it up, and patience paid its prize, this time in the shape of a nice Short-toed Treecreeper, which is a resident inhabitant of this forest, but not always straightforward to find. Our next stop produced about a dozen Marsh Tits by a bird feeder, and here we managed to track down a nice Middle-spotted Woodpecker, of which we had good scope views. Still, the birds were silent, but we were looking for movement and when we saw one we found the bird and had fantastic scope views of a feeding male Black Woodpecker. Our lucky series continued and we managed to find our last woodpecker, a close by Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. No one was disappointed with the morning as we had seen five species of woodpeckers and the rain stopped so we could enjoy our picnic lunch in the open.

Driving on a motorway for 30 minutes we found ourselves in a nice, but small, fishpond system, which is now maintained only as a bird reserve and not for fish production. The first pond was rather empty, but quite contrastingly the next one was full of birds. We had excellent views of Black-necked Grebes, we found a female Goosander, and a few new waders, like Avocets, Ruffs and Dunlins. Pygmy Cormorants were numerous. After a while we heard what we were waiting for: the so typical call of a Bearded Reedling nearby. We moved toward the call and this time we had luck. Though this bird was just as shy as the previously heard ones, but the reed here was much more open and we had excellent views of the bird feeding two metres away from us.

We still had time to stop once more at the crane watch site. The weather improved a lot and this time we had a nice sunset, though by the time the many thousands of Common Cranes arrived, the sun had sunk beyond the horizon. Still, it was a nice way to end this highly productive trip, as arguably the cranes were among everyone's favourites during the week.



Wednesday, 10 November

It was a very short day indeed. After breakfast we said goodbye to our lodge and staff and to the many thousands of geese which will hopefully use this newly established habitat in the same number and diversity, and will be enjoyed from the terrace of the restaurant for many years to come. After a rather quick drive we arrived at Budapest Airport well in time where the party disbanded.

Acknowledgements

I hope you all enjoyed your visit to the Hortobágy and that you have many magical memories from cranes against a blood red sky to the penetrating amber eyes of Long-eared Owls. Many thanks for travelling with us. Thank you also to Sue for allowing us to use her photographs in this report.

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February 2017



Itinerary and Weather

- 04 November London - Budapest – Hortobágy (via M3 motorway), short stop by the Motorway near Gyöngyös – birding in the central area of the Hortobágy NP – Hortobágy Eco Lodge (Balmazújváros).
Fine but a bit cloudy. 12 °C.
- 05 November Short walk around the lodge - Southern grasslands of the NP – Tiszacsege by the Tisza river – Crane watch
Cloudy but dry, no wind. 12 °C.
- 06 November Hortobágy-fishponds (by a small train) – Balmazújváros
A bit rainy and windy, cloudy. 15 °C.
- 07 November Southern grasslands of the NP – Elep-fishponds – southern grasslands – Balmazújváros – Crane watch.
Mainly cloudy, but no wind. 8°C.
- 08 November Bihar grassland and buffalo reserve – Tisza-lake
Mainly cloudy, but no wind. 8°C.
- 09 November Woodlands near Debrecen - Polgár Fishponds – Crane watch
Rainy in the morning, cloudy but dry in the afternoon, some sunshine in the evening. About 10°C.
- 10 November Early morning start – Budapest-airport.
Sunny.



CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING THE TOUR

No of days recorded	Abundance scale (max for any one day)
	1 = 1 - 4
1 2h means seen on 1 day and heard on 2 other days	2 = 5 - 9
	3 = 10 - 99
	4 = 100 - 999
	5 = 1000+

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Mute Swan	3	2	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Grater White-fronted Goose	6	5	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
Lesser White-fronted Goose	2	1	<i>Anser erythropus</i>
Tundra Bean Goose	1	1	<i>Anser fabalis rossicus</i>
Greylag Goose	6	4	<i>Anser anser</i>
Red-breasted Goose	4	3	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>
Barnacle Goose	2	1	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
Common Shelduck	2	2	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Ruddy Shelduck	1	1	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	4	3	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Gadwall	1	3	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Common Teal	4	4	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Mallard	6	5	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail	3	2	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Northern Shoveler	4	3	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Common Pochard	3	4	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Ferruginous Duck	1	1	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>
Greater Scaup	1	3	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Tufted Duck	2	4	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Common Goldeneye	1	3	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Common Scoter	1	1	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
Goosander	1	1	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Common Pheasant	6	3	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Black-throated Diver	1	1	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
Little Grebe	3	3	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	3	3	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	2	1	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Red-necked Grebe	1	1	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>
Great Cormorant	6	4	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Pygmy Cormorant	2	4	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>
Great Egret	6	3	<i>Egretta alba</i>
Grey Heron	6	3	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
White Stork	1	1	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
White-tailed Eagle	5	3	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Eastern Imperial Eagle	4	1	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	5	2	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	4	1	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Long-legged Buzzard	1	1	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
Common Buzzard	6	3	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Rough-legged Buzzard	1	1	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	5	1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Saker Falcon	2	1	<i>Falco eleonorae</i>
Peregrine Falcon	3	1	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Merlin	1	1	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Common Kestrel	5	2	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Common Coot	2	4	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Common Moorhen	- 2h	1	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Water Rail	1	1	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Common Crane	6	5	<i>Grus grus</i>
Great Bustard	1	3	<i>Otis tarda</i>

Pied Avocet	1	1	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Grey Plover	2	2	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
European Golden Plover	1	3	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Northern Lapwing	5	3	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Dunlin	1	3	<i>Chalidris alpina</i>
Eurasian Curlew	3	1	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Snipe	1	1	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Ruff	1	1	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Black-headed Gull	5	4	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull	4	3	<i>Larus canus</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	3	1	<i>Larus michahelis</i>
Caspian Gull	4	3	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	6	4	<i>Columba livia</i>
Stock Dove	1	3	<i>Columba oenas</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	6	3	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Little Owl	3	1	<i>Athene noctua</i>
Long-eared Owl	1	3	<i>Asio otus</i>
Common Kingfisher	- 1h	1	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Black Woodpecker	3	1	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
European Green Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Picus viridis</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	3	1	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Syrian Woodpecker	2	1	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>
Common Skylark	1	1	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Crested Lark	3	1	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
White Wagtail	1	1	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Dunnock	1	1	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Black Redstart	1	1	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Mistle Thrush	2	2	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Common Blackbird	2	1	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Fieldfare	3	3	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Goldcrest	2	1	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Winter Wren	4	1	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Great Tit	4	3	<i>Parus major</i>
European Blue Tit	5	3	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Marsh Tit	1	3	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
Long-tailed Tit	2	3	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Bearded Reedling	3	1	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>
Eurasian Penduline-Tit	1	1	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	2	2	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Common Treecreeper	1	1	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Short-toed Treecreeper	1	1	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
Great Grey Shrike	3	1	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
Common Magpie	5	3	<i>Pica pica</i>
Eurasian Jay	1	1	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Western Jackdaw	4	3	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Rook	6	5	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Hooded Crow	6	3	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Common Raven	2	1	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Common Starling	5	3	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
House Sparrow	6	4	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Tree Sparrow	4	3	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Common Chaffinch	2	1	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Common Linnet	2	1	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
European Goldfinch	4	3	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
European Greenfinch	3	1	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Eurasian Siskin	1	3	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Eurasian Bullfinch	1	2	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
Common Reed Bunting	1	1	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Yellowhammer	3	1	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Corn Bunting	1	1	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>

MAMMALS

Red Fox
Stoat
Roe Deer
Brown Hare

Vulpes vulpes
Mustela erminea
Capreolus capreolus
Lepus europaeus

This list represents those birds and other animals seen by any of the party members of this tour.

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