

# Austria's Steppes & Wetlands

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Vienna and transfer Illmitz.
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- Day 2/7** Natural history excursions throughout Neusiedler See National Park.
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- Day 8** Drive Vienna and fly London.
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### Departs

May

### Focus

Birds and general natural history

### Grading

Grade A/B. Short day walks on mostly flat ground, plus one optional cycle ride.

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code AUT01) or brochure

### Highlights:

- Single centre holiday based in the village of Illmitz
- Explore Neusiedler See National Park, including excursions into Hungary
- Great White Egrets, Pygmy Cormorants, White Storks & Ferruginous Ducks frequently seen.
- Breeding Black-tailed Godwits & migrating waders, including Ruffs & Temminck's Stints
- Colourful European species such as Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, Golden Orioles and Penduline Tits
- Travel by horse-drawn carriage to the reedbeds bordering Lake Neusiedler.
- Look for butterflies such as Southern Festoon & amphibians including Fire-bellied Toad.
- Watch displaying Great Bustards & hunting birds of prey including Eastern Imperial Eagle



From top: Eurasian Bittern, Black-tailed Godwit, Austrian wetlands  
Images by Paul Marshall and Paul Stanbury



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

## Introduction

In terms of diversity, Neusiedler See National Park in Austria is one Europe's least known wildlife hotspots. Forget the alpine meadows and mountains of the Alps that you would normally associate with Austria! On this holiday we will be focusing exclusively on the country's warm and flat lowland regions, more akin to the steppes to the east, and the reason we can expect to see such a range of plants, birds, insects and animals is that we will be exploring a region that lies at a crossroads of landscapes, habitats and cultures.

## Itinerary

*Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.*

### Day 1

### Fly Vienna, transfer Illmitz

We depart London Heathrow on a mid-morning British Airways flight to Vienna, arriving in the early afternoon. Upon our arrival we transfer to the small and attractive village of Illmitz, our base for the next 7 nights as we explore the wetlands of the Neusiedler See – Seewinkel National Park and the adjacent Hungarian Steppes.

After checking in, we will spend the rest of the afternoon enjoying the nearby soda lake and the vast reedbeds that surround Lake Neusiedl; the second largest continuous reedbed in Europe. The soda lake holds hordes of birds such as Red-crested Pochard and migrant Ruff, plus countless Greylag Geese with their goslings. Stunning Avocets and Black-winged Stilts may be seen sitting on their nests at the margins. The flowers here are a spectacle in May, with a good display of wetland orchids amongst the highlights. Within the undisturbed reedbeds we can search for, and listen to, Bitterns and a bewildering variety of warblers that nest here, including Sedge, Reed, Savi's and the largest and noisiest of the family, the Starling-sized Great Reed Warbler. The characteristic calls of the Bearded Tit and Penduline Tit are also frequent sounds of these dense reed stands and occasional bushes, but it will take a little more luck to find one of the Little or Spotted Crakes that breed there!

### Day 2

Following breakfast we will drive the short distance to visit the largest of the Seewinkel's lakes, Lange Lacke. On arrival we will walk through flower-rich pasture known as 'Hutweide', admiring the masses of purple-flowered Green-winged Orchids and Austrian Sage, Austrian Flax and Yellow Bedstraw. In turn these flowers attract lots of butterflies and day-flying moths. Both the bird and plant life is more reminiscent of a coastal region and includes breeding Mediterranean Gulls, Avocets and Common Terns. In addition, large numbers of waterfowl frequent the lake, including Spoonbill, Black-necked Grebe, Garganey, Red-crested Pochard and a good range of both breeding

and migrant waders. Blue-headed Wagtails, Tree Sparrows and Corn Buntings are common and Roe Deer and Brown Hare are frequently seen.

After lunch, we will head off to the extensive plain near the Hungarian border, where we will go in search of Great Bustards, the heaviest flying bird in Europe and, for many, the undoubted avian highlight of our holiday. Late in the afternoon they gather to perform their spectacular 'foam bath' displays, where it is hard to tell one end of the bird from the other! Short-eared Owls, often seen in daylight, also breed here, along with Montagu's Harrier and Curlew. We will keep an eye on the sky for soaring raptors and cross a wooden footbridge over the Einserskanal to see what lies over the border in Hungary. Various warblers, including River, Marsh and Icterine, may be found in the scrub here.

This evening, as with most others, you are welcome to relax and enjoy a drink before dinner and join in with completing our checklist for the day. You can also take a stroll from the hotel or join an optional night walk to listen for crakes and look for bats and amphibians.

### Day 3

We will rise early this morning – setting off at around 6.30am – to travel by horse-drawn carriage to the Sandek Tower. This ex Cold War military observation tower gives an amazing view over the reedbeds and marshes. Here we will enjoy our picnic breakfast overlooking numerous herons, egrets, Spoonbills and other waterbirds. Marsh Harriers constantly quarter the reedbeds whilst the occasional Little or Eurasian Bittern and Ferruginous Duck may break cover before diving back into the reeds. After breakfast we will walk back to Illmitz and learn about the natural and cultural history from one of the staff at the National Park's Visitor Centre.

After lunch we will look at another of the Seewinkel's soda lakes and adjacent woodland, a good spot to look for butterflies, dragonflies, Golden Oriole and the attractive Hoopoe, one of Europe's most popular and quirky birds. Penduline Tit, Barred Warbler and Red-backed Shrike live in the willows and scrub that fringe the reedbeds along with numerous Nightingales, which are likely to serenade us for much of our time in Austria.

### Day 4

This morning we will explore a remnant of steppe grassland at Zitmannsdorfer Weisen. Here a mix of dry sandy soils, wet sedge and reedbeds and rough meadows provide a habitat for a wealth of exciting wildlife and a nesting ground for Montagu's Harrier, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew and Bluethroat. This area is particularly rich in insect life and we will be on the look out for dragonflies and butterflies, including the beautiful Southern Frestoon.

Following lunch at a local restaurant, we will check to see if Bee-eaters have arrived back at a nearby sand quarry and then drive to Hackelsberg, a hilltop nature reserve commanding spectacular views over Lake Neusiedl. Hackelsberg is an area of limestone meadows, woodlands and scrub rich in flowers, insects and reptiles.

## Day 5

Today you have the option of travelling by minibus to the River Danube and beyond, or using cycles provided by the hotel to explore this flat and quiet region along its many miles of cycle routes. If you choose the latter, you may wish to take the ferry to the other side of Lake Neusiedl and on to the beautiful little village of Rust, enjoying a leisurely 10 kilometre journey, each way, through a mostly flat landscape. Despite its unfortunate name, Rust is probably the most attractive village in the region with its old town square, colourful 16th to 18th Century houses and White Storks nesting on the rooftops.

In contrast, the minibus will travel first to higher land to the north of the Seewinkel, where rare and exciting raptors such as Imperial Eagle, Saker and Red-footed Falcon can be seen. We will have a picnic lunch amid lush forest beside the Danube, listening out for woodpeckers while watching the pleasure boats cruising upriver. We will also look for Baskettail, Clubtail and Emerald dragonflies and keep an eye open for woodland butterflies cruising around sheltered glades.

After lunch, we will travel to the WWF Marchegg Nature Reserve, which holds ancient wet woodland and quiet meadows alongside the River March and the Slovakian border. Here we can watch the comings and goings of a tree-nesting colony of White Storks from a special viewing platform. Walking along one of the trails, we will look for woodpeckers (most of Europe's species occur here) and stunning Collared Flycatchers. Oxbow lakes abound with the conspicuous signs of Beaver, though seeing one of these nocturnal creatures would be a highly unlikely treat.

## Day 6

Today we drive into Hungary to explore the lakes, marshes and wet forests of the 'Hansag'. The 'flatlands' of the Hansag are being restored to their former glory and this extensive patchwork of habitats is home to a wealth of exciting wildlife. First we visit the wetlands at the very southern end of Lake Neusiedl, although an area of dry grassland will mark our first stop, for here live charming Sousliks, little ground squirrels that tease photographers by ducking out of view just as shutters are ready to be pressed. We then walk along the Einserkanal, past the single sluice gate that controls the water level over the vast area of the Lake.

Following a picnic lunch near Lake Kiraly, we will explore the surrounding wet forest and look for birds and dragonflies from the observation platform. Our primary focus here will be forest birds and their ecology and during our easy walk on level ground we hope to find such species as Golden Oriole, Black and Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Collared Flycatcher and Short-toed Treecreeper. There may also be time to visit a wetland at Nyirkai-Hany and, along with enjoying plenty of birds, perhaps including White-tailed Eagle, learn of the 'Hansag', its wildlife and the traditional Hungarian Grey Cattle and Rackka Sheep.

## Day 7

Our final day in Austria will start with a walk from Illmitz through vineyards and meadows to a hide overlooking bird-rich pools and Lake Neusiedl's reedbeds. This is a good place to look for the endangered Ferruginous Duck and a recent colonist from the east, Pygmy Cormorant. Parties of Black Terns over the pools may have Little Gulls or White-winged Black Terns with them, while flocks of migrant Spotted Redshanks, Ruffs, Wood Sandpipers and other waders feed actively in the pools.

For lunch, we will visit a local 'Geiselsteller' to meet a wine farmer who will explain how the area's distinctive soil and climatic conditions affect both the quality of the wine and the wildlife that the region supports. We also get to meet his woolly Mangalitza Pigs, which not only look fabulous, but taste good too – as we will have found out during our lunch of locally-sourced meats, cheeses, breads and strudels.

During the afternoon, we will look at a part of the Seewinkel new to us. In particular, we will seek out some very obliging Long-eared Owls and their families of still-fluffy fledglings, which often give excellent views from their nesting and roosting trees.

Our final evening meal in Illmitz will be at a Hungarian restaurant, where we can enjoy a traditional 'Puszta Nacht' dinner accompanied by gypsy music. Set in a huge old thatched farm building this offers a fitting cultural finale to a holiday rich in wildlife highlights.

## Day 8

London

There will be an optional pre-breakfast opportunity for a last look at Lake Neusiedl's reedbeds before packing and setting off to Vienna Airport for our early afternoon flight back to London Heathrow.

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## Tour grading

This tour is graded A/B and includes short day walks on flat ground, plus one optional cycle ride.

## Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. We will be based in a comfortable hotel in the village of Illmitz. All rooms have private facilities.

## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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