

# Austria's Steppes & Wetlands

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Vienna and transfer Illmitz.
- Day 2/5** Natural history excursions throughout Neusiedler See National Park.
- Day 6** Drive Vienna and fly London.

### Departs

May

### Focus

Birds and general natural history

### Grading

Grade A/B. Short day walks on mostly flat ground.

### Dates and Prices

Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code AUT01)

### Highlights:

- Single centre holiday based in the village of Illmitz
- Explore Neusiedler See National Park, including excursion into Hungary
- Great White Egrets, Pygmy Cormorants, White Storks & Red-footed Falcon frequently seen.
- Breeding & migrating waders, including Ruffs & Stints
- Colourful European species such as Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, and Golden Orioles
- Travel by horse-drawn carriage to the reedbeds bordering Neusiedler See
- 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: Red-footed Falcon, Military Orchid, European Suslik  
Images by Martin Pitt



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## 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 on a mid-morning / lunchtime flight to Vienna, arriving in the early to mid-afternoon. Upon our arrival we transfer to the small and attractive village of Illmitz, our base for the next 5 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 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 & Early Spider Orchids and Austrian Sage, Austrian Flax and Yellow Bedstraw. In turn these flowers can 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. Dependent on the water level, 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. Close by we will try to see the Suslik, the communal ground squirrel of the steppes.



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 the famous Andau footbridge over the Einserkanal to see what lies over the border in Hungary. Various warblers, including River, Marsh and Icterine, may be found in the scrub here.

### Day 3

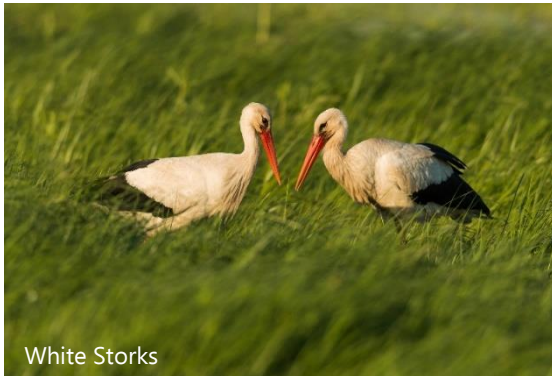
We will rise early this morning – setting off at around 6.30am – to travel by horse-drawn carriage to the Sandek Tower. This ex Cold War military observation tower gives an amazing view over the reedbeds and marshes. Here we will enjoy our picnic breakfast overlooking numerous herons, egrets, Spoonbills and other waterbirds. The trees around the tower act as a migrant trap and Turtle Doves, Barred Warblers and other migrant species can be attracted here. We will not ignore the rookery as it normally holds a couple of breeding pairs of Red-footed Falcons and maybe even Long-eared Owl. After breakfast we will walk back to Illmitz for lunch in the hotel.

We will then head to Weisen and visit the local Bee-eater colony before walking along a remnant of steppe grassland at Zitmannsdorfer Weisen looking for orchids and other flowering plants and the insects they attract. We will finish the day by stopping off 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, 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. We will search the ditches for Fire-bellied Toads and Tree Frogs.



## Day 4

Today we will travel by minibus to the River Danube and beyond. Initially we travel to higher land to the north of the Seewinkel, where despite the enormous wind farm rare and exciting raptors such as Imperial Eagle, Saker and Red-footed Falcon can still be found. 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. We will end the day at a traditional restaurant in Illmitz giving the opportunity to savour locally sourced food and wine.

## Day 5

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. We then walk along the Einserkanal, past the single sluice gate that controls the water level over the vast area of the Lake looking over the area of marsh and hopefully connecting with the Common Cranes that have recently recolonized the area

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 woodland 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. The wetland edges hold Marsh, River and Grasshopper Warblers. There may also be time to visit a wetland at Nyirkai-Hany. Along the way we will be enjoying plenty of birds, perhaps including White-tailed Eagle and Pygmy Cormorant. Learn of the 'Hansag', its wildlife and the traditional Hungarian Grey Cattle and Racka Sheep.





## Day 6

## Illmitz, Vienna, London

Our final day in Austria will focus on the remaining lakes around Illmitz depending on which hold water and what we have yet to see. With migration in full swing, the birds change on a daily basis however 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.

We will then head back to Vienna to catch the afternoon flight back to London.

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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. Alcoholic drinks are extra.

## Weather

We hope for pleasant sunny days, but should be prepared for anything! It can be warm in early May, but equally we could experience rain, afternoon thunderstorms, or even snow. It's best to bring a variety of layers and plan for all eventualities!

## Your Safety & Security

You have chosen to travel to Austria. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice> regularly prior to travel.

## 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.