

Hungary's Winter Birding Bonanza!

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Budapest and transfer to Hortobágy National Park

Day 2/3 Hortobágy National Park

Day 4/5 Bükk National Park

Day 6 Fly London

Departs

March

Focus

Birds

Grading

A/B. Day walks only

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code HUN06) or see the current Naturetrek brochure

Highlights

- Enjoy a spectacular Long-eared Owl roost soon after landing in Budapest.
- Raptors include Eastern Imperial and Greater Spotted Eagles, Saker & Rough-legged Buzzard.
- Explore the forested hills of Bükk National Park for woodpeckers, possible Ural Owl & Hawfinch
- Hoards of wintering Greater White-fronted Geese, with Lesser White-fronted and Red-breasted Geese mixed in.
- Possibility of wintering Wallcreeper and Rock Bunting
- An outside chance of Wolves
- Opportunity to extend your tour in Budapest, Hungary's vibrant capital city.
- Led by expert naturalist guides.



Long-eared Owl, Eastern Imperial Eagle & Black Woodpecker



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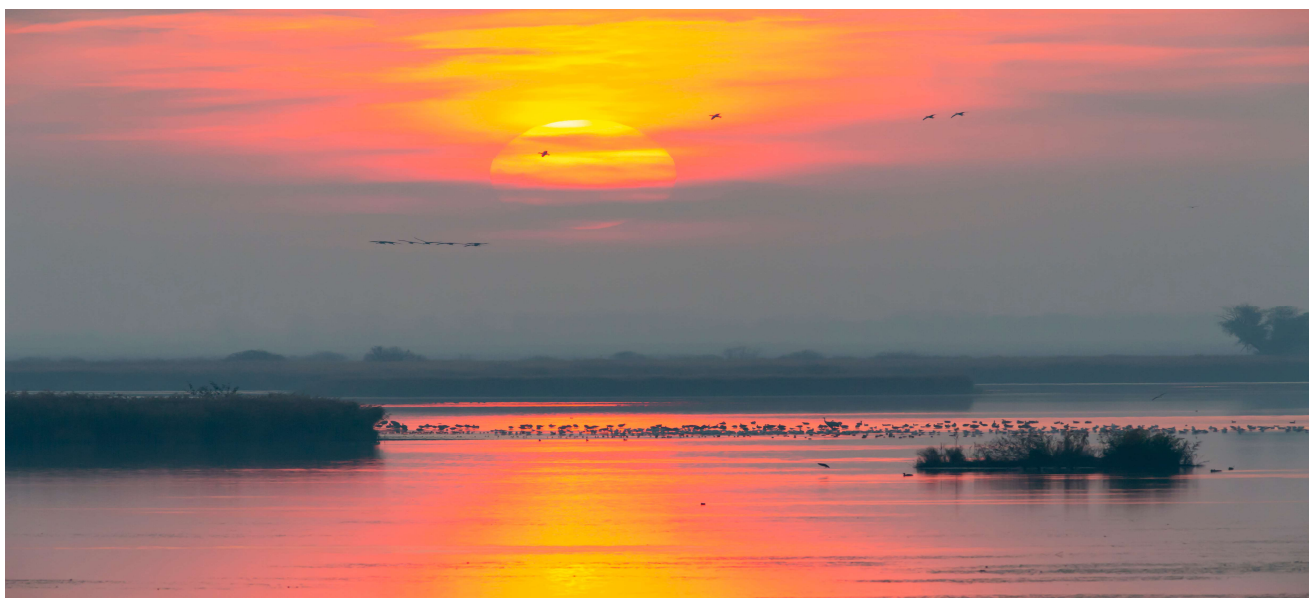
Introduction

Once the coldest days in the depths of a Hungarian winter have passed, the land begins to come back to life. Freshwater lakes thaw out, allowing thousands of wintering wildfowl to return to these refuges for roosting and bathing, bringing with them some of the scarcer visitors such as the striking Smew. At the same time, the vast forests in the north also start to see the first signs of spring, with birdsong gradually increasing and a peak of activity from the area's fine suite of woodpeckers.

This six-day holiday sets out to enjoy some of the very best birdlife during Hungary's late winter season. Starting off from Budapest airport, it is a relatively short drive to see one of Europe's most spectacular gatherings of Long-eared Owls, with over 500 individuals found in a single village in the winter of 2023! We then visit the famous Hortobágy National Park. Alive with birdsong and insect life in the spring and summer, in the winter it's the sheer abundance of wildfowl and great flocks of other bird species which attract birdwatchers from all over Europe. Staying close to the heart of the park, we will seek two rarer species of geese – Lesser White-fronted and Red-breasted – which join the huge flocks of Greylag and Greater White-fronted Geese. Great Bustards roam the fields here, while the area is magnificent for birds of prey, most notably Eastern Imperial Eagle, Hen Harrier, Rough-legged Buzzard and Saker.

Following on from the Hortobágy, we venture north to Bükk National Park to visit vast, ancient forests which are home to six species of woodpecker, all of which should be in full voice and display as they mark out their territories. Although spring migrants are yet to arrive, these will be replaced by some of the scarcer residents here, including Ural and Eurasian Pygmy Owls. Accessible stone quarries nearby may provide us with an opportunity to look for the resplendent Wallcreeper, along with other scree-type specialists, such as Rock Bunting. Wolves reside in the area, though we'd have to count ourselves very lucky to view these elusive packs.

There are bound to be plentiful highlights during this short Hungarian holiday!



NB. 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.

Days 1 – 3

Arrive; drive to Hortobágy National Park

We depart London on an early morning flight to Budapest, the Hungarian capital. After landing, we drive eastwards through interesting countryside, birding as we go until we stop off at one of the largest Long-eared Owl roosts in Hungary – a fantastic site that hosted over 500 owls in 2023! The owls are easy to approach during the day and seeing so many close together is a truly spectacular experience. As we approach with caution, we will be able to admire their wonderful plumage in fine detail and we might even find a roosting Short-eared Owl amongst the gathering.

As we continue our journey, we eventually cross the River Tisza and enter the Great Plains of the Hortobágy where we will notice a dramatic change in the landscape. In Hortobágy National Park we will explore the famous Hortobágy *puszta*, a vast area of grassland stretching to the horizon, providing endless vistas and studded with many fishponds that provide excellent habitat for high numbers of both resident and wintering birds.



Great Bustards

The lakes, if not frozen, form the main drinking and roosting sites for thousands of Greater White-fronted and Greylag Geese, but we will also search for the rare Lesser White-fronted and Red-breasted Geese here, too. A White-tailed Eagle may disturb the flocks of wildfowl and Saker are also never too far away, while Europe's smallest bird of prey, the Merlin, pursues the many buntings which feed in the fields. Bearded Reedlings and Penduline Tits are found in the reedbeds, and the ponds are frequented by Pygmy Cormorants, herons and egrets.

Also during our stay, we shall be looking for the magnificent Great Bustard – a species that flocks together in the winter and that is mostly found on rape fields bordering the protected areas. Throughout our time in the park, raptors will be one of the main attractions, with good numbers of Eastern Imperial Eagle, Rough-legged Buzzard and both Western Marsh and Hen Harriers. Long-legged Buzzard is also possible, while



Greylag Geese

we shall be looking for wintering Greater Spotted Eagle too. Great Grey Shrike, Crested Lark, Fieldfare, Corn Bunting and Tree Sparrow are fairly common throughout the cultivations here and, if time allows, we will search the various gardens and orchards where we may chance upon a Syrian Woodpecker.

Days 4 – 5

Bükk National Park

After breakfast this morning, we will leave the open landscapes of the Hortobágy behind us and drive north to reach the Bükk Hills. Situated in the north-east of the country, 97% of the park is covered in ancient woodland, while the limestone karst that forms the hills holds over 900 caves.



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

Inside Bükk National Park we will walk the ancient beech and oak woodlands to search for a variety of woodpeckers, which at this time of year, should be in full voice as they set to mark out their territories: Black, Grey-headed, Middle Spotted, White-backed and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers are all possible here.

Elsewhere, we will slowly investigate the many picturesque valleys and also pay a visit to an abandoned quarry to look for other woodland birds including Hawfinch, all while keeping our eyes open for Rock Bunting. At another much larger quarry we will also hope to find one of Europe's star avian attractions, the glamorous Wallcreeper – diligent searching may reveal this highly sought-after bird on the higher ridges of the quarry walls; Alpine Accentors can be seen on occasion.

If the weather is favourable, one evening after dinner, we will go searching for Ural Owl. This large and magnificent species inhabits the most remote and undisturbed forests, but birds do often appear at the edge of the forest here, so it is certainly worth a go. We will also have chances to look for Marsh and Willow Tits, Mistle Thrush and Common Crossbill and we will check the muddy roadside, for the presence of the local Wolf pack is sometimes revealed.

Day 6

London

This morning we will make the two-hour drive back to Budapest in time to catch our afternoon flight back to London.

Tour grading

This tour is graded A/B, consisting of day walks and one late evening walk if weather allows. We will travel to each site by minibus, then take leisurely walks to explore the area, generally over easy terrain, although some paths can be rough in places and potentially slippery. Please also be prepared for some very cold and harsh conditions as we seek the winter birds of this region.

Weather

Expect dry but potentially very cold conditions. If there is precipitation, this may fall as snow and conditions therefore underfoot may be slippery.

Accommodation

This is a two-centre holiday, firstly staying at St. Hubert Guesthouse in Hortobágy village itself for three nights and then two nights at the Nomad Hotel in the town of Noszavj. Both have all the modern amenities of a typical guesthouse/hotel.



St Hubert Guesthouse



Nomad Hotel

Extra expenditure

Items of a personal nature such as drinks, etc. tips (allow £10 per day).

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, 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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