

Hungary at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Budapest and transfer to Szigetszentmárton
Day 2/4	Kiskunság National Park and Budapest
Day 5/7	Bükk National Park
Day 8	Fly London

Departs

December

Focus

Birds and festive cheer

Grading

A. Day walks only

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code HUN08)

Highlights

- Look for Great Bustard in Kiskunság National Park
- Raptors including Eastern Imperial & White-tailed Eagles, Saker Falcon & Rough-legged Buzzard
- Scan the wetlands and fishponds of Kiskunság NP for flocks of geese and other waterfowl
- Explore the forested Bükk Hills for Ural Owl and eight species of woodpecker
- Danube boat trip and festive concert in Budapest
- Opportunity to extend your tour in Budapest, Hungary's vibrant capital city
- Led by expert naturalist guides



From top: Ural Owl, Budapest, Great Bustard



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Introduction

Hungary is a scenic land of wooded hills and endless flat plains, dotted with reed-fringed lakes and intersected by one of Europe's great rivers, the mighty Danube. With such a variety of landscapes and habitats on offer, it is not surprising to learn that Hungary is also one of Europe's very best wildlife destinations all year round, in particular for its abundant and varied birdlife. In the winter it is renowned for the large numbers of waterfowl that spend several months on the vast inland wetland areas, plus woodland bird species in large tracts of forest. This two-centre holiday explores these habitats which offer a varied and bountiful number of species, whilst also including time in Budapest to enjoy the Christmas festivities of the capital.

We begin with four nights to the south of Budapest and on the edge of Kiskunság National Park, which is the ideal location from which to explore the steppes, marshes and lakes of this productive area, as well as easy



access to one of Europe's finest cities. Huge flocks of geese are attracted to these wintering grounds and we can expect to see Greater and maybe Lesser White-fronted Geese, as well as the endangered Red-breasted Geese. Great Bustards have a strong population here, and we will see them in wintering flocks as well, whilst Great Grey Shrikes patrol the grasslands and both Bearded and Penduline Tits can be found in large numbers in the reedbeds. Eastern Imperial Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, and Saker Falcon are resident, whilst Hen Harrier, Merlin and Rough-legged Buzzard are present at this time of year. We will spend some time in Budapest as well, enjoying the special atmosphere of the festive season, including a sightseeing cruise on the Danube and admiring many of the city's famous buildings; plus, we will enjoy a classical music concert one evening.



We then head to the Bükk Hills for the last three nights of the holiday, stopping en route at a large roost of wintering Long-eared Owls, providing an excellent opportunity to see this charming owl species from close range, plus some lakes to look for Smew and other ducks. In the Beech, Hornbeam and Oak covered hills of the Bükk, one of our main focuses will be the majestic Ural Owl, as well as eight species of woodpeckers, that are all possible, including White-backed, Black, Lesser Spotted and Grey-headed Woodpeckers. Hawfinches and Bramblings can be found anywhere in the region,

and we will visit an abandoned quarry hoping for Wallcreeper and Alpine Accentor. On the penultimate evening of the holiday we will have dinner and wine-tasting in a unique, traditionally Hungarian setting.

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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 Budapest

We depart London on a flight to Budapest, the Hungarian capital. After arriving, we meet our local guide and head south to the small town of Szigetszentmárton and our hotel on the banks of a smaller branch of the Danube. This is a good base for the next four nights to explore Kiskunság National Park to the east and venture into the capital to the north. If there is still daylight, we will take a birding walk along the river.

Day 2

Kiskunság National Park & Budapest

Kiskunság National Park and the wider region offer us a fantastic range of habitats to explore, including grasslands (puszta), sandy dune-like hills, farmlands, marshes, gravel pits, reedbeds, woodlands and fishponds.

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, Tundra Bean, Barnacle and Red-breasted Geese here, too. A White-tailed Eagle may disturb the flocks of wildfowl and Saker Falcon (which is featured on the 50 Forint coin) are also never too far away, while Europe's smallest bird of prey, the Merlin, pursues the many buntings which feed in the fields. Reed Buntings, Bearded Reedlings and Penduline Tits are found in the reedbeds, and the ponds are frequented by Great and Pygmy Cormorants, herons and egrets.



Penduline Tit

After our first morning in this exciting area, we return to our hotel for a late lunch before then heading into the capital in the afternoon with the plan to attend a classical music concert in either St. Stephen's Basilica or Matthias Church (the venue will depend on schedules which are released close to the time). We will explore the immediate area of the city where the concert is held, taking in the grandiose architecture and festive atmosphere before enjoying the concert.

Day 3

Kiskunság National Park

We spend the whole day out in the field, and we shall be looking for the magnificent Great Bustard, the national bird of Hungary. These huge birds are notoriously shy, but the Kiskunság, with its traditional farming techniques, supports a good population and we stand an excellent chance of encountering this spectacular species as they gather in wintering flocks.

As we scan the fields and pastures, we are also likely to see Curlew, Ruff, Lapwing and Dunlin taking refuge here, along with individual Black-bellied and Golden Plovers, although not in breeding plumage unfortunately. We could also see small groups of Common Crane, Fieldfare, Redwing and Starlings, and then in pools species such as Little Stint, Avocet and Common Redshank. Bittern are present here as well, although we will be very lucky to see one of these, whereas Snipe are much more likely.



Long-legged Buzzard

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 we shall be looking for wintering Greater Spotted

Eagle too. Great Grey Shrike, Crested Lark, Corn Bunting and Tree Sparrow are fairly common throughout the cultivations here.

Day 4

Kiskunság National Park & Budapest

We will head out once again this morning, visiting new locations within the park, where the ponds and lakes have rafts of ducks like Shoveler, Teal, Wigeon, Pintail and Long-tailed Duck.

This afternoon we head back into Budapest and will see the city from a completely different perspective, taking a boat trip along the Danube. As we cruise slowly along the river, we will see many of the iconic highlights including the Parliament building, Buda Castle, Fisherman's Bastion, and the Chain Bridge, all from the warmth and comfort of our vessel. We will either have dinner this evening on the boat or in one of the many fabulous restaurants before heading back to our hotel.

Day 5

Kiskunság National Park & Bükk National Park

This morning we will have one last walk exploring the pools and wetlands of the Kiskunság region, hoping to add to our list some of the species not yet seen.

We will then depart the area and set off north-east towards the Bükk for the second half of the holiday. We will make some stops en route, including a visit to a large roost of wintering Long-eared Owls, providing an excellent opportunity to see this charming owl species from close range. 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.



Long-eared Owl (Mike Crewe)

We will also stop at some gravel pits to see what is out on the water, and amongst good numbers of ducks we hope to see Smew and Greater Scaup, plus Red-necked and Little Grebe, and in recent years there have even been sightings of Red-throated and Arctic Divers and Velvet Scoter!

We will arrive in the late afternoon at our wonderful hotel in the village of Noszvaj, where we stay for the next three nights.

Days 6 - 7

Bükk National Park

The Bükk is an upland area comprised mainly of forested hills which, in effect, are the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. The region was given national park status in 1976 in order to protect its geological, archaeological, historical, floral and faunal treasures. The hills rise gently from 300 metres above sea level to a maximum height of only 960 metres and, as such, no strenuous walks are undertaken whilst here. We will explore the mixed Hornbeam-Oak forests, old Beech woods, Oak-dotted fields, rocky dolomite-limestone slopes and agricultural land that all create such a diverse patchwork of habitats.



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

Inside the national park we will walk the ancient Beech and Oak woodlands to search for woodpeckers, and across the two days we hope to see eight of the nine European species that have been recorded here, including Black, Grey-headed, Middle Spotted, Lesser Spotted and the scarce White-backed Woodpecker. We will have to keep both our ears and eyes peeled to see as many of them as possible! Whilst doing so, we will also likely find Marsh and Willow Tits, Mistle Thrush, Common Crossbill, Brambling, Serin, Bullfinch and maybe Black Redstart.

Elsewhere, we will 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. We will also check the muddy roadsides, for the presence of the local Wolf pack is sometimes revealed.

If the weather is favourable, one evening after dinner, we will go searching for Ural Owl as this is one of the best areas in the country. 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. On the last evening of the holiday we will have a classic Hungarian dinner with wine-tasting in a unique, traditionally Hungarian setting – the perfect way to toast a wonderful festive holiday!

Day 8

Fly London

This morning we should have time for a final couple of hours of birding in this superb region before the drive back to Budapest Airport in time to catch our flight back to London.



Saker Falcon



Greylag Geese

Tour Grading

This tour is graded A, consisting of day walks only. 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. There will also be some walking when in Budapest. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys both culture and walking in the countryside and is of an 'average' level of fitness.

Food & Accommodation Included in the Price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. The first hotel is on the banks of a Danube channel to the south of Budapest, whilst the second hotel in the village of Noszvaj is very good quality. All rooms have private facilities.

Please note: Should you wish to see more of Hungary's beautiful capital city, we would recommend you extend your stay at the beginning or end of the holiday.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read our main Naturetrek brochure and complete and return the enclosed booking form together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us now on 01962 733051. Alternatively, you are welcome to book on the internet by visiting www.naturetrek.co.uk, or telephone us and make a booking with a credit or debit card.

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