

Autumn in Hungary

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 13 October 2009



Long-eared Owl



Common Cranes



The Naturetrek group

Report and images compiled by Malcolm Stott



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leaders: Malcolm Stott (Naturetrek Ornithologist)
Norbert Riezing (Local Guide)

Participants: Bob Winter
Mavis Winter
Mark Cunningham
Diane Donovan
Roger Gooch
Mary Gooch
Brian Smith
Jean Smith
Brian Cheevers
Cherry Cook
Paul Bennett
Tony Goadby
Michael Davidson
Geoff Oliver
Joan Oliver

Day 1

Tuesday 6th October

Heathrow, Budapest and Tuzsa

Weather - sunny & warm

We assembled early morning at Terminal 5 for our departure to Hungary. Although we had some 30 minute delay to take-off, the flight was uneventful and we arrived in glorious sunshine and temperatures of 21 degrees. Tony joined us at the airport and Norbert, our Hungarian Guide, was also there to greet us. Luggage loaded into the trailer we were soon able to relax and enjoying our first taste of the countryside as headed east, through the flatlands of the 'Great Hungarian Plain.

After an hour and a half of driving we stopped at a service station for lunch, with the expectation of see Imperial Eagle and perhaps Saker Falcon. Whilst Stephen (our driver) prepared lunch we scanned the horizon looking for raptors. Buzzards were most obvious soaring in the sky and seen at rest in an arable field where they were joined by a couple of Ravens. Kestrels and Sparrowhawks were noted drifting quite low over-head. In the far distance two Imperials Eagles were seen soaring, but we hoped for better views of these majestic birds. Closer-by Crested Larks were numerous around the car-park and joined by White Wagtails and Black Redstarts. Linnets and a small flock of Goldfinches were also recorded before we continued on our journey.

Not long after we had turned off the motorway we experienced a tyre 'malfunction' on the minibus! We decided to make the most of an opportunity to go birding while the tyre was being replaced! We took a short walk along the edge of some cultivated land and were amazed by the sheer number of Corn Buntings perch on the overhead power-line; hanging like pearls on a string and perhaps outnumbering the total UK population!

We reached the Nadas Centre, our base for the next 5 nights, by 6:00pm and after settling in to our rooms we later gathered in the bar for a drink and the bird log before dining out at a local restaurant. After an excellent meal and some convivial conversation we returned to our hotel and retired to recuperate from a long day of travel.

Day 2

Wednesday 7th October

Hortobagy Fishponds and Crane roost at dusk

Weather - Light rain early morning the rest sunny and warm

For the early risers we had a dawn bird-watch around the hotel complex before breakfast. By 8:00pm we were ready to leave the hotel for a days' bird-watching at the Hortobagy fish-ponds. The first walk this morning was a very leisurely pace with time to enjoy the birds and the landscape. Hundreds of Gadwall, Teal and many Great White Egrets were present at the first lagoon. A lack of diving duck reflected the exceptionally low water-levels. Marsh Harriers floated over the golden heads of reeds and were joined by an occasionally a Pygmy Cormorant, but it was the 3 White-tailed Eagles that inspired us most. As we left a female Sparrowhawk swept low over the path, very close to where we stood, taking everyone's by surprise. Although Penduline Tits were vociferous along the reed-fringed path, they proved rather difficult to see and when we did manage a glimpse it was only brief as they flew before they immediately vanishing in to another patch of tall Phragmites. A flock of 20 or so Long-tail Tits were busily feeding and moving through the bushes as we approached the first observation tower and many of these showed the characteristic white-head of the Scandinavian race. Climbing the gazebo we could see the White-tailed Eagles, two were seen sitting on a mud bar across the lagoon while a third was perched in distant tree, and a small number of Spoonbills which mingled amongst the flock of Great White Egrets. The sudden arrival of a very boisterous school group shattered the tranquillity and hastened our exit. A herd of Water Buffalo, brought in as part of vegetation management, were grazing near-by as we walked back to the centre.

After lunch we used a novel mode of transport, a narrow-gauge railway, to take us further into the reserve. During the journey a Bittern was flushed from a ditch, providing excellent albeit brief view before it disappeared in to reed on the other side of the track. The lagoon we visited this afternoon was very shallow with plenty of exposed mud-banks creating ideal conditions for feeding waders such as Grey Plover, Spotted Redshank, Ruff, Dunlin, many Curlews and 5 Avocets. Where the water was deeper we found both Great-crested and Little Grebe species, Shoveller, Wigeon, and Pintail. The many roosting waders appeared unperturbed by the close presence of a Marsh Harrier which was busily feeding on what appeared to be a goose carcass. As many as 6 Marsh Harriers could be seen in the air together, as they played and swooped over the vast reed-beds. The low sun behind us provided perfect light to enjoy the birds and made identification so much easier.

All too soon time had passed-by and sadly we had to leave. The climax of today was to witness the spectacular sight as thousands of Cranes fly-in to roost. As we positioned ourselves to get the best view, the sun's embers turned the sky a pastel cerise highlighted by candyfloss coloured clouds. Before long we could hear the Cranes calling, then wave after wave flew overhead to settle on the Puszta. This proved to be a truly marvellous experience! The Crane counted for the area had a staggering tally of 81,700 individuals present, a record number for this early in the season. Walking back to the minibus we could hear a distant Little Owl calling. This evening we stopped at the restaurant for dinner before returning to the hotel and following the bird-log we all retired content with the days birding.

Day 3

Thursday 8th October

Egyek - Nagymajor and Northern Hortobagy

Weather - warm and sunny

This morning we had an impromptu birding session which added African Morning Dove and Serin to the trip list. We left the hotel 30 minutes later than planned and headed to some nearby woodland for a walk in search of woodpeckers. Although our target species (Syrian and Black) eluded us, we did manage to find a Great-spotted Woodpecker and hear Green Woodpecker. A small flock of Siskin were new, but the star bird had to be the Hawfinch perch on top a tree.

Back at the hotel we boarded the minibus and set off for a days' bird-watching in the northern sector of the Hortobagy in an attempt to find some birds of prey. Our first stop produced another White-tailed Eagle, several Buzzards and a Kestrel. Crested Larks were very obvious and we saw Great-grey Shrike. We faired only marginally better at our second stop, where we had more Buzzards, another Kestrel and Great-grey Shrike before seeing a Long-legged Buzzard in the distance. As we travelled through this unique landscape, its pastoral management was clearly evident; shepherds with their dogs tending flocks of sheep while others herded cattle amongst which several were of the traditional 'Grey Hungarian' breed.

After lunch we continued in our search of more raptors, but were sidetracked by the prolific number of butterflies that included Pale Clouded Yellows, Painted Ladies and Small Blues along the field margin of our first stop. While across the road we scanned the fields in hope of more birds of prey. An odd looking Buzzard, perched in the distance, presented us with an ID challenge, in silhouette against strong sunlight, when suddenly we found ourselves a midst a real life drama was about to unfold in front of us. A Sparrowhawk, totally focused on Starling for dinner, pursued its prey close to the ground and in a desperate bid to avoid its talons the Starling twisted, turned and dived amongst the group using all its skill to avoid the fatal blow. Sadly for the Starling it was eventually out-manoevred, but proved us with quite a spectacle!

For our second evening of Crane-watching we chose a new location to observe the birds coming in to roost. From the tower we waited and as the sun dimmed we experienced another magnificent sunset; the scene could have been straight out of the Serengeti as the birds began to arrive – marvellous! Every tour needs a WOW factor and this was ours; another magical moment and an exciting conclusion to a wonderful day on the Puszta.

Day 4

Friday 9th October

Nagyivan - South Puszta and Hortobagy Village

Weather - dull but warm with strong winds mid-afternoon

An early breakfast was necessary this morning since we needed to collect Dr Gabor Kovacs, the National Park Ranger, from Nagyivan. He would help us to find the specialities birds on the Puszta this morning and he didn't disappoint us. Our first stop produced 3 Stone Curlews before leaving to visit an area of adjoining arable land to look for Great Bustards where we found a group of 10 feeding along a field-edge. Although the birds were quite some distance away, we had some reasonable views through telescopes.

Next we had a very dusty ride out onto the Puszta to search for Dotterel and again we were lucky with a small flock of 33 birds found and some Golden Plovers. This wilderness (510 sq km) of salt-marsh, wetland and alkali-steppe grassland habitats is vast and provides a unique experience. This area is not only one of the best birding places in Europe, but also offers much more to the general naturalist. During the past 15 years around 320 species of bird have been recorded here, almost 75% of all the birds in Europe. The seemingly endless flat steppe preserves some important remnants of the original vegetation. A true wilderness area like no other, with a pastoral system still grazed in the traditional way by shepherded cattle and sheep and has the distinction of holding one of the largest populations of Great Bustard in Central Europe.

Next we called at the Hortobagy village to visit the Tourist Centre and buy maps before taking a short walk to see the main attraction, a Long-eared Owl roost in a tree in the car park! Lunch was by the famous, 'Nine Arches' bridge and later there was time to wonder round the village and do a little shopping. On our way for another evening of Crane-watching we had time for a short walk by a farmstead where we saw the traditional Roca (horned sheep) being brought back to the sheep pens and found a highly venomous Wolf spider before returning to the minibus.

This afternoon we returned to the site we had first visited to watch the Cranes. This time we sat discretely beneath the small hillock from where we had some excellent views of the birds as they flew directly overhead to the roosting area. The evening had a definite touch of autumn chill in the air, so we were please to arrive at the restaurant for some hot food and bring a sense of feeling back to the body before the bird-log back at the hotel.

Day 5

Saturday 10th October

Tusza and Kaba lagoon

Weather - generally overcast with sunny periods

Having had a few early starts this morning was a more leisurely affair. We started with breakfast at 8:00pm before a stroll to some woodland near the river. Although we saw several Great-spotted Woodpeckers and we even found a Green Woodpecker, the Syrian Woodpecker still managed to elude us!

After coffee back at the hotel we departed for the Sugar Beet factory at Kaba where we visited the lagoon area. Finally we managed to catch-up with Ferruginous Duck and other diving duck including Goldeneye; an early winter visitor. Although a Black-necked Grebe was present on the lagoon, the highlight for most was perhaps the elegant Marsh Sandpiper.

On our way back we briefly stopped for coffee in a small town where the lady dealt with our peculiarities without batting an eye-lid! We travelled along the eastern fringe of the National Park, through what was mostly arable land with maze crops to try and maximise our chances of seeing the impressive numbers of Cranes on their feeding grounds. Marsh Harrier and Sparrowhawk were the only two other species of note before we arrived back at the hotel. After a short rest and a little packing we left for our last meal at the village restaurant, followed by the now customary bird log before retiring to complete our packing.

Day 6

Sunday 11th October

Tusza and drive to Butti Hills

Weather - rain until mid-afternoon then overcast with sunny periods

We departed the hotel at 9:00am to start our journey north to the next destination the Butti Hills. We made frequent stops along the way in search of Syrian and Black Woodpeckers, Imperial Eagle and Saker Falcon in particular. However, it was not until the third stop of the morning that we managed to find one of the target species a Saker Falcon. Although a bird was identified perched on the 'seventh pylon', this was at a great distance away and the falcon barely discernable! All was rectified later when we did managed good views of another bird much to everybody's delight and the guides' relief!

Despite our early arrival at the Nomad Hotel we were greeted with a warm reception and Barbara soon had hot drinks and several plates of delicious apple strudel organised while we waited for Stephen to produce lunch. By the afternoon the rain had eased and we enjoyed a walk to woodlands by a lake to look for the 'invisible' Syrian Woodpecker. Although we saw several Treecreepers and Nuthatches, heard a Middle-spotted Woodpecker and some even had excellent views of a Sparrowhawk, alas we had no encounters with either Syrian or Grey-headed Woodpeckers!

The meal tonight was a gastronomic delight, with course after delicious course appearing on the table and the local wine was very agreeable –full bodied, smooth with a fiery after-burn! After the bird log some decided an evening constitutional walk was necessary before retiring for the night.

Day 7

Monday 12th October

Butti National Park, Hor Valley

Weather - rain all day

A pre-breakfast walk was rewarded with views of a Middle-spotted Woodpecker, a small flock of Hawfinches and for some a Red Squirrel. The breakfast banquet over, we all just about managed to squeeze onto the minibus. First we visited the village for yet another attempt to find Syrian Woodpecker. The minibus parked outside the church (seeking divine intervention?) and we walk the short distance to look over some orchards, apparently good habitat for the species. Enough to say no Syrian Woodpeckers were to be seen, but we did see a late Hobby on its migration south.

After a couple of attempts at getting cash from un-cooperative ATM machines, we eventually arrived at our destination, the Hor Valley. Although the rain was persistent, we were unperturbed in our search for Rock Bunting and were not really surprised when we failed to find any. Visiting the cave was an interesting diversion before we headed off on our quest to try and find woodpeckers. Despite the inclement weather the valley was picturesque with fiery colours and wisps of mist giving it an otherworldly air! The trees were in a fabulous state of flux, some hanging onto the blousy greens of summer and others already changed to an earthier hue. Undaunted by the rain we persevered in our search, but eventually had to admit defeat. It was comforting to know we were not alone, another group trying to find woodpeckers were also disappointed.

We returned to the hotel briefly, after an aborted attempt to find Fire Salamander, to change before an evening of wine tasting at a local vineyard. This was very interesting, not to mention a pleasant experience, and we soon forgot all about woodpeckers! We returned to the hotel just in time for another delicious meal. After the bird-log we expressed our gratitude and appreciation to Norbert for his company and persistence in trying, against all the odds, to show us a good selection of birds to be found in autumn in Hungary. Domestic arrangements dealt with for the next day we all retired to pack.

Day 8

Tuesday 13th October

Butti Hills – Budapest

Weather - Overcast with slight drizzle

We bade farewell to Barbara and the Nomad Hotel and by 8:15am began our journey to Budapest for some, while the rest of us were deposited at the airport. The journey was uneventful having time to stop for an Imperial Eagle on route. This all changed as we reached the outskirts of the capital city. Due to road-works and a spate of accidents, traffic congestion was severe and we had an anxious period when we were beginning to wonder if we would make the airport in time for our Heathrow flight! On reaching the terminal building the possibility of another delay, due to the Presidential convey of several black limos and motor cycle outriders, was unthinkable! Fortunately we passed through untroubled but still in a rush, with little time to say our farewells, and only 20 minutes to spare before boarding our flight! We descended into a sunny Heathrow 15 minutes ahead of schedule, and collected our baggage (or moved to the transit area) before melting into the crowd for our onward journey.

Although we had good weather in the Hortobagy, birding was not easy given the exceptionally dry conditions, contrary to the Butti Hills where the rain proved more than a challenge birding in the Hor Valley! Which just leaves me to say thank you for your companionship and the camaraderie that stemmed from the experiences we shared together and above all your patience during the most frustrating periods – can we declare Syrian Woodpeckers extinct?!

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	October								
			6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybatus ruficollis</i>		4				✓	2		
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		9				✓	6		
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>						1			
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓				✓	✓		
5	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>		30				9			
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	1	1	1			1	
7	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		12			25				
8	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		80				1		1	2
9	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1							
10	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		1					30		
11	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓				
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		✓							
13	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		✓							
14	Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓				✓			
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		4				2			
17	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		7				3			
18	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>						11			
19	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>						15			
20	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>						1			
21	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>					1				
22	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		4	1						
23	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		20				1	2		
24	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>							2		
25	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	✓
27	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>			1						
28	Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	2								1
29	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	6	1	2	5	✓	6	6	1	2
30	Saker Falcon	<i>Falca cherrug</i>							2		
31	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>								1	
32	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
33	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	1			
34	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		H							
35	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		1				9	14		
36	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>					10				
37	Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>					3				
38	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	60	✓	1	✓	✓				
39	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		5							
40	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		4			12				
41	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		1							
42	Eurasian Dotterel	<i>Charadrius morinellus</i>					33				
43	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		7				4			
44	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		20	2			7			
45	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		2							
46	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		6							
47	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			1						

	Common name	Scientific name	October							
			6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
48	Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>					1			
49	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	60	35	1	✓	✓			
50	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>		2						
51	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus canus</i>			1					
52	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
53	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓		✓	2		
54	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>		H						
55	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓		✓			✓		
57	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	African Morning Dove			H						
59	Little Owl	<i>Anthene noctua</i>		H	H					
60	Northern Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>				7				
61	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>						H	1	
62	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	2	3	1	✓	✓	✓	
63	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus picus</i>			H		1	1	1	
64	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	2	✓	✓	✓	3	2	
65	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓				
66	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		2	2	1				
67	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		2	✓	✓	✓			
68	Red-throated Pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>		1	H					
69	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		1						
70	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	1		
71	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>						1	1	
72	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>							3	
73	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		2	2	2	1	1	7	
74	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1					3	
75	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	2	2	✓	✓	✓	6	✓	
76	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	6	✓	✓	✓		1	1	
77	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>							H	
78	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		3	2		1			
79	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>			1					
80	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		1						
81	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biamicus</i>		7						
82	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		20				6	1	
83	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>						6	1	
84	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
85	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
86	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					1	5	✓	
87	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>						3	H	
88	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>		✓			H			
89	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>		3	5	3	4	3		
90	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1		1		2	6	✓	
91	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
92	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		✓		✓				
93	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	7	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
94	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	1				2	2	
96	Common Starling	<i>Sturna vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	House Sparrow	<i>Passer Domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	October							
			6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
98	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Chaffinch	<i>Fringa coelebs</i>			2			✓	✓	
100	Eurasian Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			2		1	2	1	
101	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓			✓		
102	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			2		✓	H		
103	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	15	12	✓	✓	✓	250	✓	
104	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	6				✓			
105	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			1		4		5	
106	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			5					
107	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoenicus</i>		6		1				
108	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>							H	

Mammals

Serotine Bats *Vesperugo serotinus*

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Hare *Lepus europaeus*

Roe Deer *Capreolus capreol*

Reptiles & Amphibians

Tree Frog *Hyla arborea*

Marsh Frog *Rana Ribibunda*

Butterflies

Pieris brassicae Large White

Colias australis Berger's Clouded Yellow

Cyaniris semiargus Marazine Blue

Inachis io Peacock

Aglais urticae Small Tortoiseshell

Vanessa carbui Painted Lady

Artogeia rapae Small White

Colias hyale Pale Clouded Yellow

Polyommatus icarus Common Blue

Vanessa atalanta Red Admiral

Polygonia calbum Comma

Dragonflies

Ashna juncea Common Hawker

Sympetrum sanguineum Ruddy Darter

Spiders

Lycos singoreinsis Wolf Spider