

Autumn in Hungary

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 19 October 2016

Report compiled by Marcus John



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Tour participants: Marcus John (Naturetrek) & Peter Wolff (Local; guide) with 13 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Wednesday 12th October

Everyone met in the arrivals hall of Budapest airport, where we greeted by our Hungarian guide Peter and our driver Tibor. We climbed aboard the bus and immediately headed out of the suburbs and into the countryside. We were soon entering the “great plain” of Hungary: a flat landscape with wide horizons, a mixture of cereal fields and rough pasture but dotted with woodland and small lakes. We were heading south towards the Kiskunsag National Park, an area of Puszta habitat similar to the more famous Hortobagy. The Hungarian word *Puszta* means "plains", and refers to a steppe-like habitat of open grassland with scattered trees and bushes.

We had left Budapest around mid-day and it was soon time for lunch. As we enjoyed the first of Tibor's picnics, we saw three Brown Hares and two Great Grey Shrikes, a typical bird of the plains. One of the shrikes behaved more like a Kestrel, repeatedly hovering as it searched for food; this was a behaviour we were to witness several times during the tour.

Our first proper stop was at a bog forest near Osca, where we found lots of signs of woodpecker activity. We walked for some time and were finally rewarded with good views of a Middle-Spotted Woodpecker. Next, we drove across the open expanse of Bugyi fields, where Peter found a flock of magnificent Great Bustards. It soon became apparent that though close together, the males and females were feeding in separate groups. Flocks of Lapwing and Greylag Geese were also present and a stunning male Hen Harrier flew past. After a dull day, the light was transformed as the setting sun shone through a narrow gap between the low clouds and the flat horizon, bathing the Great Bustards in a golden glow.

Day 2

Thursday 13th October

Most of us met together at dawn for walk before breakfast, which became our routine throughout the tour. It was cold but dry as we walked around the wooded grounds. Birds were thin on the ground but we did find a female Black Redstart and both Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers.

After a good breakfast, we were ready to head out and explore the Kiskunsag National Park. Our first stop was Apay fish ponds, where several man-made lakes are surrounded by extensive reed beds. Scanning the adjacent fields, we found several White-tailed Eagles, mostly dark immatures. Peter took us to a fishpond that had just been drained, where the mud and shallow pools was teeming with waders. A scan with the scopes soon revealed a wide range of species including Little Stint, Ruff and Avocet; much closer were three juvenile Curlew Sandpipers. Another male Hen Harrier was quartering in the distance whilst two Marsh Harriers showed well as they flew low over the reeds.

We climbed up into a tower hide, which offered a panoramic view across the whole area. The sheer number of Grey Herons and Great Egrets was impressive and we saw our only Rough-legged Buzzard of the trip. As we walked back to the bus, we heard the distinctive, ringing call of Bearded Tit. After some searching, we eventually found a pair as they made their way along the base of the reeds. A male then flew out and perched in the open for several seconds, affording even better views!

After coffee and lunch in a local village, we visited an area of Bugyi fields where the enigmatic Saker Falcon breeds. Almost as soon as we climbed out of the bus, we found a large raptor perched on a distant pylon. Looking through scopes, we delighted to identify this as a Saker, our opinion confirmed when it flew off with a typical falcon flight. A flock of Tree Sparrows was a welcome sight, having become such a scarce bird in most parts of the UK. As the sun put in a late appearance, we returned to have another look at the flock of Great Bustards, with several groups of Roe Deer feeding in the fields nearby - a great way to finish off a memorable day!

Day 3

Friday 14th October

Our pre-breakfast walk was more productive than yesterday, yielding another Black Redstart, a pair of Corn Buntings, and a migrating flock of 400 Stock Doves. Just before returning for breakfast, we watched a Red Fox as it made its way through the misty fields.

Today we travelled east across central Hungary to the famous Hortobagy, which holds significant bird populations at every season. Our route took us along the River Tisza, a major waterway that crosses the country from north to south, eventually joining the mighty Danube in Serbia. It is the largest of all the Danube's tributaries and a significant flyway for migratory birds. The banks are well-wooded and hold a good variety of species. After a hour or so, we stopped by the river to have a quick look for woodpeckers. We soon had a tantalising view of a Syrian Woodpecker but it quickly disappeared and left most of us frustrated!

When we stopped to buy lunch supplies, we were amazed to see an eagle fly slowly over the village. Unfortunately, the leaders were in the supermarket and only able to identify the bird when it was already quite distant - it was our first Eastern Imperial Eagle. Peter was confident we would see another one, so we were in optimistic mood as we ate our picnic lunch. A sharp call alerted us to the presence of another Syrian Woodpecker and this time it sat up in a close tree, where everyone could make a positive identification. Helpfully, a Great Spotted Woodpecker flew into an adjacent tree to provide a direct comparison! As we finished our sandwiches, a flock of Common Cranes flew over the river - a foretaste of what was to come that evening.

In the late afternoon, as we drove across the wide plains of the Hortobagy, several big groups of Cranes fed in the stubble fields on either side of the road. As dusk approached, we parked up to wait for the Cranes to fly in to roost. Soon the first large flock appeared, flying in a V formation as they headed out onto an inaccessible marsh (a perfect roost site). Several more flocks flew low across the clear sky and by the time we left, we estimated that we had seen around 10,000 Cranes in total. As we drove to the hotel, a Long-eared Owl flashed across the beam of our headlights - a brief glimpse but a very nice way to complete the day.

Day 4

Saturday 15th October

Our new hotel was situated right on the banks of the River Tisza and on the early morning walk we saw our first Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. After breakfast, we crossed the river on a local ferry - a flat barge which was winched across on a rope. A Kingfisher flew low over the water and perched on the opposite bank as we watched from the "deck".

Our first stop today was at a nearby oxbow lake, which held several Ferruginous Duck, along with good numbers of Teal and Little Grebe. From here we drove out into more open habitat where Peter hoped to find large raptors. Sure enough, we saw a total of eight White-tailed Eagles, including at least three adults, along with Marsh and Hen Harrier. We also enjoyed more sightings of Great Grey Shrike; close views of this distinctive species are a wonderful feature of autumn in Hungary. Next, we drove a little further into the Hortobagy and turned down a rough track to another good area for birds of prey. However, the highlight here was a flock of around 30 Bearded Tits. They repeatedly flew high and circled overhead, before dropping back into the reeds. This unusual behaviour is probably a precursor to late autumn movements, when population pressure may force this normally sedentary species to seek out new reed beds.

As we drove towards our lunch stop, we saw a large raptor flying in front of us and stopped to investigate. We quickly realised this was our second Eastern Imperial Eagle but this time everyone had a good view. Pale wing markings told us it was an immature bird; it was being mobbed by a Buzzard, which looked tiny in comparison! Soon afterwards, we stopped to eat our picnic by another large fishpond, where we had close views of a pair of White-tailed Eagles. At one point they flew low over the water, spooking the local geese, before perching in waterside trees. As we were watching a close pair of Bearded Tits, a Kingfisher flew into reeds only a few metres from where we sat.

We finished the day back at the Common Crane roost. We stopped a little further along the road and this time, groups of Cranes flew directly overhead. As flock after flock crossed the darkening sky, their distinctive calls carried through the still air - a truly memorable experience.

Day 5

Sunday 16th October

We again crossed the river on the ferry and went to see if we could get better views of feeding Cranes. After seeing several large flocks in the distance, we were pleased to get close to a couple of small family groups, which were feeding adjacent to the road. Whilst watching the Cranes, we found a good number of smart White-fronted Geese amongst a flock of Greylags.

We spent an hour walking along a drainage channel, where dozens of migrant passerines were moving through scrubby woodland. We enjoyed point-blank views of several confiding Goldcrests as they fed low down. We found another Eastern Imperial Eagle and a Sparrowhawk, which flushed hundreds of Starlings and corvids when it took off.

Later that morning, Peter took us to a couple of large, empty barns to look for owls. We were fascinated to find the pellets of both Barn and Little Owls and eventually saw two of the latter species as they flew out of the far entrance. Luckily, one of them flew up and perched on a nearby roof, allowing us good views through the scopes.

We stopped in the village of Nadudvar for welcome coffee and cakes, before heading out to fishponds near Hajduszoboszló. However, heavy rain caused us to return to the famous spa town to eat lunch under cover. The rain eventually eased and when we returned to the fishponds, we were able to enjoy a long walk. We found some interesting birds, including five Black-necked Grebes, four Spotted Redshanks and three Marsh Harriers. When the rain returned, we decided to head straight back to the hotel and enjoy a little “down time” before dinner.

Day 6

Monday 17th October

Our early morning walk was enlivened by a cooperative Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, which allowed prolonged views through the scope. A flight of Cranes over the river was our last sighting of this species before we headed off north west to the hilly country of Bukk National Park.

The drive was straightforward and by mid-day we had arrived at the excellent Nomad Hotel in the pretty village of Noszvaj. Nestled in a steep, wooded valley, this was a real contrast to the plains we had left behind. We went for a walk through the village and into the forest, finding a nice variety of woodland species including Marsh Tit, Jay and Hawfinch.

We ate lunch at the hotel, a delicious goulash soup; the food at this hotel was superb and certainly surpassed our expectations. The whole place had a lovely ambience, the rooms were very comfortable and the staff were warm, friendly and spoke excellent English!

In the afternoon we set off for the northern end of the Hor Valley, where we took two long walks through extensive woodland. Interspersed with the dominant Beech were Hornbeam and Sycamore as well as scattered conifers. This forest is protected and human activity is minimal. It feels like a truly wild environment, with plenty of dead trees and snags providing habitat for a range of woodpeckers. We saw several tit flocks which contained both Marsh and Coal Tits. Other birds included Jay and Mistle Thrush but the woodpeckers remained hidden. We hoped that the next day would bring us better luck.

Day 7

Tuesday 18th October

Some of us went out at dawn and found a nice Hawfinch perched high in a tree just outside the hotel. The breakfast was remarkably generous and there was a great variety from which to create our lunch sandwiches.

We spent the day at the southern end of the Hor Valley, enjoying an extended walk through unspoilt woodland. We stopped first at an old quarry, where we heard a Grey-headed Woodpecker and then saw it fly across the valley. Better still, a Black Woodpecker followed, looking unbelievably big compared to the previous species. As we waited for more woodpeckers, Peter thought he heard a Nutcracker. He played the call on his speaker and we heard it respond, though at some distance. At this point Stuart (who had been loitering back along the path) caught up to tell us that he had seen the Nutcracker perched in the top of a conifer! Later on, Dave also a Nutcracker when he walked back through the same area, though it eluded the rest of us.

Although we had already seen Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, we were delighted when a female perched up very close and proceeded to chisel away at a rotten trunk for several minutes. As we walked on, the sheer number of dead trees lying on the ground told us that we were in prime White-backed Woodpecker habitat. We listened hard and eventually heard a call that Peter identified as belonging to this species. Some of us then had a glimpse of it perched on a thin trunk. Luckily, everyone soon saw it fly over and we heard it drumming from the other side of the path. This sighting was followed by another fly-over Black Woodpecker, calling as it flew past.

We ate our sandwiches then set off to retrace our steps and walk slowly down the valley. Back at the quarry, we had good views of a male Sparrowhawk and a flock of Long-tailed Tits, including several of the white-headed northern race. These “*caudatus*” birds are very attractive and seldom seen in Britain.

Day 8

Wednesday 19th October

We went for our last pre-breakfast walk and found a multitude of Nuthatches, as well as another showy Hawfinch. After a hearty breakfast, we set off on the two-hour drive back to Budapest. We stopped at a service station for coffee and found a big flock of Goldfinches, along with a close pair of Crested Larks. These were the last birds of note before we arrived at the airport and said our farewells to Peter and Tibor. Their hard work and cheerful disposition had helped to ensure an enjoyable and successful tour.

Hungary offers excellent birding at all times of year, thanks to its location at the heart of Europe. Autumn is a great time to see a variety of migratory species as they move through the hills and plains to escape the northern winter. We greatly enjoyed our time exploring different areas of the country, with the main highlight being the sight and sound of thousands of Common Cranes, both feeding and flying into roost. Other special moments included watching a flock of Great Bustards and getting good views of Eastern Imperial Eagle and Saker Falcon. We also saw eight species of woodpecker and a nice selection of passerines. Close views of Bearded Tit, Great Grey Shrike, Tree Sparrow and Hawfinch will all live long in the memory.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	October							
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		7		30	30			
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			1	3	5			
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					5			
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1	20	10	50	12			
5	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		30		60	50			
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	50	10	50	25	2		2
7	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			1					
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>			4	2	1			
9	White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>				300	30			
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		30						
13	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		100		40	3			
14	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>					5			
15	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>					3			
16	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					1			
17	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	2	2	2	2				
18	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		3	1	3	10			
19	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	1	1	2	1	2	
20	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	15	40	20	50	20	4	4	2
21	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>		1						
22	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		8		12				
23	Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>			1	1	1			
24	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	4	25	10	25	20	2		1
25	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1			1			
26	Saker	<i>Falco cherrug</i>		1						
27	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		1	H	H				
29	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		6	4	10				
30	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		2	4	10	60			
31	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		1	10,000	6,000	2,000	14		
32	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	65	41						
33	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		2						
34	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		2						
35	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		2						
36	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	150	300	100	200	6			
37	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		80						
38	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		1						
39	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>		3						
40	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>		2						
41	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		10	1	1	12			
42	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>					H			
43	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>					4			
44	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		8		1				
45	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
46	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
47	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	October							
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
48	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
49	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
50	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
51	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		H						
52	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>			1					
53	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H		H	H		H		
54	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1	1		2			
55	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				2				
56	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>				1	H		2	
57	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>							1	
58	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		1		2	H		1	
59	Middle-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>	1							
60	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>			1					
61	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		2	1	3	2	4	4	
62	Lesser-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>				1	H	1	2	
63	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>							1	
64	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	H	H		2	H			
65	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		2	1	H	10			2
66	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
67	Red-throated Pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>		H		H				
68	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		H	2	2	6			1
69	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>							1	
70	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	H	2	2	3	1	
71	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1		H	1	2	2	2	
72	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		1	15	12	15	6	15	2
73	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	1	3	2		5			
74	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1		1	10	10	10	
75	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	2							
76	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>						2	2	
77	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	2	6		2	2		4	
78	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	4	2		2	30	20	20	
79	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		10		30	H			
80	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			H	6	H	2	20	
81	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>						8	20	2
82	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
83	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	H			4	2	5	10	5
86	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	H							
87	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>				H		4	6	
88	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	5	2		2	2	1		
89	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		3	1	4	H	5	8	
91	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>							1	
93	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
94	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>						3	10	
95	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
96	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
97	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	10	60	10	30	100	20	30	
98	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		17	13	12	20	12		

	Common name	Scientific name	October							
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
99	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	4						3	1
101	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>							H	H
102	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>								4
103	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				1				
104	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				15	H	H	H	
105	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
106	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓
108	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			2		2			
109	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				1	H			H
110	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓					

Mammals

	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>							2	
	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	20	40	12	50	10	2	2	
	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			1	1				
	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	3				1			
	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>						1		
	Greater Noctule Bat	<i>Nyctalus lasiopterus</i>		6		2	1			
	Pipistrelle bat sp.	<i>Pipistrellus sp.</i>			2					
	European Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>		1						

Butterflies

	Peacock	<i>Aglais io</i>			2					
	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		2	1	1			1	
	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>				6				
	Pale Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias hyale</i>				2				
	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		2		4				
	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>				2				
	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>			1					

Others

	Hummingbird Hawk-moth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>							1	
	Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>	✓	✓						
	Marsh Frog	<i>Pelophylax ridibundus</i>				1				
	Roman Snail	<i>Helix pomatia</i>							1	
	Newt sp.					1				