



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

36 Thunder Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich NR7 0PX

Telephone: 01603 300552

www.honeyguide.co.uk E-mail: chris@honeyguide.co.uk



Hungary
Kiskunság National Park
2 – 9 June 2013

Holiday participants

Malcolm and Helen Crowder
Colin Taylor
Pat Boon
Sue Davy

Leaders

Gábor Orbán and Paul Tout

Our hosts at Kondor Lodge: Gábor Orbán and Andrea Katona.

Ecotours www.ecotours.hu and Kondor Ecolodge and www.kondorhotel.echt.hu

Report by Paul Tout with additions by Helen Crowder.

Photos in this report were all taken during the course of this holiday, those edged green by Paul Tout, edged blue by Helen Crowder, and elsewhere as indicated.

Cover: an arable field on the way to the Bösztörpuszta, 5 June.

Below: the group by the same field (Gábor Orbán).



This holiday, as for every Honeyguide holiday, also puts something into conservation in our host country by way of a contribution to the wildlife that we enjoyed. The conservation contribution this year went the Kiskunság Bird Association, which is based at the National Park's Lake Kolon Bird Observatory.

The Association has been studying the endangered moustached warbler at the lake for many years and is also marking some of the nightjars which nest in the dunes with geolocators. These are tiny units worn by the birds which record the timing of sunrise and sunset, unique on any given day (other than at the equinoxes) anywhere in the world. If the birds can be recaptured in years to come (and nightjars are usually faithful to their breeding sites) then the data can be downloaded and a full year's migration deduced from the data obtained. Our donation of £40 per person was topped up by gift aid and £500 from the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, which pays for two geolocators.

As at June 2013, the total for all conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 was £89,420.

DAILY DIARY

Sunday 2 June – Arrival at Kondor Lodge in the Kiskunság National Park

The group assembled at Budapest airport, four by Wizzair from Luton, Sue via a more complicated route from Greece, and we were met by Gábor's partner Andrea. Gábor was waiting in the minibus for the 90 minute journey to Kondor Eco-Lodge, where in the early evening sunlight there was just time to admire our accommodation in the traditional thatched buildings and unpack a few things before sitting down to a delicious 3-course supper and local wine. Paul arrived as we were finishing, having set off driving from Trieste (600km, 400 miles to the west) after lunch.

Monday 3 June – Close to base at Kondor Lodge

Some of the group were up and about well before breakfast and keen to explore. The vast expanse of Lake Kondor's marsh and reedbed just over the road was teeming with life. Rollers perched on telegraph wires, hirundines and marsh harriers hunted low, the latter putting up lapwings, redshanks and other small waders; cuckoos and golden orioles called, red-backed shrikes were nesting in a bush next to the track across which a farmer led his fiercely-horned but docile Hungarian grey cattle to their daytime grazing area. Tiny frogs and toads on a journey of their own were so numerous that we gave up trying to avoid them. Amongst other mulleins in bloom alongside the path was the beautiful *Verbascum phoeniceum* in both purple and brick red forms.



Verbascum phoeniceum.

After breakfast, having assembled our picnics and in cool and somewhat overcast conditions – perfect for birding – we set off in the minibus to explore a little further up the road, pulling onto a sandy track with a false acacia plantation on one side and a grazed field on the other – the 'souslik field'. The European ground squirrel (*Spermophilus citellus*), also known as the European souslik, is a medium-sized rodent (200g-400g) living in dry grasslands in many parts of southern and eastern Europe and is the main prey of the saker falcon and many other large raptors. The fields to the east of Kondor Lodge support a thriving population, which are usually easy to see as the fields are closely cropped by horses. We did manage to catch a glimpse of a few but the cool and cloudy conditions were evidently not to their liking and we obtained much better views later in the week.



Lesser grey shrike (digiscoped).

With low temperatures keeping insect activity to a minimum it was birds and wild flowers to the fore, and difficult to know what to look at with rollers, turtle doves, linnets, tawny pipits, crested larks, lesser grey shrikes and Montagu's harriers all on view in the space of a few minutes and easily watched. The sheer abundance of birds and the ease with which they could be observed in the open habitats was a source of joy throughout the week. Much of the area around the 'souslik field' is an organic farm and it was lovely to see a wide range of cornfield weeds, all now rare or even extinct in the UK, including cornflower, corncockle and scented mayweed. Here and there patches of the original dry grassland vegetation survive, rich in steppe grass, baby's breath *Gypsophila paniculata* and field eryngo, the latter extraordinarily rare in UK

but one of the commonest species of the dry *puszta* grasslands

Further down the track the view opened out, and accompanied by the jangling song of corn bunting, the 'kroop kroop' of bee-eaters and the calls of quail, we had a closer look at one of the most damaging invaders in the National Park, the common milkweed *Asclepias syriaca*, not as its scientific name suggests from Syria (a rare mistake by Linnaeus) but from North America, which is colonising vast areas of the National Park wherever there are sandy soils.

Gábor pointed out the first of many bee-eater nests, a single pair nesting not in an earthen bank but in a 'cliff' about 15 cm high in the side of the track. We could see where the birds had dug out the burrow for the new breeding season, creating a substantial pile of sand on the track. It was suggested to Gábor that he should get a local bee-keeper to place some hives at Kondor with a view to attracting the birds to the newly-created sandbank behind the Eco-Lodge and sell the resulting honey to guests ... at which point three young men passed driving a pick-up carrying beehives. Gábor stopped them, got chatting and a deal was struck. Kondor should have its hives by the end of the month! Many more pairs of bee-eaters, perhaps 30 in all, were nesting just down the track close to a farm. In some respects it must be a hard life being a bee in the Kiskunság when you add the rollers, shrikes (both lesser grey and red-backed) and hoopoes to the equation.

An odd sight was an old farmer driving up and down a field of wheat in a tractor towing a harrow consisting of a light chain and followed by half-a-dozen barn swallows. Asked what he was doing he said "feeding the swallows". Literally. Being an organic farm, unable to use pesticides against aphids and with no other effective biological controls available, the only solution is to force the aphids to take to the wing where they are 'mopped up' by the local hirundines.

One of the extraordinary contrasts of this part of Hungary with the UK was the sheer abundance of turtle doves. Close to the farm there were at least a couple of dozen feeding in the fields and grassland. It was difficult to see what they were eating but it was clear that the species is enjoying rude good health, at least in this part of the country.

Near the shelter of some trees we enjoyed our picnic with the added luxury of a choice of hot drinks, then walked across a wildflower meadow in splendid condition after the wet spring, full of yellow rattle, hoary plantain, dyer's greenweed and greater knapweed, the latter almost a metre high in places. Much of the sward was made up of spiny restharrow, not quite in flower but which must be stunning in mid-June.

Out of the wind behind a shelter-belt of false acacia we were treated to some splendid views of golden oriole, lesser grey shrike and hoopoe, all nesting in close proximity. A queen of Spain fritillary was laying her eggs on field pansies and a flock of tree sparrows flitted in and out of the standing barley. We stopped briefly at the 110 year-old Romanesque - Eclectic Calvinist church of Kunpuszta, seemingly isolated but apparently strategically located to serve to several communities, then walked a little further, admiring Danzig vetch, dragon's teeth, more poppies and cornflowers and another lesser grey shrike before driving on a short distance to a meadow with verbena-leaved clary, dianthus, and in the shelter of its far edge a nice selection of butterflies including grizzled skipper, chestnut heath, green underside blue, brown argus, Niobe fritillary and cardinal fritillary. The cardinal was carefully caught to reveal the red flush on its underside forewing which distinguishes it from the similar-looking silver-washed fritillary, and the Niobe was identified from photographs later.



Cardinal fritillary, bug orchids, and pyramidal orchid.

A last stop before heading back was at damp meadow which held some blue iris *Iris spuria*, a sturdy clump of northern bug orchids *Anacamptis coriophora* subsp. *coriophora*, and a single perfect magenta pyramidal orchid.

Tuesday 4 June – Lake Kolon (Izsák), Soltszentimre (the bridge overlooking the *puszta*)

Today we met the group benefiting from the donation of the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust on this holiday, the Kiskunság Bird Association. The group is based at the National Park HQ, Lake Kolon Bird Observatory, and as we made our way along the sandy track in the minibus it was clear we were in for a treat. Squacco heron and pygmy cormorant were seen feeding at a tiny section of the lake which we passed.

When we arrived at the observatory we were given a short introduction on the ringing work (a MILE of mist-nets!) and the massive restoration project costing 2 billion Hungarian forints (more than £5½ million of EU funds) which has seen the lake return to something like its original glory following its drainage during the post-war period under communism.



The start of our privileged tour of Lake Kolon.

Following the talk, 'Moma', the chief ranger at the lake, took us out in a boat (with a magnificently quiet electric engine) for a closer look. The scale of restoration is truly breathtaking. The area of open water will be extended from 6 hectares to more than 40 and new nesting islands are being created with some of the dredgings. Even with the cold, breezy and overcast conditions it was soon clear that this is a real magnet for birds. The large reedbeds are host to some of the many marsh harriers that we saw during the week, great reed warblers, great cormorants, pygmy cormorants and black-winged stilts, the last noisily harassing us on much of the boat trip. Whiskered terns and black-headed gulls, black-necked and great crested grebes, plus a single pair of common terns, were nesting on floating vegetation in one bay of the lake. There were ferruginous ducks and coot here and there, and drier areas were inhabited by redshanks which harangued us whenever the black-winged stilts let up for a moment!

It wasn't all birds, though. Turning into a quiet backwater we were treated to lovely close-up views of the yellow flowers of a species of carnivorous bladderwort *Utricularia* sp., one (or maybe more) of three species at the lake, the pretty pink spikes of amphibious bistort, water soldier and masses of what appeared to be newly sprouted plants of water plantain everywhere that the soil had been disturbed by the restoration work.

Edging into a quieter back-channel we were struggling to hear much song from the many passerines in the reedbeds, which were fairly quiet because of the cold wind. Here and there we did hear and see reed and sedge warblers together with bearded tits. Eagle-eyed Helen spotted a rail that was quickly identified as a male little crane before it retreated into the reeds, calling occasionally along with its mate a few metres further up the channel.

Returning to 'port' we were taken to visit other parts of the reserve, being shown a red helleborine *Cephalanthera rubra*, incredibly rare in UK and evidently scarce in Hungary as well.

Back at HQ we were taken for a quick trip up onto a viewing platform overlooking the dunes. On the way we had excellent views of great spotted woodpeckers feeding young that were close to fledging. We were able to look down on a perched hobby in what seemed like perfect breeding habitat – pines and other woodland growing on sand-dunes and overlooking a wetland full of dragonflies!

The dunes are, unsurprisingly, a breeding habitat for nightjars and the ringers are fitting geolocators to several birds this summer and the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust will be paying for two with the contributions from the holiday. These gadgets, much smaller (and cheaper) than satellite tags are little more than a clock and a light sensor. Daylight length (the time between dawn and dusk) is used to determine the bird's latitude, while the mid-time between a dawn and dusk ('midday') is used to determine longitude. In this way, two position fixes can be obtained daily. Nightjars exhibit high site fidelity and if they are recaptured in 2014 (or later) the data on where they have been in the past year can be downloaded to a computer and migration routes plotted on a map.

Taking our leave of the ringers, we moved on to Soltszentimre where a small bridge crosses a drainage canal beyond which the land opens out into wide open *puszta* and proves an excellent birding spot. Great reed warblers flitted up and down the channel, crossing between banks of reed. Very soon little bitterns (first the male, then the female) were seen flying across and were 'scoped while feeding, fairly distantly but in excellent light.

Turning our attention to the open *puszta*, the cool air meant little heat haze and good views of the local (and seemingly ubiquitous) rollers as well as red-footed falcons, rooks and jackdaws. First one, then a second and finally a total of six adult male great bustards could be seen walking from left to right, ever closer, displaying as they went through the tall grass before finally disappearing behind a small scrubby hillock. A short while later a fearsome local, looking like Hungary's answer to the wrestler Hulk Hogan, came rattling across the puszta towards us on a horsedrawn cart. All in all, a magnificent day.

Wednesday 5 June – Bösztörpuszta, Apaj, Kun Hill

The day dawned cool and cloudy once again. Excellent weather for birding and wild flowers if not for butterflies. On our way to the Bösztörpuszta, passing several little owls near habitations, we could not drive by without stopping at the sea of red which appeared to our left – a huge field of corn poppies, millions of them, many more than a metre tall after all the rain and covering several hectares, mixed in with various mayweeds, forking larkspur and sun spurge. People sometimes say "the colour was so bright it hurt my eyes" but in this case it really did! The arable weeds were a real feature of this holiday and several species that are now rare or endangered across the 'old' EU were still relatively common .

At a site close to a drainage ditch in the Bösztörpuszta overlooking some agricultural land Gábor rapidly found and scoped a stone-curlew for all to see. There was plenty of other activity too, with whiskered terns regularly flying low over our heads and night herons and little egrets feeding. A drainage authority worker arrived to adjust the roadside sluice, and lifting the crank-cover revealed a white wagtail nest full of chicks about a week old. He said that he found a nest under the crank-cover every year without fail. The chicks were perfectly healthy but the parent birds were nowhere to be seen.



Gábor photographs the wagtail nest while the drainage man looks on.

Moving on, we stopped at a large and promising wetland stretching out beside the road that, here and there, was obviously quite saline in character. In the fresher part of the marsh further from the road there were large numbers of what were probably breeding marsh terns, mostly whiskered terns but with a good admixture of smart white-winged black terns, many of which fed a just short distance away next to the bus.

The weather had brightened somewhat as we moved on a short distance for lunch and there was even a little sunshine, which tempted a few Bath white butterflies onto the wing. This area had more visible water and revealed a number of excellent birds in addition to the ubiquitous marsh terns and noisy black-winged stilts, including white storks, avocet, redshank, ruff and greylag geese. A sedge warbler sang uninterruptedly from the scrubby reeds in front of the van and a whinchat and a northern wheatear were picked up and scoped on the rough ground behind the van. Of real interest was the small group of Kentish plovers that were spotted. These birds, now very rare on the saline lakes in Central Europe, had probably been flooded out elsewhere and looked thoroughly disconsolate with none of the intense breeding season displays and vocalisations associated with this species. The final fine bird at the site was an immature white-tailed eagle seen flying right-to-left just 250 metres in front of the bus.



Male golden oriole in a cherry tree.

As we reached the centre of the town of Apaj, Paul shouted for a woodpecker on a the short post of a junction box beside the road: a Syrian woodpecker which slid around the back of the post before flying off. Stopping to try and trace it we were initially disappointed until a splendid, bright black-and-yellow male golden oriole flew in to take some cherries from a small tree right in front of our eyes. (The orioles in particular seem particularly easy to see in this part of Europe. We saw them every day and all the group remarked that they were the best views ever of stunningly bright males, often drawn into the open by fruiting trees.)

We drove through the *puszta* east of Apaj, passing water buffaloes and a fine yellow wagtail, then pulled off the road, knee deep in salvia, larkspur and chamomile, to watch another displaying male great bustard, and two distant collared pratincoles in flight before the arrival of a very heavy downpour. By the time we reached Kun Hill, a burial mound constructed by a people who occupied Hungary long before the arrival of the modern Hungarians, the rain had stopped, although dark clouds were all around. It was a beautiful spot with wonderful 'vibes', giving panoramic views over the *puszta* where in a distant field a great bustard was feeding. We could hear the high-pitched calls of sousliks but the storm clouds were threatening and with lightning strikes just a short distance away the top of a hill didn't seem the best place to be in a thunderstorm.

We passed a nice stand of a blue iris, *Iris spuria* on the way to the small town of Kerekegyhaza, where bread for breakfast was purchased and staff at the Co-op might have been a little surprised by the arrival of a bunch of British birdwatchers.

Thursday 6 June – Tiszaalpár, Tőserdő,

After breakfast we were intrigued to see what had been caught overnight in Gábor's state-of-the-art moth trap. 'Young' Colin, a keen British naturalist also staying at Kondor Lodge, had identified most of the catch which included a flamboyant cream-spot tiger and a pine hawkmoth amongst many other species (some shown on page 15). Mothing is an absorbing activity and we had places to go, so thanking Colin we set off east towards the valley of Hungary's second largest river, the Tisza, which rises in Ukraine and flows for almost a thousand kilometres through Hungary before discharging into the Danube in Serbia.

Our first stop was the riverine woodlands at Tőserdő, populated by pendunculate oak and Hungarian ash (*Fraxinus angustifolia* subsp. *pannonica*) the local form of the narrow-leaved ash which dominates damp woodland across southern Europe. The weather wasn't all it could have been, rather chilly and overcast but with added mosquitos and drizzle. Underfoot it was very wet and unfortunately the path to the tower hide which overlooks an oxbow lake was flooded, but we did see yellow birthwort scrambling along the verges, a huge stag beetle on a tree trunk, a nuthatch, and in a clearing where there was a very fine carving of a bee-keeper, a black woodpecker flew over and was 'called back' using a recording. The birds have already finished breeding by early June but remain territorial.



Large copper.

A great find, and the only butterfly here, was a large copper in the same clearing. The subspecies *rutilus* is notably less fussy than the now extinct British subsp. *dispar* or the still-extant Dutch *batavus*, and can be found in many spots in southern and eastern Europe. Back at the van a 'pied' woodpecker flew out of the woodland behind us and into some mulberry bushes over the road, and with four possible species it was a nice bonus to confirm it as a middle spotted woodpecker with its rose-tinted breast. We had good views as it flew back and forth bringing mulberries, presumably to the nestlings.

With the weather improving rapidly we drove a short distance to the best stop of the day, the magnificent wetland at Tiszaalpár, pausing by an interesting memorial to Greater Hungary, the giant country that had existed before its defeat in WW1 and the treaty of Trianon (close to Versailles near Paris) in which Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and half its population, leaving many Hungarian-speakers outside the current borders. The treaty was signed on 4 June 1920 and is commemorated annually, hence the fresh wreaths.

Parking by the town church, we made our way up some steps, past several impressive firebug aggregations on the church walls and onto the viewpoint overlooking the marshes, again created from 'amputated' oxbows. Unlike the recce visit in 2012 when water levels were low, the wetland was in fantastic condition with bird breeding colonies in full swing. Spoonbills and pygmy cormorants provided excellent views, a bittern boomed and large numbers of whiskered terns fed over the distant flooded grassland. There were large numbers of ducks, including ferruginous and garganey; greylag geese and grebes (including black-necked grebes with chicks) dotting the open water, and night herons, great white egrets and the odd squacco heron flying to and from their breeding areas. Often sites like this fail to provide much in the way of good views of passerine birdlife but the scrub on the ancient dune below the viewpoint (mostly the alien Duke of Argyll's tea-tree, *Lycium barbarum*) held plenty of birds and we had excellent views of the common eastern European pairing of red-backed shrike and barred warbler, the former seeming to benefit from the aggressive behaviour of the latter towards potential predators. Good views were also obtained of an absurdly yellow male golden oriole feeding on mulberries while the only garden warbler of the trip lurked in the undergrowth nearby. Crossing over a gully between the dunes took us to a slightly closer viewpoint over the marsh. There were some information boards about the archaeological finds at the site involving pre-Hungarian peoples, and the spot must have made a marvelous settlement with its lovely dry sand overlooking a bend in a huge slow-moving and productive river. Splendid views of a feeding purple heron were added to the day's list but the insistently calling penduline tits refused to show and we had to content ourselves with the regular fly-bys of golden oriole and green woodpecker – interesting birds to compare. As we headed back to the van we enjoyed the spectacle of a white-tailed eagle being mobbed by a pair of yellow-legged gulls, the eagle jinking over to show its talons to the gulls and revealing its 'full adult' tail before disappearing behind the trees.



Memorial to Greater Hungary.
Present-day Hungary is the central part.

A further stop at Lakiteleki-Holt-Tisza, a 'dead' oxbow arm of the Tisza 'lost' to river-straightening in the 19th century (when it was almost 50% longer), and given over to tourism with boating, bars and restaurants and coarse fishing, provided calling penduline tits and revealed a very cooperative black woodpecker which showed itself well before our observations were rudely interrupted by a short but incredibly intense downpour that had us scurrying for the nearby van. Our route back to base took us through the city of Kecskemét in the center of the Kiskunság region, where Gábor gave us a brief cultural tour, pointing out notable buildings and parking in the centre so we could take photographs.

Friday 7 June – Böddi-szék, Kiskunsági - főcsatorna ('Snakey channel')

The theme today changed from fresh to salty water with a visit to one of Hungary's largest soda lakes, the Böddi-szék, an 'endorheic' basin where water flows in but almost the only outflows are by way of evaporation, leaving behind carbonates and other dissolved salts which are concentrated in the remaining water. This makes life difficult for many plants and animals and these sites are characterized by low (but interesting) diversity and quite high productivity from the few species that can 'make a living' in the harsh conditions. Driving through open *puszta* countryside we passed some old disused storage tanks half-buried in an ancient dune. Gábor explained that they were the remnants of a scam organized by the Hungarian underworld buying untaxed agricultural diesel and selling it on to motorists, masterminded from a nearby heavily-fortified mansion. The underworld characters have moved on, the house now has a legitimate owner and the cuttings around the tanks have been colonized by bee-eaters.

As we drove across the *puszta* towards the lake the vegetation became ever more arid-looking, brought about by the physiological drought caused by the dissolved salts in the groundwater. Here and there on raised areas of dune the vegetation took on a more normal appearance of dry grassland. Arriving at the farmstead bordering the lake it soon became clear that the water levels were extremely high compared to 2012, going some way to explain the displacement of the Kentish plovers we'd seen at Böszörpuszta a couple of days ago. The Böddi-szék is one of the last sites for nesting Kentish plovers in Hungary but this year the conditions are evidently not up to scratch. Another 'coastal' species which finds conditions inland on the soda lakes to its liking was present however and we rapidly connected with a flock of avocets.



View from the observation tower (Malcolm Crowder).

Climbing the (very high) observation tower yielded a few more species including marsh harrier, yellow-legged gull, black-winged stilt and shelduck. Gábor said that a few years ago shelduck was a very rare species in Hungary but which has increased rapidly, occupying new sites each year. This mirrors experiences around the northern Adriatic, 600 km to the west, where the species was absent until the 1980s but which now numbers in the thousands between Sicciolo, the salt-pans visited on the Istrian Honeyguide Holiday, and the mouth of the river Po south of Venice. This is probably where the new Hungarian birds are coming from. There was no sign, however, of the stone-curlews seen in 2012.



Spadefoot toad.

Around the farmstead were the 'usual' *puszta* specialties including lesser grey shrike, roller and red-footed falcon and there was a chance to inspect (and try out) a functioning *puszta* well. There were several 'toads' swimming around in the water a few metres down and, given the habitat, they were likely to be something interesting. Fishing (toading?) them out in the bucket revealed them as common spadefoot toads, not really very common at all (or at least not very easy to see) and a lifer for many in the group. Spadefoots are fossorial (living in burrows in sandy soils) and the well had acted as a giant pitfall trap, capturing them on their nightly wanderings.

Heading back towards the main road we stopped at a small area of dune, slightly raised above the surrounding farmland, with plenty of wild flowers including wild asparagus and common rockrose, their roots clear of the salty groundwater.

By now the weather was beginning to warm up for almost the first time during the week and there were a few butterflies out and about on the dune including silver-studded and common blues. Some calls and a bit of a panic amongst the birds for a passing marsh harrier revealed a small water body a few hundred metres away, largely hidden by low reeds but packed with birds including large numbers of moulting shovelers, teal, garganey and mallard, plenty of spotted and common redshank, a grey plover and even a 'ginger' ruff in summer plumage ... all regularly 'stirred up' and moved by the marsh harrier for our benefit.

In the afternoon it was back to freshwater once again and the Kiskunsági – főcsatorna or 'Snakey channel' which once was used (and perhaps will be again) to bring water from the Danube to the heart of the Kiskunság. There was a nightingale singing here, and a 'gravel' pit with an excellent range of dragonflies including Norfolk hawkler, black-tailed and white-tailed skimmers and white-legged damselfly. We watched a male penduline tit put the finishing touches to a beautifully constructed, pouch-shaped nest hanging from a branch on a tall white poplar, to the constant accompaniment (in these habitats of riverine poplars and willows) of calling golden orioles and turtle doves. A muddy puddle filled with several bright 'green' frogs provided a few minutes of entertainment and explained the popularity of the site with night herons. By this time we were well on into late afternoon and it was time to head home.



Penduline tits' nest high up in a white poplar.
(Colin Taylor)

Saturday 8 June – Kunadacs, Danube at Szalkszentmárton, saker falcon site, Apaj, bee-eater colony

A short stop-off at a hoopoe nest in a house in Kunadacs failed to come up with the goods. Perhaps the birds had already fledged, or failed due to the poor and unseasonal weather. Whatever the reason it was only a short hop to the dune overlooking an interesting wetland at Alsóadacsi. This proved to be a really splendid site in the warm sunshine, full of plants and butterflies including an assembly of several beautiful cardinal fritillaries on a large thistle. The dune is also a site of a very ancient cemetery in which Gábor pointed out some old-style wooden grave markers or *kopjafá* in which the size and shape of the carving can be 'read' to provide information on the person buried beneath it, their age at death, sex, number of children and when they died.



At the cemetery site: Queen of Spain fritillary and ethereal steppe grass.

The only bittern seen on the trip flew briefly across the marsh but there were few birds to speak of other than a brood of newly-fledged yellow wagtails. The small yellow sand irises *Iris arenaria* subsp. *humilis* for which the site is famous had gone over and pride of place went to the butterflies, including large heath and chestnut heath as well as safflower skipper.

The endangered yellowy milk-vetch *Astralagus excapus* was still in flower and a range of knapweeds and other nectar plants were just coming into flower. This spot had considerable atmosphere and a nice 'feel' to it. From Alsóadacsi we headed west towards the Danube hoping for Freyer's purple emperor but it was not to be. The second half of May had witnessed some of the heaviest rain on record in the Danube catchment and the river had done its job, gathering it up and funneling it towards the Black Sea ... through Hungary. When we arrived at the site, the old ferry stage opposite Dunaújváros, we were met by 'Road Closed' signs, a wall of sandbags and a river that was 6 or 8 metres above its level in June 2012, the entire Danube having reached (but not breached) the penultimate embankment. Little was added to the day's haul apart from a singing yellowhammer.

Heading back westwards we arrived at a fairly featureless and really rather unattractive piece of Hungarian farmland dominated by large electricity pylons, each of which featured, high up, a large, dark blob. A nestbox. For saker falcons. The steppe equivalent of the peregrine, in Central Asia this species has collapsed as a result of nest robbery to supply falconers. The eastern European population which feeds on sousliks and birds and is centered on Hungary has become the most important, and is stable or even increasing as more boxes are provided. The nearest nestbox to us appeared to be occupied by a pair of kestrels but the box slightly further away had several large birds loafing around, the fledged young of this large, heavy, almost buzzard-like falcon, occasionally taking to the air for a quick circle around, perhaps to cool off somewhat as it was now getting rather hot. Close by we saw a pair of the common birds of the Hungarian farmland, the stonechat, although looking radically different from the russet British and Irish birds of the subspecies *hibernans* with almost no reddish tones and the males with an extensive snowy-white collar, wing-panels and rump. From here we moved on to a rapid series of open wetlands and *puszta* grasslands rich in wildlife. Temperatures by this stage were now back to the norm for mid-June and it was beginning to get quite hot and humid. Stopping off for lunch we settled by a bridge in a broad open area surrounded by wetlands with the constant flyovers of night herons, black-winged stilts and great white egrets, marsh harriers and white storks accompanied by singing yellow wagtails and a sedge warbler evidently feeding young. After lunch and a short walk down a track past a herd of young water buffalo wallowing in the water we reached an observation tower overlooking the marsh and large herd of great Hungarian cattle. A short burst of Savi's warbler song suggested a bird was very close by and a short reply from Gábor's iphone brought it out into the open for a couple of minutes for everyone to admire. The sun was beating down by this stage and the haze made identification of a large raptor on a post in the distance rather difficult, some 'plumping' for common buzzard and others for a sub-adult white-tailed eagle. The debate raged for at least 15 minutes, the bird occasionally adjusting its position until, just as we were leaving, it took to the air, providing excellent views of a sub-adult white-tailed eagle!

Coming back along the road close to Apaj we flushed the only pair of grey (or 'Hungarian') partridges of the week, even though the habitat seemed ideal. The enormous numbers of marsh harriers, tens of birds seen daily, must make life very short indeed for a partridge in this part of the world.

A farewell hike to the top of Kun Hill, surely one of the most evocative spots in Europe, provided a couple of great bustards and some very close sousliks viewed from the van, before we headed back towards Kondor Lodge, but Gábor had a trump card up his sleeve with one final superb stop at a large bee-eater colony with perhaps 200 occupied burrows. A fantastic site marred slightly the presence of a nature photographer parked in the colony just a couple of metres from occupied nests.



Bee-eaters at the colony near Apaj.

With the conditions still warm, after dinner it was down the track to see some nightjars. A large bright green sand lizard scuttled away from a hole in the path as we approached a clearing. The birds were there, flying and calling, providing perhaps not top-notch views but this was a species we hadn't anticipated seeing at the start of the week with temperatures at 12°C and overcast!

Sunday 9 June – Departure from Kondor Lodge

Our return flight just after midday allowed for breakfast at the usual time and a fairly leisurely departure. We said our goodbyes to Paul as he left on the long drive back to his home in northern Italy, and ourselves had a swift and straightforward journey to the airport, in glorious sunshine!

WILDLIFE LISTS

BIRDS

h = heard

No.	Day	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	Date	SUN 2/6	MON 3/6	TUE 4/6	WED 5/6	THU 6/6	FRI 7/6	SAT 8/6	SUN 9/6
1	Great crested grebe			x		x			
2	Little grebe					x			
3	Black-necked grebe			x		x	x		
4	Cormorant								
5	Pygmy cormorant			x		x	x		
6	Squacco heron			x		x		x	
7	Bittern					h	h	x	
8	Little bittern			x					
9	Night heron		x	x	x	x	x	x	
10	Great white egret			x	x	x	x	x	
11	Little egret				x	x	x		
12	Grey heron		x	x	x	x	x	x	
13	Purple heron			x		x	x	x	
14	Spoonbill				x	x	x		
15	Black stork		x					x	
16	White stork		x	x	x	x	x	x	
17	Mute swan					x	x		
18	Greylag goose				x	x	x	x	
19	Shelduck					x	x		
20	Mallard		x	x	x	x	x	x	
21	Garganey						x		
22	Teal						x		
23	Shoveler						x		
24	Pochard					x	x		
25	Ferruginous duck			x		x	x		
26	White-tailed eagle				x	x	x	x	
27	Short-toed eagle			x					
28	Honey buzzard						x		
29	Marsh harrier		x	x	x	x	x	x	
30	Montagu's harrier		x					x	
31	Buzzard		x	x	x	x	x	x	
32	Saker falcon							x	
33	Red-footed falcon			x	x	x	x		
34	Hobby		x	x			x	x	
35	Kestrel		x	x	x	x	x	x	
36	Grey partridge							x	
37	Pheasant		x	x	x	x	x	x	
38	Quail		h	h	h	h	h	x	
39	Coot			x		x	x	x	
40	Moorhen			h				h	
41	Little crane			x					
42	Great bustard			6 ind.	3 ind.			2 ind.	
43	Stone-curlew				x				

44	Collared pratincole				x				
45	Black-winged stilt			x	x	x	x	x	
46	Avocet				x		x		
47	Kentish plover				x				
48	Grey plover						x		
49	Lapwing		x	x	x	x	x	x	
50	Ruff				x		x		
51	Spotted redshank						x		
52	Redshank		x	x	x	x	x	x	
53	Black-tailed godwit			x	x				x
54	Curlew				x		x	x	
55	Little gull					x			
56	Black-headed gull			x	x	x	x	x	
57	Mediterranean gull								x
58	Yellow-legged gull				x		x		
59	Common tern			x	x		x	x	
60	Black tern						x		
61	White-winged black tern				x				
62	Whiskered tern			x	x	x	x	x	
63	Feral pigeon		x	x	x	x	x	x	
64	Woodpigeon		x	x	x	x	x	x	
65	Collared dove	x		x	x	x	x	x	
66	Turtle dove		x	x	x	x	x	x	
67	Cuckoo		x	x	x	h	x	x	
68	Swift			x		x			
69	Nightjar								x
70	Tawny owl						x		
71	Little owl						x	x	
72	Kingfisher					x			
73	Bee-eater		x	x	x	x	x	x	
74	Roller		x	x	x	x	x	x	
75	Hoopoe		x	h	h		h	h	
76	Black woodpecker		x				x		h
77	Green woodpecker						x		x
78	Middle spotted woodpecker						x		
79	Syrian woodpecker				x				
80	Great spotted woodpecker			x	x	x	x		
81	Middle spotted woodpecker								
82	Skylark		x		x		x	x	
83	Crested lark		x		x		x	x	
84	Sand martin		x	x			x		
85	Swallow		x	x	x	x	x	x	
86	House martin		x	x	x	x	x	x	
87	Tawny pipit		x						x
88	Yellow wagtail		x	x	x	x	x	x	
89	White wagtail			x	x	x	x	x	
90	Robin						h		
91	Nightingale		h	h	h	h	x	h	
92	Black redstart		x	x	x	x	x	x	
93	Whinchat				x		x	x	
94	Stonechat		x		x		x	x	
95	Wheatear				x				
96	Blackbird		x	x	x	x	x	x	
97	Song thrush		h				x		
98	Mistle thrush						x		
99	Savi's warbler						h	x	
100	Sedge warbler			x	x		x	x	
101	Reed warbler			x					x

102	Marsh warbler						x	x	
103	Great reed warbler			x	x		x	x	
104	Chiffchaff		x	x	h	h	x	h	
105	Blackcap		h	h	h	x	x	h	
106	Whitethroat				h				
107	Barred warbler				x				
108	Garden warbler				x				
109	Spotted flycatcher		x			x	x	x	
110	Long-tailed tit					x			
111	Penduline tit H					x	x	x	
112	Great tit		x	x	x	x	x	x	
113	Blue tit		x			x			
114	Nuthatch					x			
115	Short-toed treecreeper					h			
116	Lesser grey shrike		x	x	x	x	x	x	
117	Red-backed shrike		x	x	x	x	x	x	
118	Starling		x	x	x	x	x	x	
119	Golden oriole		x	x	x	x	x	x	
120	Jay			x	x	x	x	x	
121	Magpie		x	x	x	x	x	x	
122	Jackdaw			x	x		x	x	
123	Hooded crow		x	x	x	x	x	x	
124	Rook		x	x	x	x	x		
125	House sparrow		x	x	x	x	x	x	
126	Tree sparrow		x	x	x	x	x	x	
127	Serin				h	x			
128	Hawfinch		x						h
129	Chaffinch		x	x	x	x	x	x	
130	Greenfinch		x	x	x	x			
131	Goldfinch		x	x	x	x	x	x	
132	Corn bunting		x	x	x	x	x	x	
133	Yellowhammer								h



Black woodpecker at Lakiteleki-Holt-Tisza as the sky darkened before a downpour;
and souslik near Kun Hill.

MAMMALS

Roe deer	Souslik	Brown hare
----------	---------	------------

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

European pond terrapin	Sand lizard	Common toad	Green toad
Common spadefoot toad	European tree frog	<i>Pelophylax</i> 'green' frog sp.	

BUTTERFLIES

Safflower skipper	<i>Pyrgus carthami</i>	Essex skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	Large white	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Small white	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	Bath white	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	Painted lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>
Red admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>
Cardinal fritillary	<i>Argynnis pandora</i>	Niobe fritillary	<i>Fabriciana niobe</i>
Queen-of-Spain fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>	Glanville fritillary	<i>Melitaea cinxia</i>
Heath fritillary	<i>Mellicta athalia</i>	Large wall brown	<i>Lasiommata maera</i>
Meadow brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	Large heath	<i>Coenonympha tullia</i>
Chestnut heath	<i>Coenonympha glycerion</i>	Small heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>
Green-underside blue	<i>Glaucopsyche alexis</i>	Large copper	<i>Lycaena dispar</i> subsp. <i>rutilus</i>
Eastern baton blue	<i>Pseudophilotes vicrama</i>	Silver-studded blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>
Brown argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>	Common blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>
Small blue	<i>Cupido minimus</i>		

MOTHS

Some species from the moth trap on 5 / 6 June

Buff arches	<i>Habrosyne pyritoides</i>	Magpie moth	<i>Abraxas grossulariata</i>
Willow beauty	<i>Peribatodes rhomboidaria</i>	Pine hawkmoth	<i>Sphinx pinastri</i>
Swallow prominent	<i>Pheosia tremula</i>	Poplar kitten	<i>Furcula bifida</i>
Cream-spot tiger	<i>Epicallia villica</i>	Lobster moth	<i>Stauropus fagi</i>
Flame-shoulder	<i>Ochropleura plecta</i>	Heart and dart	<i>Agrotis exclamationis</i>
Bright-line brown-eye	<i>Lacanobia oleracea</i>	Setaceous Hebrew character	<i>Xestia c-nigrum</i>
Common wainscot	<i>Mythimna pallens</i>	Double-line	<i>Mythimna turca</i>
Treble-lines	<i>Charanyca trigrammica</i>	Mullein moth	<i>Cucullia verbasci</i>
The rustic / The uncertain	<i>Hoplodrina blanda</i> / <i>Hoplodrina octogeneria</i>	Cream-bordered green pea	<i>Earias clorana</i>



Cream-spot tiger



Buff arches



Poplar kitten

DRAGONFLIES AND DAMSELFLIES

Norfolk hawker	<i>Aeshna isosceles</i>	Four-spotted chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>
Common darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>	Black-tailed skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>
White-tailed skimmer	<i>Orthetrum albistylum</i>	Banded demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>
White-legged damselfly	<i>Platycnemis pennipes</i>	Blue-tailed damselfly	<i>Ishnura elegans</i>
Scarce blue-tailed damselfly (probably)	<i>Ischnura pumilio</i>	Southern emerald / Migrant spreadwing damselfly	<i>Lestes barbarus</i>

OTHER NOTABLE INVERTEBRATES

Roman snail	<i>Helix pomatia</i>	Cockchafer	<i>Melolontha melolontha</i>
Pollen chafer	<i>Oxythyrea funesta</i>	Rose chafer	<i>Cetonia aurata</i>
Firebug (aggregations)	<i>Pyrrhacoris apertus</i>	Stag beetle	<i>Lucanus cervus</i>

PLANTS	
Dicotyledons	
ALISMATACEAE – water-plantains	
<i>Alisma plantago-aquatica</i>	Common water plantain
APIACEAE – umbellifers	
<i>Eryngium campestre</i>	Field eryngo
ARISTOLOCHIACEAE – birthworts	
<i>Aristolochia clematitis</i>	Yellow birthwort
ASCLEPIADACEAE – milkweed	
<i>Asclepias syriaca</i>	Common milkweed (Alien)
ASPARAGACEAE – asparagus family	
<i>Asparagus officinalis</i>	Wild asparagus
ASTERACEAE (COMPOSITEAE) – daisy family	
<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Yarrow
<i>Ambrosia artemisiifolia</i> (<i>A. elatior</i>)	Ragweed (Alien)
<i>Artemisia elatior</i>	a wormwood
<i>Carduus nutans</i>	Musk thistle
<i>Centaurea cyanus</i>	Cornflower
<i>Centaurea scabiosa</i>	Greater knapweed
<i>Chicorium intybus</i>	Chicory
<i>Chamomilla recutita</i>	Scented mayweed
<i>Erigeron annuus</i>	Annual or daisy fleabane (Alien)
<i>Matricaria recutita</i>	Scented mayweed
<i>Onoropodium acanthium</i>	Cotton thistle
<i>Tragopogon pratensis</i>	Goatsbeard
<i>Zinnia</i> sp.	a zinnia (Alien)
BORAGINACEA – borage family	
<i>Anchusa azurea</i>	Large blue alkanet
<i>Buglossoides arvensis</i>	Corn gromwell
<i>Cynoglossum</i> sp.	A houndstongue. <i>C. hungaricum</i> is the species listed in the National Park flora.
<i>Echium vulgare</i>	Viper's bugloss
<i>Phacelia tanacetifolia</i>	Lady Phacelia
BUTOMACEAE – flowering rush	
<i>Butomus umbellatus</i>	Flowering rush
CANNABACEAE – hop & cannabis	
* <i>Cannabis ruderalis</i>	Hemp. A split, not everywhere accepted, from <i>C. sativa</i> .
CARYOPHYLLACEAE – pinks	
<i>Agrostemma githago</i>	Corn cockle
<i>Arenaria serpyllifolia</i>	Thyme-leaved sandwort
<i>Dianthus diutinus</i>	Long-lasting pink. A pink that needs further study. If the former, it's 'sub-endemic' to the Pannonic flora.
<i>Gypsophila paniculata</i>	Gypsophila (baby's-breath to florists)
<i>Silene otites</i>	Spanish (Breckland) catchfly
CISTACEAE – rockroses	
<i>Helianthus nummularium</i>	Common rockrose
CRUCIFERAE – cabbage family	
<i>Sisymbrium</i> sp.	A widespread rocket, difficult to pin down: could be <i>S. altissimum</i> or <i>S. polymorphum</i> .
DIPSACACEAE – scabiouses	
<i>Scabiosa canescens</i>	A scabious
<i>Scabiosa ochroleuca</i>	Yellow scabious

EUPHORBIACEAE – spurges	
<i>Euphorbia cyparissias</i>	Cypress spurge
<i>Euphorbia seguieriana</i>	
<i>Euphorbia helioscopia</i>	Sun spurge
FABACEAE (Leguminosae) – peas	
<i>Amorpha fruticosa</i>	False indigo (Alien)
<i>Astragalus cicer</i>	Wild lentil
<i>Astragalus excapus</i>	
<i>Coronilla varia</i>	Crown vetch
<i>Genista tinctoria</i>	Dyer's greenweed
<i>Lathyrus tuberosus</i>	Tuberous pea
<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Birdsfoot trefoil
* ? <i>Lotus glaber</i>	Narrow-leaf birdsfoot trefoil
<i>Lotus pedunculatis</i>	Greater (= marsh) birdsfoot trefoil
<i>Lotus tenuis</i>	Narrow-leaved birdsfoot trefoil
<i>Mellilotus officinalis</i>	Ribbed melilot
<i>Ononis spinosa</i>	Spiny restharrow
<i>Tetragonobulus maritimus</i>	Dragon's teeth
<i>Vicia cassubica</i>	Danzig vetch
<i>Vicia cracca</i>	Tufted vetch
FAGACEAE – beech family	
<i>Quercus robur</i>	Pedunculate oak
GERANIACEAE – storksbills and cranesbills	
<i>Erodium cicutarium</i>	Common storksbill
<i>Geranium pusillum</i>	Small-flowered cranesbill
GUTTIFERAE	
<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>	Perforate St John's-wort
HYDROCHARITACEAE – frogbits	
<i>Hydrocharis morsus-ranae</i>	Frogbit
<i>Stratiotes aloides</i>	Water soldier
<i>Trapa natans</i>	Water chestnut
IRIDACEAE – Irises	
<i>Iris spuria</i>	Blue iris
<i>Iris arenaria</i> subsp. <i>humilis</i>	Sand iris
LABIATAE (Lamiaceae) – labiates	
<i>Ajuga genevensis</i>	Blue bugle
<i>Salvia nemorosa</i>	Wild sage
<i>Leonurus cardiaca</i>	Motherwort
<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	White horehound
<i>Prunella laciniata</i>	Cut-leaved self-heal
<i>Stachys germanica</i>	Downy woundwort
<i>Stachys palustris</i>	Marsh woundwort
<i>Stachys recta</i>	Perennial yellow woundwort
<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i>	Wall germander
LENTIBULARIACEAE – bladderworts	
<i>Utricularia</i> sp.	A bladderwort, probably <i>U. vulgaris</i> , common bladderwort.
LINACEAE – flaxes	
<i>Linum perenne</i>	Perennial flax
MORACEAE – mulberries	
<i>Morus alba</i>	White mulberry
<i>Morus nigra</i>	Black mulberry

OLEACEAE – olives and allies	
<i>Fraxinus angustifolia</i> subsp. <i>pannonica</i>	Narrow-leaved ash
PAPAVERACEAE – poppies	
<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>	Corn poppy
PLUMBAGINACEAE – sea-lavender family	
* <i>Limonium gmelinii</i> (= <i>L. hungaricum</i>)	Siberian statice
POLYGONACEAE – knotweeds	
<i>Persicaria amphibia</i>	Amphibious bistort
RANUNCULACEAE – buttercups	
<i>Consolida orientalis</i>	Eastern larkspur – abundant
<i>Consolida regalis</i>	Forking larkspur – occasional
ROSACEAE – roses	
<i>Agrimonia eupatoria</i>	Agrimony
RUBACEAE – bedstraws	
<i>Galium verum</i>	Lady's bedstraw
<i>Galium album</i> (<i>G. mollugo</i> subsp. <i>erectum</i>)	Upright hedge bedstraw
SALICACEAE – willows and poplars	
<i>Populus alba</i>	White poplar
<i>Populus nigra</i>	Black poplar
SCROPHULARIACEAE – figworts	
<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>	Yellow rattle
<i>Veronica longifolia</i>	Long-leaved speedwell
Mulleins: these are a bit of a puzzle. According to the National Park flora, these are the mulleins in the National Park: <i>Verbascum austriacum</i> , <i>V. blattaria</i> , <i>V. densiflorum</i> , <i>V. lychnitis</i> , <i>V. nigrum</i> , <i>V. phlomoides</i> , <i>V. phoeniceum</i> and <i>V. thapsus</i> . The following two were straightforward:	
<i>Verbascum phoeniceum</i>	Purple mullein
<i>Verbascum thapsus</i>	Great mullein (often called Aaron's rod, though that name is sometimes used for other species)
Yet: <i>Verbascum speciosum</i>	Hungarian or showy mullein – seems to match the most common, much-branched species that we saw, showing orange stamens with white hairs, also a feature of some unbranched mulleins.
SOLANACEAE – nightshades	
<i>Datura stramonium</i>	Thorn-apple
<i>Lycium barbarum</i>	Duke of Argyll's tea plant (Alien)
VERBENACEAE – vervain	
<i>Verbena officinalis</i>	Vervain
VIOLACEAE – violets	
<i>Viola arvensis</i>	Field pansy
Monocotyledons	
LILIACEA – lily family	
<i>Allium vineale</i>	Crow garlic
<i>Muscari comosum</i>	Tassel hyacinth
ORCHIDACEAE – orchids	
<i>Anacamptis coriophora</i> subsp. <i>coriophora</i>	Northern bug orchid
<i>Anacamptis laxiflora</i>	Lax-flowered orchid
<i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i>	Pyramidal orchid
<i>Cephalanthera rubra</i>	Red helleborine
<i>Epipactis atrorubens</i> subsp. <i>borbasii</i>	Borbás's dark red helleborine
<i>Epipactis bugacensis</i>	Bugac helleborine
<i>Epipactis helleborine</i>	Broad-leaved helleborine
POACEAE (also called Gramineae) – true grasses	
<i>Stipa borysthenica</i>	A steppe grass