

TRIP REPORT

Cranes, Gees, Dotterels, Great Bustards, Saker Falcon, Imperial Eagle, Owls, Woodpeckers and much more...

**Hungary, 8 days
October 11th-18th 2018
for a private group**



Beautiful painting by Marton Zsoldos <https://www.facebook.com/zsoldosmarton/>

This tour concentrated on the Autumn/Fall migration which is a very special season on the Great Hungarian Plains. On the lowlands we spent time at the 2 best areas, the less known, but unbeatable **Kiskunsag National Park** and the famous **Hortobágy 'Puszta'**. Kiskunsag is the best for **Great Bustards, Stone Curlews** and a wide range of **Herons, Egrets** and **waterbirds**, plus a great variety of **raptors**, such as **Saker Falcon** or **Imperial Eagle**. At Hortobagy you can enjoy grandstand views of **crane migration** from watchtowers or alongside fishponds and fields. There are always good number of **Bean** and **Greater White-fronted Geese**, plus at the fishponds many interesting other birds such as **Ferruginous Duck, Pygmy Cormorant** and vast numbers of **waders, herons, egrets** and **wildfowl**. The evenings were highlighted by thousands of trumpeting **cranes** flying low overhead. It was an unforgettable experience!

We also visited the **Bükk Hills** which is characterized by vast beech woods and open limestone meadows with different karst forms produced by erosion. It is a perfect area for birding, where raptors soar above the valleys and dense deciduous woodlands provide home for woodland species such as owls and woodpeckers including **Ural Owl, Black, White-backed, Grey-headed, Green, Great Spotted, Middle Spotted, Lesser Spotted** and **Syrian Woodpecker**.

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We had 12 really nice people in the group, all Bernie's friends and travelling companion plus Gabor and Andi as local guides and also hosts at Kondor Ecolodge in the Kiskunsag National Park. The number 12 somehow reminded me one of our first tours with Bernie and friends more than 15 years ago, the (in)famous **Birds and Bears and Beers tour in Poland-Slovakia-Hungary** where we had so much to see and celebrate that nights proved a bit short occasionally. Some still refer to that group as the Dirty Dozen.... Well, by now we have matured a lot and however we had plenty to celebrate we never run out of wine, beer & fun! ☺



At the flat Hungarian Puszta up to the colourful Bükk Hills we found from Dotterels to Ural Owl plenty of various birds

Fact File

- 8 days in Hungary visiting 3 large National Parks: Kiskunsag National Park, the famous Hortobágy and Bükk National Parks
- start and finish in Budapest
- using 3 accommodation located on site with excellent birding possibilities

Highlights

- 3 full days at Kiskunsag and Hortobágy National Parks visiting huge flat steppes, fishponds and experiencing the mass migration of cranes
- 3 full days at Bükk Hills visiting dense deciduous forests, limestone rock formations, quarries
- wide variety of birds and habitats
- tens of thousands of Cranes and Geese
- plenty of herons, raptors, owls, woodpeckers and other interesting bird species

Accommodation

2 nights in our own Kondor EcoLodge in the heart of the Kiskunsag National Park
 3 nights in a hotel at Hortobágy National Park
 2 nights in a family run hotel by the foot of the Bükk hills with the best cuisine in the region
 We catered vegetarian and gluten free needs as well at all places.



Activity level generally we had easy, sometimes moderate walks

Itinerary

Days 1-2

After arriving in Budapest we travelled towards **Kiskunság National Park**. We decided not birding en route, but travelling directly to our Kondor Ecolodge. Still we had an exciting surprise stop to see a roosting Long-eared Owl in a village. After getting the rooms we had a little time to look around and for a change found a pair of Tawny Owls. Not a bad start for sure! Finally we were ready for the first tasty dinner during the tour.



Looking for Great Bustards

Early morning found some of us looking around in the garden and at some of the ponds where there was a chance to visit hides, some with feeding stations. Wren, Sparrowhawk, Great Spotted Woodpecker were added to the list.

Soon we were surprised at the breakfasts that tables were fully covered by a choice of food, so we were surely not starving at all. Each of us made our choice of packed lunch as well which gave the freedom of selecting what we liked and as much as we wanted. Coffee, tea and water always were available during midday picnics as well.

After breakfast we started a full day circle mainly visiting the middle and upper parts of the Kiskunság National Park.

We first stopped at a grassy area and hiked an ancient man-made hill which served partly as a burial site, partly as a shelter or escape elevation during major floods by the River Danube which deposited huge amount of sand during the tens of thousands of years. This elevation was a perfect lookout point to concentrate on finding Great Bustards and other grassland species. There were some in a large distance, none very obvious or nearby, but Bernie found an Eastern Imperial Eagle in the air. We also added Kestrel, Hooded Crow, Skylark and Curlew.

Later on we negotiated some really bad roads, but as Gabor pointed out worse the road, better for nature. Surely we have not seen wildlife hit by fast cars.

We checked out several fields, both grasslands and agricultural land. Some Roe Deers pretended to be Great Bustards, but later on we found a real group as well, some of them even get in the air so we had witnessed their majestic flight.

Our picnic was at a lovely local cafeteria where we could add some delicious cakes or handcrafted icecream to our fulfilling lunch.

During the afternoon we discovered the grounds of some lakes and fishponds with good reed-bed around where we hoped to find many different local and migrating species such as Grey Heron, Avocet, Ringed Plover, Snipe, Grey Plover and Greenshank. Marsh Harrier was dwarfed

by White-tailed Eagles. We had plenty of Great Egrets around, but had to work hard to see Reed Bunting and Bearded Tit.

Beside the birds the local ancient breeds of Great Gray Hungarian cattle and Water Buffalos were interesting.

On the way back we made a small detour to visit an area where Gabor knew a pair of Saker Falcons had a successful breeding earlier during the year, so we gave a chance to find them. We had a very good timing, as we got out of the bus and checked the bird from a distance sitting on an electric pylon soon we saw it flying towards us and crossing in front towards a nearby hunting area.



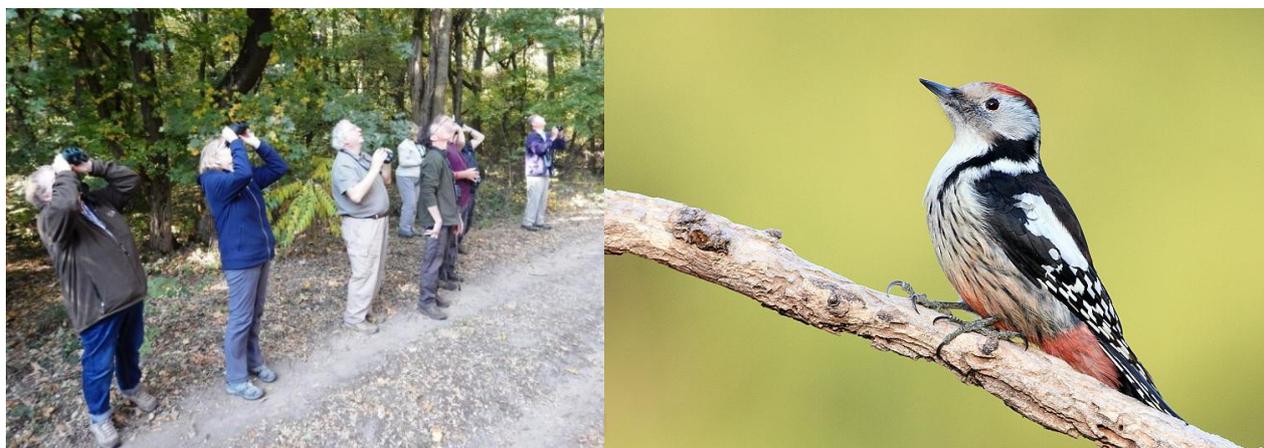
Always great to see a Little Owl and one of the highlights is surely to witness a Saker Falcon on the wings

Day 3

Morning birding gave us some common species like Great Tit, Greenfinch and Chaffinch, but Bernie identified the calls of Brambling and Woodlark as well. But the first Black Woodpecker of the tour clearly stole the show.

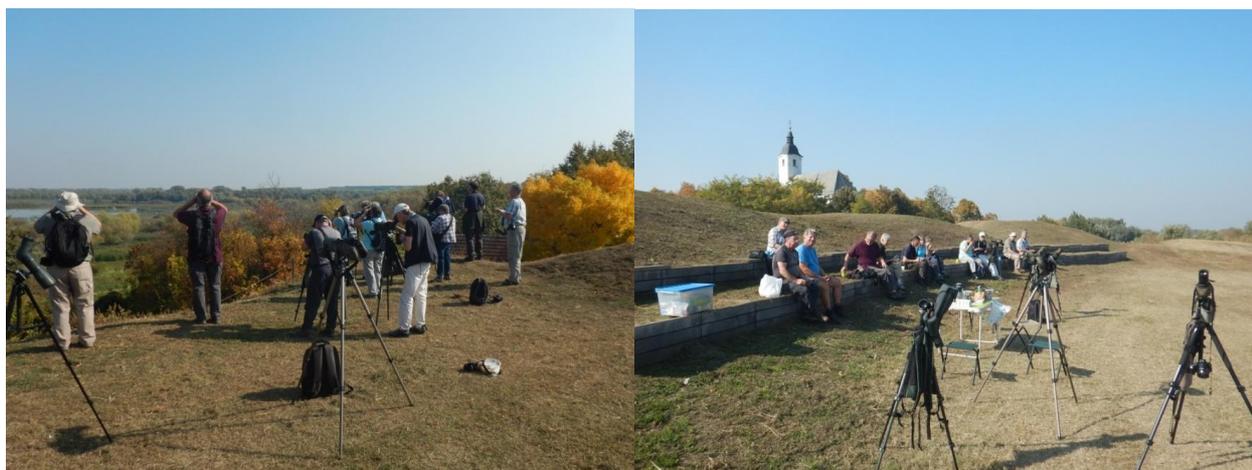
On the way from Kiskunsag to Hortobagy first we visited an old gallery forest, a woodpecker paradise and a fantastic oxbow lake area with thousands of birds.

In the forest we had Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted, Great Spotted and Black Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreeper and some other forest species.



Looking at a Middle Spotted Woodpecker

From the forest we continued to a nearby village where from top of an ancient mud-fortress we could look down on a huge wet meadow and an oxbow lake. This offered a good scope view of dozens of species, including Pygmy Cormorants, various Herons, Egrets and waterfowl.



Looking down on a huge oxbow lake with thousands of birds and enjoying picnic lunch

We walked between a lake formed by peat extracting and the marshy edge of the oxbow lake till an excellent panoramic view of the area covered by water. We were finding more and more species, some of them in really good numbers, from Great White Egrets through Squacco Heron till Spoonbill and the white-headed form of the Long-tailed Tit we had various things and most of the people saw Kingfisher as well.

During the afternoon we had a long drive from this Easternmost edge of the Kiskunsag National Park up to the Westernmost edge of the Hortobagy National Park. Upon arrival to our simple, but well located accommodation we had a little time to look around before our dinner. Some discovered the Little Owl in the garden, some found the first Cranes in the nearby fields. We had a substantial dinner at a typical Hungarian Csarda and we discussed our plans for next day.

Day 4



The first morning at Hortobagy was like in a fairy tale with Common Cranes in the mist and some gagging Geese. There were plenty of Tree Sparrows and we found a Goldcrest as well.

After breakfast we drove to the headquarter of the NP and while Gabor and Attila get our permits and tickets the group visited the exhibition and we also looked around the famous Nine-arched bridge over the Hortobagy River.

Later on we drove to a village where on a few trees scattered around some gardens we found dozens of Long-eared Owls.

After that we visited a huge grassland area where we struggled through quite deteriorated roads while we were searching Dotterels. It got quite late, so at a point we decided to set up our picnic literally in the middle of the Puszta which word has 2 meanings: one is a huge open grassland and the other is emptiness. Well, here it was easy to understand both explanation for sure. Later on we struggled further and finally we have found a really large trip of Dotterels, over 60 in a group. We all had excellent views through the scopes.





A few out of the tens of thousands of Cranes and a Dotterel out of a nice trip of them

We had some excitement at a point before reaching on dirt roads a better quality road where even the local ranger had to ask from a farmer the way out. Close to Nadudvar we had very good views of Great Bustards again.



One of the days we visited a day roost of large number of **Long-eared Owls**.

Our final big goal was to witness the evening arrival of Cranes to their night roosts. Gabor suggested a walk towards one of the marshy areas where soon we witnessed thousands of Cranes coming continuously with an incredibly coloured sky as a background. Although mosquitoes tried to outnumber the Cranes they could not really spoil the magical moments with the trumpeting noise all over. This was an unforgettable spectacular for sure.



River Hortobagy with the 9-arched-bridge; Waiting for the evening arrival of the Cranes

Day 5

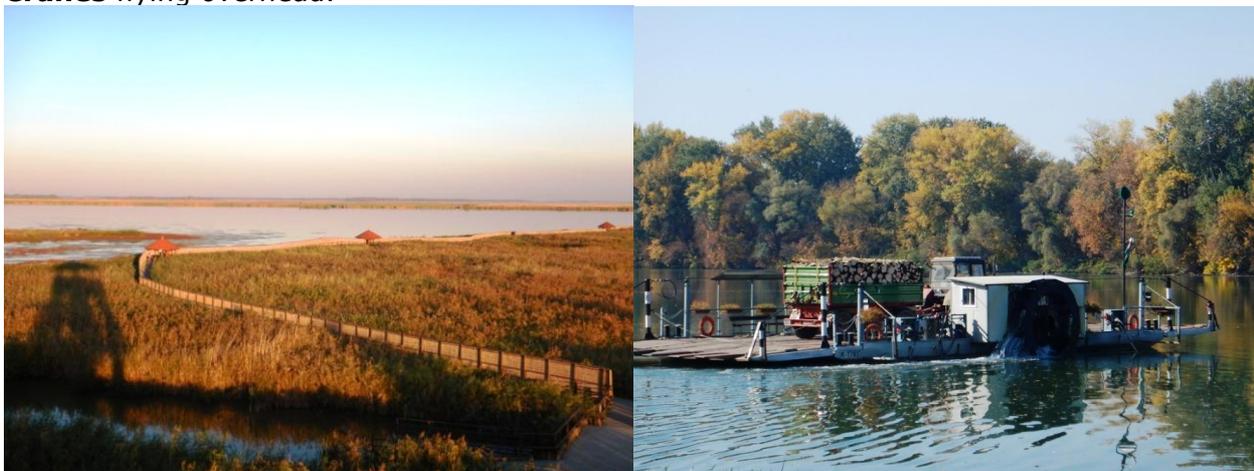
This day we dedicated to explore the Hortobagy fishponds, including the famous **Hortobágy Halastó**.

The first ponds attracted many waterbirds including **Pygmy Cormorant, Ferruginous Duck, Little Egret, Water Pipit, Black Redstart and Stonechat**. There was a White-tailed Eagle in a distance and much to our surprise we saw quite upclose a really shabby Golden Jackal as well. The reedbeds were home to **Penduline** and **Bearded Tits**.

From one of the lookout towers we witnessed a juvenile White-tailed Eagle harassing the large number of Greylegs mixed with some White-fronts and Tundra Geese. We had stunning views of Kingfisher, Hen Harrier and Great Grey Shrike as well.

At the end of our walk we checked out the last fishpond which offered **Black-winged Stilt, Spoonbill, Black-tailed Godwit**.

Soon as the end of the day approached more and more Cranes arrived in bigger and bigger waves and we had again a beautiful evening with picturesque sky around with masses of **Cranes** flying overhead.



Birding hides at Hortobagy Fishponds; A strange ferry to cross River Tisza on the way to Bukk

Day 6

After breakfast we visited Northern Hortobagy, another typical **Pusztá** grassland habitat to experience. Finally everybody had Little Owl here and raptors including **Rough-legged Buzzard** which we could compare with a nearby Common Buzzard.

Later on we headed towards the **Bükk hills** and en route we stopped alongside the River Tisza and searched **Syrian and Black Woodpecker** but had Great Spotted and Green as well.

We had a great picnic here and after that we used an interesting ferry to cross River Tisza on the way to Bukk which was one of a kind experience.

Upon arrival to the foot of the Bukk Hills we shortly visited the beginning of the Hor Valley before we arrived to our last hotel at Noszvaj.



We always helped each other to point a bird; this time we found a Syrian Woodpecker

Day 7

We spent the full day in the **Bükk National Park** and visited beech woods, scenic valleys, old quarries and limestone meadows for raptors, woodpeckers, owls and woodland passerines.

Pre-breakfast walks around our hotel were productive with some species of **woodpeckers** including **Grey-headed, Treecreeper, Common Crossbill, Hawfinch** were all found in this area of orchards and oak forests.



Although there was always a possibility to rest, our group rarely sat if there was a chance for a new bird! ☺

Later on we drove up to different points of the Bükk Hills. Where-ever we searched birds we were walking among beautifully coloured beech trees. We had plenty of Great Spots, a Black Woodpecker and we heard but not seen White-backed.

After picnic in the forest we drove up to the **Bükk Plateau** to explore extensive oak and beech woods, an excellent area for **Hawfinch, Treecreeper** and **woodpeckers**, including the elusive **White-backed**. We visited the most famous forest with a nice walk. Here giant beech trees die naturally, hence the name "**Ancient Woods**".



On the way back from this enchanting forest with all the glamour of the autumn colours of the foliage Bernie even found a very cooperative **Ural Owl** which was observed and enjoyed by each member of the group up close. What a bird!

Soon after we had Black Woodpecker, Mistle Thrush and Brambling as well. Very nice finish of a lovely day in gorgeous forests.



A very cooperative Ural Owl and a stunning Black Woodpecker



Well, not all the walks were easy strolls, so from time to time we needed a bit of rest...



It is surely worth to visit the Ancient Forest which was really memorable with all those colours

Day 8

After our last morning birding which resulted in an amazing side by side comparison of Green and Grey Woodpecker we had breakfast and went out again to the beginning of the Hor Valley. We tried hard the only missing woodpecker, the White-backed, but without luck.

We returned to our hotel for lunch, travelled back through Eger to Budapest where Andi and Gabor carried out for us a nice sightseeing tour stopping at the most interesting parts of this lovely city.

We finished the tour with lots of hugs and smiles and we felt that with these nice people we would be happy to travel for birding and wildlife anywhere! We just can not wait to have a chance to organize another tour for Bernie and friends!

