

Hungary birding trip 2.-8.8.1998

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I participated to a Finnature organized birding trip to Hungary with 13 other Finnish birders led by Finnature guide, Jari Peltomäki, and this reports covers highlights of the trip. The group saw altogether 163 species, from which I saw 151 and only Pygmy Cormorant was new to me.

Introduction

Hungary is rather cheap country to explore and provides good number of interesting species to search for. Cheap accommodation is easy to find in countryside and food is very delicious and low priced in western standards. Deer and wild pig meats are specialties, which you can taste with very reasonable price. Local wines, especially red and tokaji wines are worth to taste. Thus, Hungary provides good combination of hot weather, interesting bird species, interesting culture, delicious meals and friendly people.

Literature

- Gerald Gorman: Where to watch birds in Eastern Europe. Pages 90-131 describe well all major Hungarian birding areas.

Itinerary of the trip

- **02 Aug** (day 1): Flight from Helsinki to Budapest, visit Buda Hills and driving later in the afternoon to Felsőtarkany near Bukk Hills, NE Hungary.
- **03 Aug** (day 2): Morning visit to a quarry near Felsőtarkany, noon and afternoon at Bukk Hills National Park (Cserepfalu, Hor Valley).
- **04 Aug** (day 3): Morning drive from Felsőtarkany to Hortobagy making one hour stop to the fields between Fuzesabony and Tiszafured to search Saker, noon continuing to Hortobagy and spending afternoon at Csecsi fishponds.
- **05 Aug** (day 4): Hortobagy NP; morning Kaba sugar factory and its fishponds, afternoon Gyökerkuti fishponds.
- **06 Aug** (day 5): Hortobagy NP; morning in Nagyivan to search for Great Bustard and Aquatic Warbler, next Hortobagy-Halasto fishponds, later afternoon Kis-Jusztus marshes. Evening visited in Nagyivan to search Barn Owl.
- **07 Aug** (day 6): Morning visit in Tiszafured to search Syrian Woodpecker, then to Hortobagy NP; Fenyves fishponds, afternoon Csecsi fishponds, later afternoon northern NP in Darassa puszta.
- **08 Aug** (day 7): Drive from Hortobagy to Budapest making stops on a way between Tiszafured and Furesabony. Afternoon flight from Budapest to Helsinki.

Weather

The first few days were unusually hot in Hungary in 200 years temperature rising up to +40°C and in some places even over it. Few heavy thunderstorms were in the afternoon. Otherwise it was just sunshine whole week.

Daily log

02 Aug

Our group left on Malev flight from Helsinki at 9.35am and arrived Budapest 11am. Local guide Endre Sos was welcoming us to hot Hungary. Quickly changing money and heading by bus through Pest to Buda and up to Buda Hills (Normafa), where we explored a couple hours to search for woodpeckers and enjoying picnic lunch. One of the main species was **Middle Spotted Woodpecker**, which was finally seen just when we were planning to leave the place. Most people were already in the bus when someone noticed that a tree by the parking place hosted the target woodpecker! Two Green Woodpeckers, 6 Hawfinches and 10 Nuthatches were other species to mention when we enjoyed nice sceneries over the city.

In the afternoon we made few stops to couple of main historical places in Pest until we headed towards Bukk Hills, drove through Eger and arrived Felsötarkany where we stayed the night in a hotel and enjoyed delicious meal in a nearby restaurant. Just before midnight Tawny Owl was few times calling behind the hotel. The first day brought 41 species.

03 Aug

Early in the morning before breakfast morning walks around the hotel. Single **Grey-headed, Middle Spotted** and **White-backed Woodpecker** showed up to few people. Two **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** were calling as well on top of Greater Spotted and Green Woodpeckers. After the breakfast we headed to the higher rocky hills, which had a quarry near Felsötarkany where we tried to find Rock Thrush. However, the surprise was to find 4 **Rock Buntings**, which are usually hard to find later in the summer though few birds are nesting there. No sign of Rock Thrush. Several Yellowhammers were calling.

Then we drove to Bukk National Park to search raptors and other hill species. On a way in a small village when we were buying water bottles two **Lesser Spotted Eagles** were soaring near the village vicinity. Several hours we spent in very hot Cserepfalu enjoying picnic when **Imperial Eagle** family soared over the hill ridge and Bee-eaters were flying near by. A few Goshwaks, Sparrowhawk, Hobby, Hoopoe, 2 Ravens were other species to mention. Late in the afternoon we did a visit to Hor Valley, which had horrified warnings of dangerous ticks. Nobody got any ticks but the valley brought several new species: female **Collard Flycatcher**, Kingfisher, several Treecreepers, Long-tailed and Marsh Tits, and a Mistle Thrush.

On our return trip to hotel we did a stop in a local Eger vineyard tasting local wines and enjoying cool vine cellar, as the day was extremely hot.

This evening we decided to go for a dinner to a very good restaurant in Eger where we found that also Finnish president had visited at a dinner there two years earlier. The restaurant was well known about its delicious meat meals. Black Redstart, Songthrush and Stonechat were rather common. The number of day species was 62 and total number 71.

04 Aug

The group did some walking again around the hotel in the morning before the breakfast. Rather brown Chiffchaffs were numerous, few Wrens were calling and Blackcap was showing up. The same woodpeckers showed up as yesterday except the Grey-headed. After breakfast was time to leave hilly sceneries to gradually we arrived to flat fields before Tiszlafured to search Saker, which is breeding in the area. Watching in hot weather brought 2 Tawny Pipits, several Rollers and Kestrels. Finally somebody found a large Falcon sitting on an electricity pole, and it saw **SAKER**, which later played with few Kestrels. One of the target species was seen!

Happily we continued to Hortobagy, where at noon we checked in to a nice hotel on the western edge of puszta. Tens of White Storks, Marsh Harriers, Red-backed and Lesser Gray Shrikes, and around 100 **Red-footed Falcons** welcomed us to Hortobagy. After our lunch we headed to Csecsi fishponds and the afternoon brought high number of marsh species, which are typical in Hortobagy. Some of the best there were a Night Heron, 12 Garganeys, 5 **Avocets**, a Ringed and 2 Kentish Plovers, 6ad Little and 2ad Temminck's Stints, 2ad Curlew Sandpipers, 5ad Dunlins, 20 Curlews, 2 Great Reed and 3 Reed Warblers, 15 Bearded and 15 Penduline Tits, and 9+1 **Pygmy Cormorants**. A juvenile Black Tern and 6 Whiskered Terns gave us something to identify closed species on top of 100 Yellow-legged Gulls among which was one Caspian Gull.

Quail was calling near the hotel. The day was the best during the trip bringing 113 species and increasing the total trip count to 130. Good dinner finished with Tokaji wine and crêpes with ice cream in our hotel's restaurant crowned the great but hot day.

05 Aug

After an early breakfast we headed to Kaba sugar factory ponds. The smell was less attracting but good species kept our morning busy. Among 10 Black Terns we found our first ad and juv **White-winged Terns**. Another pool brought 10 Black terns more, 3 Black-necked Grebes, 3 Black-winged Stilts, 8 Avocets, ad **Little Gull**, 2 Hoopoes, 2 calling Nightingales and 2 Greenshanks.

We continued to Gyökerkuti fishponds, which were rather poor though hosting high number of ducks. The only species to mention were an Osprey and 6 Gadwalls.

Picnic lunch in our hotel was suspended by a strong thunderstorm with heavy wind and rain, which lasted two hours and cooled down a little bit the temperature. Afternoon nap was luxury. Our afternoon program was slightly changed due to thunderstorm and we went for the last hours to Kis-Jusztus marsh by the main road 5km east of our hotel. Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, Great White Egret, Little Bittern, singing Savi's Warbler and over flying Spoonbill were most interesting ones to mention.

98 species and 12 new species brought the trip count to 142. I enjoyed another good dinner this time with Wild pig meal.

06 Aug

Very early breakfast and drive to the village Nagyivan, where we met local National Park warden Dr. Gabor Kovacs, who was guiding us to the restricted area of the national park. Target species were Great Bustards, Aquatic Warbler, and Stone-curlew. Gabor quickly showed us first 3 Stone-curlews, then two Little Owls sitting on the roof of a building and finally 10 **Great Bustards**. Those world largest flying birds were grazing like sheep.

We tried to find from another marsh area Aquatic Warbler though Gabor mentioned that most probably they have already moved away when the breeding season is over. The area was too dry and we did not find any birds though did a hard dry and played its call tens of minutes. Only Sedge Warblers showed up.

We left this great area and headed to Hortobagy-Halasto fishponds. Gabor knew exactly, which one was recently emptied and it provided thousands of birds. Following numbers might tell something: Spoonbill 150, Black-tailed Godwits 700, 80 Little Egrets, 60 Great White Egrets, 1200 Graylag Geese, 1100 Mallards, 300 Lapwings, 1000 Spotted Redshanks, 520 Whiskered Terns. Sure the best bird was a **Great Black-headed Gull** (3cy) among Yellow-legged Gulls. Other good species were 6 Glossy Ibises, a single Grey Plover, 2 Red-necked Grebes, 2 **Pygmy Cormorants**, 3 Gadwalls, a **Ferruginous Duck**, **Montagu's Harrier**, a snake carrying **Short-toed Eagle**, a calling Water Rail, several Savi's Warblers and a Marsh Warbler. Now there were enough targets to take photos.

Later in the afternoon we spent 1,5 hours at Kis-Jusztus mash when Gabor was driven to his home village. Long hiding Corn Bunting was new to us.

We decided to take an early dinner in our hotel restaurant and drive then back to Nagyivan village to try to see Barn Owl, which is nesting and roosting in the chapel tower. During our dinner also Gerard Gorman arrived and we spent time together in the evening excursion. When the sun went down over 40 Night Herons did their evening flights. Suddenly two **Barn Owls** dived out from the chapel tower and disappeared in few seconds to the dark night. We played the owl call and one returned to sit on top of the church. Great end to a very successful day and time to celebrate good species in our hotel with Tokaji wine. The day brought 95 species and 15 new to the trip.

07 Aug

The morning program started to search Syrian Woodpecker from Tizslafured parks with help of Gerard without success. A single Icterine Warbler, 3 Serins and 5 Wood Warblers were seen in the parks. There after we returned Hortobagy and went to Fenyés fishponds. Wide reedbeds brought us the idea to try to play Aquatic Warbler song without success. Then we tried to play **Moustached Warbler's** song, it immediately responded and showed up few times to our surprise. Two Penduline Tit nests, several Bearded Tits, far flying Short-toed Eagle, 4 Marsh Warblers and very well showed Great Reed Warbler were best to mention.

Then we went to Hortobagy village to make tourist shopping, and take pictures of nesting White Storks. Market place had all kind horse and puszta products for sale, which however did not take good success among us.

In the afternoon we went again to Csecsi fishponds and this time we found 6 Whimbrels among 200 Curlews. One pool hosted 1300 Coots among which we found 4 **Ferruginous Ducks**, 2 Red-necked Grebes, and a Black-necked Grebe. Single **Little Bittern**, 2 over flying

Pygmy Cormorants, 2 Water Rails, 170 Lapwings, 330 Black Godwits, and a juv Caspian Gull among 50 Yellow-legged Gulls.

Last few ours we wanted to spend in the northern part of Hortobagy to see dry steppe species and thus, we drove to Darassa. Short watching to the sky brought a good candidate of **Long-legged Buzzard**. When it came closer we could very well identify it. A little bit later another bird was flying near by. We went further on to the place where few years earlier had nested hundreds of Rosy Starlings. This year they had not been there but we found **Lesser Spotted Eagle** sitting on top of a tree. This dryer area was more suitable also for 4 Whinchats.

In the darkening evening we returned to our hotel and had our farewell dinner in Hortobagy. The daycount was 101 and 4 new species increased the trip count to 162. Maybe it's worth to mention that thousands Starlings and Rooks are the most numerous species outside of fishponds.

08 Aug

Immediately after breakfast we checked out the hotel and headed towards Budapest making few stops North of Tiszlafured. At the same place where we saw Saker we tried to find it again. However, we were lucky to find **Syrian Woodpecker**, which flew from somewhere and sat to the tree just in front of us! Another one was a little bit later by the road. Good finish for the trip to add one more species to the list to have grand total of 163 species.

We drove then straight to Budapest, did last shopping and arrived at the airport well in time to say thanks and goodbye to our good guide Endre. Flight from Budapest to Helsinki left at noon and we arrived cool Helsinki with great memories of Hortobagy and Bukk Hills.

Species list

1. Little Grebe
2. Great Crested Grebe
3. Red-necked Grebe
4. Black-necked Grebe
5. Great Cormorant
6. Pygmy Cormorant
7. Little Bittern
8. Night Heron
9. Squacco Heron
10. Little Egret
11. Great White Egret
12. Grey Heron
13. Purple Heron
14. White Stork
15. Glossy Ibis
16. Spoonbill
17. Graylag Goose
18. Gadwall
19. Teal

20. Mallard
21. Garganey
22. Shoveler
23. Pochard
24. Ferruginous Duck
25. Osprey
26. Short-toed Eagle
27. Marsh Harrier
28. Montagu's Harrier
29. Goshawk
30. Sparrowhawk
31. Common Buzzard
32. Long-legged Buzzard
33. Lesser Spotted Eagle
34. Imperial Eagle
35. Kestrel
36. Red-footed Falcon
37. Hobby
38. Saker
39. Quail
40. Pheasant
41. Water Rail
42. Moorhen
43. Coot
44. Great Bustard
45. Black-winged Stilt
46. Avocet
47. Stone-curlew
48. Little Ringed Plover
49. Ringed Plover
50. Kentish Plover
51. Grey Plover
52. Lapwing
53. Little Stint
54. Temmink's Stint
55. Curlew Sandpiper
56. Dunlin
57. Ruff
58. Snipe
59. Black-tailed Godwit
60. Whimbrel
61. Curlew
62. Greenshank
63. Spotted Redshank
64. Redshank
65. Green Sandpiper
66. Wood Sandpiper
67. Common Sandpiper
68. Great Black-headed Gull
69. Little Gull

70. Black-headed Gull
71. Common Gull
72. Yellow-legged Gull
73. Caspian Gull
74. Common tern
75. Whiskered Tern
76. Black tern
77. White-winged Tern
78. Rock Dove (domestic)
79. Wood Pigeon
80. Turkish Dove
81. Turtle Dove
82. Cuckoo
83. Little Owl
84. Tawny Owl
85. Barn Owl
86. Common Swift
87. Kingfisher
88. Bee-eater
89. Roller
90. Hoopoe
91. Grey-headed Woodpecker
92. Green Woodpecker
93. Greater Spotted Woodpecker
94. Syrian Woodpecker
95. Middle Spotted Woodpecker
96. White-backed Woodpecker
97. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
98. Crested Lark
99. Lark
100. Sand martin
101. House Swallow
102. Barn Swallow
103. Tawny Pipit
104. Tree Pipit
105. Yellow Wagtail
106. White Wagtail
107. Wren
108. Robin
109. Nightingale
110. Black Redstart
111. Whinchat
112. Stonechat
113. Wheatear
114. Blackbird
115. Songthrush
116. Mistle Thrush
117. Savi's Warbler
118. Sedge Warbler
119. Marsh Warbler

120. Reed Warbler
121. Great Reed Warbler
122. Moustashed Warbler
123. Icterine Warbler
124. Whitethroat
125. Lesser Whitethroat
126. Blackcap
127. Garden Warbler
128. Wood Warbler
129. Chiffchaff
130. Willow Warbler
131. Spotted Flycatcher
132. Collard Flycatcher
133. Bearded Tit
134. Long-tailed Tit
135. Marsh tit
136. Coal Tit
137. Blue Tit
138. Great Tit
139. Nuthatch
140. Treecreeper
141. Penduline Tit
142. Golden Oriole
143. Red-backed Shrike
144. Lesser Grey Shrike
145. Jay
146. Magpie
147. Jackdaw
148. Rook
149. Common Crow
150. Raven
151. Starling
152. House Sparrow
153. Tree Sparrow
154. Chaffinch
155. Serin
156. Greenfinch
157. Goldfinch
158. Linnet
159. Hawfinch
160. Yellowhammer
161. Rock Bunting
162. Reed Bunting
163. Corn Bunting