

Holiday Highlights  
Hungary  
1-6 November 2012

**Guides:** Roy Atkins and Attila Steiner

**Guests:** Adrienne & Robin Mace, Andy Golding and Mervyn Wiles

**Day 1:** Everything seems to be ahead of schedule today - we all meet early at the meeting point and we're through check-in and security before the time we were actually meant to be meeting! The flight is bang on time and from the airplane actually touching down, through getting off the plane, showing our passports and collecting our bags to meeting Attila at the gate takes almost exactly half an hour - which must surely be a speed record for getting through an airport! We elect to head straight to the hotel rather than eat en-route and after an hour and a half we arrive, well ready for our evening meal. We then have a quick chat about the plans for tomorrow and head to bed.

**Day 2:** The weather is lovely when we waken and we pause outside the rooms to check the trees in the garden where amongst Great Tits and Chaffinches are three woodpeckers; two Great Spotted and a Syrian. It is a great opportunity to compare these very similar species and a great start to the trip - a new bird for everyone before we have even had breakfast!

Once fed and filled with coffee we meet up at the van and drive pretty much straight to the little town of Nagyivan where we are picking up a local ranger from the Hortobagy National Park, Gabor. He is a shy man who despite understanding quite a lot of English is nervous of trying to speak it and so he chats happily with Attila who occasionally passes on snippets of information as we drive round to an area where there have been some Great Bustards recently. We pause to admire a Little Owl on a chimney enjoying the morning sunshine and spot the occasional Buzzard, a Marsh Harrier and flocks of Common Cranes in the fields plus enormous numbers of Rooks before we arrive and pull onto the verge. Attila explains that the dirt track is horribly muddy and slithery and so we can drive no further and we will walk for perhaps one or two kilometres in search of the bustards and as he says so Roy scans the field to our right and says, "We won't need to walk that far." Attila looks puzzled and Roy adds, "There is a big flock of Great Bustards in this field!"

Delighted that we won't be getting all 'clarted' up in the mud we are soon standing with our scopes trained on a flock of 35 Great Bustards! They look fantastic in the sunshine and are not even that far away so we can see every detail of their plumage. It is a nice mixed flock of males and females with both groups sticking together, the males noticeably bigger and bulkier and with more white

in their wings. Some are preening and fanning their black and white tipped tail feathers. These are excellent views and we watch them for a long time as they walk around, preen and feed.

There are other birds in the area too including a few Tree Sparrows, Common Buzzards, Magpies, a distant Rough-legged Buzzard and a couple of White-tailed Eagles. There is quite large group of Roe Deer in one of the fields.

The male bustards wander into a rape field and are busily feeding when we finally decide to move on but almost as we do the males all take flight across the field and round to join the females again. Here they pause for a short time before the entire flock flaps heavily into the air for a short fly round once more before landing back in the same field – a very nice little finale to our viewing of these impressive birds.

We drive back the way we came and pause to enjoy the site of the Common Cranes feeding in the fields. There are hundreds if not thousands of cranes way off in the background, flying around in long lines in all directions. It is fabulous to see them like this in the sunshine and a few are even 'dancing!' At one spot we get out and are pleased that the Cranes are just far enough away not to be disturbed so we enjoy excellent views through the scopes - we can even see that although most have bright red eyes there are a few birds with paler eyes and one on which they are almost white! Roy finds a nice Great Grey Shrike in one of the fields and over the trees we spot at least three White-tailed Eagles including two having a squabble.

We pause again along the road to check a pylon on which there is a nest box for Saker Falcons. These birds stay on territory year round and we are delighted to spot one of the birds on the pylon nearby and soon we are enjoying wonderful views about as close as you could really hope for and we are able to see every detail of its plumage through the scopes - simply fantastic.

We drive round to the Hortobagy visitor centre as we have not actually paid for our entrance yet and after a look round the centre we then inspect a few trees in the village. This is a good spot for roosting Long-eared Owls and sure enough there are a few roosting in one of the bigger trees nearby. They look absolutely wonderful! Although hard to pick out at first soon we realise there are more than we thought and find two, then two more, then a group of six then another one and another until we have fifteen birds in total and no doubt we haven't found them all. Some are all fluffed up and fast asleep, others are looking at us in a calm sort of way while others are staring as if in shock - all stiff and bolt upright, ears erect and tall, their brilliant orange eyes staring us out! What a fabulous treat

We drive on to a viewing tower, pausing en-route to watch a hovering Rough-legged Buzzard which drops into a field but fails to catch anything. We have lunch scanning the wide open steppe but there is little moving other than a few Common Buzzards so after we have eaten we move on. We drop Gabor back at his house then make our way round to an area of wet grassland where there are some big flocks of geese. Walking across the plain we arrive at a spot from which to scan the area and start checking the enormous number of White-fronted Geese, with a smaller number of Greylags in amongst them. There has been a Red-breasted Goose here recently but there is no sign. The geese are soon disturbed by a fly over White-tailed Eagle and then a second bird flying the other way. A third one is on the ground and later we are not sure whether we are seeing more birds or the same ones again. We spot our first Hen Harriers of the trip, all flying along above the grass and reeds in the same direction and perhaps going to roost - three ring-tailed and a single male. A Rough-legged Buzzard shows very well and even pauses to hover allowing us good scope views before flapping lazily onwards. There are quite a few Common Cranes in flight and a few ducks - all Mallards and Teal plus a couple of Snipe and a flock of Lapwings. It has really clouded over now and starts to rain so we head back to the van and drive up to a spot where there was a big crane roost last night.

At this spot we enjoy a coffee while we wait for the cranes to appear but frustratingly the rain comes on heavily and we sit in the van and watch through the windows for any signs. In the end we are disappointed when thousands of cranes fly past in long lines away in the distance and head off in the wrong direction! With the rain still spotting and the light fading fast we decide to call it a day and head back to the hotel for a break before our evening meal.

**Day 3:** We wake to find thick fog and after breakfast decide to abandon our original plan of visiting one of the fish farms, heading instead to the 'Steppe-animal Park' where we can see the unusual breeds of farm animals that have evolved over thousands of years in the Hungarian steppe country of the Hortobagy. Before we even arrive we come across a big herd of Hungarian Grey Cattle in one of the fields - impressive beasts with enormously long horns. There are more of these at the park and we also enjoy various breeds of sheep including the famous Racka Sheep with their corkscrew horns. Even more famous are the Woolly Pigs that look rather like a pig in sheep's clothing. We also discover the meaning of the word frizzly as we see frizzly pigeons and frizzly geese both with long, curly feathers on their backs. It is also possible to have a close look at a heron-well and looking down into the water we find two or three Marsh Frogs and several Fire-bellied Toads. As we walk back towards the vans we notice that the fog is now lifting allowing us to watch a Sparrowhawk that causes chaos amongst the Collared Doves and disappears into the distance.

With better weather we now head to the fish ponds pausing to enjoy the sight of a Great Grey Shrike on the way and as we arrive we get good views of a Kingfisher along one of the channels. We arrive to find good viewing conditions as we start our walk along the track between two of the ponds. One has been drained and they are still removing the water and catching the carp as they do so. The open mud and shallow pools have attracted a lot of birds and we start by checking the gulls of which there are hundreds! The vast majority are Black-headed Gulls but there are also large numbers of Caspian Gulls and Roy takes everyone through the identification features of this species. It is good to have a flock that is close enough that all the details can be seen and we then discover an immature Lesser Black-backed Gull amongst them. This bird has very long, slim wings so is most probably of the Baltic race, fuscus. There are a few Common Gulls and a single Yellow-legged Gull looking bulkier than the Caspian's and with a noticeably thicker and more angled bill and pale eye.

Those who are glazing over with this gull talk (most people?) are delighted when suddenly we find a small group of Spotted Redshank as a distraction and scanning the rest of the lagoon we discover there are lots of Grey Herons - more than forty! There is a single Great Egret and a few Shovelers. In the trees in the background are at least three White-tailed Eagles and occasionally another will fly past, mainly juveniles but also a couple of adults. A close Rough-legged Buzzard flies through and we carefully check for the Greater Spotted Eagle as one has been seen here recently.

Andrew calls that he has spotted a Water Rail and we get great views as it works its way along the near edge of a reed bed often right out in the open. There are more White-tailed Eagles flying around in the background and on the water a few ducks and a Great Crested Grebe. There are several Marsh Harriers in the area and every few minutes one will glide lazily by over the reeds. We are also pleased to discover two immature/female Black Restarts feeding on flies around a big pile of vegetation heaped up on the bank.

We walk a little way further on and suddenly there is a real rarity flying around over the canal beside us - a Kittiwake!! This is a very rare bird in Hungary but we have been keeping our eyes open as there has been a small influx in the last few days. It is a beautifully marked young bird and astonishingly tame flying by very closely indeed. At the far end of the track there is another drained pond and we scan the mud discovering Black-tailed Godwits, dozens of Teal, a couple of Wigeon, a single Shelduck, Great White Egrets and an astonishing number of Snipe feeding right out in the open, a nice opportunity to have a good look at them. We see more Curlew, yet more White-tailed Eagles and hear a Penduline Tit. As we start walking back a couple of ringtail Hen Harriers fly past and then we hear the Penduline Tits again so we try playing a bit of the call. After a few moments we see some movement in the reeds and then there

it is – a superb Penduline Tit showing very well for a few moments before taking flight and vanishing back over the reeds.

Back at the van we enjoy lunch then take a much shorter walk in another direction still trying to find the Spotted Eagle. With the sun now coming out we are hopeful perhaps it might take a little fly around and judging by the behaviour of the White-tailed Eagles this seems reasonable. We are thrilled at the sight of several White-tailed Eagles flying around over the pond obviously spotting something in the water and soon one plucks out a fish and takes it to the shoreline where other birds start coming in to try and get some. We enjoy fantastic scope views of first two then three then four birds squabbling over the fish with Hooded Crows trying to nip in and pinch bits too. More birds are perched in the trees in the back ground and a sweep of the binoculars produces a count of ten White-tailed Eagles!

As we walk back Roy catches a frog and close examination of the metatarsal tubercles (yes really!) means a positive identification as a Marsh Frog - which is what we are suspecting from the start but it is good to check as all three species of water frogs are possible here.

We are rapidly running out of time as we have to be at the train on time to be taken to the far end of the Hortobagy Fish Ponds where we are hoping to witness the large crane roost. We pause briefly en-route to watch a female Sparrowhawk beating up a superb male Hen Harrier and spot a very smart Fieldfare as we arrive. The train journey is quite good fun and we scan the reedbeds and pools as we travel adding Little Grebe, Pochard and Gadwall on the way. At the far end we walk to a good viewing spot and start scanning the huge fish pond ahead of us. There are thousands of birds out there and we check through a big flock of gulls, hundreds of Teal, Shoveler and Mallards and thousands of White-fronted Geese. There are more Great Egrets and our first Pygmy Cormorants fly overhead. There are also a few Cranes already stood in the water behind the geese and another beautiful male Hen Harrier flies through. We find a nice mixed flock of Dunlin and Grey Plover as well a single Black-tailed Godwit and a few Lapwings.

We work carefully through the geese and suddenly Attila hits the jackpot - Red-breasted Goose! They are not easy to pick out at first but as the light improves a little and the birds become less hidden by other birds eventually everyone gets good views of three birds sat together amongst the White-fronted Geese. We are thrilled to see this rare species and take turns enjoying the views through the scopes until suddenly we hear a Bearded Tit call behind us! We decide to try playing a little of the call to coax it in and sure enough within moments we spot some movement amongst the reeds and soon an adult male and a young bird are flitting around amongst the reeds giving good if brief views. We return

to scanning the lake and Roy adds another Red-breasted Goose to the tally and we soon realise that there are in fact another three making six in all.

Then the Common Cranes start to come in. At first a couple of hundred fly in from the far side of the lake but soon hundreds more are materialising in the background and then more and more until thousands are flying in and swirling round about the birds already in the water before dropping in amongst them. But there are still more coming and scanning to the right we see lines and lines of hundreds of cranes appearing one after the other and heading in to roost. The noise is building up as they swirl around before settling and then birds start coming in from our left! Geese too are appearing in their hundreds and they add to the noise of the cranes and now thousands of cranes are coming in from the left and from beyond the reed beds. There are hundreds swirling round above the roost now and still hundreds more flying in and it is just continuous! The birds on the ground are now like an ocean of birds, a huge area where you cannot see any water for the cranes tightly packed in a mass. And still they come - line after line after line, thousands of birds at a time and the noise gets louder as they greet each other and drop into the roost - and the lines of birds keep coming with no let up. Two days ago the count for this site was 50,000 Common Cranes!! This does not seem unreasonable as we watch the astonishing spectacle before us. And still they come - a constant and steady stream of calling birds flying in and swirling round and settling. It feels like it is never going to end as every time we scan into the distance there are still more lines of birds on their way! With the light really fading now we actually have to leave to get the train back while birds are still appearing. The area of the pond covered by cranes is immense and even as the train sets off, with the light almost gone, there are still stragglers coming in to join the party. It has been a wonderful experience and although the mist and the fading light is too poor for photography it is a memory that will likely stay with us for a very long time.

**Day 4:** Today we want to make the most of the good weather as the forecast is not so good for tomorrow – so we head out to the Bukk Hills for a change of scenery and some woodland birding. It is beautiful sunny weather as we travel and we decide to make a stop to try and find Eastern Imperial Eagle in a good area for them. There are certainly plenty of Common Buzzards here and a scan finds at least six with others flying by in the background but sadly no eagles. A few White-fronted Geese and Greylags fly over and we find a very distant flock of Stock Doves but little else.

We drive on through the town of Eger and on to the hills where we take the track running up towards the quarry and immediately stop as Attila has spotted a Common Crossbill in a Spruce tree beside the road! We jump out to enjoy superb full frame views through the scopes as it plucks cones from the tree and extracts seeds while holding it with one foot against the branch. We soon realise

there is a second bird, both superb coloured males, but it is only when a Sparrowhawk flushes them that we realise there are actually four in the tree. They fly round, back over our heads then back again over the road with the flock now numbering seven. We take the track up through the trees and park up before walking up a steady slope towards the quarry. It seems surprisingly quiet until we get close to the quarry and come to the first vertical rock faces where we discover at least two Grey-headed Woodpeckers feeding on the rock face. We get excellent views before they fly and then a Green Woodpecker flies up from the ground soon appearing on one of the pinnacles of rock providing a great chance to compare these two similar species.

Once in the quarry we scan the rock face over and over, up and down in search of Wallcreeper. The quarry seems to be completely birdless at first then gradually we find a couple of Great Tits, a Black Redstart and overhead a flock of Siskins flies over. We try a different angle but still no luck. A couple of Ravens appear, a Sparrowhawk flies over and also a Buzzard but it seems that the Wallcreeper is not here today despite recent sightings. While scanning the higher part of the quarry we are pleased to find a superb male Mouflon! He is a most handsome beast with a good set of horns and we watch him for some time.

We walk back to the van and then drive part way up the road to an area where we have seen several species of woodpecker in the past and we listen out for any birds while we eat lunch here - but it is completely birdless here today! We decide to drive right to the top and have a walk in the higher quarry, but here too there is nothing, just four more Mouflon that run across the rocks ahead of us. In the end we give up and walk back to the van to try somewhere else.

We head to a reserve nearby taking the road up through the forest, passing though lots of fabulous looking Black Woodpecker habitat - but there is no sign of any birds. We arrive at the far end of the road and take a walk keeping our eyes and ears open for woodpeckers or any other birds. It still seems astonishingly quiet and after a while all we have seen are a couple of Great Tits, a Goldcrest, two Mistle Thrushes and two Willow Tits. Attila says that this is a good area for Ural Owls and we walk on, passing through a couple of nice meadow areas that look like good hunting areas for this species but there is no sign, then we arrive at a final meadow and there, perched right on top of a small conifer is a Ural Owl looking enormous atop such a small tree! It looks absolutely superb through the scopes filling the view it is so close and we watch as it scans the ground all around looking intently at times at a particular spot as though it can hear something there. It flies on enormous broad wings to a new perch, a little more obscured now, and then after a minute or two flies again, this time out of sight. We are delighted and grinning from ear to ear start back towards the van.

We walk back with a new spring in our step back past the meadows and suddenly, there right in front of us, is another Ural Owl!! This one soon drops to a low perch in the long grass and again we enjoy fantastic views through the scope before it flies across the edge of the wood. Here it turns round to face us before making quite an unpleasant grating call a few times, which might be aimed at us we are not sure, then flies off into the trees. Wow, a great way to finish what has been rather a quiet day.

**Day 5:** The weather forecast was right and it has taken a turn for the worse as we set off this morning, raining in short sharp showers as we drive to Lake Tizsa to see what we can find. We arrive at the end of a shower and jump out to check the ducks and geese in the shallow bay in front of us. Here we find a nice selection of ducks including Teal, Shoveler, Wigeon and an astonishing number of Gadwall. There is a big flock of Greylags and then Attila finds a couple of Pygmy Cormorants - our first perched birds and nice to compare the size with a pair of Mallard beside them. There are a few Little Grebes and in the background Grey Herons and Great White Egrets while a Marsh Harrier flies slowly across.

A sharp shower of huge raindrops sends us back to the van and we wait this out before crossing the road to check the lake on the other side. Here there are large numbers of coots and another Pygmy Cormorant this time on the same log as a Great Cormorant which is great to see as the size difference is astonishing! There is a Great Crested Grebe and more ducks of the same species though we also add Tufted Duck to the growing list. We get very good views of Caspian Gull showing all the features of this species very well indeed and with the rain coming again we head back to the van and drive on.

Our aim is to check out other areas of Lake Tizsa but in the process we pass through several Eastern Imperial Eagle territories and so take our time and when we reach an area that Attila says is particularly good for this species and get out to scan. We soon spot a ringtail Hen Harrier then a superb male as well. There are several Roe Deer in the fields and then we find a third Hen Harrier as well as Buzzard, Kestrel and plenty of Hooded Crows and Rooks. We are just about to leave when Adrienne point out a large dark bird above the distinct trees. It is a long way off but quickly the scopes are back up and yes, sure enough, it is an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle! We are delighted and enjoy watching through the scope as it slowly glides along the skyline. Attila then notices that there is a second bird perched on a very distant pylon and we decide it would be better to get closer so we climb quickly into the van and drive round until we reach this area. Adding Wood Pigeon to the list as we drive (very scarce at this time of year!) we are disappointed to discover the eagle perched on the pylon has flown by the time we get there. We soon pick up a bird in flight though giving us better views than we had before. We watch as it glides slowly for a while then suddenly it starts losing height in a long fast glide until almost at the ground



a second bird appears and they squabble, presumably over whatever the second bird has been eating on the ground. They tussle for a while before gaining height and gliding slowly above the trees and then finally drop down behind the wood and out of sight.

Well pleased we head back on our route to explore the lake, continuing to look out for eagles as we go but without any further luck. A brief stop at the edge of a farm adds Crested Lark to the trip with several birds playing around the hay bales here as well as Goldfinches, Tree Sparrows and a single Yellowhammer. We check out another spot on the lake which is empty then a third where we find a long line of Pochard and Tufted Ducks in the distance. There is a single Great Crested Grebe and after a few minutes think we have found another Kittiwake!! As it gets closer we realise it is in fact a first winter Little Gull with the same pattern on the wings, another nice find.

We still have the rest of this bay to check however and the further on we go the more birds there seem to be. At the next stop we find a couple of Goldeneye, lots more Pochards and Tufties and plenty of Great Crested Grebes then we are very pleased to discover a Great Northern Diver - a rarity in Hungary - the first record being as recent as 2003 though it has occurred almost annually ever since. It is only Attila's third in the country so it is even rarer than Kittiwake!

Further on we pass yet more Great Crested Grebes and diving ducks and then in the furthest part of the bay we are amazed to find three Black-throated Divers fishing together. There is a long line of Tufted Ducks, Pochard and Goldeneye and then we discover a nice little group of five Black-necked Grebes. Scanning further round still we discover two Slavonian Grebes as well, a much scarcer bird in Hungary, then as Roy is watching these, a Red-throated Diver appears in his scope view! This bird is much closer and swims past quite close though it seems to be underwater more time than on the surface. Scanning further produces a fourth Black-throated Diver and a Hen Harrier flying right across the lake and to our surprise a pair of Great Crested Grebes displaying! As we are about to leave the edge of the lake we suddenly hear the call of a Treecreeper very close by and soon find two birds working the trees beside us, both of them Common Treecreepers with a gleaming white flank.

We are about to head off for lunch when Attila suddenly hears a Long-tailed Tit calling nearby so we walk over to the bushes to see if we can find it. There are a surprisingly large number of Blue Tits here but eventually we find the Long-tailed Tits and are very pleased to discover that there are not just normal looking birds but a couple of white-headed birds amongst them as well. This is one of the few areas where you can see both races together but judging by reactions it looks like people prefer the white-headed ones which really do look cute! There are still more birds to be discovered here though and as well as fly over Siskins, Andrew

spots a couple of Bramblings, we find Bullfinches and then realise we are hearing the call of Short-toed Treecreeper! After a bit of coaxing at least two birds appear in the nearby trees and though not always easy to get onto them as they are very active everyone manages to see them eventually, and see the rather dusky flanks of these birds. Well pleased with these sightings we realise we had better get our skates on as today we have lunch ordered at a nice little inn and we already have to ring them to tell them we will be late! We arrive soon enough and enjoy a superb bowl of Hungarian Goulash - well you have to don't you!

After we have eaten we drive next to a village that has a very famous Long-eared Owl roost. Arriving there we soon find our first birds and are astonished to discover nine birds all in the same few branches of one tree! Nearby are a couple more and then in a third tree there are another five! We add two in the big tree behind them and then round the corner find three more groups totalling another 21 birds. They are astonishingly tame and peer down at us in varying states of alarm with their big orange eyes, then gradually calm down and fluff back up and many go back to sleep. It is interesting to see how variable they are in colour of both general plumage and also face colour - some being a really pretty tan colour and gentle looking while others have much striper looking faces and look more aggressive.

It is hard to pull ourselves away but we would like one last look at the cranes before we leave the area tomorrow and so drive round to a road the cranes pass over on their way to the roost we watched a couple of days ago. As we arrive the first flocks are already passing overhead and looking down the road a few minutes later we can see hundreds if not thousands flying towards the road down there! Worried we are in the wrong spot we drive down the road a short distance but then notice cranes flying towards the road in long lines everywhere!! We stop and jump out to enjoy the sight but notice that they seem to spot us on the road and either go one side of us or the other to avoid flying too close, so we decide to hide behind a large clump of bushes and see if it makes a difference. Over the next half hour or more we enjoy wave after wave of cranes passing overhead or to either side of us. Hiding like that seems to make a difference and we enjoy some cranes that pass right over our heads and the constant calling and appearance of wave after wave of more cranes makes for the most fantastic show. The sky is very dark overhead but way to the west there is a gap in the cloud with a beautiful sunset and the cranes passing in front of this look particularly artistic. It is such a pleasure to spend time just soaking in the atmosphere and enjoying the wonderful site of these majestic birds as they head to roost and when finally the numbers start to dwindle and the light really fades we are very pleased to have seen the roost in these two very different ways - a fabulous finish to a great days birding.

**Day 6:** After yesterday's mixed weather we are delighted to find completely clear blue skies this morning though a massive drop in temperature! It is a glorious drive towards the Bukk Hills with the trees taking on their autumn colours. Passing over Lake Tisza there appears to be the same birds but we don't stop, focussing instead on scanning the fields and trees as we continue along the road in the hope of raptors as the weather is perfect. There are certainly plenty of Buzzards but we have not been travelling long when suddenly a much bigger bird is flapping lazily above the fields and we pause to check it - a superb adult Eastern Imperial Eagle! We are out of the vehicle in moments and watching this beautiful bird as it circles over the farmland but then drops into the field behind some bushes. It is a very well marked bird with brilliant white 'braces' on its back and a lovely blonde nape. A second bird flies in from the same direction, this one less well marked and presumably a younger bird and both birds tussle for a few moments before dropping back into the field this time the beautiful adult perching in full view and looking absolutely stunning through the scope. In the distance there is a third bird but we enjoy these two for some time before they finally leave us. Scanning the area we realise that there are several Buzzards also in view, a Kestrel and a Sparrowhawk and then another bird hovering nearby which we realise is in fact a Long-legged Buzzard! This is a great find and is a well marked bird with clean orangey tail and pale marking on the upper surface of the wings and as it hovers we remark on the long-winged look these birds have. We are very pleasantly surprised to find a second one nearby.

We finally move on and keep scanning as there are more raptors constantly in the air including a ringtail Hen Harrier and then a fabulous Goshawk being mobbed by Hooded Crows which make for a very good size comparison. A Sparrowhawk a few moments later looks tiny!

Our next stop is a small reservoir and we scan the edges checking the ducks which include Teal, Wigeon lots of Mallards and to our surprise a Pintail, a male moulting into breeding plumage making it look like a male with a females head! There are Grey Herons and amongst the dead branches at the edge of the lake a flock of Goldfinches and single Linnet. We arrive at the Hor Valley and drive up the rather pot-holed track into the forest. The slopes either side of the road are covered in Beech trees and the colours are rather beautiful with the orange of the autumn Beech leaves and bright yellow Maples here and there underneath. We watch a Red Squirrel dash off up the slope to our right as we drive through the trees. The target here is White-backed Woodpecker but they are not common and Great Spotted Woodpecker is much more likely and we see our first immediately we get out of the van. There are plenty of Nuthatches and as we walk along the track we see several but otherwise it is pretty quiet. We hear a Marsh Tit, spot a few Great Tits and Chaffinches, and then another Great Spotted Woodpecker. Now and then we hear tapping noises and search hard before finding either a Nuthatch or yet another Great Spotted Woodpecker

- but each time we are hopeful. There is plenty of evidence that White-backed Woodpeckers are here as the trees have their characteristic stripped bark but as we arrive back at the van we have still not located one. As we turn the van to head back along the track we suddenly notice several tall thin fungi beside the track. They are quite astonishing being a good ten inches tall perhaps and yet less than half an inch wide. and even trying a second area nearby doesn't produce the goods -- just our eighth and ninth Great Spotted!

Slightly frustrated we have to leave it and go for lunch as there just isn't time to look any longer and we soon arrive at the delightful Nomad Hotel where a warm welcome and warm soup await. It is a delicious lunch and replete we take a short walk around the village. This is a good area for Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Hawfinch and we scan the trees as we walk soon locating three Marsh Tits, several Great tits, Greenfinches, Chaffinches and other common birds like Tree Sparrow and Robin. We find a Great Spotted Woodpecker and then Andrew picks out another woodpecker in a nearby tree - a Middle Spotted. It flies right over our heads and proceeds to show extremely well indeed in the nearby oaks even allowing prolonged scope views. As we watch this bird at least two more Great Spotted Woodpeckers fly over and then Attila hears a Hawfinch call. Scanning in the direction of the call we pick up three birds flying above the trees looking chunky and short-tailed but frustratingly they don't land and vanish behind the woodland.

We start walking slowly back towards the hotel pausing and scanning regularly and have hardly gone anywhere when suddenly Attila calls that there is a Black Woodpecker! It is flying above the forest and not a brilliant view as this also vanishes behind the trees but we do get several seconds of flight view of this large almost crow-like bird. Another Great Spotted Woodpecker flies over. Then another Great Spotted Woodpecker flies over ... then another! What is going on!! It seems really strange that so many of this species are here but even odder that they are all flying the same way as if migrating - there is no way they are going to be heading to the north-east! By the time we arrive back at the hotel we have seen another five more as well as very nice female Siskin perched in full view and some distant Fieldfares with a single Redwing.

But we are out of time. We need to be at the airport in a couple of hours so we start the journey towards Budapest as darkness falls and arriving at the airport we say our fond farewells to Attila before catching our flight back to London.

## **BIRDS**

Great Northern Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
Red-throated Diver  
Black-necked Grebe  
Slavonian Grebe  
Little Grebe  
Great Crested Grebe  
Great Cormorant  
Pygmy Cormorant  
Great Egret  
Grey Heron  
Mute Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Greater White-fronted  
Goose  
Red-breasted Goose  
Shelduck  
Mallard  
Gadwall  
Wigeon  
Teal  
Pintail  
Shoveler  
Tufted Duck  
Pochard  
Goldeneye  
White-tailed Eagle  
Eastern Imperial Eagle  
Marsh-Harrier  
Hen Harrier  
Rough-legged Buzzard  
Long-legged Buzzard  
Common Buzzard  
Goshawk  
Sparrowhawk  
Kestrel  
Saker Falcon  
Pheasant  
Water Rail  
Coot  
Common Crane  
Great Bustard  
Lapwing  
Grey Plover  
Dunlin  
Spotted Redshank

Curlew  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Common Snipe  
Black-headed Gull  
Caspian Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Yellow-legged Gull  
Common Gull  
Kittiwake  
Little Gull  
Feral Pigeon  
Stock Dove  
Wood Pigeon  
Collared-Dove  
Long-eared Owl  
Little Owl  
Kingfisher  
Black Woodpecker  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Middle Spotted Woodpecker  
Syrian Woodpecker  
Green Woodpecker  
Grey-headed Woodpecker  
Crested Lark  
Meadow Pipit  
Wren  
Robin  
Black Redstart  
Mistle Thrush  
Fieldfare  
Redwing  
Blackbird  
Goldcrest  
Bearded Tit  
Long-tailed Tit  
Penduline Tit  
Blue Tit  
Coal Tit (h)  
Marsh Tit (h)  
Willow Tit  
Great Tit  
Nuthatch  
Common Treecreeper  
Short-toed Treecreeper  
Great Grey Shrike  
Jay  
Magpie

Raven  
Rook  
Hooded Crow  
Jackdaw  
Starling  
House Sparrow  
Tree-Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Brambling  
Bullfinch  
Goldfinch  
Greenfinch  
Siskin  
Linnet  
Hawfinch  
Common Crossbill  
Reed Bunting  
Yellowhammer

## **MAMMALS**

Roe Deer  
Brown Hare

## **AMPHIBIANS**

Fire-bellied Toad  
Green Toad  
Marsh Frog

## **BUTTERFLIES**

Red Admiral  
Peacock  
Hummingbird Hawkmoth

## **FLOWERS**

Cypress Spurge (*Euphorbia cyparissias*)  
Siberian Yarrow (*Achillea setacea*)  
Annual Gypsophila (*Gypsophila muralis*)  
*Plantago schwarzenbergiana*  
*Artemisia santonica*  
Siberian Statice (*Limonium gmelinii*)  
And the fungus *Clavariadelphus fistulosus* (Pipe Club)