

# Austria & Hungary: Birds, Nature & Culture in the Heart of Europe |

Trip Report | June 19 – 30, 2024 | by Gerard Gorman



**Participants: group leader and guide Gerard Gorman, with Fay, Susan, Sheryl, Yvonne, Steven, Lise, Janice, John, David, Lauren, Maryann, Lorna.**



Our latest Naturalist Journey's tour to Austria and Hungary was another great success. We explored these two neighboring, but very different countries that nestle in the heart of Europe, taking in lovely landscapes and rich historic and cultural sites. We visited some wonderful wildlife habitats: mountains, forests, grasslands, farmlands and wetlands, seeing both the resident and summer visiting birds and a selection of other flora and fauna.

There were many highlights. Raptors like Imperial and White-tailed Eagles and Saker Falcon, a dozen shorebirds, wildfowl including the endangered Ferruginous Duck, 9 species of woodpecker and many songbirds, some classic European LBJs! Popular and colorful highlights were the many European Rollers, European Bee-eaters and Eurasian Hoopoes. Non bird animals seen included Grass Snake, Slow Worm (a legless lizard), European Pond Turtle, Praying Mantis, many Brown Hares, Eurasian Red Squirrel, European Ground Squirrel, Western Roe Deer and Northern Alpine Chamois.

Our accommodations were in great locations, our hosts friendly and welcoming. We ate well, too, mostly authentic local dishes, and all personal diets were catered for, and some of us tried the fine local wines.

## Day to Day Highlights

### Day 1 / June 19 / Austria / Vienna / Hainfeld / Lilienfeld / Eschenau.

We met at Vienna airport at noon, introduced ourselves, and then went westwards towards the foothills of the Alps and our first base. Our driver Tibor negotiated the city traffic without any fuss; he was to become a great and popular member of our group! We were soon on country roads passing through tidy villages and by pastures and woodlands. Rural Austria is truly scenic and easy on the eye. We stopped at a rest-stop, ate a packed lunch, birding as we did so. Our first birds included many that are typical of central Europe: Common Wood-Pigeon, Carrion and Hooded Crows, Eurasian Tree Sparrows, Gray Heron, Common Buzzard and we heard several Eurasian Blackcaps and Common Chiffchaffs singing, as we would most days. We found a Marsh Tit (looking similar to a Black-capped Chickadee) at a roadside stop and saw our first White Stork, too: there'd be many more during the trip! We arrived at our family-run guesthouse in Eschenau at about 5pm. Common Swifts, Common House-Martins and Barn Swallows were flying over the village and Eurasian Jackdaws and Eurasian Kestrels on the local church tower. It was a pleasant evening, so we had dinner (good home cooking), outside on the terrace. As we did so Eurasian Blackbird, Black Redstart, Spotted Flycatcher, White Wagtail and Eurasian Goldfinch were in and around the garden. It had been a good start!

### Day 2 / June 20 / Austria / Eschenau / Mitterbach / Gemeindealpe / Mariazell / Hubertusee.

Several of us watched birds in the garden before breakfast. After breakfast we were joined by a friend of mine, a top local birder, Thomas. He would come with us to our main destination today, Gemeindealpe, a peak in the Ötscher-Tormäuer Nature Park. The ski-resort was not functioning at this time of year, but its chairlift was and that is how we would get up into true Alpine habitat at over 1600 metres. Up there there'd be some species we would not see lower down. It was a pleasant ride up and over the conifer forest, pastures and meadows. Almost as soon as we disembarked from the lift, we found Ring Ouzel and Water Pipit, two of our Alpine targets. We took a circular walk and saw Dunnocks and Coal, Willow and Crested Tits in the dwarf pines. Water Pipits were doing their singing aerial display over every open area. We took advantage of the excellent café and facilities, too. The views were panoramic, and the weather was kind. As the weather was pleasant, we ate a picnic on the mountain, and as we did so we picked up both Goldcrest and Common Firecrest (relatives of the kinglets of North America) and a Eurasian Hobby, a medium-sized falcon. A young Slow Worm (not a worm, not a snake, but a legless lizard) was found, too. We took the chairlift down, and some of us saw a Chamois (an Alpine goat species) dart across a clearing below. Back down the mountain we stopped in a wooded Dolomite valley to see another specialty hereabouts, Western Bonelli's Warbler. Near Mariazell we glimpsed a Common Rosefinch, which seemed to have a nest and so would not show itself well. At the scenic lake of Hubertusee, a highlight was pairs of Tufted Ducks. We also saw another great bird today, Black Stork, which is not as common and certainly not as confiding as White Storks are. Raptors included European Honey-buzzard, a raptor lifer for most of the group. We got back to our guesthouse in good time to freshen up before dinner and later ran through our checklist of sightings.

### Day 3 / June 21 / Austria / Eschenau / Wiedenfeld / Traisen / Ochsattal.

Today, we journeyed around the sub-Alpine area not far from our base. We visited various spots in the forests and along the River Traisen. We took several short walks, picking up some new species for the trip as we went, such as a group of Common Mergansers on the river, Great Spotted Woodpecker, a very obliging Gray-headed Woodpecker, a hugely impressive Black Woodpecker, a tiny Eurasian Wren, a cute Eurasian Blue Tit, a busy

Eurasian Nuthatch and Hawfinch. There were some Crag Martins, too, but truth be told they were high up swirling around a cave in a limestone crag. A pair of Red-backed Shrikes entertained us as we stopped for a “coffee-break” in a traditional wayside inn. We saw another Black Stork and also heard our first Common Cuckoo today. On the mammal front we had great views of a Eurasian Red Squirrel and once again butterflies were out, it being a fine sunny day. Back at our guesthouse another Eurasian Green Woodpecker was seen, and a pair of Spotted Flycatchers were found nesting in a barn. It had been another super day, and after a break we met for drinks (the Austrian white wine was popular), had dinner, ran through our list of sightings and discussed our plans for the next day when we would move on.

#### **Day 4 / June 22 / To Hungary / Pan-European Picnic Site / Fertőrákos / Lake Fertő / Mexikópuszta / Fertőd.**

After breakfast we checked out and headed eastwards, on our way to neighboring Hungary. We took a picturesque route, avoiding the highway. We left Austria and entered Hungary at Sopron: there were no border checks as both countries are members of the European Union. We then took a backroad to a very interesting cultural site, the memorial of the *Pan-European Picnic* (in German the *Paneuropäisches Picknick*, in Hungarian the *Páneurópai Piknik*) near the Hungarian village of Fertőrákos right in the Austrian Hungarian border. This marks the place and events of 19th August 1989. On that day, a peace demonstration took place here, the participants having a picnic right by the Iron Curtain. That picnic is said to have been a significant one in a series of events that ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. Everyone was fascinated by the location and the memorial and museum there. In the village of Fertőrákos we stopped to take photos of a pair of White Storks that stood on their big chimney-top nest. Many Common House-Martins were nesting under the eaves of the same building. We skirted the southern edge of Lake Neusiedl (as it is called in Austrian German) or Lake Fertő (as it is called in Hungarian) stopping to watch birds and take in the views: there were often vast reedbeds on one side, vineyards on the other. This shallow, salt-lake is one of Central Europe’s great bird areas and is part of a cross-border international National Park. In these new habitats, and new country, we started to see new birds: Graylag Geese, Mute Swan, Great Egret, Pygmy Cormorant and Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, European Turtle-Dove and Northern Lapwing, to name a few. We stopped at a famed birding site called Mexikópuszta, and from a birding tower watched Black-winged Stilts, Eurasian Curlews, Ruff, Wood Sandpipers, Black-headed Gulls and Whiskered Terns. We arrived at our second base, our first in Hungary, in Fertőd, famed for its 18th century Baroque-Rococo Esterhazy Palace. In the evening, we went for dinner in a nearby restaurant, right opposite the palace.

#### **Day 5 / June 23 / Hungary / Fertőd / Mexikópuszta / Esterhazy Palace Gardens.**

This morning, we returned to the excellent site of Mexikópuszta, and this shallow brackish wetland did not disappoint us. But on the way, we stopped when someone spotted a large raptor: Imperial Eagle, a real eastern European speciality. Then, soon after, we saw a huge White-tailed Eagle. We finally got to the lake and scanned from a roadside watch tower and later took a walk to another at the heart of the area. There was wildfowl everywhere; Graylag Geese, Common Shelducks, Garganeys, Northern Shovelers, and even a few of the rare Ferruginous Duck. We saw our first grebes, Little and Great Crested, Eurasian Coot, and many shorebirds including new ones for the trip such as Black-tailed Godwit, Spotted Redshank and Common Redshank. Black and Common Terns, Great Cormorant, Eurasian Spoonbill, Little Egret and Purple and Squacco Herons were all new, too. Somewhat smaller birds included Sedge and Great Reed Warblers, Western Yellow Wagtail, Penduline Tit and we had some glimpses of Eurasian Golden-Orioles, a brightly colored bird that is quite common but often surprisingly hard to see. As if all that was not enough, a superb male Red-footed Falcon appeared. The place was simply alive with species! We checked a patch of grazing land (known as *puszta* in Hungarian) by the wetland and spied a few European Ground Squirrels, a mammal which has declined drastically in much of Europe, but which holds on in Hungary. In the afternoon we visited the Esterhazy Palace. First, we all posed by a statue of

Joseph Haydn, who was court composer here in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Some chose to go inside and take in the history and culture, others preferred to walk the extensive gardens to look for birds and some did both.

In the wooden gardens Middle Spotted and Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Eurasian Linnet and were seen. After some rest and recuperation at our guesthouse, we went again to the nearby restaurant, which had proved popular as it served some fine authentic Hungarian dishes.

## **Day 6 / June 24 / Hungary / Fertőd / into Austria / Tadten / Andau Bridge / Illmitz/ Lange Lacke / Back to Hungary / Fertőd.**

This morning, we drove the short way back into Austria! Easy to do these days, as the time of the Iron Curtain has long gone. The first area we visited was a grassland reserve at Tadten. We drove on a loop road, getting out at various places to watch birds, including at the *Brücke von Andau* (Andau Bridge) over the Einser Canal. This is not only a good birding spot, but also a place with history. During the Hungarian uprising in 1956 around 70,000 people fled from the country into Austria here via a small, wooden bridge. In November of the same year the bridge was blown up by the Soviet Red Army. In 1996, on the 40th anniversary of the event, the bridge was rebuilt in a joint operation of the Austrian and Hungarian armies. We crossed the bridge into Hungary and then back into Austria taking in the history and the birds. A new bird here was Common Cuckoo, an iconic bird, larger than some expected, which we heard doing its “*cuck-oo, cuck-oo*” song and then saw. This area is excellent for raptors, and we saw another couple of Imperial Eagles (probably here owing to the many hares which are a favored prey), several Eurasian Marsh-Harriers and a fine male Montagu’s Harrier. Next up was another new trip bird, Marsh Warbler, a true “little brown job” but one which has a distinct song, and we got brief but decent views. We moved on, a few miles to check some small salt lakes. The best for birds was the Lange Lacke reserve where we once again saw some of the wetland birds that we’d now become familiar with, but also some additions like Yellow-legged Gills, Green-winged Teal, Red-crested Pochard, Common Pochard, Common Greenshank and Little Ringed Plover. We had lunch by the National Park centre in Illmitz, a small town with several pairs of nesting White Storks, and also looked at the impressive exhibition. Back in Fertőd, we had another fine dinner in our preferred restaurant and judging by the conversations the favorite bird today was probably, despite a lot of competition, the Eurasian Hoopoe. Over dessert (Hungarian desserts were proving very popular) we announced our plans for the next day when we would travel on, further into Hungary.

## **Day 7 / June 25 / Hungary / Fertőd / Szár / Csákvár / Kiskunság / Bugyi.**

After breakfast we checked out and headed further eastwards towards Budapest. We took a few minor roads and then the main M1 highway. After around an hour, we stopped in a pleasant village by the Vértes Hills. Our main target here was Syrian Woodpecker, a member of the picid family that prefers lightly wooded places rather than forests, and rural villages with gardens and orchards are often good places to look for it. Sure enough, we soon found one, and then another, a pair. There were Black Redstarts here, too, and another new species for the trip, Eurasian Jay. This was another species which surprised some of our group as it was bigger than they had expected. We then visited another friend of mine, who had told me that he had a pair of Wrynecks nesting in a nestbox in his garden. He kindly allowed us all in to try to see them, but despite waiting patiently it was not to be, maybe there were too many of us, although we did keep a discreet distance. While we were away, Tibor had prepared a picnic for us, so we ate right there in a pleasant spot. Next up was a nearby wetland area set in farmland, where there was a good selection of shorebirds, waders and wildfowl, but the highlight was probably our first European Roller, a beauty which is always popular. Moving on, we skirted the south of Budapest on the ring-road, crossing the two branches of the Danube via a bridge, and entering the Kiskunság region, a lowland plain that lies east of the river. Before reaching our next hotel, we checked a few sites nearby and had very close



views of Mediterranean Gulls: our bird list was continuing to grow. There was several Roe Deer in the crop fields, too. We checked into our hotel, set in woodland just outside a village, and ate in its restaurant at 7pm.

## **Day 8 / June 26 / Hungary / Kiskunság NP / Apaj Puszta /Bugyi.**

Today we explored the Kiskunság, both the protected National Park grasslands, the *puszta*, and its farmlands. The habitats were in stark contrast to the mountains and forests of Austria where we had been just a few days earlier. One of our main target birds was Great Bustard, Hungary's national bird in fact, and after scanning a few fields, we found four big males. This magnificent species is also one of the planet's heaviest flying birds. Other typical and special birds in the Kiskunság are Caspian Gull and Lesser Gray Shrike, and we saw both of these, too. Other new trip birds in the fields were Crested Lark, Whinchat, European Stonechat and Northern Wheatear. We also found that many species, for example, Northern Lapwings, European Turtle-Doves, Eurasian Hoopoes, European Bee-eaters, European Rollers, Western Yellow Wagtails, Eurasian Skylarks and Corn Buntings, were much more common here than they had been in the west of the country – yes, on the bird front it may not be the case that “the west is the best”. It was good to see some Gray Partridges, too, a species that is declining across much of Europe. The “dry” habitats had been exceptionally productive, so for a change of scene we moved a short way to some wetland areas. There we watched a host of birds including Pied Avocets, Marsh Sandpiper, Common Kingfisher, Savi's Warbler and Bank Swallow. A new trip reptile was, European Pond Turtle, several of which were basking on vegetation in the water. A Wryneck perched in a dead tree was a great find, especially as we had missed it earlier on our trip. Elated, we headed back in good time, had our evening meal and did out daily checklist. But our birding was not done for the day. After dinner we waited in a clearing by our hotel and soon what we were hoping for - the churring song of a Eurasian Nightjar. Then another one called from the woods and as darkness fell, they came out and we were treated to their flapping and clapping flight display. The conditions had been perfect, a still warm evening, and so it was a tremendous end to what had already been a successful day.

## **Day 9 / June 27 / Hungary / Bugyi Gravel Pits / Kiskunság NP / Apaj Fishponds / Bugyi.**

Another full day in the Kiskunság. We first headed for some nearby gravel pits, then later to a system of fishponds. Central and Eastern Europe are dotted with fish farms, where freshwater species like carp are reared for the Christmas and Easter tables. These places are usually old and surrounded by reeds and bushes and in a semi-natural state, so good for wildlife, particularly birds. We found more ducks, including handsome drake Red-crested Pochards and Ferruginous Ducks, Great Crested Grebes, a nesting colony of Black-headed Gulls, Whiskered and Common Terns, Pygmy Cormorants, Purple Herons, Eurasian Penduline-Tit, and others. Three new wetland birds for our trip, and great finds, were Common Reed Warbler, Little Bittern and Black-crowned Night Heron. Later in the day, back in the grasslands, we came upon another four Great Bustards and another Imperial Eagle. As usual, there were many Roe Deer and Brown Hares about, too. We were having a good time, everyone spotting things, even Tibor (although truth be told, he is no beginner having many years of experience driving birdwatchers around). After checking every farmstead and barn that we passed, we finally saw a Little Owl, too! A key bird, one that is a real specialty of the Hungarian plains (it even appears on the 50 Forint coin) is the Saker Falcon, the second biggest falcon on the planet. It took a little time, but eventually we also ticked that one off. It had warmed up today, so we headed back to our hotel a little earlier. After dinner, some of us went out again to watch the Eurasian Nightjars, and they performed well once more, three of them this time.

## Day 10 / June 28 / Hungary / Bugyi / Ócsa / Lake Tisza / Tard / Noszvaj.

After a 7am breakfast we checked out and headed eastwards again, towards the Bükk Hills. First, we stopped at Ócsa and walked a roadside woodland seeing a family party of Long-tailed Tits. We then took the highways for over an hour but when stopping for gas and a “coffee-break” Crested Larks showed well – these birds are often at such places. Scanning the vast Lake Tisza, we saw many wildfowl and waterfowl, gulls, terns and waders, nothing new this time, but still good sightings. There were also several noisy Great Reed Warblers in the reedbeds here. Several villages on our route had dozens of pairs of nesting White Storks and there always seemed to be a Eurasian Kestrel hovering at the roadside. Near the village of Tard (surely one of the shortest and easiest Hungarian names to spell), we watched a colorful colony of European Bee-eaters (we’d seen many on our journey but never enough), another Eurasian Hoopoe, a Red-backed Shrike, a Serin, and a singing European Turtle-Dove, the latter another species that in parts of western Europe is in trouble owing to hunting and loss of habitat. Our second Little Owl was found, too, watching us from a ruined farm building. As we checked into our final hotel in Noszvaj, a Eurasian Nuthatch and a Short-toed Treecreeper were in trees by the parking place. Everyone enjoyed some free time at our delightful family-run place, some taking a dip in the pool and others sampling the local wines.

## Day 11 / June 29 / Hungary / Noszvaj / Bükk Hills.

We spent all day exploring the forest and adjacent habitats of the Bükk hills, much of which is a National Park. A major highlight was a Tawny Owl in woodland at the edge of our village. Moving on, we drove a short way and then hiked into the forest proper, taking a flat trail. Deciduous trees dominated, oak, ash, beech and hornbeam. It was to be a big woodpecker day! Indeed, Eurasian Green, Middle Spotted, Great Spotted and White-backed Woodpeckers were all seen well, the latter a major achievement as it is by far the rarest of the family here and across much of Europe. Other sightings today were Red-backed Shrike, Eurasian Jay, Marsh Tit, Common Chiffchaff (we had heard many but not always got good views), Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper, Eurasian Wren, Hawfinch, and there were lots of butterflies on the wing. During our last dinner (some had the *Hungarian Cold Fruit Soup* again) I asked everyone to write down three things: their favorite bird of the trip, their favorite other wildlife species and another general favorite thing, event or place. I asked that everyone let me know at breakfast but the morning, but all were so eager that I got all the responses before the dessert arrived. Here are the “results”. Fay (Eurasian Hoopoe, Roe Deer, and the chair-lift ride in the Alps to see Ring Ouzel and Dunnocks etc.): Susan (Wryneck, Brown Hare, and sketching at the Esterházy Palace): David (the displaying Water Pipits, the Chamois, the overall camaraderie and fellowship of the group): Lauren (the many colorful European Bee-eaters, the Brown Hares, and saving and releasing a Praying Mantis that somehow got on our bus): Maryann (the European Bee-eaters and seeing the villages and towns in both counties): Lorna (Eurasian Hoopoe, Orchids and wildflowers in general, Cherry Beer): Steve (White-backed Woodpecker, Muskrat, and “the very thoughtful celebration” on his birthday in our guesthouse in Austria with a home-made Sacher torte by our hostess who shares his birthday - wonderful!): Lise (the European Nightjars, “other wildlife” fellow travelers!, and our quaint Gasthaus in Austria: John (Black Stork, Slow Worm and, originally and touchingly, his favorite “other thing” was our always helpful and kind driver Tibor): Jan (the many European Bee-eaters, Marsh Frog, and the “puns” (I’m not sure who or what she is referring to?): Sherry (Ruff, Grass Snake, Cherry Beer): Yvonne (European Robin, Marsh Frog and a meal of Pork and Bacon in Forest Mushroom Sauce with Rice! – an original and great choice!). That is a great diversity of things, which reflects so much of what we saw and experienced.

## Day 12 / June 30 / Hungary / Noszvaj / Bükk Hills to Budapest.

Our journey to the Heart of Europe was nearly over. Before breakfast a few of us did some birding around our

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hotel. After another fine buffet breakfast, we checked out and said farewell to our friendly hotel folks and drove to Budapest. It was an easy, relaxed journey of two hours mainly via the M3 highway. Everyone was taken to their drop-off points, our trusty driver Tibor doing a grand job as he had done throughout our trip. Most had chosen to extend their stay for a few days in Budapest, a culturally rich city. Many thanks to everyone who was involved in this Naturalist Journey's tour around Austria and Hungary, in the Heart of Europe.

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