

# Austria & Hungary: Trip Report

June 21 – July 2, 2017 | Written by guide Gerard Gorman



## With Guide Gerard Gorman and Participants: Jane, Susan, and Cynthia and David

This was the first Naturalist Journeys tour to combine Austria and Hungary, and it was a great success. We visited and birded some wonderfully diverse habitats and landscapes in 12 days — the forested foothills of the Alps in Lower Austria, the higher Alpine peak of Hochkar, the reed beds around Lake Neusiedler, the grasslands and wetlands of the Seewinkel in Austria and the Hanság in Hungary, the lowland steppes and farmlands of the Kiskunság east of the Danube, and finally the pleasant rolling limestone hills of the Bükk in north-east Hungary. In this way, we encountered diverse and distinct habitats and therefore birds, other wildlife, and flora, everywhere we went. We also stayed in a variety of different family-run guesthouses and lodges and sampled only local cuisine. As we went, we also found time to take in some of the rich history and culture of these two countries.

## Wed., June 21, 2017

We met up at Vienna International Airport at noon and were quickly on our way eastwards into Lower Austria. It was a pleasant sunny day and the traffic around the city was a little heavy, but we were soon away from the ring-road and in rural Austria. Roadside birds included both Carrion and Hooded Crows, several Eurasian Kestrels, and Barn Swallows zoomed overhead. Near Hainfeld we drove up a farm road, stopped for a picnic, and did our first real birding. The first species we came upon included White-throated Dipper, Gray Wagtail, Eurasian Wren, Eurasian Robin, Common Chiffchaff, and Eurasian Blackcap (by the end of the tour everyone was familiar with their song). Two male Yellowhammers gave us great, close views by a farmstead, and one sang his “little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese” song. Later, we watched two Honey Buzzards soaring above a forested ridge. We stopped for coffee in a village inn, to find the owners having a birthday party. They immediately made us feel at home, offering us some of the cake — they were the first of many friendly folks we were to meet on our travels. We then checked-in to our first accommodation, a family-run *gasthaus*. Someone remarked upon arrival that the building was “So Austrian, just what I imaged!”. There were also plenty of birds around our guesthouse. A Middle Spotted Woodpecker played hard to get, but we finally got views. We compared the House and Eurasian Tree Sparrows, and Eurasian Jackdaws

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and Common Swifts flew around the church tower. Eurasian Nuthatch, Black Redstart, Song Thrush, and White Wagtail were in the garden. It was so pleasant, we ate outside (the first of many authentic and hearty meals on our tour!) and some sampled the local wine. It had been a great first day with new birds for all.



## Thurs., June 22, 2017

Today we explored the so-called “pre-Alps,” the hills and forests at relatively low, for Austria, elevations. It was warm and sunny as we set off following the scenic Traisen River Valley to Lilienfeld, a town with an abbey dating from 1202. We explored the woods and meadows above the town seeing a range of woodland songbirds. On the way down, a Black Stork flew up from a roadside fishpond. Near Hohenberg we walked in a pleasant valley, flanked by high limestone crags, seeing Coal, Willow, and Great Tits, Goldcrest, two singing Western Bonelli’s Warblers, and Common Ravens. A

Common Buzzard soared together with a European Honey Buzzard, allowing us to compare them. Next up was a short walk along a forested ridge where one of the highlights of the whole tour awaited us — a young Boreal Owl peering at us from the entrance of a Black Woodpecker cavity! After this mega moment, we headed off to the Hubertussee, a picturesque Alpine lake. There we watched pairs of Tufted Ducks and feisty Eurasian Coots, a Spotted Flycatcher, and two Greenfinches building a nest, but all agreed that the star bird here was a stunning male Common Rosefinch which greeted us with its “pleased-to-meet-you” song. During a downpour here, we drank coffee in a lovely traditional inn, and some tried the home-made strudel. We also saw some Roe Deer today, our first wild mammal of the tour.

## Fri., June 23, 2017

Today we went up to the high peak of Hochkar, to around 1600m above sea-level, taking a convenient road. We were joined by local birder Thomas, who was to prove a great asset. Our goals here were Alpine birds that dwell at or above the tree-line. Once at the top, it did not take long to locate the birds, and we had hardly walked anywhere! A singing Water Pipit doing its flight display was the first to get our attention. Then we watched two Citril Finches, a classic high-elevation species in Europe, getting real close views of a fine male. Other birds here were Rock Dove, Ring Ouzel, Eurasian Siskin, and a flock of Yellow-billed Chough. We also saw Alpine Chamois, a mountain goat, grazing on a grassy ridge above an impressive cliff. Indeed, the views from the peak were panoramic and the Alpine floral impressed us all, too. Later, on the way down the mountain, we stopped in an old spruce forest, seeing Crested and Coal Tits, Goldcrest, and Eurasian Treecreeper. Our journey back to our guesthouse took us through the stunningly scenic landscapes of the Ötztal-Tormauer Nature Park, with its crags, forests, meadows, and rivers. But several rainstorms limited our birding, though we did get flying views of a Black Woodpecker and heard a Gray-headed. Back at our friendly guesthouse, we were served another fine and generous dinner.

## Sat., June 24, 2017

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Today we moved on, eastwards towards the lowlands. We soon began to see White Storks, which would become more numerous as we went. We stopped at some ponds near Eisenstadt where Great Crested Grebes were displaying and we heard our first Common Cuckoo of the trip. We crossed into Hungary, with the border now open and unattended, went around the city of Sopron, and took a rural road by Lake Fertő (known as Lake Neusiedl in Austria), the biggest saline lake in Central Europe and a cross-frontier national park. In a village, we took photos of a huge White Stork nest on a chimney on a rather run-down mansion, with Common Swifts and House Martins flying around us. Moving on, Red-backed Shrikes were perched on posts in vineyards and the odd Golden Oriole flashed by. We stopped in the grounds of the Eszterházy Palace in Fertőd and soon found a Syrian Woodpecker and then a Great Spotted; it was good to compare these similar looking relatives. A European Serin had been singing all the while here, and we finally tracked it down. We watched a European Red Squirrel hopping from tree to tree here, too. We then checked into our small, nearby guesthouse after another fruitful day.

## Sun., June 25, 2017

On a pre-breakfast walk we had great views of a Eurasian Green Woodpecker, which even perched on a concrete utility-pole. Later, we spent most of the morning at a fantastic wetland right on the Austrian-Hungarian border. We saw many shorebirds, including Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Northern Lapwings, Spotted Redshanks, Wood Sandpiper, Common Redshank, and a few Ruff in breeding plumage. Ducks also featured prominently, with Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, Garganey, Green-winged Teal, and Common Shelduck all adding to our growing list. Greylag Geese and their goslings were everywhere, even on the road, and Eurasian Spoonbills fed on the lake. As we watched these birds, first a Purple Heron, then a Black-crowned Night Heron, flew over us. It was almost raining birds. As it was now warming up, we stopped for homemade lemonades in a bar in a small village, the last one before the border. Until 1989 this place had been out-of-bounds to tourists — how times have changed. After a tremendous morning, the group took an hour-long guided tour of the Eszterházy Palace in nearby Fertőd. This grand Baroque-Rococo building was built between 1763 and 1766 and was, for a time, the home of the composer Joseph Haydn. After lunch in a nearby café, with White Storks watching us from their nest on an old building, we headed to the wooded swamp of the Osli Reserve. As soon as we arrived, we saw a Great Spotted Woodpecker on the ground below a feeder, then another one, and then a Middle Spotted Woodpecker appeared, too. As we watched a nearby canal, an Otter suddenly appeared, much to the abhorrence of a family of Mute Swans which hissed and flapped at it. Then quite an incredible rain storm arrived, so we abandoned our walk and headed back to base. This unusual and unexpected storm did, however, seem to suit the big Roman Snails which, liking the dampness, came out into the open.

## Mon., June 26, 2017

Before breakfast we walked at the end of the village, which was very birdy. Highlights were Golden Orioles and a Black Woodpecker, which flew over the soccer field! After breakfast, we drove back into Austria (easy to do in this joint national park) to visit some farmlands and pastures. Brown Hares were everywhere and Sedge Warblers and Red-backed Shrikes were numerous. We stopped at Andau Bridge over the Hanság Canal, a place with some history. In 1956, many Hungarians crossed this bridge, now rebuilt, during an uprising, before it was blown up and the “Iron Curtain” effectively closed. There were information boards on those events and a remnant of the border fence. On the birding front, we got great views of a Eurasian Wryneck, which actually flew from Hungary into Austria, as well as a Common Cuckoo. Two species of aquatic dragonfly, Beautiful and Banded Demoiselles, fluttered over the water. As we left the area, a beautiful male Montagu’s Harrier flew back and forth before us and we got more views of Turtle Doves. We then visited the impressive

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National Park centre in the quaint village of Illmitz, taking our picnic in the shade here and, as it was a hot day, bought ice-creams, too.

Moving on a short way, we scanned the shallow lake edge from a well-placed blind, and got great looks at Red-crested Pochard, Pygmy Cormorant, Little Ringed Plover, Common Terns, Yellow-legged



and Black-headed Gulls. We also saw our first European Bee-eaters today, but we were to see many more later. Back in Hungary, we visited a spot for Imperial Eagles and before long were treated to four, including one that flew above us. It was a truly great end to the day!

## Tues., June 27, 2017

Our now regular pre-breakfast walk was always worthwhile. This morning we finally got views of a Common Nightingale; this famous skulker decided to show itself after several days of singing from thick cover. After breakfast, we moved on again, deeper into Hungary in the direction of Budapest. The landscapes were getting flatter, and south of the capital we crossed the River Danube and onto the Kiskunság plain. We soon started to see more European Stonechats and our first Lesser Grey Shrikes and European Rollers. European Bee-eaters become more frequent at roadsides, often perching low on fence posts. Eurasian Marsh Harriers were common. Finally, after searching several likely looking spots, we came across some Great Bustards. These magnificent birds, rare across so much of Europe, are said to be the world's heaviest fly birds, and they seemed to be, as we watched some males take off and power away before joining another group. We counted 14 in total. Our next guesthouse was a working ranch, with some fine horses, and lots of Common House-Martins nesting under the eaves of the stables.

## Wed., June 28, 2017

Before breakfast we saw a Hoopoe and several European Souseliks, a species of ground squirrel, scurrying in the short grass. Then we set off to explore the northern part of the Kiskunság, much of which is protected as a National Park, mainly for its steppe habitat called "puszta." We also came upon some European Pond Terrapins basking on vegetation by a canal as a Great Reed Warbler sang its raucous song in the reeds. Near the settlement of Apaj we visited a colony of Rooks, but mainly to see Red-footed Falcons. These small gregarious falcons use the nests of Rooks, as like all falcons, they do not make their own nests. We got great views of both males and females, perched and in flight. Further on, we watched another falcon species, but a much larger one, Saker. We enjoyed two birds, first perched and then flying. When one was joined by a Eurasian Kestrel we noted the size difference. At the end of the day, we visited a colony of European Bee-eaters, many of these colourful beauties were sitting low and entering their burrows in the sandy ground and we got some good photos. As we headed back for dinner, a Tawny Pipit perched up before us on a fence-post.

## Thurs., June 29, 2017

After the north, today we explored the south part of the Kiskunság. It rained quite heavily at times this morning, but we still enjoyed ourselves, drinking coffee and watching the birds from a restaurant veranda. And, of course, it eventually cleared. The fishing lakes had Black Terns and Bank Swallows catching flies over the water. We got good looks of Eurasian Reed Warblers that came out

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from cover, and saw more Great Reed Warblers. But the real highlight was a male Little Bittern that, after a few glimpses, flew over us and perched up in the reeds in full view. Moving on, a roadside salt-lake had many of the shorebirds and wildfowl we had already seen, but also a Common Greenshank, a new bird for the tour. Our last stop today was quite near the ranch, in pleasant farmland where Rollers and Bee-eaters sat on wires. As we watched them, a huge bird of prey suddenly appeared flying towards us. It was an adult White-tailed Eagle, and we got a prolonged view. After dinner, we searched for Little Owl around the range, with no luck, but surprisingly we did see a single Great Bustard fly by.

## **Fri., June 30, 2017**

Before breakfast we finally caught up with the Little Owl, perched on a small farm building. He had been hiding for days, but obviously came out this morning to say good-bye to us as we were leaving. And then another great bird, a Short-toed Snake Eagle, suddenly appeared, too. After checking out, we headed north-eastwards to the Bükk Hills, but we took our time and birded as we went, coming upon more European Bee-eaters and European Rollers. We bought lunch from a bakery (this was popular, so we did this on several days). At a highway rest-stop, we had Crested Larks almost at our feet, and later saw Eurasian Skylarks soaring high and singing.

Just before the hills we checked out a wetland, and saw a new bird for the tour, Great Cormorant, amongst others. Just as we were about to leave, a Black Stork came in and flew right by us, then did a circle and came back, giving wonderful views. We then checked-in to our exceptional family-run guesthouse at the end of a pleasant village. Our dinner was superb, and we also sampled the local wines as we were indeed in a famous wine-growing region.



## **Sat., July 1, 2017**

This morning we took a walk down the very pleasant limestone, wooded, Hór Valley, part of the Bükk National Park. After all the fine food and drink we had been served, we agreed we needed some exercise! Not far in we got a new bird, a Rock Bunting, and later a Yellowhammer bathing in a puddle. Other birds today included Great Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, Red-backed Shrike, Eurasian Jay, Coal, Marsh, and Eurasian Blue Tits, Eurasian Nuthatch,

Song Thrush, European Turtle Dove, and Eurasian Sparrowhawk. Besides birds, Nine-spotted Moths and Rose Chafers, two attractive insects, were easy to take pictures of, and two of Europe's largest butterflies, Scarce Swallowtail and Silver-washed Fritillary, also posed nicely. There were also plenty of Roman Snails on the move. We ended the day with more wine tasting and another delicious meal in lovely surroundings. After dinner, we went through our trip sightings and discussed everyone's favourite moments and highlights.

## **Sun., July 2, 2017**

Before breakfast we birded the village edge, seeing Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Spotted Flycatcher, Hawfinch and Short-toed Treecreeper, a new bird for the trip. After another excellent

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breakfast (the choice was fantastic, and much of it local with homemade produce), we set off towards Budapest, arriving around noon. The “Red Bull” air-show was taking place over the Danube and the embankment road was closed, so getting everyone to their hotels proved a challenge, but we managed it!

I would like to thank Jane, Susan, Cynthia, and David for being good company and an enthusiastic group.

Trip Report by Gerard Gorman, Budapest, Hungary, July 2017.

