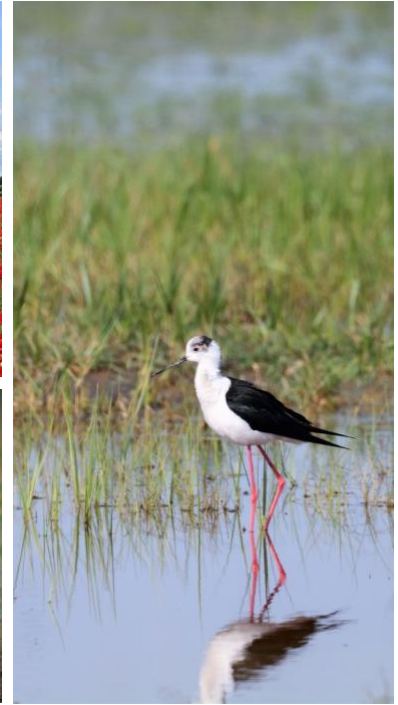


Austria & Hungary | June 19 – 30, 2023

Trip Report | by Gerard Gorman



With guide Gerard Gorman, and participants Alex, Brian, Jim, Mary, Sherry and Tom



This Naturalist Journey's trip to Austria and Hungary was a resounding success. We travelled through two hospitable countries and visited many remarkable places within them - beautiful landscapes and historic and cultural sites. We explored significant wildlife habitats in both countries: mountains, forests, grasslands, farmlands and wetlands. The resident and summer visiting birds and other wildlife absorbed us every day.

There were lots of highlights. On the bird front, we recorded 12 species of raptor, 11 shorebirds, 10 wildfowl species, 9 finches, 8 woodpeckers, and 8 chats and flycatchers. Specialties of the region seen included Great Bustards (the world's heaviest flying birds), a powerful Saker, handsome Red-footed Falcons, majestic Imperial Eagles, endangered Ferruginous Ducks, delightful Lesser Gray Shrikes and eye-catching Bearded Reedlings. Splashes of color were provided by European Rollers and European Bee-eaters. The striking Eurasian Hoopoes, with their flamboyant crests, that we watched on several days proved very popular indeed. Mammals we found included many Brown Hares (the large size of which surprised many), European Ground Squirrels (an endangered species) and a Northern Chamois that lay down to rest at the snow line in the Alps.

Our accommodations were well chosen, all in perfect locations for our itinerary, and each with wildlife nearby. We also ate very well (no one lost weight on this tour!) often being served authentic local dishes. We sampled some fine regional wines, too. Many thanks to everyone for making this journey so enjoyable.



Mon., Jun. 19

Austria | Vienna | Alpine Foothills | Hainfeld | Eschenau

We had all arrived in Austria at different times, some flying in a few days early to take in the historic city of Vienna. We all met as agreed at the airport at noon and then headed off westwards towards our first base in the foothills of the Alps. It was a surprisingly warm and sunny day. We headed westwards on the ring-road highway and then turned off to take a more rural route. After around an hour, we pulled onto a track in a shady conifer woodland for a light picnic lunch. Common birds typical of this corner of Europe, like Eurasian Blackcap, Common Chiffchaff and Common Chaffinch, were singing and a Eurasian Siskin was briefly seen. We drove through pleasant countryside seeing farm and village birds like Common Wood-Pigeon, Carrion and Hooded Crows, White Wagtail, European Goldfinch and Eurasian Tree Sparrows. The occasional Gray Heron and Common Buzzard stood in mown fields, waiting for a vole or mouse to move and become lunch. We arrived in the quiet village of Eschenau at around 5pm and checked into our quaint, family run accommodation. Someone remarked that it was "Just how I expected a rural Austrian Gasthaus to be!" Common Swifts, Common House-Martins and Barn Swallows were flying rapidly overhead and Eurasian Jackdaws and Eurasian Kestrels hanging around the church tower. As it was a glorious, warm evening we had dinner outside on the terrace. A Black Redstart called from a nearby rooftop as we dined, a Spotted Flycatcher hawked for insects from a perch, and a White Wagtail foraged on the lawn.

Tues., Jun. 20

Austria | Eschenau | River Traisen | Lilienfeld Lehenrotte Forest | Ochsattel Ridge | Wiesenfeld

When several of us went out before breakfast it was already warm and sunny, but we saw many typical "village" birds. After breakfast we were joined by Thomas, a local birder and friend of mine. Thomas had got permission to take us up a private road and, importantly, he had the key to the locked barrier, which saved us a steep walk up to an old forest near the hamlet of Lehenrotte. There were super views of the valley below from the ridge at the top. The highlight here was a Black Woodpecker which we heard calling and drumming and then saw flying and perched. We got the full show of Europe's biggest picid, a close relative of North America's Pileated. A Stock Dove cooed and both common and European Honey Buzzards and Common Ravens soared over the valley. As we were about to leave, we heard a commotion in the canopy, we figured an owl was being mobbed by Eurasian Jays and smaller birds. Sure enough, there was a Tawny Owl, which we glimpsed as it silently glided into deeper cover. Back in the valley below near Hohenberg we scanned a high rock wall where two Eurasian Crag Martins were circling – they were rather unexpected as they are rare breeders here. We got better, much closer, views of a tiny Goldcrest, and a very smart Crested Tit in the conifer tress. Thomas left us before noon as he had to go to work in the afternoon. In the middle of the day, it was quite hot, nice clear weather but usually high temperatures for this region.



We dealt with this by stopping occasionally for cold drinks and today by eating our picnic lunch in the shade by a small, picturesque waterfall. There was a Gray Wagtail here, a bird which we'd see by waterways on numerous occasions in the coming days. In the afternoon we walked an easy loop trail on a wooded ridge called Ochsattal. We got our only decent view of a Common Chiffchaff here – but we would hear this “little green job” almost every day. We had good views of a Grey-headed Woodpecker on a snag and found three more Black Woodpeckers. Wonderful, you can never get enough woodpeckers!

Our drive back followed some attractive, woodland lined, stream and river valleys. We stopped at a bridge near the village of Wiesenfeld where Gray Herons flew over and we finally saw, after several attempts, a White-throated Dipper. Back at Eschenau, we were greeted by the resident Eurasian Blackbirds, Black Redstarts and White Wagtails in the garden as we parked up. A pair of Hawfinches landed by the feeders but were “missed” by those who had already gone to their rooms. No worries, as we would catch up with more of these big finches later in the trip.

Wed., Jun. 21 Austria | Eschenau | Hochkar Mountain | Eschenau

Today, we drove further into the Alps to get up a higher mountain where we'd find some different birds. Thomas had got a full day off work so joined us on our trip and once again proved to be a great help. We stopped for fuel and to stock up on drinks and at the same time saw a Honey Buzzard over a wooded ridge. Soon after, as we paused at a traffic light, a Black Stork flew low over us. When we arrived at the foot of the Hochkar mountain, we were greeted by a barrier and construction workers and their machinery – the road had just been closed for maintenance! What to do? Thomas spoke to the chief engineer and remarkably managed to persuade him to let us up the road. Apparently, he had explained and pleaded that he was with birdwatchers who had come all the way from the USA to visit this place. We were not quite sure what Thomas said, but without him it is doubtful that we would have been able to drive up the mountain road to the ski resort at the top of Hochkar, our ultimate destination. When we got out at the ski resort, which was of course without snow at this time, we immediately heard a Water Pipit singing. It did not take long for us to see one doing its parachuting flight display - later we would watch several others. Several Alpine Newts were in a water tank, and we lifted one out to get a better look before carefully putting it back. Next, we watched a singing Dunnock and then a Common Firecrest, a tiny, beautiful bird. We also saw a pair of Coal Tits, which several times flew to a bush with food -obviously they were feeding nestlings there.



We ate a picnic lunch and then walked up to a higher viewpoint. The weather and panorama were both perfect. The surrounding craggy peaks were magnificent and there were still some patches of snow on the highest slopes. It was here that we added another mammal to our list, a Northern Chamois (also known as Alpine Chamois). One of these mountain-living, iconic, goat-antelopes trotted into view across the valley before lying down and resting by a rocky outcrop. In the mid-afternoon, we drove back down the mountain. Our route back to our base in Eschenau was very scenic, the road following valleys with rushing rivers flanked by spruce and pine forests. Alpine Austria is truly beautiful. Thomas joined us for dinner, during which a Eurasian Green Woodpecker flew in, calling loudly, and then landed on a small tree nearby. It was soon followed by another. Some dropped their cutlery and grabbed their binoculars!

**Thurs., Jun. 22 Eschenau | Kleinzell | Pottendorf | Hungary | Sopron
Pan-European Picnic Site | Fertőrákos | Lake Fertő
| Fertőd**

We departed after breakfast, driving generally eastwards as today we would cross into neighboring Hungary. We took a picturesque mountain road, stopping above the village of Kleinzell by a small religious shrine. We would have our last chance of Western Bonelli's Warblers here in the Dolomite dominated woodlands they frequent. After a wait, when a superb Black Stork soared by us, we finally saw three of these "little green jobs". Back in the valley, we took a break for coffee and restrooms and then pushed on. The landscape began to change as we reached the lowlands. Instead of cliffs and forests, we now drove by fields of wheat and sunflowers and there were acacias rather than conifers. Our next major stop was at Pottendorf a town close to the Hungarian border. Here we walked in the park of a famous, but rather dilapidated schloss (often called a "castle" but "chateau" would perhaps be a better description). Together with its chapel and park, this schloss dates from the early 1100s and although now mostly a ruin, it is a listed historical building. There were Black Redstarts, Eurasian Jackdaws and feral Rock Pigeons on the ruins, Barn Swallows, Common House-Martins and Common Swifts overhead, a couple of Eurasian Kestrels and Eurasian Coots on the pond - which was an old moat. This was easy birding in a cultural and historical setting.

We crossed the Austria-Hungary border at Sopron (no checks here as both countries are members of the European Union) and then took a minor backroad. It was time for our picnic lunch, and we took this at an intriguing spot, the



memorial site of the Pan-European Picnic (in German the Paneuropäisches Picknick, in Hungarian the Páneurópai

Piknik). On 19 August 1989, a peace demonstration with a picnic took place here, near the Hungarian village of Fertőrákos right by the Austrian-Hungarian border. That picnic is regarded as having been a significant one in a series of events that ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. In Fertőrákos itself, we took pictures of a pair of White Storks on a huge rooftop stick nest and of dozens of Common House-Martins nesting under the eaves. We then birded the edges of Lake Neusiedl (as it is known in Austria) or Lake Fertő (as it is called in Hungary). This large, shallow, saline wetland is one of Central Europe's great bird areas and much of it, together with adjacent habitats, forms a cross-border internationally protected National Park. We were soon watching the first of what would be many Eurasian Marsh-Harriers and Great Egrets. We saw Bearded Reedlings, Marsh and Common Reed Warblers and a Common Cuckoo, too. Skirting the lake we spotted our first Red-backed Shrikes of the trip. In the evening we went for dinner in a nearby restaurant, which was in a marvelous location, right by the impressive Esterhazy Palace. This grand Baroque-Rococo building, often referred to as the Hungarian Versailles, dates from the late 18th century. After a thrilling day, we ran through our checklist which now included both bird and culture sights in two countries.

Fri., Jun. 23 Hungary & Austria | Fertőd | Seewinkel | Illmitz | Esterhazy Palace Gardens | Fertőd

After breakfast we popped over the border back into Austria (a straightforward thing to do as the border crossing is small and hardly staffed) where we were joined by another local birder and friend of mine Rudi – a real character. There are many shallow salt-lakes in the Seewinkel area, as the plain between Lake Neusiedl and the Austrian border with Hungary is named. Conditions often change at each wetland, some dry out, others fill up after rain, but Rudi had kindly checked them out in recent weeks and was thus able to take us to the ones where birds were currently congregating. We visited several places around the pleasant town of Illmitz seeing shorebirds such as Pied Avocets, Black-winged Stilts, Black-tailed Godwits and Little Ringed Plovers. Four Ruff in breeding plumage – one with a white head, others rufous and black – were a good find. These iconic and fascinating birds breed way to the north in the Arctic, spending a short spring there, and it's likely that these four were already on their way south again. Northern Lapwings were quite common here as indeed they'd also be on subsequent days the lowland grasslands and farmlands in Hungary. We also came upon our first Eurasian Magpies, striking and clever, but often underrated and undervalued birds. There were also Common Shelducks with "cute" ducklings, stunning drake Red-crested Pochards and a handsome Garganey was spotted, too. A pleasant surprise was two Gray Partridges that flushed from a grassy shoreline into an adjacent vineyard – these birds are now uncommon hereabouts. There



were Graylag Geese with well-grown young, almost everywhere. We also had great views of Pygmy Cormorants, some flying right above us, and Eurasian Spoonbill. The large gulls we saw today around the lake, both in Austria and Hungary, were Yellow-legged Gulls.

We had lunch by the National Park center and then returned to Hungary and Fertőd for a break and to allow time for some to take a guided tour of the Esterházy Palace. In the evening, we went to the same local restaurant for dinner as yesterday, but this time we set off a little earlier and walked through the gardens of the Esterházy Palace to see a few birds beforehand. We saw a family of Great Spotted Woodpeckers and then had a surprise sighting of a Short-toed Snake Eagle circling over the town. Some of us posed for pictures alongside a statue of the Austrian composer Franz Joseph Haydn. Haydn was the court musician for 30 years here under the patronage of Prince Nikolaus. Just before we reached the restaurant, we had exceptional views of a Eurasian Hoopoe feeding on the ground, probing through the grass and soil with its curved bill – yet another avian highlight and one we caught on camera and video.

Sat., Jun. 24 Hungary & Austria Fertőd | Mexikópuszta | Fertőújlak | Tadten | Andau Bridge | Mexikópuszta | Fertőd

This morning we went to Mexikópuszta, a curious name for an area of brackish wetland and meadows on the Hungarian side of the lake. On the way we stopped to watch a large raptor – it was an Imperial Eagle, the first of five we would see today. From a convenient birding-tower we could survey the water and the surrounding fields. There were more Graylags, Common Shelducks and other wildfowl here, and two Spotted Redshanks in breeding plumage were a new shorebird for the trip. There were Little Egrets in the water and Great Egrets and Gray Herons in the fields. Western Yellow Wagtails flitted around and sometimes landed on fence posts and a gorgeous male Red-footed Falcon flew so close that we could see its red feet and bill. We drove to the hamlet of Fertőújlak which lies right on the border - one can cross into Austria here on foot, on horseback or by bicycle but not by car. Indeed, this frontier zone, which was out-of-bounds to tourists a few decades ago, is now a popular biking area with designated routes along the so-called Iron Curtain Trail. We pulled over to take photos of some traditional breeds of livestock – primitive-looking Racka Sheep and big imposing Hungarian Gray Cattle. On we went, and after a few miles crossed the border once more into Austria, to visit a grassland reserve near the village of Tadten. Our main target here was Great Bustard, the world's heaviest flying bird.



As we entered the area, a Great Reed Warbler belted out its raucous song from a reedy channel. It was getting a little windy, so we climbed a sturdy birding tower to scan the landscape. Almost at once two big birds were spotted in flight – Great Bustards. But they dropped into tall vegetation and then proved hard to find - never mind, we'd catch up with these extraordinary birds again in Hungary later. Another key bird here was a male Montagu's Harrier. A Eurasian Hobby chasing swallows sped by. We circled the reserve on a loop road, getting out at the Brücke von Andau (Andau Bridge) at the Einser Canal. This is a good birding spot, but also one with a significant history. During the Hungarian uprising in 1956 an estimated 70,000 people fled from the country into Austria across a small, wooden bridge here. On November 21 of the same year the bridge was blown up by Soviet troops. In 1996, on the 40th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution, the bridge was rebuilt in a joint, commemorative operation of the Austrian and Hungarian armies, and this is where we now stood. We crossed the bridge into Hungary and then back into Austria, some cyclists did the same – how times have changed. After another busy day of natural and cultural history, we headed back to Fertőd. We had another fine dinner and then, on the short walk back from the restaurant, had a double woodpecker experience – a Eurasian Green and two Black Woodpeckers calling, flying around and perched up, before they went to roost in some big hole-riddled plane trees.

Sun., Jun. 25 Hungary | Fertőd | Lake Tata | Gerecse Hills | Szár Kiskunság | Bugyi

After breakfast we checked out and headed further east, deeper into Hungary. We took some minor roads and then the M1 highways in the direction of Budapest. We stopped at Lake Tata but as it was Sunday, and the weather was nice, it was rather busy with joggers, dog-walkers and people generally out for the day, so we did not linger. We did, however, see our first Middle Spotted Woodpecker in the adjacent woods. We drove a few miles up into the Gerecse Hills and had our lunch at a picnic site in a clearing. Eurasian Nuthatches entertained us as we did so. A day-tripping family were curious to know what we were looking at in the big tree, so we showed them the birds. It is always beneficial to engage the locals. Next up was a Yellowhammer, an Old World bunting, that sang his "little bit of bread and no cheese" from a roadside snag. We found Green Rose Chafers here, too, iridescent emerald-green and purple-bronze colored beetles, crawling slowly on flowers. These proved popular and cooperative photographic subjects.

We left the hills and after a short way on the highway, we paused our journey again. We visited the village of Szár and found that the locals were getting ready for a "Village Day", setting up stalls and fun-fair rides. We popped into the local pub for drinks and to use the rest rooms, and then strolled down the street to look at a pair of nesting White Storks. But we were soon halted when a male Syrian Woodpecker alighted on a wooden utility pole - we all

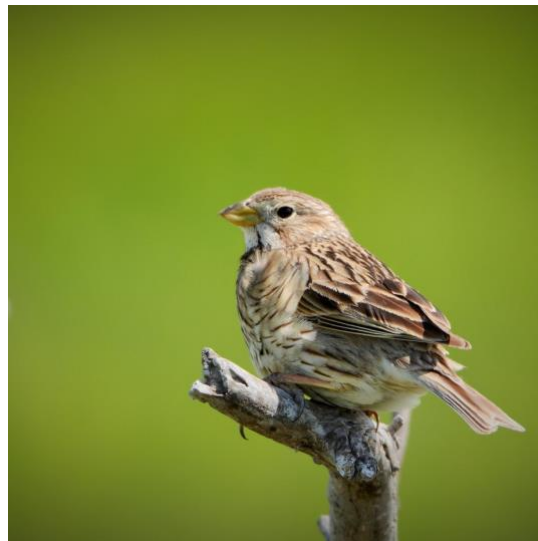


got splendid views. This was not actually unusual behavior, this woodpecker is very much a bird of “secondary habitats” such as orchards, gardens and villages with lines of trees like this one. In the late afternoon, we passed just south of Budapest, Hungary’s capital, crossed the mighty Danube and reached the Kiskunság region, a mostly flat, lowland, plain that lies east of the river. There were Roe Deer and Brown Hares in most fields. We checked into our next base at the edge of a village where we would stay for three nights. Indeed, every one of us appreciated that we had a good amount of time in each place we stayed in, to unpack and explore the surrounding areas in detail, and not have to quickly move on every other day.

Mon., Jun. 26 **Hungary | Kiskunság NP | Apaj Puszta | Kunpeszér**
Bugyi

Today we would explore the north of the flat Kiskunság region, both the protected National Park puszta (a Hungarian term for low grasslands and grazing land) and adjacent crop fields. This was “big sky” country, quite different from where we had been in Austria a few days earlier. We would see many “farmland birds” here such as dainty European Turtle-Doves, bulky Common Wood-Pigeons, fine-looking male Ring-necked Pheasants, elegant Great Egrets, Northern Lapwings with their smart crests, flocks of Rooks, bright Western Yellow Wagtails and singing Eurasian Skylarks and Corn Buntings. Both Black-headed and Mediterranean Gulls were often in the air, following tractors that were mowing fields. We regularly saw White Storks searching in fields for food to take back to their young waiting in nests in the surrounding villages. This was also a great area for Eurasian Hoopoes, we saw several of these always popular birds, and two colorful species - European Rollers and European Bee-eaters. The Rollers were easy to watch, but very flighty, so it was hard to take good photos. The Bee-eaters, on the other hand, were easier to capture, especially in and around their breeding colonies in sandy walls. Another typical bird in the Kiskunság grasslands is Lesser Gray Shrike and we observed several often hovering in flight as they hunted for food.

There were Whinchats and European Stonechats, too, we also found some rarer species - a pair of Eurasian Thick-knees, a dozen Great Bustards and several Montagu's Harriers, arguably the most elegant harrier anywhere. Eurasian Marsh-Harriers were common, and we also saw an Imperial Eagle and a huge White-tailed Eagle. Hungary is a key European country for Saker, a big, powerful, falcon (it even features on the 50-forint coin) and a bird that everyone really wanted to see. So, we pulled over at an open grassland where these raptors sometimes visit to hunt Ground Squirrels. These small colony-living mammals (also known as Susliks) are endangered across much of Europe, but in Hungary they maintain a foothold. It did not take long for a Saker to appear, an impressive female – they are bigger than males. It was first spotted soaring above us before it dashed down lower and made several passes. We all got super views. We also saw several Red-footed Falcons today, much smaller than the Saker but



nevertheless another raptor for which Hungary is internationally important. Throughout the day we had been checking farm buildings and rooftops for Little Owl, as these little predators are mainly diurnal and like to sit out, but with little luck. We figured that the hot weather had forced them “indoors” into the shade, until finally we found one by a cattle farm by a hole in the corner of a barn. Time had flown, and we needed to head back for dinner, which we did with some reluctance as we were having such a happy time. We also added an amphibian, Green Toad, and a reptile, European Pond Turtle, to our overall wildlife list today.

Tues., Jun. 27 Hungary | Bugyi Gravel Pits | Kiskunság NP | Apaj Fishponds | Bugyi

After a 7am breakfast we set off to explore the area again, but this time concentrating on wetlands – gravel pits, fishponds, and marshes. Black-headed and Mediterranean Gulls were resting in a crop field, and we were able to compare them. From a raised bank we were able to get views of a mixed colony of these gulls on an island in a gravel pit lake. Common Terns were nesting here, too, and there were some pretty Great Crested Grebes on the water. A few miles away, at a fishpond system near Apaj, our bird list was significantly boosted by a range of species new for the trip. Ducks such as Common Pochard and Ferruginous Duck, around ten Whiskered Terns, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Squacco Heron and Reed Bunting. The big gulls here were different from the Yellow-legged Gulls we had seen further west at the start of our tour; these were Caspian Gulls. We also got repeat, and in some cases better, views of Pygmy Cormorants, Eurasian Spoonbills, Little Egrets, Black Storks, Purple Herons, Red-crested Pochards, Garganeys and many other species we’d seen earlier in the trip. From a bird-tower we scanned a flooded area. Savi’s Warbler was “singing” (which sounds like a reeling, buzzing, insect) and finally we all managed to see it perched on the top of a reed. A White-tailed Eagle came in and flushed a flock of Graylag Geese. After having seen several in flight, we also got a great view of a Golden Oriole perched in the open in a poplar tree. On the way back to our accommodation, we made several stops, often to watch European Rollers. A small roadside marsh hosted Black-winged Stilts and Northern Lapwings, both with their young, a couple of Black-tailed Godwits and our only Wood Sandpipers of the trip. The Wood Sandpipers do not breed in Hungary but stop over when on migration. A little further on, we scanned a recently mown field which positively thronged with birds. There were White Storks, Rooks, Eurasian Jackdaws, Great Egrets, Gray Herons and various others, all looking for food in the cut grass. There were also another six Great Bustards - we’d now seen these very special and rare birds on three different days, once in Austria and twice in Hungary. A little further on still we also stopped at the place where we had previously seen the Eurasian Thick-knees and soon found them again. It had been yet another truly tremendous day.



Wed., Jun. 28

Hungary | Bugyi | Ócsa | Szentistván | Bükk Hills Noszvaj

After breakfast we checked out, loaded up the van, and set off eastwards. Before taking main roads to our ultimate destination in the Bükk Hills, we stopped in a wet woodland near the village of Ócsa. When we disembarked, a lady who had just walked her dog there kindly warned us that mosquitoes were out in numbers, but we did not encounter that many at all. Nevertheless, once we had found our main target here, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, we moved on. This marvelous little bird is Europe's smallest picid, about the size of a Downy Woodpecker. We stopped at a store to buy drinks and a picnic lunch and then headed east, mainly taking the M3 toll road. At a gas station on the highway in open country we saw a Crested Lark singing.

After about an hour from there we left the highway and took a back road. Just before the village of Szentistván, we stopped at a small lake with reeds. Several Eurasian Marsh-Harriers, Great Egrets and Great Warbler were. As we were about to leave, a Little Crane called from the dense reedbed. It was quite close but refused to reveal itself - as is often the case around the world with cranes and rails. Several pairs of White Storks, with well-grown young, were nesting on roadside utility poles in the village and a Black Redstart sang from a chimney top and a European Serin from a wire. We had our picnic in the shade of a big tree in an otherwise open area of puszta just outside town. There were Lesser Gray Shrikes and Eurasian Skylarks singing high in the sky. A smart male Northern Wheatear showed well by a farmstead. We headed up a short way up into the Bükk Hills where we would spend our final two nights. Before getting to our accommodation, we took a lane lined with bushes, seeing a family of Red-backed Shrikes and many Eurasian Tree Sparrows. We then heard a Eurasian Wryneck call, and some of us glimpsed it flying into a patch of trees, but it simply would not come out and show itself. A Barred Warbler behaved the same way for a while, but after some patience and perseverance we finally got a view of that one. A party of Common Ravens were foraging in a field. We also had a good sighting of a male European Stag Beetle today, which glided through the air showing his extraordinary "antlers". In the evening we sat in the pleasant garden bar of our family-run hotel and sampled the local wines.



Thurs., Jun. 29 Hungary | Noszvaj | Bükk Hills

We spent all day visiting pleasant sites in the south of the Bükk Hills, in woods, vineyards, pastures, meadows and around villages. We started before breakfast around our hotel getting an outrageous view of a Hawfinch on the path right in front of us. In the park we found Great Spotted, Middle-spotted and Eurasian Green Woodpeckers, Great and Eurasian Blue Tits, Eurasian Blackcap, Eurasian Nuthatch, Song Thrush, Eurasian Tree Sparrows and Collared Flycatchers, amongst others. Later, we walked along the Hór-valley on an easy trail through shady deciduous forest. Butterflies were out in large numbers and songbirds occasionally dropped onto the path before us to drink at puddles. We saw a Marsh Tit and a flock of about eight lovely Long-tailed Tits. One of our target species here was Rock Bunting and some of us glimpsed a pair sitting high in a bush in a stone quarry.

Near the village of Cserépfalu a hind Red Deer suddenly dashed into the open and through bushes as we drove along. We paused in the vineyards above Cserépfalu, to take in the beautiful scenery and listen out for Wood Larks. Sure enough, one soon started to sing from a wire, and we got good views of it in our telescopes. This was the penultimate day of the tour, but the exceptional experiences just kept coming. Near the village of Tard whilst watching dozens of European Bee-eaters, flying to and from their colony, hawking for insects and sitting in wires, a Eurasian Wryneck landed in a small tree. It was then joined by a recently fledged chick. To say “excitement broke out” is an underestimation. It had appeared that time was running out to see this unusual, “mysterious” woodpecker, but now two had turned up and were showing well. It is not often that birdwatchers break away from taking pictures of colorful Bee-eaters, but that is what happened here. As it had been a still and sunny day, many butterflies had been on the wing. Amongst others we found Small Tortoiseshell, Small White, Red Admiral and Peacock Butterfly. Dainty attractive Nine-spotted Moths had emerged, too.

After our last dinner together, we talked about the tour. I asked everyone to list their highlights – top three birds, another animal, and a favorite “other thing”, meaning anything other than wildlife. Tom’s top three birds were Common Firecrest, Great Crested Grebe and Eurasian Wryneck, his favorite mammal was the Chamois and favorite habitat the sub-Alpine environments in Austria. He also mentioned the simple, old-fashioned, coffee pot at the Nomad Hotel! Sherry said it was very difficult to choose just three species, but ultimately came to a decision: she most liked the Northern Lapwings, the European Goldfinches and the European Serins. Her favorite mammal was the Roe Deer and habitats the “big sky” grasslands and fields in Hungary. Alex’s top three birds were Eurasian

Hoopoe, Squacco Heron and Pied Avocet. His favorite other animal was the Beautiful Demoiselle dragonfly, and



he very much liked the wildflowers, lowland and upland. Mary most liked the Eurasian Hoopoe, European Bee-eaters and Northern Lapwings. Her favorite other animal was the Red Admiral butterfly. She really liked our final hotel and the surrounding Bükk Hills. Brian's highlights were the Eurasian Wryneck, Black Woodpecker and Syrian Woodpecker (now there is a man with good taste!). He enjoyed the various butterflies and the Stag Beetles and being in the "puszta" (Hungary's grasslands), the Alpine habitats and the wetlands. He enjoyed the food and praised all the hotels, for different reasons, too. Jim top three birds were Eurasian Wryneck, Eurasian Hoopoe and the Rook flocks and his favorite mammal was the Brown Hare. He enjoyed the Hungarian food, the varied, mosaic, landscapes and habitats (particularly the "puszta") and our stops at the former "Iron Curtain" sites. Quite a selection of highlights!

Fri., Jun. 30 Hungary | Noszvaj | Bükk Hills to Budapest

Our travels in the Heart of Europe would now draw to an end. Some of us got in a bit of last morning birding close to our hotel, seeing the species we had come to expect hereabouts but also a new one for the trip: two Short-toed Treecreepers. After previously only hearing it, we also finally saw a Eurasian Wren, too. That was quite surprising as this tiny bird is not uncommon here, but sometimes that is how birding goes. After a leisurely, and lavish, breakfast we drove to Budapest. This was a relaxed journey of around two hours, mainly on the M3 toll road. Everyone was taken to the same hotel on the Buda side of the Danube, on the embankment right by the river. It was an ideal location. All had chosen to linger for a few days in this vibrant and culturally rich city - a wise decision. Last but not least, thank you once again to everyone who was involved in this Naturalist Journey's tour around Austria and Hungary.

Poppies along the Austria-Hungary border (Gerard Gorman - GG), Black-winged Stilt (GG), European Goldfinch (GG), Hungarian Gray Bull (GG), European Bee-eater (GG), Group in Austria (GG), White Wagtail (GG), Fritillary & Thistle (Alex Kistler - AK), Group Selfie (Brian Elliott - BE), Crested Tit (BE), Waterfall (BE), Common Firecrest (AK), Birding Hochkar (AK), White Wagtail (AK), Spotted Flycatcher (AK), Pied Avocet (AK), White Stork (GG), Esterhazy Castle in Fertod (BE), Group Birding (GG), Bearded Reedling (GG), Cattle (AK), Eurasian Thick-knee (GG), Imperial Eagle (GG), Corn Bunting (GG), Group Looking for Savi's Warbler (BE), Black Redstart (GG), Long-tailed Tit (AK), Nine-spotted Moths (AK), Exploring the town (BE), Gorgeous Fields (BE), Swallowtail (GG), Eurasian Barn Swallow (BE), Cheers to New Friends! (BE)