

BIRDSEEKERS

HOLIDAYS FOR BIRDWATCHERS



HUNGARY

May 2010 – 8 Days

HIGHLIGHTS: Either for rarity value, excellent views or simply a group favourite.

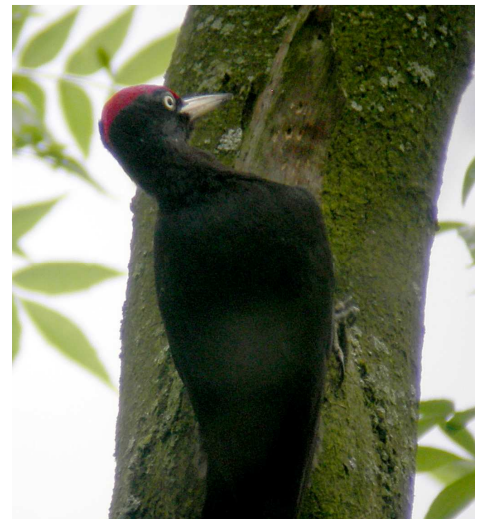
- Great Bustard
- Short-toed Treecreeper, adult feeding 3 chicks
- Collared Flycatcher
- Barred, Savi's, & River Warbler
- Early Spider Orchid
- Syrian Woodpecker
- Black Woodpecker
- Red-footed Falcon
- Collared Pratincoles copulating
- Saker Falcon, adult and 3 chicks on a nest
- Red-crested Pochard
- Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Roller
- Nightwalk to see Tawny Owl and Nightjar
- Montagu's Harrier - The Full Monty!
- Hawfinch

Leaders: Steve Bird, Gina Nichol and Gabor Orban

SUMMARY:

Our tour to the heart of the Hungarian "puszta", the sprawling grasslands stretching across the scenic Kiskunsag National Park began in Budapest where Steve, Gina and half the group were met by Allan, Janice, Annette and Sara who had arrived a few days early to explore the city. We made our way outside the terminal where we were met by Gabor and his wife Andrea and our driver Misci. After loading up the van, we headed south away from the airport where we saw our first **Magpies, Hooded Crows, Barn Swallows, Northern Lapwings, and Rooks**. Our first birding stop was at Osca, a protected forest just ½ hour away which we soon nicknamed 'mosquito forest' and after a quick snack we walked along a track through the woodland and found several **Chaffinch, Chiffchaffs**, and a **Spotted Flycatcher**. A **Collared Flycatcher** fluttering around a nest hole showed well and a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** flew in allowing good views. Julie spotted a **Short-toed Treecreeper** working up a trunk in a wet area but the bird moved too quickly for some of us to catch up with. Fortunately, a little later, we spotted 3 chicks perched on a trunk and being fed by an adult and all of us got fabulous views of this behaviour which Gabor had never seen in his twelve years of studying treecreepers. As we walked back, a **Middle Spotted Woodpecker** made a quick appearance and a **Great Tit** was seen.

Moving on to Bugyi village we surveyed the steppe habitat which held **Marsh Harriers** coursing over the fields, **Black-headed Gulls**, a close **Stonechat** and some **White Storks**. A **Eurasian**



This Black Woodpecker gave us superb views in the Mosquito forest



These were the 3 young Short-toed Treecreepers that huddled together in between feeds from the parents

Spoonbill flew across the road ahead just before we stopped on a side road and got out to walk. It wasn't long before Gabor spotted our first **Great Bustard** and as we watched we found at least 9 males strutting around in an open area. For many, this bird was the main reason for coming on the trip and we had nailed it within a few hours of arriving. Other birds in the area included several displaying **Eurasian Skylarks**, a few **Grey Herons** cruising by, a pair of **Common Buzzards** circling in the distance and a **Common Kestrel** hovering over another part of the field. A **Yellow Wagtail** appeared in a tree just ahead of us along the road as did a **Whinchat** and our first **Eurasian Tree Sparrows**. A stop for the first of many **Corn Buntings** led to the sighting of a **European Roller** perched in a tree. When the bird took flight, the stunning blues and purple colours elicited shrieks of delight from the crowd.

We continued south to an area called Busturpuszta which was normally dry but this year supported some shallow ponds that were filled with birds. **Whiskered, White-winged, and Black Terns** hawked for insects low over the open water and a **Black-tailed Godwit** in full breeding colours was spotted standing near the edge of the water. We moved ahead so that we could get out and scope it and found two **Garganey** nearby. Other birds that were seen in the pools included **Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocets, Spotted Redshank, Common Redshank, 30+ Wood Sandpiper, Dunlin, Little Stint**, and at least 60 **Ruff** including some excellent looking males that were displaying. Nearby, three **Common Cuckoos** were seen perched on the power lines behind the ponds. We could hear **Great Reed Warblers** singing from a watery ditch and by the time one finally showed our attention was diverted to a **Little Bittern** that appeared in the reeds. Amazingly as we watched the **Little Bittern**, the **Great Reed Warbler** flew in and perched next to it right out in the open making for a cracking view of both birds together. A **Purple Heron** flew over and a **Stone Curlew** was reported and overall this was a fantastic stop and one of the highlights of the trip.

As the daylight began to fade, we arrived at our lodge in the heart of the Kiskunsag National Park. We enjoyed a nice meal and reviewed our sightings of our first day birding in Hungary.

On our first morning at the lodge, we awoke to a sparkling day with crystal blue clear skies. Our pre-breakfast walk to an area that had once been a lake yielded several **Eurasian Goldfinch, Greenfinch** and a **Hoopoe** calling. A **Red-backed Shrike** showed well and our first **Golden Orioles** were seen in the tree tops glowing in the morning sun. There were **Long-tailed Tits, Great Spotted Woodpecker** and a stunning **Lesser Grey Shrikes**. The warmth of the sun got some butterflies going including



This very nice male Collared Flycatcher was a highlight on our first day when we visited mosquito forest



A welcome bonus was this Little Bittern that came out of the reeds as we searched for a Great Reed Warbler



Red-backed Shrikes were soon to become an attractive everyday part of the birdlife of Hungary

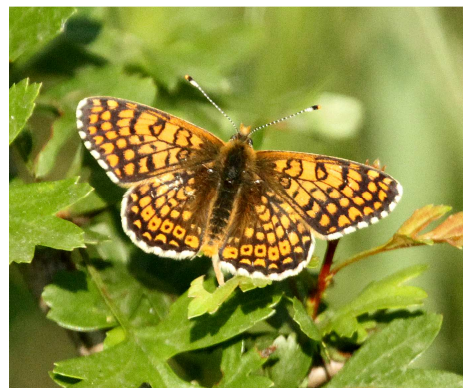
Glanville Fritillary, Red Admiral, Wood White, Reverdin's Blue, Common Swallowtail, Small Heath, Clouded Yellow, Large Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Grizzled Skipper, and Silver-studded Blue.

After breakfast, we drove to an area where **Red-footed Falcons** were flying close to the road so we pulled off to get better views of them. A **Yellow Wagtail** and **Whinchat** were seen as were several **Red-footed Falcons** including both males and females flying over the open fields. A **Reed Bunting** perched on a tall stalk of grass gave nice views and Gina spotted a **Little Owl** perched on a power stanchion.

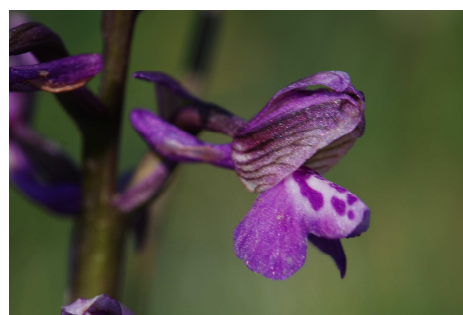
At our next stop on a road that traversed a large marsh, two **Great Bitterns** was heard calling (booming) from both sides of the road but as was to be expected from this elusive species neither of them showed. The plant enthusiasts were excited by the presence of a **Bug Orchid**, plus **Green-veined Orchid** and **White Helleborine**, while the birders pointed out a **Jackdaw** that flew out of a nest box. **Whiskered Terns** were flying over the marsh and another **Lesser Grey Shrike** was seen. Nearby **Small Copper** and **Comma** were added to our list of butterflies for the day.

We walked along the road and stepped off into the grasses to check an area for a singing **Sedge Warbler**. While scanning the reeds, a bright green **Tree Frog** was seen as it perched in the open on a twig over the reedbed. A **Grass Snake** (which feeds exclusively on amphibians) swam to the edge just below the frog and with patience some of us finally had cracking views of the **Sedge Warbler**. We continued on past a walled compound and spotted both **Wood Warbler** and **Green Woodpecker** in the trees above the wall. There were some **Purple Herons** flying around and some **Sand Martins** flew right above our heads. Around the corner was a colony of **European Bee-eater** and these delightful birds gave superb views perched on the ground in tree tops and flying around. We moved on to another area near a farm with some large ponds and a lookout tower. A **Black Stork** flew in approaching us slowly and giving a fantastic flight show as it soared by and out over the ponds. Several **Pied Avocets** were also seen near along the shoreline as we took lunch while surveying the many ponds. From the lookout tower, **Eurasian Coots** were seen as were several **Graylag Geese** in the distance with goslings in tow.

Continuing on to another area with more trees and wetlands, we encountered a family of **Long-tailed Tits** just off the road. **Great Tits** were also around as we made our way to a pond surrounded by reeds. Several dragonflies were seen here including **Scarce Chaser**, **Downy Downy Emerald**, **Black-tailed Skimmer**, **Hairy Hawker**, **Four-spotted Chaster**,



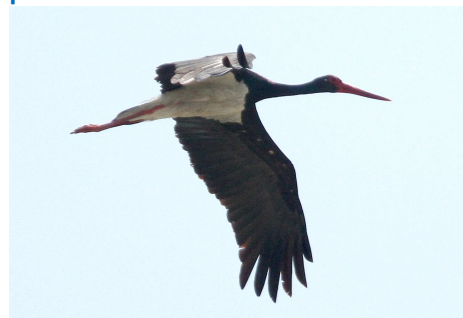
At the time we thought these were Heath Fritillaries, but closer inspection revealed them to be Glanville Fritillary



This was an excellent photo by Mike of a Green-veined Orchid we found



Smart Lesser Grey Shrikes were all in full breeding plumage with a lovely pink flush on their breast



This rare Black Stork showed well as it came towards us and flew overhead

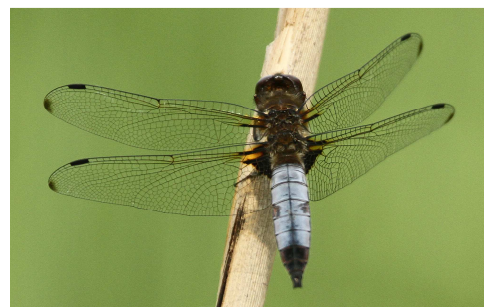
Green-eyed Hawker, White-legged Damselfly and Variable Damselfly. Across the pond, we scoped a **Common Whitethroat** in a bare tree which was soon replaced by a very vocal **Great Reed Warbler**. There was a **Penduline Tit** gathering nesting material literally 6ft from us and we noticed an active nest of a pair of **Red-footed Falcons**. Working back along the main path, we found an active **Penduline Tit** nest and amazingly an active **Golden Oriole** nest. On another pond there was a **European Pond Terrapin** basking in the afternoon light. Two **Grass Snakes** were seen along the edge of the pond and another one was seen swimming toward the shore. We spent several minutes studying the variety of **Blue-tailed Damselfly** females and as we retreated to the van, we heard the increasingly common call of the **Nightingale** and then managed to scope a **Turtle Dove** calling from a nearby tree top.

Back on the road, we stopped for a quick drink at a roadside restaurant and then moved on to another lake area which held **Black-winged Stilt** and more **Graylag Geese**. We were getting used to the ubiquitous call of **Common Cuckoos** in the background and found a nice **Mediterranean Gull** among the **Black-headed Gulls** flying over the lake. Once again a **Great Bittern** was heard calling and a **Tree Pipit** was seen well as the skies darkened and an approaching storm forced us to head back to the lodge.

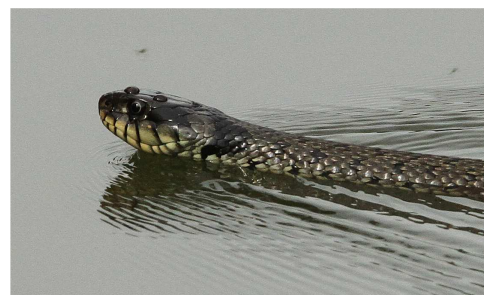
On our pre-breakfast walk, we saw an adult **Yellowhammer** feeding a fledgling chick, a **Black Redstart** and the omnipresent **Red-backed Shrike**. After breakfast as we were driving out, we stopped to look at a **Souslik** and also saw **Eurasian Jay** and the breeding pair of **European Rollers** not far from our lodge. We stopped in a small town and after a bit of searching found a **Syrian Woodpecker** working in some oaks in a playground. It flew off before all of us got on it so in our quest to re-find it we ticked **Collared Dove, Blackbird, Greenfinch, Golden Oriole, Jackdaw** and our best **Serins** of the trip.

Moving on we arrived at Oscu forest which we nicknamed “mosquito woods” and as we were getting out of the bus, a **Nuthatch** was seen in the car park. We walked the main trail and got good views of a **Hawfinch** in the trees above us. Gabor heard a **River Warbler** so we diverted to track it down and found it singing in a low bush. Excellent views of this skulking species. Next up was a very nice **Black Woodpecker** that flew up onto a dead tree and began drumming. After lunch at the picnic grounds, we had managed to get good views of a **Middle Spotted Woodpecker**.

After a short coffee/pit stop, we drove through to an agricultural area and climbed a small hill to look out over a wetland area.



This male Scarce Chaser (Blue Chaser) was seen on one fish pond along with many females

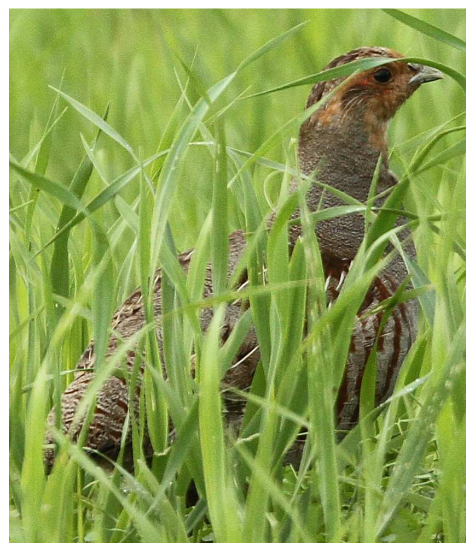


A couple of Grass Snakes gave fabulous views as they swam across one of the lakes



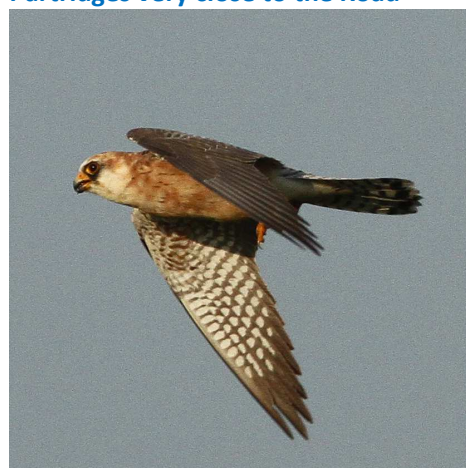
This particular Yellowhammer showed well on a morning walk from the lodge, while another morning walk had us watch a couple of birds drop to the ground to feed a couple of well grown youngsters.

The poppy covered hill was a nice vantage point to see **Great Crested Grebe, Little Ringed Plover, Stone Curlew, Mediterranean Gull, Yellow-legged Gull, and Common Tern.** A Lapwing chick ran for cover near our bus and then we drove through some of the farm roads and got out to walk an area in search of **Collared Pratincoles.** Not only did we find the birds but we saw them displaying and even a pair copulating! Amazing! A little further on several **Common Quail** were heard calling but despite our persistent efforts to spot one, it proved typically impossible. As we drove out, Julie spotted two **Grey Partridge** in the grass close to the road and we enjoyed excellent views of these birds.



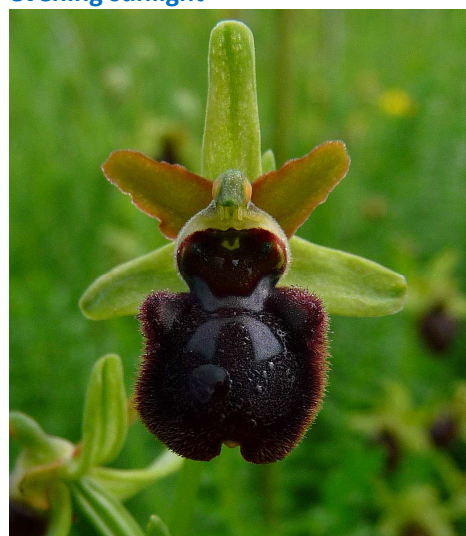
July found a lovely pair of grey Partridges very close to the Road

The afternoon light was lovely now and we stopped at another area and walked up to the top of a grassy knoll to view the expanse of open habitat that seemed to stretch for miles. There were several **Great Egrets** (the Old World sub-species *Casmerodius albus albus* showing a dark bill during the breeding season) and a few **White Storks** feeding in the distance. To the amusement of the local shepherds we watched a half dozen or so **Great Bustards** and a small flock of **Ruff** that flew in. A male **Montagu's Harrier** was spotted in the distance and a gorgeous **Hoopoe** gave a superb flyby much to the delight of Frank, and of course the rest of us! A herd of Great Gray Hungarian Cattle lazed in the evening sunlight and just beyond them we noted several **Red-footed Falcons** performing aerial displays and perching on some power lines. We decided to move closer to the birds and were treated to great views as they flew back and forth as well as perching on the wires. A **Tawny Pipit** was noted but could not compete with the antics of the Red-foots and once again the day ended with a fantastic avian display. For non aviaian delights we also had **Speckled Wood, Wood White, Painted Lady, Green-veined White, and Large Skipper** amongst the days butterflies.



One of the lovely Red-footed Falcons that performed wonderfully in the evening sunlight

Our pre-breakfast walk in the fog and mist yielded a **Lesser Whitethroat, Turtle Doves, Spotted Flycatcher, Yellowhammer, European Bee-eater, and a lone Tawny Pipit.** After breakfast, we checked a flower filled field for a rare orchid and found lots of other interesting flowers but no orchid. We moved up the road and stopped for some **Siberian Iris** growing in a ditch and as we were looking at them, Janice spotted the **Early Spider Orchid** on the other side where we enjoyed great views and photos of this exquisite flower.



Janice spotted a patch of gorgeous Early Spider Orchids out in a meadow

Our next stop was at a park next to an oxbow lake. Navigating past the park amusements, we could hear the distant call of a **Wryneck** across the pond. In the pond itself were **Great Cormorant** and **Black-crowned Night Heron**, plus several **Downy Emeralds** hawking for insects. A road led across a

bridge into a more forested area and here we found **Green Woodpecker** and **Middle Spotted Woodpecker**. The **Wryneck** proved elusive at first but finally showed exceptionally well as it called from an open branch above the lake shore. Fabulous!

We moved to an area next to a church that overlooked another oxbow lake which was filled with birds including **Common Pochard**, **Pygmy Cormorant**, **Eared Grebe with babies**, **Northern Shoveler**, **Ferruginous Duck**, and **Squacco Heron**. We nicknamed this area 'church-hill' for obvious reasons, including the fact that we could not pronounce the proper Hungarian name! There were several **Eurasian Spoonbills** flying around but the real treat was a **White-tailed Eagle** seen in flight! From here we travelled through a town which had a **White Stork** nest on a power pole at the main road junction. Our next stop offered raised paths above several fish containment ponds. As we started out on the path, a **Black Stork** was seen flying over. Most of the fish ponds were dry but the larger ponds held many **Common Pochards**, **Ferruginous Ducks**, **Gadwall**, **Common Moorhen**, **Grey Herons**, **Eurasian Spoonbills**, **Common Terns**, **Whiskered Tern**, and **Black-crowned Night Herons**. A **Common Cuckoo** on the wire showed well and there were a few **Yellow-legged Gulls** around. A **Little Bittern** was seen briefly along the edge of one of the canals and a ditch filled with reeds offered up a **Sedge Warbler** that sang for several minutes in open view. A **Reed Warbler** gave it some competition but was a bit less photogenic as it stayed lower in the reeds. Backtracking a bit, Mike spotted a **Kingfisher** across one of the bigger ponds. He used the **Squacco Heron** at the edge of the pond as a land mark and soon we were all looking at our only **Kingfisher** of the trip. There were some **European Rollers** on the distant power lines and as we came around to the van, Julie recounted her memorable views of a fine looking Bull.

We headed back to the lodge for an early dinner and reviewed our list for the day. A few of us had the energy to go on a night walk and were rewarded with excellent views of a **Tawny Owl** and not so satisfying views of two **Nightjars**.

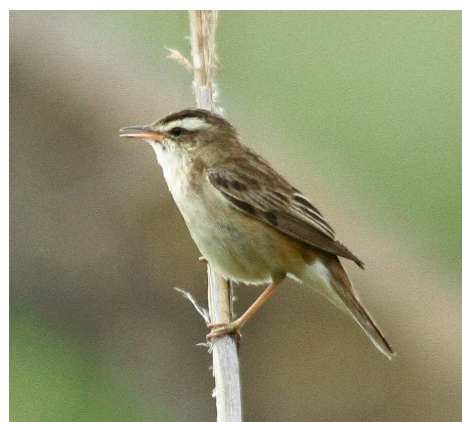
Our final pre-breakfast walk of the tour yielded better views of **European Rollers**, **Common Stonechats**, **Greenfinch** and a surprise **Barred Warbler** that was heard singing and also seen in song flight, and perched in a dead bush. A **Montagu's Harrier** coursed through an open field and those who lingered saw another **Wryneck**. After breakfast, as we were congregating at the van, we added two new species, **Mistle Thrush** and **Common Redstart**. We drove a short distance from the lodge and into an open field to watch a group of **Bee-eaters** give a show as they flew among the power lines and



This Wryneck gave us fabulous views after initially proving very elusive



Whiskered Terns were a delight to watch hawking for insects, and easily seen at many sites normally in association with Black and White-winged Terns



Not uncommon but very nice to see sat out in the open, this Sedge Warbler was a performer

shrubs. We marvelled at their antics for several minutes until a **Hoopoe** flew past and then we were distracted temporarily when a **Sparrowhawk** flew over. **House Martins**, **Corn Buntings** and a nice **Lesser Grey Shrike** were around but could not get much attention given the magical performance of the **Bee-eaters**.

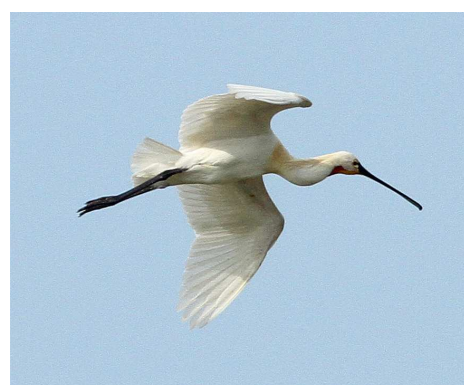
Our next stop was back at 'church-hill' overlooking the oxbow lake that we had visited previously. There were fewer birds than before and the highlight was several **Eurasian Spoonbills** flying over at very close range. Keith found a **Birchwort** that he was quite please about here, and after lunch we met a guide from Kiskunsag National Park who took us to a site where there was a **Saker Falcon** nest on a power stanchion. The man made nest box held three chicks and we had good scope views of the adult flying past and the chicks peering out of their nest. All the time this was going on we had many **Sand Martins** and **Barn Swallows** acrobating around us. The next site held a breeding plumaged **Black-tailed Godwit** in a freshly plowed field, a few **Common Redshank** displaying, and a small **Sand Martin** colony. The rest of the afternoon was spent slogging through the mud at three sites. The first, affectionately called "Mud I" was an elongated pond that held several **Pygmy Cormorants** perched on a dead tree and a few **Squacco Herons** and **Moorhens**. A **Hobby** flew over and the reedbeds around the edge eventually gave up a **Savi's Warbler**, plus **Reed Bunting**, and **Sedge Warbler**. At "Mud II" we searched for **Bearded Tit** but had to be satisfied with **Great Crested Grebes** and **Pygmy Cormorants** in good afternoon light. Another **Barred Warbler** was seen in song flight above a favoured bush and a heard of sheep distracted us as they passed close behind and unfortunately made many of us miss a couple of **Linnets** that crossed the path up ahead. On the way out, Steve found a **Fire-bellied Toad** which amazingly had avoided being trampled by the sheep. Our last stop of the day was at "Mud III", a known habitat for Corncrake, so also called "Corncrake Field". Try as we may it appeared that the Corncrakes were not in yet. Our consolation was a couple of **Icterine Warblers** seen on our way back. In the evening, we set up a moth light and after dinner we logged just one visitor, a **White Ermine**.

Before breakfast we checked the moths but there were more at a light on the main building than at the official moth light! A nice **Poplar Hawkmoth** was seen as was a **Clouded Border** and a **Pale Tussock**. Around the grounds, the usual **Blackcap**, **Nightingale** and **Chiffchaff** were heard calling.

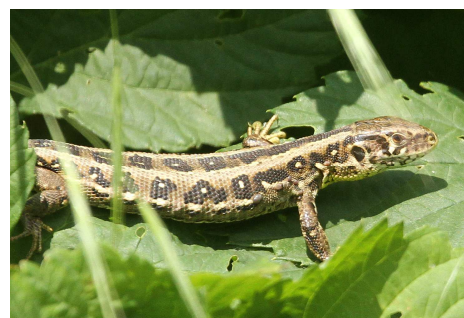
After breakfast, we set off to the north and revisited Bustarpusztá, a pond which turned out to be one of our favourite sites on the trip. A **White Stork** looked comical as it tried to perch and keep its balance on a power line, while a **Stone Curlew** showed very well and there were some **Common Redshanks** in the nearby grass. In



We had fabulous looks at a group of Bee-eaters in perfect light, hunting and perching on wires.



Eurasian Spoonbills were seen on many occasions and included several that flew low overhead



This female posed nicely in the sun for us on top of a bank of leaves



A bit distant to photo but Pygmy Cormorants looked good in the scope

and around what water there was were **Avocets, Black-winged Stilts, Garganey, Gadwall, Wood Sandpiper, Ferruginous Ducks, White-winged Tern, Whiskered Tern, and Black Tern.** In the background were several **Sand Martins** and **Barn Swallows** flying around and a nearby channel held a **Little Bittern** and several noisy **Great Reed Warblers.**

We moved on to a large marshy area where we had very good views of **Penduline Tit** from the van. It was raining fairly steadily so we moved slowly along hoping for something new. A **Red-crested Pochard** in a nearby pond flew out quickly so not everyone got on it but Gabor was pleased with this local rarity. A **Great Bittern** was heard booming but never showed and as the rain got heavier we departed the area looking for drier climes. The weather report was for unprecedented rain and flooding in the whole area so we decided to take lunch on the deck of a restaurant and then went in to sit next to the warm fire and enjoyed some coffee and tea. From here we drove into a town on the Danube River allowing us views of the second largest river in Europe. Gabor told us of some of the history of Ráckeve and showed us a few land marks. The rain was not subsiding so we stopped at a pastry shop to drown our sorrows.

The rain continued so we made our way back to the lodge making a quiet stop at our favourite pond which held **Ruff, Great Egrets** and **Little Egrets** as well as the other birds seen previously.

Once again it was raining and we decided a change of scenery was in order so we made an early departure for the Bukk Hills to try some different habitat. This large area of forested mountains were a welcome change from the expansive flat lands of the Great Plain and indeed the habitat was stunning. The rain unfortunately followed us the entire way. A stop at a local hotel yielded **Black Redstart, Common Redstart, Chaffinch** and **Serin** in the parking lot. We birded a forested valley and found **Hawfinch,** a very showy **Rock Bunting, Eurasian Jay, Collared Flycatcher, Green Woodpecker, Clouded Yellow** butterfly, and a **Black Woodpecker** nest with some large chicks. The rain was unrelenting and even prevented us from walking a forest trail that was completely flooded out. Never the less, we enjoyed the change of pace and the chance to see this beautiful area. Despite the last two days of unprecedented rain, and the worst floods that can remembered in Hungary we had a very good trip with lots of excellent sightings, and most flora and fauna targets achieved. The group was a pleasure to travel with, very easy going and interested in all manner of natural things which made it all the more fascinating. Gabor's knowledge and insights about the history of Hungary also added an element of interest. In all, it was a very enjoyable trip. Thank you all!
Gina and Steve.



This Stone-curlew showed well on the ground and then gave superb views in flight



Despite the rain it never deterred this Penduline Tit from singing from the reed tops alongside the road.



Nice pair of Red-footed Falcons