



*Red-breasted Geese in the Hortobágy National Park, Hungary in November 2021 (János Oláh).*

# HUNGARY'S HORTOBÁGY IN AUTUMN

**5 – 8 NOVEMBER 2021**

**LEADER: JÁNOS OLÁH**

After a few years gap we managed to run this European weekend birding in Hungary (in covid times)! This is indeed the shortest Birdquest tour but has much to offer! This tour focuses on Hungary's World Heritage Hortobágy National Park and our prime target is to see two rare geese: Red-breasted Goose and Lesser White-fronted Goose. There are not many places in the World where one can reliably see these birds on a swift weekend break with additional goodies and with a truly amazing migration spectacle! In 2021 we did it again, we saw about 250 Red-breasted Geese and had excellent looks at several Lesser White-fronted Geese. We could even admire their golden eyering! Additional great birds on the tour included Ferruginous Duck, Tundra Bean Goose, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle, Saker, Great Bustard, Jack Snipe and Bearded Tit. Add to these we admired 130,000 Greater White-fronted Geese and 20,000 Common Cranes. What a spectacle it was to watch these amazing number of water birds arriving or leaving their roosting sites. Waiting on the edge of wetlands and watch as the tens of thousands of geese arrive in the morning. It is a sight must be experienced for birders. European birding in its best! The Long-eared Owl roost with 70 birds was also a tour highlight indeed. We also had two memorable experience with mammals on the 2021 tour as we managed to track down European Hamster at night and also had a European Otter walking across a mudflat while a juvenile White-tailed Eagle attacking it. All in all it was an action-packed short tour and after three days of birding you felt like you have been birding for a week. It was just great!



*Red-breasted Geese (foreground) and Lesser White-fronted Geese (background) in the Hortobágy National Park (János Oláh).*

Sir Peter Scott put the Hortobágy on the map for geese-lovers with his visits to this remarkable park. Yes, the same Sir Peter Scott who founded the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust as well as World Wide Fund for Nature! Although in those days geese watching also included hunting as part of the experience, he described the Hortobágy where the sky is dark from the geese. Indeed we experienced something like this in 2021 as the Hortobágy was dry (after a rather dry summer and autumn) so the geese concentrated in the eastern part of the park and used one of the fishponds for roosting. So one morning at dawn we saw 110,000 Greater White-fronted Geese as they left the roosting fishpond in waves of tens of thousands and indeed the sky was dark. Spectacular! We were lucky with the weather as we had a wonderful sunny day and a somewhat more wet second day, but no misty and foggy conditions. The latter is always a fear on short tours as the only real difficulty when you have no visibility to locate the more rare geese in the larger flocks.



*Greater White-fronted Geese (János Oláh).*



*Flock of Greater White-fronted Geese taking off (top) and in flight. On the top right area of the lower image a Tundra Bean Goose is visible which was spotted on the water as well but while taking the image it was not seen (János Oláh).*

The tour started in Budapest around mid-day and we quickly packed up and drove to a nearby spot for some birding. The days are very short in November and we definitely wanted to get some birding in, so our obvious choice was to visit the Kiskunság National Park. We took an abandoned rural road across a mosaic of agricultural and grassy habitat in search of some wintering Great Bustards. First we saw some raptors like Rough-legged Buzzard and White-tailed Eagle. We also admired a flock of 350 Stock Doves and after much scanning, we finally located some distant bustards. We took some dirt tracks and positioned ourselves to the best possible location and had great views of 42 male Great Bustards in a single flock. We cloud watch them as long as we wanted and we could compare their size with some Western Roe Deers standing right behind the bustards. Impressive birds and a great start!



*Male Great Bustards on a rapeseed field, part of the group of 42 birds (János Oláh).*

It was time for us to drive east and we arrived to the Hortobágy area by the late afternoon. A roadside stop on a freshly drained fishpond gave us Northern Lapwings, Eurasian Curlews and a few Caspian Gulls. There were no geese to be found at this fishpond though the first flocks of Common Cranes were flying over on their way to the roosting sites. We moved on to the eastern side of the park and arrived to the Nagy-szik soda lake by the last few minutes of daylight. A flock of 2000 geese were still grazing on the lakeside and we started to scan for any goodies. It only took a few minutes for us to locate the first 17 Red-breasted Geese of the tour. Even in the fading light conditions we could pick up these spectacular geese as their white flanks were glowing amongst the larger Greater White-fronted Geese. On our way to the hotel we still had a quick look of the Long-eared Owls at dusk and we counted 52 birds as they waking up and were ready to go hunting.

Early next morning still before breakfast we drove to a close area and tracked down a pair of magnificent Saker Falcons as they were still on their roosting spot. We watched them for 15 minutes when they took off and left. Geese and Cranes were flying all over the place as it is often the case in the early mornings in the Hortobágy area. We also spotted our first juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle for the day and also a White-tailed Eagle. For some participants both the Saker and the Eastern Imperial Eagle was a lifer, so the good old saying as 'a lifer before breakfast makes the day' was certainly in place here! After a substantial breakfast we drove to a wetland in the southern part of the Hortobágy and in full sunshine we positioned ourselves to an observation tower where we were expecting geese to soon fly in. As it was a brilliant sunny morning we were expecting the geese to do their normal daily activity which means after the morning feeding, they all fly into a wetland or a shallow fishpond with mudflats for bathing and resting. We were right and they were coming right on time waves after waves of geese were arriving in the next hour. In such a sunny weather it was something special to see them arriving and the numbers were building up. By 10:30 AM there about 25 000 geese on the wetland and we were busily scanning for our targets. Several parties of Red-breasted Geese were found and we even had seen them a few times in flight! Also a Tundra Bean Goose and a Barnacle Goose was located and after much work we also managed to find three adult Lesser White-fronted Geese. They were in perfect light and perfect distance so the golden eye-ring was glowing. Superb! Mission completed we could relax and watch the geese and the ever present juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagles! We finally counted 51 Red-breasted Geese in this flock.



*Red-breasted Geese (top left and bottom) and juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle (János Oláh).*

In the afternoon we continued with our quest for geese and we drove to the Virágoskúti Fishponds. While taking our packed lunch on the lakeside we could watch a flock of 20 and a flock 31 Red-breasted Geese plus we found a female Red-breasted Merganser, many Great Crested Grebes and a flock of Dunlins. Next

we drove to the largest fishpond in the complex and could see huge amount of geese albeit they were a bit distant. Occasional White-tailed Eagles moved them from one side of the pond to the other and we counted about 100 Red-breasted Geese in the flock. For the final hour of the day we drove to a nearby grassy area to locate more Lesser White-fronted Goose and luckily János Tar – who has been helping us – quickly found one close to us, grazing on the steppe. We had good looks again and for a few minutes we could watch this rare goose grazing and then it flew away with other geese. We got to see its fine golden eyering once again! For the last 30 minutes of the day we tracked down two Little Owls and had a stunning sunset with Cranes and thousands of Rooks. When it got dark we drove to an agricultural area where we were hoping to see European Hamster. In November they are not so active but we were lucky and within 30 minutes we found a very cooperative individual which allowed great looks in the torchlight from 8 meters away. A great finish to our goose-chasing day on the Hortobágy! On our first day we logged 222 Red-breasted Geese and 4 adult Lesser White-fronted Geese!



*Rooks going to roost, there must have been a few thousands of them (János Oláh).*

On our second full day we woke up to a starkly contrasting weather. It was grey, dark and it was raining! We changed plans and after breakfast we drove to the Elep Fishponds. It was still raining and we had no luck with the wintering Greater Spotted Eagle. We saw 2 Pygmy Cormorants, a male Hen Harrier, Western Marsh Harriers, White-tailed Eagle and a flock of 38 Bullfinches. The dirt roads were muddy by now and we were slipping on the soda soil in our 4x4 car. Finally made it back to tarmac and drove to the western part of the Hortobágy. We made a brief stop in Hortobágy village and tracked down a pair of Syrian Woodpeckers. First we spotted the female and then the male bird also came to investigate us. He sat on a walnut tree and gave excellent looks! After this short stop we continued our mission to try and locate the last remaining Ferruginous Ducks on the Hortobágy and with a bit of mud-wrestling we did see a party of 4 ducks eventually. We also had many Pygmy Cormorants, Bearded Tits and Goldcrests. A few fly by White-tailed Eagles were noted one juvenile was being attacked by two Western Marsh Harriers. The Penduline Tit remained elusive so we made our way towards Hortobágy village for lunch. On our way back a small flock of 50 Greater White-fronted Geese were seen close to the road and to our surprise 3 Red-breasted Geese were feeding with them allowing excellent looks. So we got our daily Red-breasted Geese!



*Male Syrian Woodpecker (left), Long-eared Owl (right) and some roadside Red-breasted Geese in rainy conditions (János Oláh).*

The gulyás soup in the Hortobágy Csárda was a good and we were soon on our way to look for more raptors in the improving weather. We soon located a fine Long-legged Buzzard and at the very same spot two adult Eastern Imperial Eagles were also showing their white patches on their scapulars and the golden nape. White-tailed Eagle was also seen. News came in that four Whooper Swans were just located a few kilometres away just in the directions we were heading. We made a stop by a flooded steppe area and located the swans and had an amazing four more juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagles. These eagles were flying around the geese and Cranes feeding on the harvested corn fields and regularly perched on the nearby trees and bales. It was such a great sighting and our count was up to 6 Imperial and 8 White-tailed Eagles by now. It was turning out to be a good raptor day after all! We decided to try our luck once more with the Greater Spotted Eagle. In the process of getting to Elep Fishponds we found a juvenile Red Kite which is definitely a local rarity. Finally we made it back to the area where we have already been in the morning when it was raining. Scanning the trees and bushes gave no result though yet another Eastern Imperial Eagle was found. Finally when we were about to give up the adult Greater Spotted Eagle was found on a small tree. It allowed good scope looks and it even flew short distances on two occasions, so we got to see it both in flight and perched. We were all happy and made our way back towards our hotel in Balmazújváros. However we

still found a few Red-breasted Geese in a roadside flock and also a pair of Saker Falcons were seen in the last few minutes of daylight! Our daily raptor count was up to 11 species which included 18 eagles of 3 species!



*Juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle (left), Red Kite (right) and White-tailed Eagle (János Oláh).*

On our last morning we left the hotel in dark and drove to the Virágoskúti Fishponds. It was an optional pre-breakfast excursion to check the crane and geese roost. While they were still showing potential rain for this morning the weather turned out to be ok. When we arrived to the fishpond where about 20 000 Common Cranes and 120 000 geese were roosting it was just getting light. The noise of tens of thousands of calling cranes and geese was amazing. It was a magical and truly unforgettable dawn chorus. In the next 40 minutes growing number and size flocks of cranes and geese left the fishpond creating a great wildlife spectacle. We even spotted about 20 Red-breasted Goose in the flying flocks of geese leaving the fishpond. Just as we were ready to go and have coffee a nice Eurasian Otter was running across the mudflat just about a 100 meter from us. We had excellent scope looks of this amazing mammal. When it was crossing a more open area we noticed a White-tailed Eagle flying low just about a meter from the ground towards the Otter with increasing speed. This juvenile eagle did attack the Otter though it quickly gave up and sat on the mud watching the Otter to disappear in the reedbed. What a great experience it was! Really satisfied with the superb morning experience we were back for a nice breakfast. After breakfast we were back to our 4x4 car and we drove to a wetland site to try our luck with Jack Snipe. Our local help Zoltán Ecsedi was waiting for

us and with his help we managed to find four Jack Snipes and got great flight views of these short-billed skulkers. This was our last real target in the Hortobágy, so very satisfied we drove back to the hotel, packed up and left for the Tisza Lake. We decided to take a look of the deeper parts of Tisza Lake in search of some early winter migrants on our way to Budapest. Indeed there were some winter migrants and checking the large Tisza Lake from various viewing points we managed to locate five Black-throated Divers, four Slavonian Grebes, a flock of 30 Goldeneyes, a female Common Scoter as well as Smew, Common Goosander and Red-breasted Merganser – a juvenile / female plumage individual from each of them. Along the lakeside willow trees Syrian Woodpecker was seen again. After this list-padding we had a nice lunch in a local restaurant and made our way to Budapest where the tour ended. Although it was only a four days long tour with two full days of birding, we all agreed it did certainly feel much longer as we packed in as much as we could! On such a short tour, the weather can be a serious problem (if foggy) but this year it was mostly good with one day of rain but no fog. We certainly had a wonderful break with many great memories and lots of geese too!

Come and join us for our next short break in November 2022!



*Common Cranes at dusk in the Hortobágy (János Oláh).*



*Adult Lesser White-fronted Goose showing its golden eyering (Sándor Borza).*

## SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

**CR** = Critically Endangered, **E** = Endangered, **V** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened

For polytypic species, the subspecies seen on the tour, where known, is placed in parentheses at the end of the species comment. Generally, species listed with trinomials are not currently split by the IOC.

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). 2021. IOC World Bird List (v 11.2). This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>. Please note, this was the current version when the report checklist was created. Some alternative names are given in parentheses.

All of our checklists are powered by our partner iGoTerra ([www.igoterra.com](http://www.igoterra.com)) who provide web and mobile applications for bird and wildlife enthusiasts and businesses. Their suite of services cover observations, rankings, lists, photos and trip management tools.

## BIRDS

**Red-breasted Goose** ◊ *Branta ruficollis* We had multiplied excellent looks of 267 individuals. **VU**



*Red-breasted Geese in flight (János Oláh).*

**Barnacle Goose** *Branta leucopsis* A singleton was seen on our first day.  
**Greylag Goose** *Anser anser* Up to 4000 were seen. This is the eastern *rubrirostris* race.  
**Tundra Bean Goose** ◊ *Anser fabalis* We had one sightings of 2 individuals.  
**Greater White-fronted Goose** *Anser albifrons* We had large numbers, one day we estimated 130 000.  
**Lesser White-fronted Goose** ◊ *Anser erythropus* A total of four adults were seen. Excellent looks! **VU**  
**Mute Swan** *Cygnus olor* 280 were counted on Tisza Lake.  
**Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna* An adult and a juvenile seen on one of the fishponds.  
**Northern Shoveler** *Anas clypeata* Up to 480 were counted on the Hortobágy.  
**Eurasian Wigeon** *Anas penelope* Hundreds were seen.  
**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos* Common.  
**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta* A few were seen only.  
**Eurasian Teal** *Anas crecca* About 100 were seen on the various floodwaters.  
**Common Pochard** *Aythya ferina* We counted 21 at one of the fishponds. **VU**  
**Ferruginous Duck** ◊ *Aythya nyroca* Four were seen at one of the fishponds. **NT**  
**Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula* Just 12 were seen on the Hortobágy and 20 at Tisza Lake.  
**Common Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula* About 30 were seen at Tisza Lake.  
**Common Scoter** *Melanitta nigra* One female / juvenile type was seen at Tisza Lake. Local rarity!  
**Smew** *Mergus albellus* One female / juvenile type was seen at Tisza Lake.  
**Common Merganser** *Mergus merganser* One female / juvenile type was seen at Tisza Lake.  
**Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator* One was seen at Virágoskúti Fishponds and one at Tisza Lake.  
**Common Pheasant** *Phasianus colchicus* Common.  
**Great Bustard** ◊ *Otis tarda* A group of 42 males were seen very well. Stunning! **VU**  
**Rock Dove** *Columba livia* Common.  
**Stock Dove** *Columba oenas* About 700 were seen on the tour.  
**Common Wood Pigeon** *Columba palumbus* A single one was seen in the Hortobágy.

**Eurasian Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto* Common.

**Water Rail** *Rallus aquaticus* (H) It was heard a few times.

**Eurasian Coot** *Fulica atra* Just a few were seen.

**Common Crane** *Grus grus* Around 20 000 were seen at a roosting fishpond and many excellent looks daytime.

**Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis* A singleton was seen in the Hortobágy and 9 at Tisza Lake.

**Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus* About 75 were seen in the Hortobágy and 10 at Tisza Lake.

**Horned Grebe** *Podiceps nigricollis* A group of four were seen at Tisza Lake. **VU**

**Northern Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus* Our largest flock was only about 100 individuals. **NT**

**Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola* (H) Just one was heard but we were busy with other things.

**Eurasian Curlew** *Numenius arquata* A total of 150 were seen. **NT**

**Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax* Just three were seen.

**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* A flock of 100 at Virágoskúti Fishponds.

**Jack Snipe** ◊ *Lymnocyptes minimus* A total of four were flushed out from a marsh.

**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago* About 16 were seen on the various wetlands.

**Spotted Redshank** *Tringa erythropus* A singleton was seen.

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* A singleton was seen.

**Black-headed Gull** *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Common.

**Common Gull** *Larus canus* About 80 were seen.

**Caspian Gull** *Larus cachinnans* Hundreds were seen on the Hortobágy.

**Black-throated Loon** *Gavia stellata* Five were seen at Tisza Lake.

**White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia* A single individual was seen in the Hortobágy.

**Pygmy Cormorant** ◊ *Microcarbo pygmeus* About 25 were seen at the various fishponds.

**Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo* Common.

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea* Common.

**Great Egret** *Ardea alba* Common.

**Greater Spotted Eagle** ◊ *Aquila clanga* One nice adult was seen. **VU**

**Eastern Imperial Eagle** ◊ *Aquila heliaca* A total of 13 were seen including juveniles and adults too. **VU**



*Juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle with muddy claws (János Oláh).*

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus* Several, daily sightings throughout.

**Western Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus* A few were seen on the Hortobágy.

**Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus* Enjoyed several looks, but only about 4 seen.

**Red Kite** *Milvus milvus* One juvenile was seen in the Hortobágy. Local rarity!

**White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla* A total of 25 were logged.

**Rough-legged Buzzard** *Buteo lagopus* Just two were seen on our first afternoon.

**Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo* Common.

**Little Owl** *Athene noctua* Five were seen on the Hortobágy.

**Long-eared Owl** *Asio otus* We enjoyed great views of a maximum of 70 individuals in Balmazújváros.



*Long-eared Owl at a communal roost where we saw 70 individuals (János Oláh).*

**Common Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis* Three were seen at various fishponds.

**Syrian Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos syriacus* Two pairs were seen on the tour.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major* The most common woodpecker on the tour.

**Black Woodpecker** *Dryocopus martius* A singleton was seen in flight.

**European Green Woodpecker** *Picus viridis* One was seen on our way to Tisza Lake.

**Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus* Common.

**Saker Falcon** *Falco cherrug* We had superb views of a pair twice and once distantly. **EN**

**Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus* One was seen in the Bihar Plains.

**Great Grey Shrike** *Lanius excubitor* Three were seen on the tour.

**Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius* Two were seen.

**Eurasian Magpie** *Pica pica* Common.

**Western Jackdaw** *Coloeus monedula* Regularly seen on the Hortobágy.

**Rook** *Corvus frugilegus* Common. A huge roosting flock was seen cc 10,000 or more birds.

**Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix* Common.

**Northern Raven** *Corvus corax* Two were seen only.

**Eurasian Blue Tit** *Cyanistes caeruleus* Common.

**Great Tit** *Parus major* Common.

**Bearded Reedling** *Panurus biarmicus* Great views on our second day. The male is a stunner!

**Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus* Two parties were seen – some of them were 'white-headed' birds.

**Eurasian Blackcap** *Sylvia atricapilla* A single male was seen at Gyökérvút Fishponds.

**Eurasian Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes* One was seen other were heard only.

**Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris* Common.  
**Common Blackbird** *Turdus merula* A few were seen.  
**Fieldfare** *Turdus pilaris* Two encounters with small flocks.  
**European Robin** *Erithacus rubecula* A single bird was seen where we had the Ferruginous Ducks.  
**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* Common.  
**Eurasian Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus* Common.  
**White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba* One was seen at Tisza Lake.  
**Common Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs* Just a few on the tour.  
**Eurasian Bullfinch** *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* A flock of 38 birds were seen, some of those showed well.  
**European Greenfinch** *Chloris chloris* A few were seen only.  
**European Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis* Common.  
**Eurasian Siskin** *Spinus spinus* A few flyover flocks and 3 at the Hortobágy Csárda.  
**Corn Bunting** *Emberiza calandra* A singleton was seen on our first afternoon.  
**Yellowhammer** *Emberiza citrinella* A flock of 12 in the Hortobágy and about 15 at Tisza Lake.  
**Common Reed Bunting** *Emberiza schoeniclus* Four were seen on the Hortobágy.

## MAMMALS

**European Hare (Brown H)** *Lepus europaeus* Several were seen on the Hortobágy.  
**Common Hamster** ◊ *Cricetus cricetus* One was seen at night. Great looks! **CR**  
**Eurasian Otter** *Lutra lutra* Superb looks of one at Virágoskúti fishponds – being attacked by White-tailed Eagle.  
**Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes* One was seen on the Hortobágy.  
**Western Roe Deer (Roe D)** *Capreolus capreolus* Up to 20 were seen daily.

APPENDIX: Overall results of the 'Bird of the tour' contest

Species	Points	Nominations
1st Red-breasted Goose	30	3
2nd Lesser White-fronted Goose	15	3
3rd Jack Snipe	5	1
4th Common Hamster	2	1
5th Saker	2	1

APPENDIX 2 - Other fauna & flora recorded

## BUTTERFLIES

**Clouded Yellow** *Colias crocea*  
**Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow** *Colias erate*