



Red-breasted Geese in flight in November 2018 in the Hortobágy National Park, Hungary (János Oláh).

HUNGARY: A LONG WEEKEND ON THE HORTOBÁGY

2 – 5 NOVEMBER 2018

LEADER: JÁNOS OLÁH and JÁNOS TAR

This swift weekend break to Hungary's Hortobágy National Park is all about geese. 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! Not many places in the World where you can see this two threatened geese species – Red-breasted and Lesser White-fronted - in such a short and comfortable weekend but the World Heritage Hortobágy National Park is certainly one of these! This year we did it again and had many excellent and multiplied looks of both species. In fact, we saw much more Red-breasted Goose than we expected, and we logged a total of 605 for the two full days geese-watching. We also counted 28 Lesser White-fronted Geese amongst the tens of thousands of Greater White-fronted Geese. Red-breasted Goose is certainly one of the best-looking geese in the World and every birder should be able to see and admire its beauty one day! The Lesser White-fronted Goose is subtler in appearance but is certainly a special goose as well!

The wintering grounds of Red-breasted Goose gradually shifting west in the last 30 years. Until the 1950s most of the population occurred along the western coast of the Caspian Sea - mainly in Azerbaijan, Iran and Iraq. The wintering area then rapidly shifted to the western Black Sea coast, and 80-90% of birds now congregate along the Black Sea coast. Even more recently, however, they wander further inland into the Romanian Baragan (salt lakes) area, along the Danube and increasing numbers are seen in Hungary and the Carpathian Basin too. Nowadays even the Birdlife International distribution map shows the Carpathian Basin as a wintering area. Within the Carpathian Basin the Hortobágy National Park is the most important staging area. In the last 20 years the Red-breasted Goose numbers simply doubled every 5 years and in 2014 / 2015 winter the count was over 2000 Red-breasted Goose in the Hortobágy area and probably around 2500 in the Carpathian Basin. The numbers are highly depending on the breeding success but certainly 2018 was a very good year for Red-breasted Geese in Hungary (the synchronised count a week after our tour resulted 1050 Red-breasted Geese in the Hortobágy area)!

Although we spent most of our time with geese watching we also had some fine supporting cast like Pygmy Cormorant, Ferruginous Duck, Great Bustard, Greater Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Rough-legged Buzzard, Saker, Long-eared Owl, Syrian and Black Woodpecker and Bearded Tit. Not to mention the spectacles of tens of thousands of Common Cranes at their roosting area.



Common Cranes flooding out of their roosting area at dawn (János Oláh).

The tour started in Budapest Liszt Ferenc Airport 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 for the day. After a short ride we had our picnic lunch by a gravel pit where some Great Crested Grebes and Eurasian Wigeons were floating about with a few Mallards. Our attention turned to a secluded road cutting across a mosaic of agricultural and grassy habitat which had many raptors. Obviously, these fields were full of voles and within no time we scored with two Long-legged Buzzard in amongst many Common Buzzards, about 15 Hen Harriers - including some lovely males, Western Marsh Harrier, three White-tailed Eagles and a magnificent Saker Falcon. A pretty impressive introduction to the countryside of the Hungarian Great Plain. However, we certainly not finished yet as our main target for the afternoon was to locate some wintering

Great Bustards. Surely enough it did not take long to find a flock of 11 big males on a rape field. It was a great location and we could get really close to these regal birds as they were feeding around. As we watched them foraging, we could compare their size with some Western Roe Deers standing side by side. Impressive birds indeed! This was a great start of the tour! It was time for us to drive east now and we arrived at the Bibic Nature Lodge in Balmazújváros for dinner. This great place was built and run by birders for birders and located in the eastern part of the Hortobágy National Park right by a soda lake.



Male Great Bustards on a rape field (top) and Saker Falcon (János Oláh).

Early next morning still before breakfast the first Red-breasted Goose of the tour was spotted from the lodge balcony by the restaurant. Not a bed start! After a substantial breakfast we shifted to our 4x4 cars and started our day-long wild goose chase! It was a brilliant sunny morning, so 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. This is the ideal time to see them from 10:00 to 15:00. We drove to one of the largest fishpond complexes in the northeast part of the Hortobágy. It was still early for the geese and first we scanned a fishpond which was full and quickly located a Red-throated Diver, Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes amongst the more common waterfowl. We moved to the large drained fishpond (with shallow water and mudflats) next and positioned ourselves for the best possible light for the incoming geese. There were already some geese on the mudflat and to our great surprise a flock of 40 Red-breasted Geese in perfect distance and light. It was amazing to see these lovely geese as long as we wanted. Then thousands and thousands of geese started to arrive from everywhere. In the next two hours 15 000 Greater White-fronted Geese arrived and we counted 164 Red-breasted Geese in amongst them. Janos Tar the Hungarian goose expert who was helping us spotted the first Lesser White-fronted Goose and we got pretty good looks, even the golden eye-ring was visible! Three more Lesser Whitefronts and a dark Branta geese was also spotted. This very dark looking goose was first seen three years ago, and we believe it's a melanistic Red-breasted Goose or a hybrid. It was a brilliant morning and our two main targets were already in the bag with superb views!



A flock of 40 Red-breasted Geese (in the foreground) were quickly seen at Virágoskút Fishponds (János Oláh).

Our visit to Virágoskút Fishponds was so good that we quickly made a master plan to visit two more geese staging area within the park, so we try to see as many Red-breasted Geese as possible on our first day! In about 45 minutes we drove to the Kondás pond of the Hortobágy Fishponds complex where the geese were already all gathering. A long-staying immature White Pelican was spotted in amongst the geese (rarity in Hungary) and we were very lucky to see 14 Lesser White-fronted Geese very well. It was three family parties with 3+3+2 juveniles. They were in perfect light and the distance was also good. Small parties of Redbreasts were also mixed in and we counted a total of 91 birds. Next we checked the fishpond number 7 just a few hundred meters away where the fish harvesting was happening so we could see this interesting process while also scanning through the geese. This pond held 31 Red-breasted, 2 Lesser Whitronts and 2 Bean Geese. We also had Eurasian Spoonbill, Golden Plovers and Black-tailed Godwits here. We had our picnic lunch at the beginning of the Hortobágy Fishponds while watching 150 Pygmy Cormorants and a single Ferruginous Duck. Our next area to be visited was a vast wetland in the southwestern part of the park. There were 50 000 geese reported the previous day. Indeed, when we arrived the wetland and the surrounding grassland was dark from the masses of geese. There were also many White-tailed Eagles around and time to time they flushed the geese. We spent the last hour of the day at this location where we counted 157 Red-breasted, 6 Lesser Whitefronts and a Bernacle Goose. Additional goodies included a male Ruddy Shelduck which is most probably a genuine vagrant arriving with the hords of Greater White-fronted Geese. A fine subadult Eastern Imperial Eagle was also scoped on a nearby tree-top. Light was fading, and the geese started to leave the wetland in small flocks. We also decided to call it a day and drove back to our lodge for a

nice evening meal. Our amazing first day yielded 444 Red-breasted Geese and 26 Lesser White-fronted Geese! It was definitely much more than we were expecting.



Geese flock (top) and Rough-legged Buzzard (János Oláh).

On our second full day we left the lodge in dark and drove to the Virágoskúti Fishponds. It was an optional pre-breakfast excursion to check the crane roost while we had no fog and this morning was still supposed to be clear. When we arrived to the fishpond where about 40 000 Common Cranes were roosting it was just getting light. We were standing there in almost full darkness and enjoyed the noise of tens of thousands of calling cranes. It was a magical and truly unforgettable dawn chorus. Growing number and size flocks of cranes and geese left the fishpond as the sun was rising creating a great wildlife spectacle. Really satisfied with the superb morning experience we were back for a nice breakfast. Back to our 4x4 cars we drove to a wetland site with many willow bushes and poplar trees. We were after a wintering Greater Spotted Eagle and local knowledge was very handy as we knew the exact time and movement of the bird. We were not

disappointed and quickly found the adult Greater Spotted Eagle and got very good scope views. There were several White-tailed Eagles around and we also had Black Woodpecker, Redwing, Fieldfare and a Great Grey Shrike. The eagle decided to move, and we got excellent flight looks of this rather rare eagle. In the next two hours we made a thorough coverage of the 'Angel House' puszta area in the hope that we can still spot a late Eurasian Dotterel. The grassland was empty and though a few Golden Plovers made a bit of excitement we could not locate any dotties. Our best bird was a Little Owl.



Common Cranes leaving the roost site (top), juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle (left) and adult Greater Spotted Eagle (János Oláh).

Our next destination was yet another wetland in the Bihar Plains. It was brilliant sunshine when we arrived and time for a picnic lunch! There were geese everywhere when we arrived and Red-breasted Geese were scattered in small 5-15 individual flocks. Our count yielded 64 Redbreasts in total and although we only managed to find a single Lesser White-fronted Goose, it was in the closest flock and our best view so far! While enjoying our picnic lunch with a nice walnut and apple cake to finish we could admire this superb Lesser White-fronted Goose. This wetland however was the most outstanding for the eagles. We saw at least five different Eastern Imperial Eagles, several White-tailed Eagles, a few Hen Harriers, Western Marsh Harriers and a Peregrine Falcon. We also thoroughly checked the resting Lapwings – 1640 individuals – for a potential Sociable Plover but we had no luck finding this rarity. There were Eurasian Curlews, several Common Snipes and a few Ruff around too.



Adult male Lesser White-fronted Goose with its well visible golden eye-ring (János Oláh).

Time was flying, and we returned to Balmazújváros for the late afternoon. When we arrived back to the lodge area, we found about 20 000 geese grazing on the grassland in front of the lodge. We could not resist a quick scan though we were already Red-breasted out for the tour, seeing them in every flock we looked at. We counted about 59 Redbreasts. A lone juvenile came very close to us and we also spotted a nice Taiga Bean Goose. Finally, a calling flock of 38 Red-breasted Geese flew right over us without landing in this huge flock. It was late afternoon now and when something put up the geese most of them flew out of the area. It was also time for us to go and check out if we can find any Long-eared Owls. We drove to the middle of the town and checked a garden which is a favorite roosting area for these owls. The willow trees were still with leaves but the more we looked, the more owls we spotted and finally our count was 28 Long-eared Owls. We enjoyed looking at these orange-eyed beauties, it was a fitting final to our long but excellent day. Our amazing second day yielded 160 Red-breasted Geese and 2 Lesser White-fronted Geese! We also had five Eastern Imperial, eight White-tailed and a Greater Spotted Eagle. It was an action-packed day indeed from pre-dawn to dusk!



Juvenile Red-breasted Goose (top) with Hungarian Flecked Cattle in the background. Long-eared Owl in Balmazújváros (left) and a flock of 18 Red-breasted Goose in flight (János Oláh).



A flock of 10 Red-breasted Geese with Water Buffalos in the background (János Oláh).

Our last morning was foggy! We had time for birding until lunch and then we had to drive to the airport. Luckily, we did not need to look for geese as we had all we wanted on the two full days. The best idea we could come up with was a walk in reedbed habitat. Our main goal was to find Bearded Tits. In the last two days we heard them a few times but only a few fleeting flight-views were obtained by some. We drove to Hortobágy Fishponds and by the time we arrived the fog has lifted (at least where we were) so in brilliant sunshine again we walked along the extensive reedbed until we found a party of Bearded Tits. There were several males and females and they really did perform well in perfect light. We also had Pygmy Cormorants, Ferruginous Duck, White-tailed Eagle and Water Pipit. Mission was completed when we got a short text on the local birdline that Nutcracker was seen in the Hortobágy village. A local rarity and this autumn we have been experiencing an invasion of Siberian birds of the macrorhynchos race. As we still had about an hour and it was on our way back to the lodge we embarked on a local twitch! In about 15 minutes we were back in the village but it was still (or again) foggy so visibility was not the best. We walked around the small streets and coveys where the bird was reported but we never managed to see the Nutcracker. We saw a nice male Syrian Woodpecker, Eurasian Treecreeper and a many tits. After an hour we gave up and returned to the Bábic Nature Lodge for our last lunch and packing. In the afternoon we drove to Budapest Liszt Ferenc Airport where the tour ended.

Although it was only a four days long little break 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 only, the weather can be a serious problem (if foggy) but this year it was really excellent and very kind to us. We certainly had a wonderful break with many great memories, a nice group of Birdquesters and lots of fun. And of course lots of geese too!

Come and join us for our next short break in November 2019!



Male Bearded Reedling was seen very well on our last morning (János Oláh).

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). 2018. IOC World Bird List (v 8.2)**. 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) 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

Total of bird species recorded: 100

Red-breasted Goose ♦ *Branta ruficollis* We had multiplied excellent looks of 605 individuals. **VU**

Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis* A singleton was seen on the huge wetland on our first day.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser* Up to 3000 were seen. This is the eastern *rubrirostris* race.

Taiga Bean Goose *Anser fabalis* We had three sightings of 4 individuals.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* We had large numbers, one day we estimated 65 000.

Lesser White-fronted Goose ♦ *Anser erythropus* A total of 28 were seen. Excellent looks! **VU**



Mixed flock of geese with mostly Greylags and Greater White-fronted Geese (János Oláh).

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* About 12 were seen.

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* A nice male was seen with the hords of Greater Whitefronts.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* Hundreds were seen.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* Hundreds were seen.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Common.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* A few were seen only.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* A few were seen on the Hortobágy.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* About 100 were seen on the various floodwaters.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* About 50 were seen at Tisza Lake. **VU**

Ferruginous Duck ♦ *Aythya nyroca* Just 14 were seen at Virágoskút Fishponds. **NT**

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* One was seen at Virágoskút Fishponds.

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* Common.

Red-throated Loon *Gavia stellata* One was seen at Virágoskút Fishponds.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* A singleton was seen.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* A few sightings on the tour.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* One was seen at Virágoskút Fishponds.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* Four late staying individual was seen at Hortobágy Fishponds.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Common.
Great Egret *Ardea alba* Common.
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* A single late individual was seen at Hortobágy Fishponds.
White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* A long-staying immature bird was seen at Hortobágy Fishponds.
Pygmy Cormorant ♦ *Microcarbo pygmeus* Up to 150 were seen at Hortobágy Fishponds
Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Common.
Greater Spotted Eagle ♦ *Aquila clanga* One nice adult was seen very well. **VU**
Eastern Imperial Eagle ♦ *Aquila heliaca* A total of 5 immatures and a subadult was seen. **VU**
Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* Several sightings throughout.
Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* A few were seen on the Hortobágy.
Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* Enjoyed many excellent looks, especially on our first day.
White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* A total of 18 were seen.
Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus* Just two were seen.
Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* Common.
Great Bustard ♦ *Otis tarda* A group of 11 males were seen very well. **VU**
Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* (NL) It was heard regularly, one was seen by some.
Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* Just a few were seen.
Common Crane *Grus grus* Around 40 000 were seen at a roosting fishpond.
Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* Two late individuals were seen at Hortobágy Fishponds.
Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* Our largest flock was 1640 individuals. **NT**
Eurasian Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* A total of 68 were seen.



Juvenile Eurasian Golden Plover (János Oláh).

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* (LO) Just one was seen by Janos.
Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* A total of 41 were seen. **NT**
Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* Just one was seen at Hortobágy Fishponds. **NT**
Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* Just three were seen.
Dunlin *Calidris alpina* Small flocks were seen.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* About 16 were seen on the various wetlands.
Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* Nine were seen.
Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* Three were seen from our lodge.
Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Common.
Mew Gull *Larus canus* Just five were seen.
Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* Hundreds were seen on the Hortobágy.
Rock Dove *Columba livia* Common.
Stock Dove *Columba oenas* 25 were seen on the Hortobágy.
Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Common.
Little Owl *Athene noctua* Two were seen on the Hortobágy.
Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* We enjoyed great views of 28 individuals in Balmazújváros.
Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus* Three were seen on the tour.
Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* The most common woodpecker on the tour.
Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* Two were seen.
European Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* One was seen by one car only.
Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* Common.
Saker Falcon ♦ *Falco cherrug* We had superb views of one on our first afternoon. **EN**
Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* One was seen in the Bihar Plains.
Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* One was seen while watching the Greater Spotted Eagle.
Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* Three were seen.
Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* Common.
Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula* Regularly seen on the Hortobágy.
Rook *Corvus frugilegus* Common.
Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* Common.
Northern Raven *Corvus corax* A singleton on the way to the airport.
Coal Tit *Parus ater* One was seen.
Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* Common.
Great Tit *Parus major* Common.
Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* (H) Heard only on our first day when we have bigger fish to fry.
Bearded Reedling ♦ *Panurus biarmicus* Great views on our last morning.
Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* One was seen only. Landed and disappeared...
Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* A party of six were seen – some of them were 'white-headed' birds.
Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* Two were seen at Virágoskút Fishponds.
Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* (H) It remained heard only.
Common Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* One was seen at Hortobágy village.
Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* Common.
Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* A few were seen.
Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* Two encounters with small flocks.
Redwing *Turdus iliacus* Two were seen at Elep Fishponds. **NT**
European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* Two were seen at Hortobágy village.
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Common.
Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Common.
Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* A few were seen, mostly in flight. **NT**
Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* Two were seen in flight. See note
Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* Just a few on the tour.
European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris* Two were seen only.
Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina* Just one seen in flight on the first afternoon.
European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* Common.
Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* A flock of 8 flew over the lodge one morning.
Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* Two were seen on our first day on the Hortobágy.
Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* Four were seen on the Hortobágy.



Western Roe Deer (János Oláh).

MAMMALS

Total of mammal species recorded: 4

European Hare (Brown H) *Lepus europaeus* One was seen on the Hortobágy.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* One was seen on the Hortobágy.

Least Weasel *Mustela nivalis* (NL) One was seen by some.

Western Roe Deer (Roe D) *Capreolus capreolus* Up to 20 were seen daily.

NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

The most up to date referenced taxonomic list referred to in the Tour Report is that of the IOC World Bird Names. Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). 2018. IOC World Bird List (v 8.2). Available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

This species was formerly called Rock Pipit, but that name is now used for the coastal form *petrosus*, which is nowadays split off as a separate species with the name Water Pipit now used for the residual *A. spinoletta*. Recent studies of plumage, voice and genetics suggest that the three races of Water Pipit might be better regarded as three separate species. The HBW suggests it might be a future split into three species. It would be Western Water Pipit *A. spinoletta*, Caucasian Water Pipit *A. coutellii* and Eastern Water Pipit *A. blakistoni*. We saw the **Western Water Pipit** on the tour.