

Hungary 2005 April

Hungary – 18th to 23rd April 2005 – Chasing Woodpeckers with Gerard Gorman

After lots of long-haul trips to Australasia, Asia and North America I thought it was time to try and plug a few gaps in my European list and use the opportunity to study species which may turn up in the UK but are not every day birds. Two weeks spent in Hungary and Poland were part gap filling and part “familiarisation” trips to see just how two of my “Anytime Tour” partners conducted their businesses. Not only was I gratified that they really know their stuff and organise well, but very impressed with the Eastern European spring... the spectacle of thousands of lekking Ruff and hundreds of marshy terns would of themselves justified the trip. I found Hungary to be a pretty country with neat cottages and tidy small towns. The countryside was less agribusiness, more farming – although change is obvious too...

Our Timing wasn't perfect, as we were too early for some summer visitors such as River and Aquatic Warblers, but it was prime time to see woodland species before the canopy becomes too closed in. The weather was very changeable but this did not spoil our trip. What is more no one could have worked harder than Gerard to get us the birds we most wanted to see without me having to suffer the arthritic pain long hikes induce.

Day by Day

Day One – 18th April 2005

Our [Bo & Maggie Crombet-Beolens and Andy Senior] sojourn started at Manston [Kent's International Airport] in the late morning of 18th April 2005. EU Jet now fly from here to Budapest at silly prices making this delightful city a very affordable weekend destination [at the time of writing flights have been suspended since Budapest Airport decided to raise its airport taxes by 300%]. Our plan was to spend a few days with Gerard Gorman before moving on to Poland for another week or so. The target for the trip was to get all 10 European Woodpeckers [for the purposes of this report we treat wryneck as a woodpecker and knew that only 9 out of 10 could be realistically found in Hungary; number 10 being on offer later in Poland] as well as some assorted lifers; Great Bustard for Andy & Maggie, Ural Owl for all etc.

We arrive mid afternoon to check into our slightly down at heel hotel in time to wander around a little and enjoy the street café scene passing by – the intrepid member of our small party did wander across the Danube so he tick “Buda” as we were on the “Pest” side. We stayed at the Matyas City Hotel – which boast a very good restaurant complete with gypsy band.

Day Two – 19th April 2005

Next morning, we were picked up at the hotel by Gerard and set off for the hills. The motorway out of town gave us a chance to start building the trip list and take in the flat rural scenery. One stop at a rest halt allowed us to observe a distant Eastern Imperial Eagle roosting near a very large nest as well as a few common and familiar species

and the virtually ubiquitous Crested Larks. A few migrant Yellow Wagtails and an unexpected Kingfisher also brightened the journey.

Our stop for the night was at the [Nomad Hotel](#) in the [Bükk Hills](#) – where we dumped our bags and checked in early before taking our first foray into the hills in search of Woodpeckers and warblers. The villages and farmland, vineyards and woods form an attractive tapestry around the location of our hotel at Noszvaj. The hoped-for Syrian Woodpecker wasn't found but we did get a view of our first woodpecker for the trip – Great Spotted in a small copse on the edge of a village before and spent a while around vineyards clocking up familiar species in unfamiliar numbers like Tree Sparrows and Corn Buntings as well as the common but less familiar Serin. Andy managed Garden Warbler, a bird which eluded the rest of us in Hungary! A quick look at a lake produced Common Cormorant and Grey Heron only and a stop by ploughed fields with pylons produce a probably Eastern Imperial Eagle, many Buzzards and a large hawk – probably a Goshawk but no Saker as we had hoped. However, we did connect wonderfully with our second woodpecker of the trip when Gerard's sharp ears picked up the call of a wryneck – which was in fact a calling pair of Wrynecks which gave us terrific views of their marvellously cryptic plumage. Two down – seven to go! Despite the cool weather we also managed to see our first swallows coming through low clearly on migration rather than the local breeding birds.

At one stop we also managed to see a couple of Ravens drifting over. completing the corvid tally for the day. We bought some supplies at a village shop and headed for an area of woodland where we lunched on bread and cheese and the local candy bars. We tried to bring in Black Woodpecker [without success] with a taped call but did attract a couple of Lesser-Spotted Woodpeckers. We also managed views of Blackcap, Woodlark, Chiffchaff and the ubiquitous Hawfinches.

We also took our first foray into the forest proper in search of White-backed woodpecker but dipped – the road follows a stream and the stream was very, very high due to the heavy rain over the preceding days, debris had been deposited onto the track and the stream had breached its banks in a number of places. We did see numerous Hawfinches and several more Great-spotted and glimpsed Middle-spotted Woodpeckers.

We decided to cut short our visit because of the conditions and to return the following day so left for more birding around the local farmland and villages. Gerard took us to a village where he had often seen Syrian Woodpecker and we drove around the village and then on to a back lane where one could look down on to the garden plots and orchards. Here we were treated to a real spectacle of a pair of Syrian Woodpeckers chasing each other around and eventually mating on the top of a telegraph pole. In the 15 minutes that we watched them we were able to see every diagnostic ID point in very fine detail. After this treat we headed back towards the hotel to another of Gerard's favoured woodpecker haunts. Five woodpeckers down, four to go!

The weather was not kind to us and the intermittent drizzle was accompanied by a very cold and brisk breeze at times when we went to the village pond in Noszvaj. We sheltered by the car and around a hedge but when the wind dropped and the rain gave

us respite we were rewarded with great views of the northern race of Long-tailed Tits, Nuthatches, Black Redstarts, Chaffinches, Hawfinches and Greenfinches and our first and only Green Woodpecker of the trip. The hawfinches were a delight and proved to be the first of very many seen every day and in good numbers wherever there were wooded areas.

We were then treated to excellent views of a pair of Middle-spotted Woodpeckers that stayed a good half an hour picking a rotten limb of an oak allowing us to get good scoped views and to get into our heads the special red and extent of the cap which is diagnostic. During the hour or so we spent at this pond Gerard also managed to get us a good scoped view of our only Grey-headed Woodpecker of the trip. Maybe not the best or closest view but Woodpecker number seven leaving us with just two to clock up in Hungary.

By late afternoon we were ready to head back for the hotel and partake of a warming libation whilst waiting for our meal to be readied. The Nomad proved to be a very comfortable hotel with an extremely pleasant and attentive hostess who told us how new the building was despite it being very traditionally built fitting into the locality perfectly.

Day Three – 20th April 2005

Day two of our birding dawned cold and wet with our spirits a little dampened by the weather. Over breakfast we reminded ourselves that the previous day had been a 7-woodpecker day and so one to rejoice in. After a very hearty breakfast we headed again for the forest and along the swollen stream. This time it was a little less of a torrent and we had breaks of dry spells between the sleet and rain so headed up the track full of hope in search of White-backed and Black Woodpeckers. Gerard called at every opportunity and even had an answering call once or twice but we had to content ourselves, for the most part, with the commonplace – the ever present Hawfinches, however, we did see our first Collared Flycatchers. Despite one or two places where the road had washed out or limbs had fallen we went several miles along the track heading towards a clearing which Gerard felt would produce Ural Owl and, just a few yards before the clearing we managed to get brilliant views of a Ural Owl sitting in a conifer. At first the bird showed only their back but it eventually turned to stare then blink at us before taking to the air and disappearing into the forest.

We lunched in the clearing and even managed to add a few trip ticks such as Teal and Mallard in an area where the stream formed a shallow pond and White Wagtail in the open area.

We re-traced our steps but still only managed the woodpeckers we saw most frequently. Great-spotted and Middle Spotted. Stopping at the entrance to the track where Rock Bunting are sometimes seen we managed Raven and Dunnock, Great Tit and Blue Tit and a raptor which we did not confidently ID – probably one of the smaller Eagles. From here we went to another wooded area where the road transacted woodland and hunted in the rain for other woodland species. We did see more Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers and numerous Nuthatches [including one adding mud to a nest entrance.] We finished the day with a last visit to the pond near our hotel in the hope

of adding Black Woodpecker – but this failed to materialise. So we retreated to the hotel for another splendid meal and a glass or two of the local red wine.

Day Four – 21st April 2005

We left the Bükk hills for Lake Tisza and the Hortobágy National Park. The drive produced more common species and a great many places where White Storks were nesting on village roofs and power poles. The flat farmlands were good places to search for Saker so we spent a fair bit of time en route doing just that. One foray turned up our only Grey Partridge for Hungary as well as many Pheasants, Common Kestrels, & Sky Larks etc. At one stop a pond was surrounded by Great White Egrets, Storks, and Herons as well as a skulking Common Cuckoo sheltering from the wind and fooling us into thinking we had seen a small raptor.

We eventually did manage to connect with a Saker which dashed across the road in front of us. We managed to find somewhere to stop and eventually saw the bird and watched it drift away being mobbed by Hooded Crows all the way. Every field seemed to hold Marsh Harriers too. We got to some fish ponds a short time before the gates were due to be closed but we did manage to add Pygmy Cormorant to the tally as well as a lot of duck species and Black Terns and a few passerines such as Sedge Warblers before having to drive out from the ponds.

Later that afternoon we checked into a pleasant pension in Tiszafüred with an unpleasant ground water smell. the sulphur took some getting used to. However, we would recommend [Nādas Panziō](#) with its clean and well presented rooms with good strong showers and tea-making facilities and a breakfast room. It also has a pool and a neat garden and a neighbour with around one hundred working bee hives amongst a small orchard – much favoured by Serin and Wryneck. In the evening we went to one of the towns restaurants and had a most enjoyable meal with each of us trying a different local dish.

Day Five – 22nd April 2005

This was our most productive day – in terms of the number of species seen [72] – which started when we drove across the flat lands of [Hortobágy](#) to meet up with Dr Gabor Kovacs who was to take us to a great spot for Great Bustard. The tracks across the puszta were pretty waterlogged which meant that those in search of Bustard were in for a long walk. However, they did manage to see, quite distantly, a group of bustard so the walk was well worth it. One of the party [Maggie] at first heard, and then say, Common Quail along another track. I [bo] stayed with the vehicle and enjoyed watching Common Cranes, Meadow Pipits, a hunting Montague's Harrier, Yellow Wagtails, Jackdaws etc. We visited an area which holds breeding Aquatic Warblers – but it was still a week or two too early for them to have arrived. The area was generally productive and we went on to the fishponds we had visited the previous day to have a better, longer look. Despite the cold wind we did get wonderful views of displaying Bluethroats, our only Common Sandpiper for Hungary, and a variety of wildfowl and water birds including a large number of Black-crowned Night Herons.

We stopped and ate our lunch at a small lake which had a number of pairs of Garganey and many Ferruginous Ducks as well as more familiar species. We saw a number of

marsh terns of all three species [Black; White-winged Black and Whiskered Terns] too as well as our first Swifts.

En route for another area of grasslands we saw at least one Red-footed Falcon and numerous Marsh Harriers. We stopped at a large farm where there was a herd of Hungarian Grey Cattle and here we enjoyed watching Cuckoos, hirundines and the like and both Peregrine and Hobby but were surprised to see a White-tailed Eagle fly high over head.

We spent some time along the bank of a canalised river looking for Black Woodpecker without success but did clock up Common Treecreeper and another Kingfisher as well as passage Collared Flycatcher, and Lesser-spotted Woodpecker.

Our final attempt to get Black Woodpecker was very near the Hotel in an area by the River where there was a campsite. Here we were entertained by more good views of Wryneck and eventually the prize of not one, but a pair of Black Woodpeckers! They flew back and forth coming to a tape and chasing each other so close that we were able to easily tell male from female. 8 down – just one left to go.

Over another delicious local dish at the same restaurant as before we discussed plans for the next day. Having cleaned up on all the target species except White-backed Woodpecker we decided to spend the next day by an early start for the Bükk Hills and the forest track as our flight from Budapest to Katowicz was not until late evening.

Day Six – 23rd April 2005

The first couple of hours of the day was spent heading for the hills with our last realistic chance of the last Hungarian woodpecker. By mid-morning we were following the familiar track through the forest in quite unfamiliar weather – dry, bright and even touching warm! The Collared Flycatchers were too numerous to count and our hopes were raised by Great-spotted, Middle-spotted and Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers before we finally hit gold when Andy spotted a fine White-backed Woodpecker busily demolishing a rotten branch on the ground across the stream. So, intent was the bird's industry that we were all able to get scoped views before it exited stage right calling all the while.

Flushed with success we decided to head back to the plains and another National Park [?] an hour or so out of Budapest.

Here we saw several new species for the trip such as Wheatears and I was able to tick Great Bustard too courtesy of a spot well-known to Gerard. This was the sunniest and warmest day of our stay in Hungary and a red-letter day – not only did the White-backed complete our target list, but it was a lifer for all three of us.

By six PM we were at the airport to find some dinner and await our onward flights.