

Birding Abroad – The Carpathian Basin Trip Report

Thursday 30 April – Friday 8 May 2026

Set amid the rolling grasslands of the Great Hungarian Plain and the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, eastern Hungary and neighbouring southern Slovakia offer some of Central Europe's finest birdwatching landscapes. Our visit was timed to savour the delights of all these areas during peak spring breeding activity. The group comprised Baden Barker, Steve & Viv Cook, Dave & Sue Cropper, John Dibbs, Ken Pinney, Joyce & Paul Simmons and Tony & Theresa Walker, with Lance and Nick leading for Birding Abroad.

Our flights from the south and north of the UK arrived in Budapest from early to mid-afternoon, allowing the group to rendezvous and meet Dani our local guide. With luggage loaded onto the minibus, and under the watchful eye of a pair of Crested Lark in the airport car park, we soon headed east along the motorway towards Debrecen, Hungary's second city. The weather could hardly have been kinder. Beneath clear blue skies, warm evening light illuminated the wide Hungarian countryside as we travelled deeper into the Great Plain. Small groups of Roe Deer grazed beside the road alongside many Common Pheasants and Hooded Crows, whilst Western Marsh-harriers quartered the wheat and oilseed rape fields and Common Buzzards perched lazily on roadside fence posts. All these became familiar sights during the week but as we crossed the River Tisza, a Black Kite drifted above its wooded banks, still a bird restricted in range and habitat here.



It was 8.00 pm, and the sun was sinking into a magnificent orange and pink sky when we reached the village of Balmazújváros in the Hortobágy region. A warm welcome from the hosts of our nature lodge was followed by an excellent evening meal of duck and a sumptuous poppy-seed torte. Outside, the night was clear and rather cool and as the lodge settled into silence, a Common Nightingale sang intermittently in the darkness, a perfect start to our tour.

Friday 1 May

Breakfast was at 7.30 am, although most of the group had already gathered on the lodge terrace admiring the floodplain meadows which stretched out before us. It was a remarkable scene to wake

up to. Ten Wood Sandpipers fed actively in the shallows alongside scattered groups of Ruff, many of the males resplendent in their extravagant and vary-coloured breeding plumage. Both species stage here in impressive numbers before continuing to their more northerly breeding grounds.

Small islands in the floodwater held breeding Pied Avocets and Black-winged Stilts, while around 50 Whiskered Terns drifted gracefully back and forth. The surrounding wet meadows supported at least 200 Greylag Geese, together with small numbers of Common Shelduck, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Wigeon, Mallard, Gadwall and Common Teal. A surprise Ruddy Shelduck added further interest. Watching over the entire scene was a White-tailed Eagle perched prominently on a post in the morning sun. Not a bad start to the day we concluded!

After a leisurely breakfast we headed out towards an area of *puszta* near Nádudvar to experience the iconic steppe habitat for which the Hortobágy is famed. En-route we passed herds of traditional Hungarian Grey Cattle grazing the meadows, their enormous horns adding to the timeless atmosphere of the landscape. Roadside verges were covered in Hoary Cress, their frothy creamy-white flowers seemingly ubiquitous during our stay in the region. Our guide led us down a road which became a dirt track and from here we disembarked to scan the vast open plains, quickly picking up our first Red-footed Falcons hawking insects over the grassland. Hungarians fittingly refer to them as “blue kestrels”, and the elegant adult males in particular, looked superb in the bright morning light. Around fifteen birds were present altogether, including several females, while nearby Common Kestrels ensured we checked each falcon carefully. The air was full of birdsong. Skylarks poured song continuously from above, joined by Corn Buntings, while the repetitive calls of two Common Quail drifted across the grassland. Rooks fed busily in the fields and three Whinchats were much appreciated, given the species’ ongoing decline in the UK. Highlight of the morning were three sightings of Montagu’s Harriers, all males distantly quartering the steppe before heat haze began to blur the horizon. Walking back along the track, sparse hedgerows produced two male Red-backed Shrikes, one shown below, freshly arrived for the summer and always charismatic birds to watch.



A couple of Common Cranes flew over, while Common Hoopoes and a Black Woodpecker, served as unmistakable reminders that we were now deep in Central Europe. A Tree Pipit perched briefly on roadside wires, our only sighting of the trip, while Common Stonechats proved widespread throughout the area. Common Starlings already had fledged young, and noisy family groups fed actively around the fields. White Storks occupied nests atop telegraph poles as we continued towards a nearby wetland where we stopped for lunch on a raised grassy mound overlooking the surrounding marshes. Here we found more Ruff together with a single Black-tailed Godwit. A pair of Hobbies hawked insects overhead while two White-tailed Sea-eagles circled high above us. From the reedbeds came the constant chattering song of Sedge Warblers, and a brilliantly coloured European Roller sat conspicuously on roadside wires.

During the early afternoon we explored another area of *puszta* where, just days earlier, a small group (or 'trip') of Eurasian Dotterel had been reported. Unfortunately, the birds had moved on, but the walk itself was delightful, with the short turf carpeted in swathes of Chamomile and other steppe flowers and grasses. Several Western Yellow Wagtails of the blue-headed race *flava* were noted as well as fairly numerous Eurasian Skylarks, while a Common Buzzard and several Red-footed Falcons drifted overhead. Another European Roller added further colour to the afternoon.

Mid-afternoon we had moved on again to explore one of the many scattered wetland complexes that make the Hortobágy such an exceptional mosaic of habitats. The first small pool held a pair of Pygmy Cormorant, whilst a Great Reed-warbler croaked loudly from the edges. Moving on we reached a more extensive area of flooded pools which produced some truly outstanding birding. Marsh terns were the main attraction, with more than 100 Whiskered Terns accompanied by 15 Black Terns and three delicate White-winged Terns feeding low over the water. Amongst them were 12 Little Gulls, mostly immaculate adults in full summer plumage, together with a single second-calendar-year bird. Around 15 Garganey added further quality to the site.



Whiskered Terns, with a single Black Tern, White-winged Tern and Garganey

The muddy margins teemed with waders including 40 Wood Sandpipers, around 150 Ruff and three Common Snipe. Best of all, however, was a superb Marsh Sandpiper and a striking Spotted Redshank,

both in elegant summer plumage. Here too, and rather bizarrely, a Savi's Warbler chose to perch in full view atop a solitary bulrush spike isolated from the main reedbed, highly uncharacteristic behaviour, but allowing the group prolonged telescope views as it sang. As if the spectacle needed further improvement, a juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle appeared overhead. What a session!



Our final stop of the day was a short walk nearby which produced two more European Rollers and yet another pair of Eastern Imperial Eagles, one of which was pursued vigorously by a territorial Short-eared Owl. A few Caspian Gulls circled over a nearby reservoir, a Eurasian Bittern boomed from deep within the reeds, a Black Stork drifted overhead and a Purple Heron rose slowly from the marsh as we finally boarded the minibus for the drive back to the lodge.

Butterflies on the wing included Small Copper, Brown Argus, Small Heath, Wall, Common Blue, Southern Small White, Large White, Swallowtail, Green-veined White, Clouded Yellow and Queen of Spain Fritillary, several of these being noted again throughout the week ahead.

It had been a fabulous first full day in the Hortobágy. Another excellent home-cooked evening meal and a few drinks rounded things off nicely, while outside the Common Nightingale once again sang intermittently into the darkness as we turned in for the night.

Saturday 2 May

Breakfast was again at 7.30 am, although several of us were out scanning the adjacent washlands beforehand. Much the same cast of birds remained from the previous morning, though a Peregrine Falcon powering through the marsh flushed around 120 Ruff into the air, and a Black Stork circled distantly above woodland beyond the floodplain.

After breakfast we set off west towards the Halastó fishpond system, passing a Cattle Egret feeding in roadside fields and an enormous rookery thought to contain four thousand nesting pairs! Travelling across the vast open landscape gave a real sense of the scale of the Hortobágy. Historically, this

immense plain was shaped by the flooding of the River Tisza, whose wandering channels created extensive marshes, wet meadows and alkaline grasslands over centuries. Although much of the original river system has long since been regulated or drained, the remaining wetlands still feel wonderfully wild to the visiting birder. The fishponds themselves were first established in the early 1900s and later expanded during the communist era of the mid-20th century.



Originally intended for commercial fish farming, they now represent one of the great ironies of modern conservation: while many natural wetlands elsewhere in Hungary disappeared through drainage and river regulation, these artificial ponds evolved into exceptional refuges for wildlife. Their mosaic of shallow pools, reedbeds, mud margins and open water now provide ideal habitat for huge numbers of breeding and migrating birds.

We arrived at the visitor centre shortly after 9.00 am and began a leisurely walk north along one of the embankment trails threading through the ponds. A gentle breeze stirred the willows lining the water and from within them came the delicate calls of our first Eurasian Penduline-tits. Patience eventually rewarded us with brief but pleasing views, and at least two birds were seen well whilst several others called invisibly from deeper cover. The willow scrub held a good selection of migrants: four Wood Warblers glowing bright yellow amongst the fresh spring foliage, accompanied by several Lesser Whitethroats and Common Nightingales. An Icterine Warbler burst briefly into song before disappearing almost immediately, almost certainly another migrant passing through. Common Chiffchaff and Reed Bunting were new additions to the steadily growing trip list.

Eventually we reached an observation tower overlooking the marshes and were greeted by a superb spectacle. The main lake seemed alive with terns: at least 150 Whiskered Terns danced constantly above the water, accompanied by around 30 elegant White-winged Terns and 50 Black Terns. Feeding amongst the floating vegetation were at least 50 Ferruginous Ducks, a species of real conservation interest, together with smaller numbers of Common Pochard and Tufted Duck. Two groups of Black-necked Grebes totalled 28 birds, all in striking breeding plumage. Around the reedbeds several Purple Herons drifted slowly overhead, joined by ten Squacco Herons, a Glossy Ibis and at least 12 Pygmy Cormorants. From somewhere deep within the reeds another Great Reed-warbler delivered its unmistakable hoarse, croaking song.

Wandering slowly back towards the visitor centre, we stopped to scan a series of muddy pools that held an excellent selection of waders. Particularly notable were a single Little Stint and two delicate Temminck's Stints feeding in the margins amongst Pied Avocets, Ruff, Black-tailed Godwits, Northern Lapwings and Wood Sandpipers.

Shortly after midday we drove into the nearby village of Hortobágy itself for lunch, where an excellent goulash soup followed by warm apple strudel was enjoyed by all. Coffee afterwards at the visitor centre provided the chance to explore an impressive exhibition detailing the history, geography and wildlife of the region. A gentle stroll through the village trees then produced one of the day's more memorable encounters: an adult Long-eared Owl sitting unconcernedly on an open branch, watching the passing tourists below. Nearby was its nest containing two large downy chicks already looking remarkably well-grown.



During the early afternoon we visited another series of ponds which held many of the same species seen earlier in the day, before we once again ventured out onto the open *puszta*. Here we enjoyed excellent views of a very pale Long-legged Buzzard, first perched on the grassland and later in flight. Scanning the horizon produced yet more Red-footed Falcons, their buoyant, effortless flight becoming one of the defining images of the trip. Several Silver-studded Blue and Scarce Swallowtail butterflies were also noted.

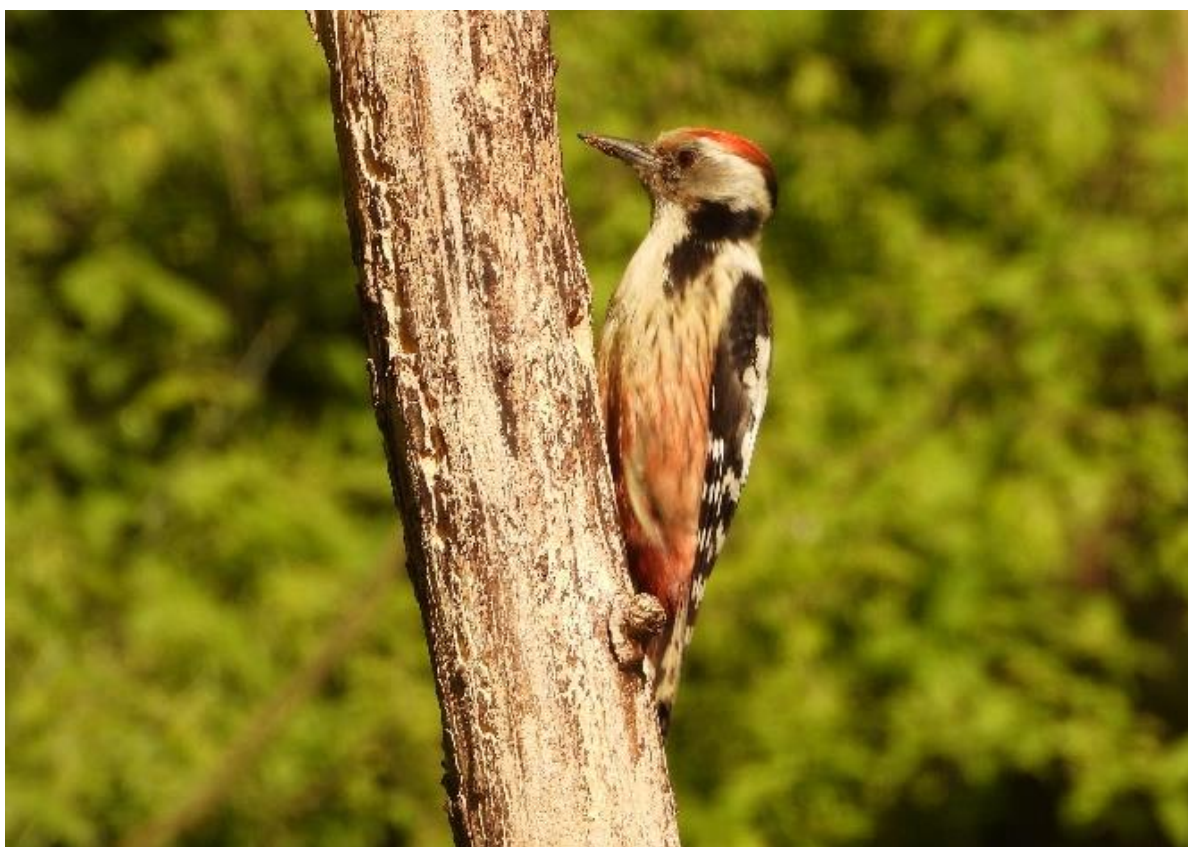
A male Northern Wheatear and several Linnets fed on the short turf, while two Little Egrets stalked a roadside ditch alongside three Common Greenshanks. In the warm late-afternoon sunshine we finally settled to watch a colony of at least eight pairs of Red-footed Falcons around their nesting area. It felt a genuine privilege to witness these elegant birds freshly returned from their African wintering grounds, beginning once more the timeless cycle of breeding on the Great Hungarian Plain. We

returned to our lodge where a party of 15 Common Crane flew over distantly and later enjoyed another lovely meal and the usual friendly banter and conversation that mark our style of tour.

Sunday 3 May

After breakfast we bade our farewells to excellent hosts and left the Hortobágy behind, heading east towards the outskirts of Debrecen. The journey offered an interesting contrast between the old and new Hungary, as we passed a vast modern BMW assembly plant rising unexpectedly from the plains. Our destination, however, was something altogether more timeless, an area of mature Hornbeam and Oak woodland where a specially constructed photographic hide had been built beside a small drinking pool and feeding area. Everything was perfectly positioned at eye level, allowing intimate views of woodland birds in beautiful natural surroundings.

No sooner had we settled quietly into the hide than the birds began to appear. A pair of Greater Spotted Woodpeckers arrived first, quickly followed by a superb Middle Spotted Woodpecker which fed only a few feet away, glowing warmly in the filtered woodland light. Great, Blue and Marsh Tits came and went, accompanied by Eurasian Nuthatches, Eurasian Jays, a Common Chiffchaff and eight Common Chaffinches. Then, for comparison, a magnificent Hawfinch appeared (photograph in the gallery at the end), its huge bill and rich colours looking particularly impressive at such close range.



Middle Spotted Woodpecker was one of several woodpecker species to show at close range

Not to be outdone, a male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker suddenly arrived, small and delicate beside its larger relatives. Then came the moment everyone had hoped for. Like some cloaked woodland phantom, a magnificent male Black Woodpecker swept silently into view. At first, it seemed wary, pausing to stare directly towards the hide and the concealed observers behind the one-way glass, as though somehow aware of our presence. The atmosphere inside the hide was electric.

Adding to the experience, a male Collared Flycatcher sang persistently from territory just beside the hide, occasionally flashing into view amongst the trees, while below us a brilliantly marked male Sand Lizard crept cautiously around the pool edge before lowering itself delicately to drink. It was one of those magical wildlife encounters where time seemed briefly suspended and nobody wanted to move. Eventually, and all too soon, we had to leave the hide. A short walk through the woodland afterwards produced another Collared Flycatcher and a second Middle Spotted Woodpecker, with a Nettle-tree Butterfly and Large Skipper rounding off a memorable morning in the forests.



A male Sand Lizard was a nice reptilian bonus at the private hide

To save time we took lunch at a roadside service station before continuing north-west across open farmland where our guide had obtained permission for us to observe a breeding pair of Saker Falcons. From a respectful distance we watched one of the birds circling powerfully over the fields before it was joined by its mate. The falcons were soon harried in turn by a Western Marsh-harrier and then a female Montagu's Harrier which appeared suddenly from nowhere, perhaps itself still moving through on migration. The aerial interactions provided an impressive demonstration of the wildness that still survives within these vast agricultural landscapes. Nearby hedgerows held a small flock of Tree Sparrows while the surrounding fields supported several Western Yellow Wagtails and a couple of purring European Turtle-doves, another species now sadly scarce across much of Western Europe.

By early afternoon we were travelling north towards the Zemplén Hills. Roadside sightings of Common Buzzards and Common Stonechats accompanied us as the landscape slowly changed from open plains to rolling wooded hillsides and vineyards. Before long the famous Tokaj wine region began to appear, its neatly cultivated slopes lending the countryside a distinctly different character from the open expanses of the Hortobágy.

Here we met a second local guide and visited an extensive marshland area alive with sight and sound movement. Ferruginous Ducks, Purple Herons, Great Reed-warblers and Reed Buntings all showed well, while several Savi's Warblers reeled from deep within the reeds. A Little Crake called repeatedly, and, after much concentrated watching, several members of the group managed brief flight views as it crossed a narrow channel.

The marsh itself felt wonderfully alive. Fire-bellied Toads and Marsh Frogs formed a constant amphibian chorus while Common Cuckoos called persistently across the wetlands - a sound now regrettably much diminished in many parts of Britain but still reassuringly familiar here. Our main target, however, was the elusive Moustached Warbler. By early May many birds were already well into their breeding cycle when they can be frustratingly quiet. For a while it seemed we might miss out, but eventually one bird burst briefly into song, its distinctive rapid, high-pitched notes carrying clearly across the reeds before falling silent once more.

A wooden observation tower provided fine panoramic views across the marsh and surrounding countryside, though no further new species were added. Several Whinchats feeding in neighbouring meadows were nevertheless much appreciated and provided a fitting final touch to the afternoon.

We reached our accommodation shortly before 6.00 pm in the attractive village of Komlóska, nestled amongst the wooded valleys of the Zemplén Hills. After a long but immensely rewarding day, a tasty evening meal and the peaceful surroundings of the hills ensured everyone was more than ready for a restful night.



Monday 4 May

Once again, the day dawned beneath brilliant blue skies. Before breakfast several of the group gathered on the terraced garden to admire the beautiful, wooded valley and surrounding pastures. Even during this short vigil there was plenty to enjoy. A Northern Goshawk powered over the woods, whilst Hawfinches called from the treetops and Black Redstarts flicked around nearby roofs. A couple of Eurasian Golden Orioles were seen crossing the woodland edges and, from somewhere deeper in the valley, the soft 'purring' of a European Turtle-dove drifted through the still morning air.

After breakfast we took a gentle walk along a quiet rural road near the lodge. More Eurasian Golden Orioles were seen, one even lingering obligingly in the telescope, and a Middle Spotted Woodpecker briefly landed nearby. European Robin, Hawfinch, Common Chiffchaff, Song Thrush and Eurasian Blackbird all added to the rich woodland soundtrack of the Zemplén Hills.

Continuing deeper into the hills, we suddenly stopped when three Eastern Imperial Eagles were spotted circling above a nearby hillside. The birds comprised one adult and two immatures, probably last year's offspring. The views were simply superb, one bird drifting low overhead in the bright sunshine, allowing us to fully appreciate the huge wings and pale, imposing structure of this magnificent eagle. Alongside the famous vineyards of the Tokaj region, we also began noticing extensive plantations of Elderberry, cultivated here primarily for use in commercial food colouring.

As we climbed steadily higher into the hills, the landscape became increasingly forested. We eventually stopped at a woodland clearing where Yellowhammers sang from the edge and a family party of Woodlarks fed quietly amongst the short grass. From here our local guide led us on foot into the magnificent woodland, dominated largely by mature Hornbeam but mixed with a variety of other broadleaved trees. The forest felt wonderfully primeval; cool and shaded, the calmness broken only by birdsong. After a careful and patient search, our guide quietly beckoned us forward and pointed high into the trees where, perched motionless amongst the branches, sat our quarry: a wonderful female Ural Owl.



A true bird of Eastern Europe's mature forests, the owl remained just long enough for everyone to enjoy telescope views before silently slipping away deeper into the woods. Our guide explained that he maintained a nest-box scheme for the species, and he believed the young had recently fledged nearby, with the adults understandably wary and protective. Having enjoyed such memorable views, we quietly withdrew and left the family undisturbed. The woodland also produced Marsh Tits and a beautiful Green-winged Orchid, while butterflies included Queen of Spain Fritillary and Speckled Wood flitting along the sunny rides. A further stop nearby brought another speciality: a Grey-headed Woodpecker attending its nest hole in a mature tree. More familiar woodland birds were much in evidence including Collared Flycatcher, Eurasian Wren, Grey Wagtail, Goldcrest, Eurasian Blackbird, Song Thrush, Chaffinch, Eurasian Blackcap and a fast-moving Eurasian Sparrowhawk.

Lunch consisted of excellent soup and pancakes enjoyed outdoors beneath warm sunshine, accompanied overhead by a passing Black Kite. Afterwards we visited an area of quarry workings cut into the wooded hillsides. Here our guides positioned us at a respectful distance from the nest of Eurasian Eagle-owl where an adult and at least one chick could be seen amongst the rocky ledges. The views were both exciting and responsibly managed, with great care taken to avoid disturbance.



Common Ravens drifted overhead calling deeply across the quarry walls, though despite much searching the hoped-for Rock Bunting remained frustratingly elusive.

Later in the afternoon we returned to the lodge before heading out again for a wine tasting evening at the Hangavári vineyard. The setting, tucked amongst the wooded Tokaj hills in the beautiful house of the vineyard owners, was delightful and both the wines and accompanying local foods proved excellent. A signed photograph of Roger Moore hung on the owners wall – even 007 himself once appreciated the place. The flowing wine was of an excellent quality and the relaxed atmosphere ensured plenty of laughter before we eventually returned to the lodge for another peaceful night.

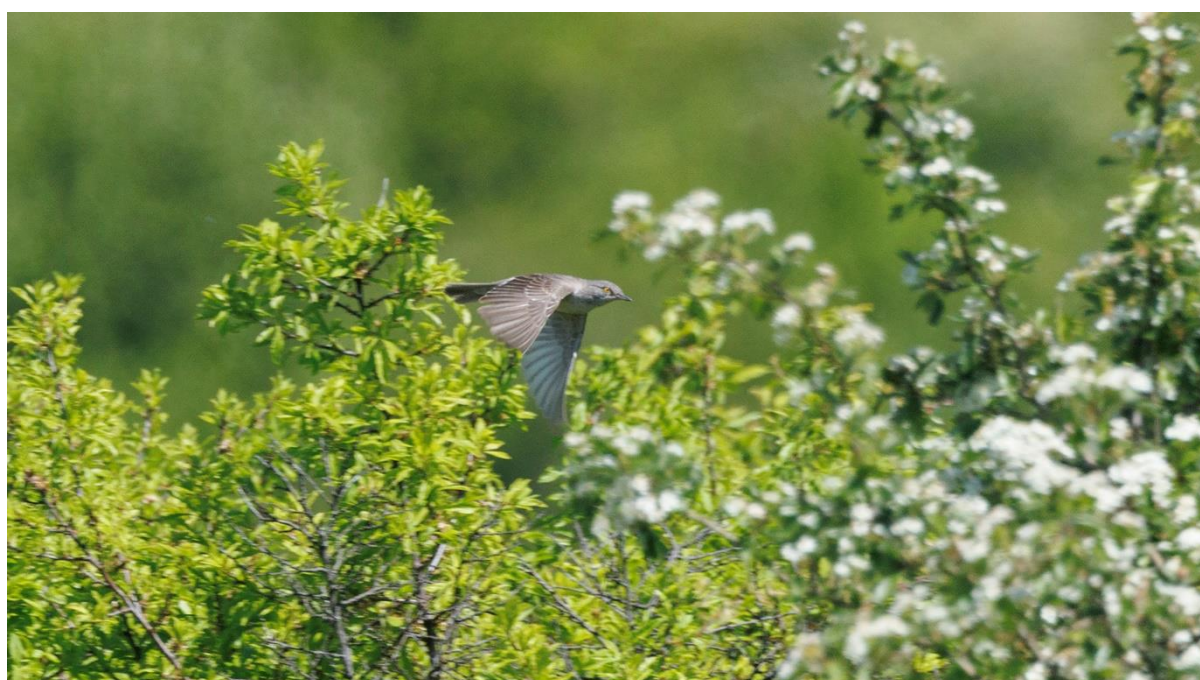
Tuesday 5 May

This morning we enjoyed a final excursion into the beautiful Zemplén Hills, a region whose quiet villages seemed to blend perfectly into the surrounding landscape. Almost every settlement possessed its own distinctive church: ornate Catholic churches crowned with onion domes or elegant baroque towers stood alongside the simpler wooden spires of Calvinist Reformed churches, together lending the villages a timeless and deeply rural character. Along the roadside we counted three Red-backed Shrikes perched prominently on wires and bushes, ever watchful for passing insects. A pleasant woodland walk produced more views of Collared Flycatchers and Wood Warblers (shown in the photographs below), species that had become emblematic of these rich Hungarian forests.



A short detour into the woods produced a fine Grass Snake slipping silently through the undergrowth together with numerous Orange Tip butterflies dancing along the sunny woodland edge with a Duke of Burgundy also being found here and several Scarce Swallowtails, their colour pattern and elegant gliding flight adding a distinctly southern European feel to the morning.

After lunch, we continued onwards to an open scrubby plain bathed in warm sunshine. This proved an excellent stop. Almost immediately we obtained fine views of a Barred Warbler, first in its scratchy song-flight and then perched slightly more concealed but still visible in a willow bush.



Nearby, two Red-backed Shrikes basked in the afternoon sun. Then came the melancholic, far-carrying call of a Eurasian Wryneck. A short search later and the bird was located clinging cryptically to the branches of an old, tangled tree. Moments later a second bird appeared, presumably its mate, giving us an excellent opportunity to appreciate this wonderfully bizarre and almost reptilian-like woodpecker. A 'purring' European Turtle-dove added further atmosphere to the scene, while overhead a small party of European Bee-eaters passed distantly by, their rolling calls carrying clearly across the plain. Butterflies again provided interest, with two striking Southern Festoons becoming welcome additions to the growing trip list.

By early afternoon it was time to leave Hungary behind. We returned briefly to the lodge to collect the luggage trailer, stopping to watch the fine sub-adult Golden Eagle shown below as it glided nicely over the road, before setting off northwards towards Slovakia.



The drive took a little under two hours and although a thin veil of cloud gradually spread across the sky, temperatures still hovered around a very pleasant 26 C. Crossing the border was seamless, with no formal controls interrupting the journey. Beyond lay a landscape of rolling farmland and small villages where many Northern House Martins were nest building. Eventually we arrived at our next accommodation on the edge of the Slovak Karst National Park.

The lodge occupied a wonderfully peaceful setting overlooking a large lake where a White-tailed Sea-eagle drifted distantly above the water and Western Marsh-harriers quartered the reedbeds. Grey Herons stalked the margins and several pairs of Great Crested Grebes floated serenely offshore, with some display. It was a delightful place to end the day and, after settling in, we enjoyed another excellent evening meal in relaxed surroundings.

Wednesday 6 May

Our now familiar routine of breakfast at 7.30 was preceded by another short spell of birding around the lodge gardens. Even this brief pre-breakfast watch proved rewarding, producing a Syrian Woodpecker, a Lesser Whitethroat and several Black Redstarts around the buildings.

Setting off west along the valley, we had not travelled far before an interesting medium-sized raptor drifting above adjacent meadows caught our attention. The bird proved to be a splendid adult Lesser

Spotted Eagle, which circled slowly overhead giving prolonged and exceptionally good views in the clear morning light.



Continuing onwards, we passed the entrance to the dramatic Zadiel Gorge, often regarded as the gateway to the Slovak Karst region. Here the porous limestone landscape has been sculpted over millennia into an impressive world of cliffs, rocky slopes and wooded ravines, with mature mixed forest cloaking the surrounding hillsides. Our first walk of the day took us into one such woodland where the rich birdlife quickly made itself apparent. Coal Tits and Crested Tits moved actively through the conifers while somewhere deeper in the forest a Black Woodpecker drummed resonantly, its powerful blows echoing through the trees. Along the sunny woodland ride we became distracted by an altogether different mystery. At least twenty unfamiliar insects fluttered rapidly passed us, never pausing long enough to settle. At first glance they resembled butterflies, yet none seemed to fit comfortably with our cumulative knowledge of this group. Suggestions were exchanged freely until Joyce wisely proposed that perhaps they were not butterflies at all, but moths. Intrigued, we noted as many identification features as possible and a 'record shot' was quickly secured, before continuing our walk, knowing the puzzle would require further investigation later that evening.

The woodland itself was exceptionally attractive. Patches of Greater Stitchwort brightened the track edges while the lilac blooms of Dame's Violet filled the warm air with fragrance. Much of the birdlife mirrored that of previous forest excursions, but the beauty of the habitat itself made every walk feel fresh and rewarding.

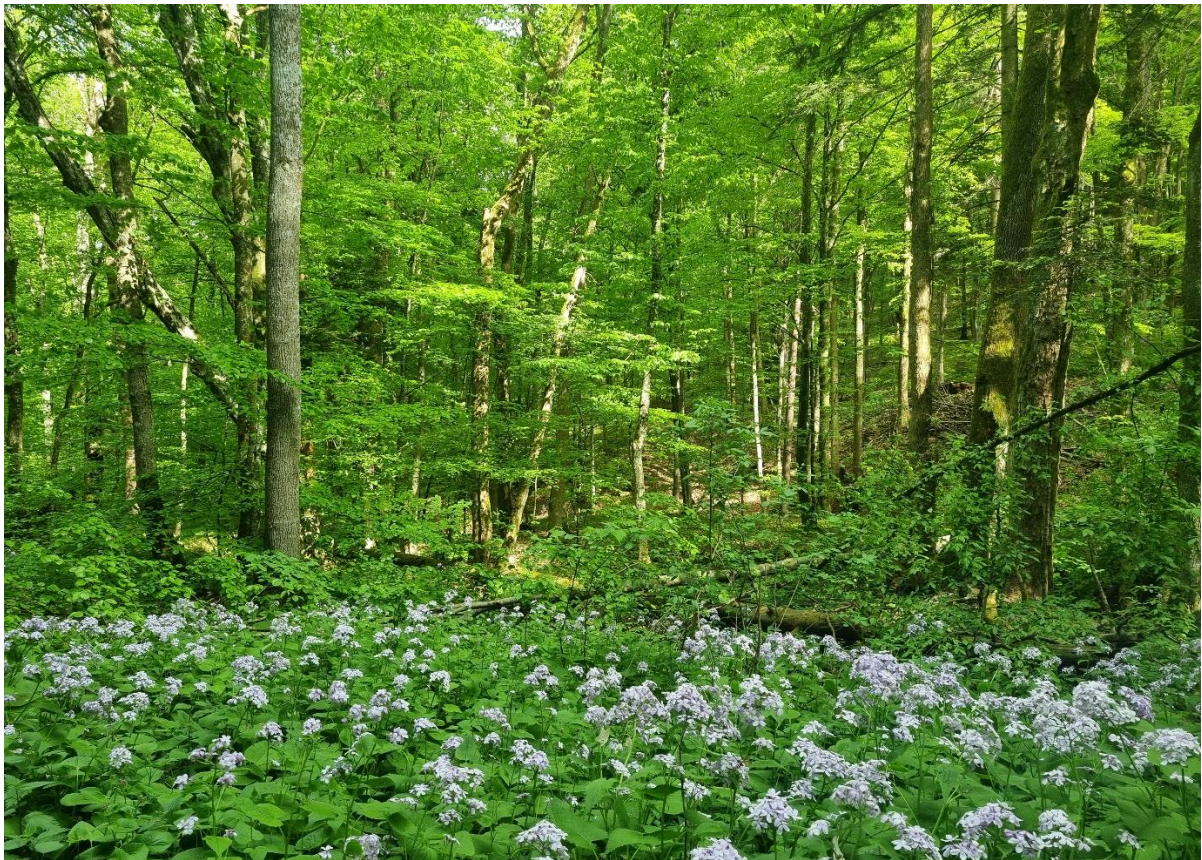
After a light snack lunch, we decided to explore a new valley close to the Zadiel Gorge. The drive there was delightful. Streamside meadows were thick with huge leaves of Butterbur, while surrounding pastures glowed yellow with countless Cowslips. Old orchards stood in blossom and the predominantly Beech woodland looked magnificent in the soft afternoon light. Sunbeams filtered through the fresh spring canopy onto a forest floor carpeted with Yellow Archangel and the delicate flowers of Herb Paris creating one of the most beautiful landscapes of the tour. The birding proved equally enjoyable. A Common Firecrest showed well amongst some conifers while Collared Flycatchers and Marsh Tits continued to accompany us through the woods.



Then came one of the day's highlights when we encountered our first Red-breasted Flycatchers of the trip. Initially they remained elusive, singing persistently yet revealing only fleeting glimpses amongst the foliage. Eventually, however, our guide located a much more obliging individual, a superb adult male glowing with its distinctive orange-red throat and breast. The bird sang repeatedly from exposed perches, allowing everyone memorable views indeed.



A Mistle Thrush and a Spotted Flycatcher rounded off the day's bird list as we returned to the lodge in the late afternoon. Some members of the group later wandered through the surrounding meadows and fields, soaking up the peaceful atmosphere of the Slovak countryside.



As dusk approached, Common Nightingales began singing from the scrub-covered slopes, their rich fluting songs providing a wonderfully atmospheric close to another memorable day. Of course, there still remained the mystery of the unidentified “butterfly” to solve over the evening meal. Field guides, notebooks and mobile phones soon appeared around the table as enthusiastic detective work commenced, with Google searches supplementing more traditional methods. Gradually the possibilities began to narrow and, after further discussion with our guide, Joyce and Dave finally arrived at the correct identification: the remarkable Tau Emperor moth. The confusion had been understandable. The species flies rapidly and erratically in bright sunshine, very much like a butterfly, and its rich colours and markings can easily mislead even experienced observers. Yet unlike butterflies, the adult moth possesses no functioning mouthparts and is therefore unable to feed at all during its brief adult life. Its restless, almost frantic flight suddenly made perfect sense. The adults emerge simply to find a mate. Eggs are laid before the moths die, while the next generation develops as caterpillars before pupating amongst the leaf litter of the Beech forest floor, where they overwinter hidden beneath the woodland canopy. With the return of warmer weather the following spring, the adults emerge once more to continue the cycle.

It was a fascinating conclusion to one of the day's more unexpected wildlife encounters and a reminder that even amongst the larger and more conspicuous birds and mammals, the forests of the Slovak Karst still held countless smaller natural wonders waiting to be discovered.

Thursday 7 May

This morning we awoke to greyer skies and cooler conditions, although fortunately it looked as though the threatening rain might hold off for most of the day. We travelled further north into the more

elevated landscapes of the Slovak Raj National Park, a region famed for its rugged forested valleys and dramatic limestone scenery.

Here we embarked on a leisurely walk through extensive mixed woodland where conifers featured more prominently than in the forests visited earlier in the tour. The birdlife was by now comfortably familiar, though quite sparsely populated with Coal Tits, Eurasian Robins, Crested Tits and Hawfinches. Particularly pleasing, however, was a party of four Willow Tits moving quietly through the trees, a species whose severe decline in Britain made the encounter feel especially poignant.

The atmosphere was wonderfully tranquil, broken only by occasional birdsong and the occasional tapping of woodpeckers. Then, just as we were nearing the end of the walk, came one of the morning's highlights when a pair of White-backed Woodpeckers appeared at close range. The male quickly disappeared leaving the female which showed well, even engaging in brief bouts of drumming. It was a superb encounter with one of Europe's most characteristic old-forest woodpeckers.



Despite repeated efforts throughout our stay, the hoped-for Three-toed Woodpecker continued to elude us. The species is certainly present in these forests but remained frustratingly difficult to pin down during our visit, a reminder that nature always retains an element of unpredictability.

Meanwhile John, who had remained near the minibus scanning the subalpine meadows which were pleasantly brightened by patches of flowering Oxlips, was rewarded with a fly-over Northern Nutcracker and three soaring Golden Eagles. Nearby, two more Willow Tits gave particularly close views, while a Peregrine Falcon circling high overhead rounded off the morning nicely.

Lunch consisted of provisions carried with us on the minibus, as all the local facilities were still closed ahead of the main tourist season. Afterwards we enjoyed a short walk beside a woodland stream where a White-throated Dipper flashed briefly upstream over the water and a Common Firecrest offered another fleeting but colourful appearance amongst the conifers.



Later in the afternoon we began the drive back towards our lodge, pausing one final time to search unsuccessfully for Rock Buntings amongst roadside limestone crags. Although the species remained stubbornly absent, the scenery itself more than compensated, with the dramatic landscape providing a fitting backdrop to our last full day in Slovakia.

We returned to the lodge by around 4.00 pm, allowing several members of the group time for a relaxed stroll beside the nearby lake with still time to pack. The reedbeds were alive with sound. A Great Reed-warbler croaked noisily from the reeds while a couple of Savi's Warblers reeled continuously nearby. An Osprey hunted across the water, Western Marsh-harriers quartered gracefully over the reeds and to round things off, a male Little Crane once again called and briefly revealed itself along the margins. It was a wonderfully peaceful conclusion to another richly rewarding day in the wild landscapes of this part of Slovakia.

Friday 8 May

The final morning of the tour broke under a soft blanket of low cloud, with mist lying over the surrounding hills and lending the landscape a quiet, atmospheric stillness. After breakfast we said our farewells to our welcoming hosts and set off at 8.00 am for the four-hour drive back towards Budapest.

Once across the border into Hungary, we joined the motorway heading west, gradually retracing our route through the broad lowland landscapes. Even from the moving vehicle there was still plenty to enjoy. Roadside wires and fence lines were alive with Common Stonechats, the most frequently encountered passerine of the journey, accompanied by Western Yellow Wagtails and Crested Larks. Here and there, a flash of richer colour came from male Red-backed Shrikes, while the occasional European Roller added a final splash of brilliance to the wires and telegraph lines of the open countryside.

As we approached Budapest, we turned south into the more open landscapes of the Kiskunság National Park, another of Hungary's great protected areas and part of the UNESCO-designated biosphere reserves safeguarding the remaining fragments of the great *puszta*.

Lunch was taken at a rural hotel which provided a pleasant break after the journey. Outside, the sky held a few drifting Mediterranean Gulls while a Eurasian Golden Oriole perched in the treetops, a final reminder of the richness of the region even close to human settlement.



With time still available, we took the opportunity to visit a section of open grassland within the Kiskunság. This proved an inspired choice. In excellent light we soon located a group of five magnificent male Great Bustards on one side of the road, with a further two birds visible on the opposite side. These immense, stately birds provided a truly fitting finale to the tour, standing motionless in the grassland like sentinels of the steppe.

Around them, the grasslands remained lively. Several European Bee-eaters hawked actively for insects, whilst at least three Whinchats sang and perched prominently, offering superb final views. A European Ground Squirrel or Souslik briefly appeared near its burrow, hesitantly keeping watch before disappearing once more underground.

All too soon it was time to continue the final leg of the journey into Budapest airport, where we arrived in good time for our late afternoon departures. Here we said our final thanks to our guide Dani and to our driver Joseph for their excellent support throughout the tour.

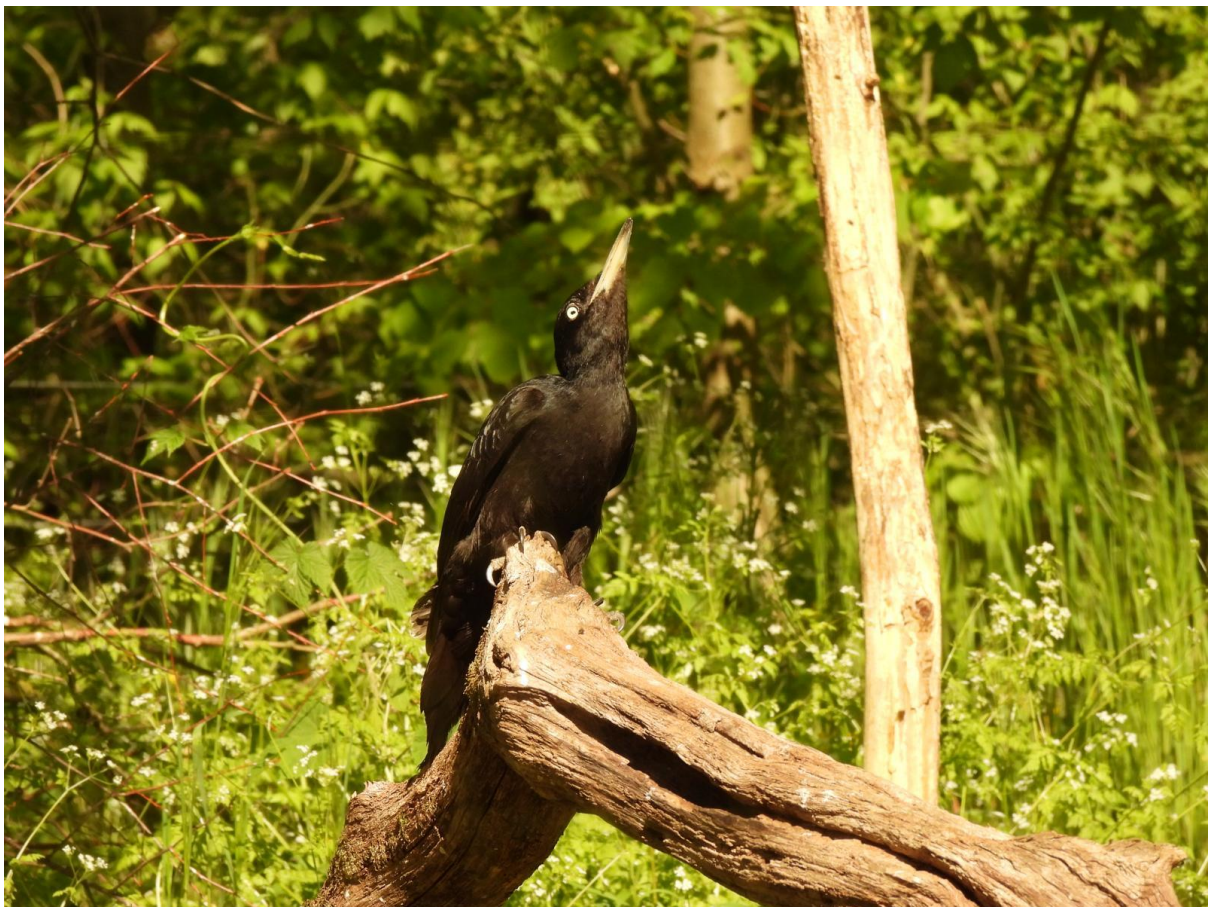
It had been a successful and memorable journey, rich in birds and other wildlife, set against a backdrop of some of Central Europe's most beautiful and varied landscapes. Just as importantly, the warmth, enthusiasm and good humour shared within the group throughout the week helped make it a thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding birding break throughout.

Thanks go to Steve Cook, Ken Pinney, Tony and Theresa Walker and our guide Daniel Balla for the use of their photographs in this report and the gallery below.

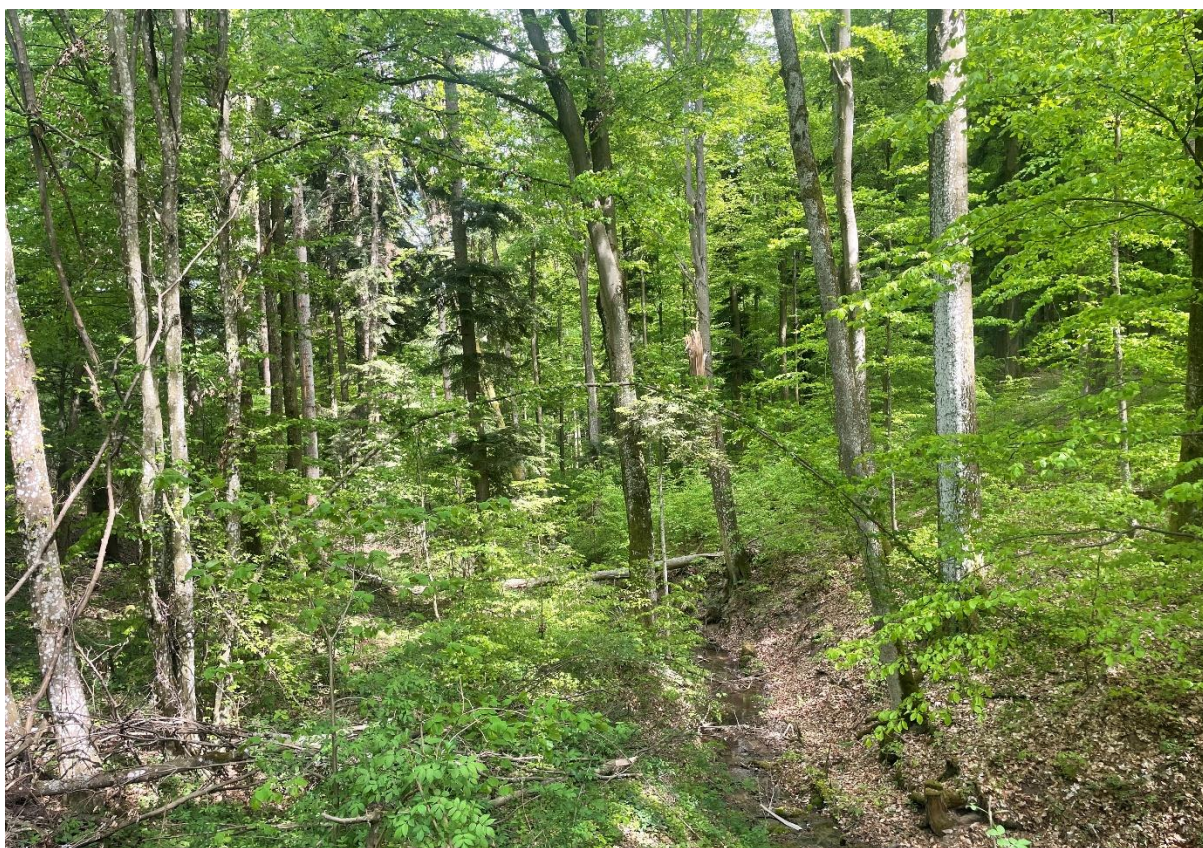
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Hawfinches are widespread in Hungary, favouring broadleaved woodland, particularly Beech and Hornbeam. They are often confiding and can be seen in urban parks.



We encountered Black Woodpecker on four dates, but none so close as this from the private hide



Our walks in the mixed forest of the Slovakian karst were simply sublime

