



Migration extravaganza in Hungary



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Birdwatching in Hungary is excellent the whole year round, but autumn birding offers a particularly memorable experience: the spectacular Common Crane migration. These birds use Hungary as a stop-over site on their journey from the breeding grounds in northern Europe and Asia to their winter quarters in the North Africa. The number of migrating cranes has increased in Hungary in the last decades and now the country plays host to over 100,000 migrating cranes. Watching these birds, in the evening light, as they come in their thousands to settle in for the night, must grade as one of most spectacular birding experiences.



The location of the country in central Europe means that it is ideally positioned in the middle of several migratory routes of other birds as well. The country hosts a great proportion of the European population of Lesser White-fronted Geese, which together with Red-breasted Geese can be found amongst tens of thousand of migrating White-fronted Geese. Ducks also occur in big numbers and the globally threatened Ferruginous Duck can be found here as well. The variety of wetlands host a considerable number of migrating waders, but of a particular significance are flocks of Dotterels which reach over 100.

The wide open skies are the domain of such raptors as Saker Falcon, Merlin, Hen and Marsh Harriers, Long-legged Buzzard, the majestic White-tailed Eagle, but above all, the globally threatened Imperial Eagle, which is also the national bird of Hungary.

Some resident birds that are difficult to see in spring and summer, form bigger groups in autumn and are more approachable. Those include the globally threatened magnificent Great Bustard, as well as the Great White Egret, Spoonbill, Pygmy Cormorant, Penduline and Beared Tits.

The rocky hills covered in both deciduous and coniferous woodlands are home to nine species of woodpeckers and an array of interesting passerines, including Hawfinch, Rock Bunting and crossbills, amongst others.



But our experience of an autumn visit to Hungary will not end in extending our bird list. Culinary tradition forms an important part of Hungarian culture and we will have great opportunities to indulge ourselves in good food and wine. Wine connoisseurs will be glad to know that Hungary has a long tradition as a wine producing country and wine-making has evolved here over many centuries. In the Edger region, where we will stay for part of the tour, wine has been made for over 1000 years. Some wines can be found in the cellars that are over 300 years old and still improving in bouquet!

With a selection of such attractive birds supported by an array of unspoiled habitats and good tourist infrastructure, Hungary is a delightful birding destination hard to beat in Europe. To enhance our chances of seeing all the important birds, a local guide will accompany us throughout the tour.

Itinerary

Day 1

You will be collected from Budapest airport and transferred by a minibus to the famous Hortobágy National Park. The journey will last about three hours and will take us through atmospheric villages and beautiful landscapes, where we will be able to view our first raptors.

Days 2-3

We will spend the next two days exploring the Hortobágy National Park. Our comfortable hotel is conveniently situated on the outskirts of the park.

The Hortobágy National Park is the largest protected area in Hungary, created in 1973 as the first national park in the country. The park embraces the largest continuous natural grassland in Europe and with its meadows, marshes, woods and commercial fishponds, provides an array of important feeding grounds for thousands of migratory and resident birds. The Hortobágy National Park is vast and with such a mosaic of varied habitats, it requires at least three days to be fully appreciated.

The steppe, known in Hungary as puszta, is, no doubt, the most precious habitat here. It still holds a large population of one of the most impressive European species, the Great Bustard, making the park one of the most important sites in Europe for them. At this time of the year, they congregate in groups and we will be able to see up to 10 of these magnificent birds feeding in the open. To enhance our chances of seeing this species, a local ranger will accompany us in our search. The Stone Curlew and possibly Collared Pratincole are also likely birds to be seen here. Wetlands are particularly impressive in the park.

The fishponds are huge and we will take a gentle stroll around them as well as a narrow-gauge train to more distant parts of the park. From observation towers and viewing platforms, we will be able to see an array of wildfowl, including, eight species of ducks: Teal, Shoveller, Wigeon, Pintail, Goldeneye, Gadwall, and much sought after the Ferruginous Duck and Red-crested Pochard.

Some of these ducks will be present in hundreds. Very impressive will be flocks of geese, White-fronted Geese in particular,



reaching the size of ten of thousands. Smaller but easily seen will also be Lesser White-fronted, Bean and Red-breasted Geese which use the fishponds for roosting. Grebes are represented here by Little, Black-necked and Great Crested. Flocks of Great White Egret and Spoonbills will be numerous though Pygmy Cormorant are less abundant. Bittern and Kingfisher could easily be flushed from the nearby reedbeds and so could the resident Bearded and Penduline

Tits. Long-tailed Tits will also be present in small flocks.

Of the raptors, Marsh Harrier and White-tailed Eagle abound here. Thermals might hold considerable numbers of Common Buzzard whereas Long-legged and Rough-legged Buzzards will be seen hunting over nearby fields. Merlin, Sparrowhawk, Saker Falcon and the magnificent Imperial Eagle will be difficult to ignore.

A visit to the Tisza River floodplain will produce a variety of passage waders. Large flocks of Spotted Redshank, Lapwing and Grey Plover will not be uncommon, and Dunlin,

Little Stint, Snipe, Ringed Plover, Curlew, Ruff and Greenshank will also be present. Flocks of over 100 Dotterels will be of a particular significance because they stay here until the first frost of winter.

Small patches of woodland are home to Great Spotted and Syrian Woodpeckers, but much excitement will be provided by sightings of Long-eared Owl which can roost here in “flocks” of over 60.

However, our encounters with Common Cranes will be the most memorable. During the day we will be able to see them feeding in the steppe, but in the evenings, we will position ourselves on their flight path to the roosting site. As the sun sets behind the horizon, Cranes will gradually fill the air and as they settle trumpeting on the ground, we will witness a natural spectacle that will stay with us for ever.

Day 4

After breakfast, we will do some final birdwatching in the Hortobágy area and then drive to the Northern Hills region. Beautiful valleys filled with vineyards, forested slopes, tiny villages and castles all create a picturesque and tranquil landscape. *En route*, we will make a few stops to search for Imperial Eagle and Saker Falcon.

Our accommodation for the next two nights is a family run hotel in a picturesque little village surrounded by the forested hills in the famous Eger wine region, the biggest producer of wine in Hungary. The wine cellars of this region are fascinating in their own right, because most of them are carved from solid volcanic rock, with some entire wineries hewn from cliff faces as a mass of subterranean tunnels and large caverns, extending over 35km. We will visit one of the

more famous wine estates here, where we will taste six different types of their wines while enjoying a delicious dinner in the wine cellar.

Day 5

We will spend a day exploring the Bükk Mountains region. Birding is very rewarding in the Bükk Mountains where dense deciduous woodlands are home to Black, Lesser Spotted, Great Spotted, White-backed, Green and Grey-headed Woodpeckers. Hawfinch, Short-toed Treecreeper and Nathatch should also be present here. Closer to small settlements, we will encounter Wryneck, Middle-spotted and Syrian Woodpeckers.



We will also devote some time to birdwatching along the open valleys looking for birds of prey. Our list should include Lesser Spotted and Imperial

Eagles as well as Hobby, Goshawk and Honey-Buzzard. With a bit of luck, we also should be able to encounter an array of interesting animals, including Red Squirrel, Pine Marten and Fire Salamander. At this time of the year, butterflies will

not be abundant, but if a calm and sunny day, we will be able to see Clouded Yellow, Painted Lady or Small Blue flitting through the forest glades. In an evening, our last three-course dinner will await us at our hotel.

Day 6

We will drive to Budapest today to catch our return flight home. If time allows, we will have a quick sightseeing tour around the city.