

# HUNGARY'S HORTOBÁGY IN AUTUMN TOUR REPORT 2024

**8 - 11 November 2024**

by János Oláh

This is the shortest Birdquest tour, it is just a weekend birding! Even such a short tour has much to offer as visiting the Hortobágy National Park in the autumn is a great spectacle with many thousands of ducks, geese and cranes! After a few years gap in 2024 we returned to Hungary's World Heritage Hortobágy National Park and our prime target was to see two rare geese: Red-breasted Goose and Lesser White-fronted Goose. The 2024 year however was a very unusual one as the hordes of geese were late, and very few Redbreasts were reported until the tour start. In the last 25 years the period between 5-15 November proved to be the most reliable time to see the Red-breasted Goose but for some reason – still unknown at the writing time of the report – the geese were not arriving en masse. Maybe – hopefully – just a weather anomaly somewhere on the migration routes. In a few weeks' time we will see if the geese will arrive at all or not, but with some effort even under such rare conditions we managed to see both rare geese, so mission was completed!

There are not many places in the world where one can reliably hope to see these geese on a swift weekend break with additional goodies and with a truly amazing migration spectacle! The Lesser White-fronted Goose was easier to see this year than it is normally and a minimum of ten were seen very well, we could admire their golden eye-rings in the perfect afternoon sunlight! On our second full day eventually an adult Red-breasted Goose was found and we could watch it as long as we wanted. Additional great birds on the tour included Ferruginous Duck, Tundra Bean Goose, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Eurasian Goshawk, Saker, Great Bustard, Jack Snipe and Bearded Tit. Add to these the fact that we admired thousands of Greater White-fronted Geese and Common Cranes. What a spectacle it was to watch these amazing number of waterbirds arriving or leaving their roosting sites. The Long-eared Owl roost with 44 birds was also a tour highlight indeed. We also managed to see four species of woodpeckers including Black, Lesser Spotted and Syrian. All in all, it was an action-packed short tour, and we enjoyed the large number of birds.

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. Unfortunately, we could not experience this in 2024 as the number of geese were unusually low, but it was still nice to see 10.000 geese (not 130.000 as on our last tour). The weather was excellent on the first day, but foggy conditions arrived on our second full day and made birding a challenge. Foggy conditions always a fear on such a short tour as it can seriously hamper your birding!

The tour started in Budapest around midday and we drove to a nearby spot for some birding. The days are very short in November, and we definitely wanted to get some birding, 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. We were lucky as we soon located 8 male Great Bustards and they allowed superb looks in perfect sunny conditions. They were preening, spreading their tail feathers and walking around. A little further on we saw 33 more male Great Bustards, bringing the total to 41. We could watch them as long as we wanted, and we could compare their size with some Western Roe Deer's standing right behind the bustards. Impressive birds, spectacular views and a great start! It was getting dark by the time we arrived to the Hortobágy but we could admire a large flock of Cranes going to roost!

On our first day we had fantastic sunshine, but the temperature was below zero in the morning. After breakfast we made a short excursion in the hope of connecting with a Saker but this time we could not find the majestic falcon. A few hundred geese appeared on a nearby stubble field, and we spotted a single Tundra Bean Goose in the flock. It is usually a difficult bird to see, so we were happy. Back to our hotel we changed to a 4x4 car and drove to a nearby wetland site. Our local help Zoltán Ecsedi was waiting for us and with his help we managed to find two Jack Snipes and got great flight views of these short-billed skulkers. We also had Eastern Imperial Eagle and White-tailed Eagle as well as another view of Tundra Bean Goose. By mid-morning the geese usually fly to a wetland site for drinking, bathing and resting, especially if the weather is sunny. We still had a little time, so checked a small fishpond system for ducks and we were rewarded by three Ferruginous Ducks in a flock of 90 Common Pochards. There were also Pygmy Cormorants, Common Goldeneyes and Black-necked Grebes around. After a quick gulyás lunch at Hortobágy Csárda we visited the Hortobágy Fishponds but the geese flock we were hoping to connect left the ponds early. We did get to see a party of Bearded Tits, Fieldfare and various ducks and a few Eastern Pale Clouded Yellows. In the afternoon we were chasing the geese in the puszta habitat and just in the right time with the best of the afternoon light we managed to get close to a flock of 3000 and found no less than 10 Lesser White-fronted Geese in amongst all the geese. They allowed excellent looks in the scope, the adult birds showing the golden eye-ring. We were happy with our sighting and spent the last hour of the day watching Common Cranes and several more thousands of geese going to roost.

On our second day we were focusing on Red-breasted Goose (not as if we did not try the previous day!), but as it was getting light, we realised the sunny weather was over and the morning was truly foggy with a visibility of maximum 50 meters. Well, we decided to change scenery and drive south to Andaháza wetlands in the Bihar Plains. This area often has less fog and a different set of geese would be visiting. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived the visibility was still poor, so we decided to go into town and tracked down two roosting Long-eared Owls as well as a fine male Syrian Woodpecker which allowed great looks. We returned to the wetland and now geese were flying into the wetland. In the next hour we could check all 2000 geese, but no Redbreasts were found. We had three Eastern Imperial Eagles, eight White-tailed Eagles and a juvenile Goshawk as well as thousands of ducks and a few waders such as Dunlins, Common Snipes and Eurasian Curlews. We made our way back towards Hortobágy when the news came in that a Red-breasted Goose was found by one of our scouting team, so we wasted no time and drove to this location. We were lucky this time, the geese were happily feeding in a grassland area, and we could have great looks of this single adult Red-breasted Goose as long as we wanted. What a relief to see one! I kept saying the magical number of one is far better than zero. It was getting late afternoon but still enough time for us to find a fantastic female Saker at its roosting site. They are not so territorial in

winter, so not as easy to see. This time we had good scope views and again we could have lengthy observation. It was not an easy day with all the reduced visibility but eventually it turned out really well as we bagged two of our major targets!

On our last day the weather was the same; still foggy with very little visibility in the morning. We decided to visit the owls roost in Balmazújváros where we admired and counted 44 Long-eared Owls. We stayed with the owls for some time, after all you don't see so many owls often in your life! Visibility was still restricted. Eurasian Bullfinch become our target in a nearby park but there was no sign of any. We left town and drove to an area where we were hoping again to find the bullfinches. And this time we did, as soon as we got out of car, we found five Eurasian Bullfinches and supporting cast on our short walk included a fine male Black Woodpecker, a large party of 'white-headed' Long-tailed Tits, a flock of 25 Hawfinches and finally a male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker as well! Happy with the result we 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. There were surprisingly few birds and reduced visibility again, but we managed to locate four Black-throated Divers and a few Common Goldeneyes. Along the lakeside willow trees Syrian Woodpecker was seen again and also Brambling and Yellowhammers. After Tisza Lake we 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 certainly packed in as much as we could! It was in stark contrast with our last tour in 2021 when we saw 267 Red-breasted Geese in amongst 130.000 Greater White-fronted Geese while now we only had a single Red-breasted Goose in amongst 10.000 Greater Whitefronts. However, we saw more Lesser White-fronted Geese than last time and a nice range of other good birds! On such a short tour, the weather can be a serious problem (if foggy) and indeed we had a little taste of this, but it did not affect our final bird list. All in all, we had seen our main targets, so everybody was happy!

## SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

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).

The species names and taxonomy used in the bird list follows Gill, F., Donsker, D., & Rasmussen, P. (Eds). **2024. IOC World Bird List (v14.1)**.

Where the subspecies seen is/are known, these are often given in parentheses at the end of the species comment.

### BIRDS

**Red-breasted Goose** ◊ *Branta ruficollis* The main target! Only one was seen this year, but good views! **VU**

**Greylag Goose** *Anser anser* About 3500 were seen.

**Tundra Bean Goose** *Anser serrirostris* Two were seen, a rare bird in the Hortobágy.

**Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*** Unusually low numbers, cc 9000 were seen.

**Lesser White-fronted Goose** ♦ *Anser erythropus* We had great looks of 10. The golden eyering is great! **VU**

**Mute Swan *Cygnus olor***

**Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna***

**Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata***

**Gadwall *Mareca strepera***

**Eurasian Wigeon *Mareca penelope***

**Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos***

**Northern Pintail *Anas acuta***

**Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca***

**Common Pochard *Aythya farina*** About 90 were seen on one of the fishponds. **VU**

**Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*** Only three were seen. They are rare by November. **NT**

**Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula***

**Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula***

**Common Pheasant (introduced) *Phasianus colchicus***

**Great Bustard** ♦ *Otis tarda* Excellent looks of 41 males in full sunlight. What a stunning bird! **VU**

**Rock Dove (introduced) *Columba livia***

**Stock Dove *Columba oenas***

**Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto***

**Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*** Heard-only

**Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra***

**Common Crane *Grus grus*** Unusually high numbers still around, we saw cc 7000.

**Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis***

**Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus***

**Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*** Eight were seen on one of the fishponds. **VU**

**Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*** 200 on our first day was the highest count. **NT**

**Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*** We counted 22 on one of the wetlands. **NT**

**Jack Snipe** ◊ *Lymnocyptes minimus* Two were seen. We rarely see this species on Birdquest tours.

**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*

**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*

**Black-headed Gull** *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

**Common Gull** *Larus canus*

**Caspian Gull** *Larus cachinnans*

**Yellow-legged Gull** *Larus michahellis* Just a single was seen at Tisza Lake.

**Red-throated Loon** *Gavia stellata* One fly over at the Hortobágy.

**Black-throated Loon** *Gavia arctica* Four were seen at Tisza Lake.

**Pygmy Cormorant** ◊ *Microcarbo pygmaeus* A few were seen in the fishponds of the Hortobágy.

**Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*

**Western Cattle** *Ardea ibis* Once a rare bird. It was a write-in.

**Great Egret** *Ardea alba* A flock of 100 was counted.

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea*

**Eastern Imperial Eagle** ◊ *Aquila heliaca* A total of eight were seen. **VU**

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus*

**Eurasian Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis* A juvenile was seen at Andaháza.

**Western Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus*

**Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus*

**White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla* About 15 were seen.

**Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo*

**Little Owl** *Athene noctua*

**Long-eared Owl** *Asio otus* We counted 44 birds at the roost site in Balmazújváros!

**Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos minor* A fine male was a write-in.

**Syrian Woodpecker** ◊ *Dendrocopos syriacus* Walk-away views of a male.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major*

**Black Woodpecker** *Dryocopus martius* One was seen well.

**European Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis***

**Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus***

**Saker Falcon** ♦ *Falco cherrug* We could study a large female as long as we wanted! **EN**

**Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*** Just one was seen.

**Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius***

**Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica***

**Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula***

**Rook *Corvus frugilegus*** Mass gathering was at a roosting site, cc 25 000.

**Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix***

**Northern Raven *Corvus corax***

**Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus***

**Great Tit *Parus major***

**Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus*** Superb looks of this superb bird in the reedbeds.

**Crested Lark *Galerida cristata***

**Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*** A large flock of the 'white-headed' form was good!

**Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes***

**Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris***

**Common Blackbird *Turdus merula***

**Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*** Excellent looks!

**European Robin *Erithacus rubecula***

**Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus***

**House Sparrow *Passer domesticus***

**Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis***

**Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta***

**Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*** A single and a flock of 26 were seen.

**Eurasian Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs***

**Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*** Two sightings of this wintering bird.

**Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*** Eventually a flock of five was tracked down.

**European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris***

**European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis***

**Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella***

**Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus***

## **MAMMALS**

**Western Roe Deer (Roe D) *Capreolus capreolus***

**European Hare (Brown H) *Lepus europaeus***

## **BUTTERFLIES**

**Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas***

**Clouded Yellow *Colias crocea***

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

**Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta***