

Limosa

HUNGARY: WINTER GEESE, WOODPECKERS AND WALLCREEPERS TRIP REPORT



The group enjoyed fantastic views of all the main target species on our 2025 winter tour to Hungary including this magnificent Wallcreeper © Gábor Simay

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2-8 November 2025

Leader: Gábor Simay

Introduction

This short trip to Hungary offers an excellent opportunity to find rare and sought after wintering geese species, to see many raptors, owls, woodpeckers and also one of the region's most special birds, the Wallcreeper.

November is also when one of Europe's biggest wildlife spectacle is happening in Hungary with the migration of thousands of Common Cranes.

As well as these species, a lot more was awaiting us and we looked for a number of other interesting resident, migratory and wintering species.

To achieve our goals, we visited a wide range of habitats from the grasslands and wetlands of the Kiskunság and Hortobágy National Parks, to the limestone rock outcrops of the Bükk Hills and the beautiful beech forests of the Zemplén Hills.

We were extremely lucky with the weather. Every day except one was sunny, the temperature was mild and pleasant, with no wind or fog. Only on our second day was it cloudy with some rain but most of that day was also fine for birdwatching.

All together, we recorded 120 species including Red-breasted and Lesser White-fronted Geese, Great Bustard, eight species of woodpeckers, five species of owls, 13 species of raptors and Wallcreeper.

Trip Diary

Saturday 2nd November

Our tour began at the Liszt Ferenc Airport in Budapest before noon, so despite the days being very short at this time of year, we still had time to do some birdwatching in the northern part of the nearby Kiskunság National Park. After a 45-minute drive mainly on the ring road of the capital, we arrived at a network of extensive arable fields and grasslands where we found our first interesting species. A few Hen Harriers were gliding over the fields, a nice Rough-legged Buzzard, a winter visitor here, was soaring above, while a Great Grey Shrike was looking for prey from a treetop.

A small covey of Grey Partridges was also found at the verge of the road. It is always nice to see this species as it has become much scarcer in Hungary in recent years due to intensification of agriculture.

After some searching, we found the birds which was the reason to visit this area: four male Great Bustards in a distant field. To get better views, we drove along the road and from a safe distance set up our scopes and had really good views of these spectacular birds.

We still had time to visit a nearby wetland where we had a brief introduction to the commoner wetlands species of the country. Our first big flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese and Common Cranes were seen and also the only Western Cattle Egrets of the trip were found amongst the Water Buffalos grazing on the pastures. The first of many White-tailed and Eastern Imperial Eagles were also spotted as they were keeping an eye on the flocks of waterfowl.

After this excellent start, we began the two and a half hour drive towards the Hortobágy, where we would spend the next four nights in the very well located Bábic Lodge. The drive was smooth but it was pitch black when we checked in at our comfortable accommodation.

Monday 3rd November

We met early in the morning at the porch of the lodge to take a pre-breakfast walk. There was a nice view over a vast grassland where there were several hundred Common Cranes and a few Caspian Gulls. Two first year Peregrines were sitting on the ground. A short walk along the village street just behind the lodge provided very good views of a Syrian Woodpecker which was first heard and then tracked down quickly.

After a tasty breakfast, we drove to the fishponds located at the centre part of the Hortobágy National Park. Here, a short and easy walk took us to some wetlands full of birds. Amongst the many dabbling ducks, we eventually managed to find a lone Ferruginous Duck. This is a



migratory species, so quite scarce at this time of year.

On the vegetated pond, a few hundred Pygmy Cormorants were feeding and dozens were drying their wings in the surrounding trees.

Bearded Reedlings © Gábor Simay

The reeds along a small channel held a nice flock of Bearded Reedlings, which

totally ignored our presence enabling us to have very close views of them.

We walked to a smaller pond where we were expecting to see some geese on their day roost. As we were waiting, we saw a Water Pipit and also some Northern Pintails. Small flocks of geese were arriving and soon enough, we spotted two adult Lesser White-fronted among them. They were quite close so could see all the field marks including their characteristic yellow eye-rings.

While we were having lunch in a nearby restaurant, a quick rain shower went through the area, but by the time we arrived at our next birding spot, the weather was fine again. Here, a pond held some waders and gulls, including a few Pied Avocets. We noticed a Great Spotted Eagle flying among the nearby willow trees. The bird eventually perched on a tree and we had excellent scope views of it, an adult bird.

We still had time to visit a Long-eared Owl day roost where we counted 28 individuals with most of them sitting in the same tree.

At dusk, we stopped at the edge of the grassland where our lodge is located and watched several thousand Common Cranes arriving at their night roost.

Tuesday 4th November

This morning, we headed towards the southern grasslands of the National Park. Good numbers of raptors were around and more than 20 Hen Harriers were seen but the best was a perched Long-legged Buzzard.

Driving further south to the Bihar Plains, we found a Saker Falcon on a pylon which was soon joined by its mate and we had great views of them sitting together.

The surrounding fields held hundreds of Common Cranes and on a nearby wetland, we found more than 10,000 Greater White-fronted Geese. They were in good light and not too far away, so we were very happy to see ten Red-breasted Geese among them. These beautiful geese were really stunning in the sunlight.

Further searching added a pair of adult Lesser White-fronted Geese, a few Ruffs and thousands of Lapwings. The air was full of raptors and we had another Saker Falcon chasing feral pigeons, while a White-tailed Eagle fighting with an Eastern Imperial Eagle was a very special sight.

From here, we drove back to the area around our lodge where thousands of geese were feeding around the wetland. Among them, we found two Red-breasted Geese and a locally scarce Barnacle Goose. In the nearby bushes, a flock of Long-tailed Tits entertained us and we spotted a few of the 'white-headed' subspecies amongst them.

Next, we drove to a crane roost site, where we were rewarded with brief views of a Black Woodpecker in a poplar plantation. The wetland itself was also exciting with a flock of Spotted

Redshanks and a small goose flock which included two Tundra Bean Geese. This goose species has become scarce in recent years in this area, most probably because of a shift in their migration route.

As the sun began to go down, flocks of Common Cranes started to arrive. We had chosen a good position with many of the birds passing directly over our heads. The sight of thousands of birds against the setting sun, and later when it was almost dark, against the full moon, was extraordinary and very memorable.

Wednesday 5th November

After breakfast, we drove to Debrecen, a large town close to the Hortobágy where there is an old oak forest which is very good for woodland birds. Once again, the weather was fantastic with blue skies and zero wind. Bird activity was very good too with Nuthatches, Mistle Thrushes, Marsh Tits and Great Spotted Woodpeckers seen quickly.

After some searching, we had very close views of a feeding male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, a couple of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and two Short-toed Treecreepers.

In the early afternoon, we again visited the central part of the National Park where we explored a pond where there were several hundred geese. They were in really good light and not far away at all. Among them, we spotted a Red-breasted Goose and no less than seven Lesser White-fronted Geese. Once again, we had good views of these rare goose species.



A lone Red-breasted Goose in a flock of Greater White-fronted Geese © Gábor Simay

In the reedbeds, we tried to find Penduline Tits which had eluded us over the previous days. Eventually, we heard their typical call and, after persevering, had great views of two birds.

Next, we visited a few more fishponds but found only commoner species so drove to a small village which is usually a reliable place for Little Owl. The site did not disappoint us and we soon found one perched on the top of a chimney just by the road. With this owl species 'in the bag', we had managed to see all the species we planned to find in the lowlands.

At this point, we received a message that three Black-winged Kites had been found not far from our lodge, so we decided to try to see these local rarities. The birds were easily found and we had good views of all three individuals. After the great success of the first part of the trip, we could now turn our attention to the next section which would be in the hills.

Thursday 6th November

We had an early breakfast and then headed off to the Bükks Hills. It was a two hour drive to this limestone range where the vertical cliffs are the winter home of a number of Wallcreepers. These unusual but beautiful birds can be tricky to find as they have long periods of inactivity so we were prepared for a long wait.

We left the vehicle at the edge of the wood and it took about half an hour to walk to the cliff. In the forest, we had very good views of two Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and when we reached the right habitat, we found a nice adult Peregrine and a few Common Ravens were circling above.

Our luck continued, however, as it took only a few minutes to find a Wallcreeper on the huge cliff. Although the bird was not close, nevertheless, it was a special observation as it was singing a couple times which was unexpected behaviour on the wintering grounds.

After a short while, the bird flew to the nearest cliff where we had tremendous views as it was feeding busily, before it flew again and disappeared behind the rocks.

We thought things couldn't get any better until our attention was drawn towards a tapping noise coming from a lightly wooded hillside. We were pretty sure this was the feeding noise of an interesting species of woodpecker. We waited patiently and eventually the bird came into view and it turned out to be a male White-backed Woodpecker, the most difficult to see woodpecker species of the trip and somewhat surprisingly, it was feeding largely on the ground among the rocks.



White-backed Woodpecker © Gábor Simay

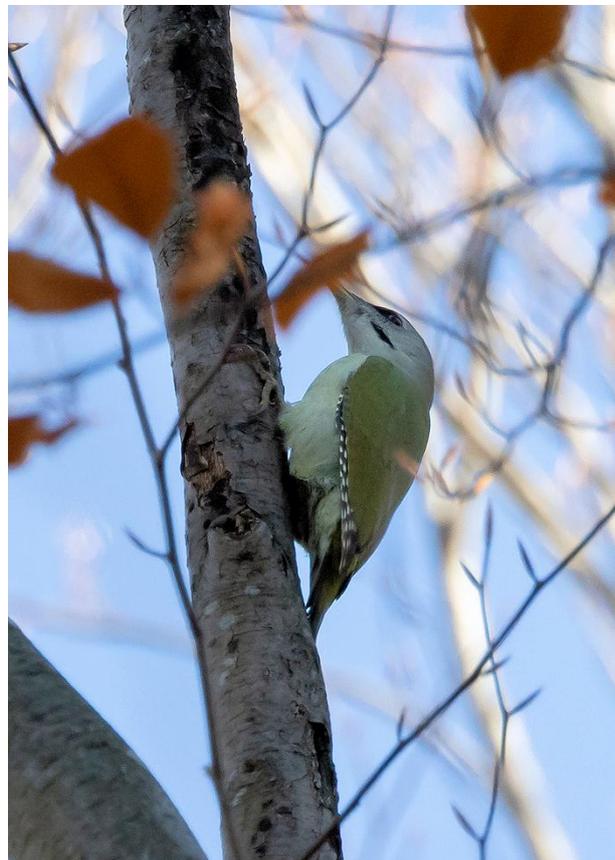
Whilst walking back to the vehicle, we saw our first Grey-headed Woodpecker, a Brambling and a couple of Marsh Tits.

We then drove for a couple of hours to the Zemplén Hills and it was already dusk when we met up with our local guide Zoli. We stopped at a vineyard and set our scope on the pine trees on a nearby ridge as we had been told an Eagle Owl regularly used these trees to call from before it left for the night to hunt.

Grey-headed Woodpecker © Gábor Simay

First, we heard the call of the bird a couple times then it perched up in the largest tree. Looking through the scope, we had a great view of this huge owl which was calling continuously.

When it finished advertising its presence, it took off and flew towards the lowlands against the dark orange evening sky – a magnificent end to the day.



Leaving this site, we drove to our comfortable small hotel located among the hills in the tiny village of Komlóska.

Friday 7th November

We did some pre-breakfast birding in the calm and silent streets of the village where we tried to find Hawfinches. Initially, we had some poor flight views but we eventually heard some birding calling which gave us very good scope views as they were feeding on a tree.

After breakfast, we met Zoli again and dedicated the day to find a Ural Owl. This spectacular and huge owl can be tricky to find in autumn, so we were prepared for an extended search. As these owls can be quite active during the day, we drove to a nice beach forest which we thought could be a good hunting ground and as we stopped the vehicle, we couldn't believe our eyes when a Ural Owl glided by in front of us and then perched in a tree. We got out, set the scope on the owl and had a brilliant view of it.



Ural Owl © Gábor Simay

As it was actively hunting, it flew and landed again, before disappearing into the valley. We stayed in the general area and soon the owl appeared again, landing very close to us in beautiful light, totally ignoring our presence. It was an incredible experience!!

As we could hear a lot of tapping and drumming, it was clear that there was good woodpecker activity in the area, so we decided to go for a short walk on a side trail. First, we had a very good view of a Grey-headed Woodpecker, then glimpsed a Green Woodpecker which was followed by a Black Woodpecker which eventually gave us a great view.

It only happens very occasionally in the hills that we find all our main targets so quickly, so we decided to visit a quarry where an Eagle Owl was known to sometimes occur.

Unfortunately, this could not be located so we drove around the nearby grasslands finding a few Western Marsh and Hen Harriers and a beautiful adult pair of Eastern Imperial Eagles.

At dusk, we tried to find some more owls in a nearby forest, but all we could locate was a pair of Tawny Owls which were calling and flying around in the almost dark forest. Despite this, it had been a fantastic day with some great bird sightings.

Saturday 8th November

It was our last morning so we started the day with a short walk in the village soon finding a Grey-headed Woodpecker which was feeding busily among the leaf litter in a garden. Next, we had more good views of a pair of Hawfinches at the edge of the village.

As we had enjoyed great views of all the special birds of the hills, we decided to check some ponds along the way to the airport hoping to find some species we hadn't seen yet.

At the first site, the ponds were mostly empty with just a few common birds, but a big flock of Pygmy Cormorants was nice, along with the first Yellow-legged Gulls of the trip, which showed particularly well. We had side-by-side comparison with Caspian Gulls both in adult and first year plumages.

We had our first proper views of a Green Woodpecker and also found two European Serins, which was another nice addition to our list.

Our final stop was very close to the airport and this pond was full of birds. Beside many common species, we found a winter plumaged Red-necked Grebe and as we were walking back to the vehicle, saw a group of Grey Partridges.

We arrived to the airport well in time and said goodbye after a very enjoyable and successful trip.