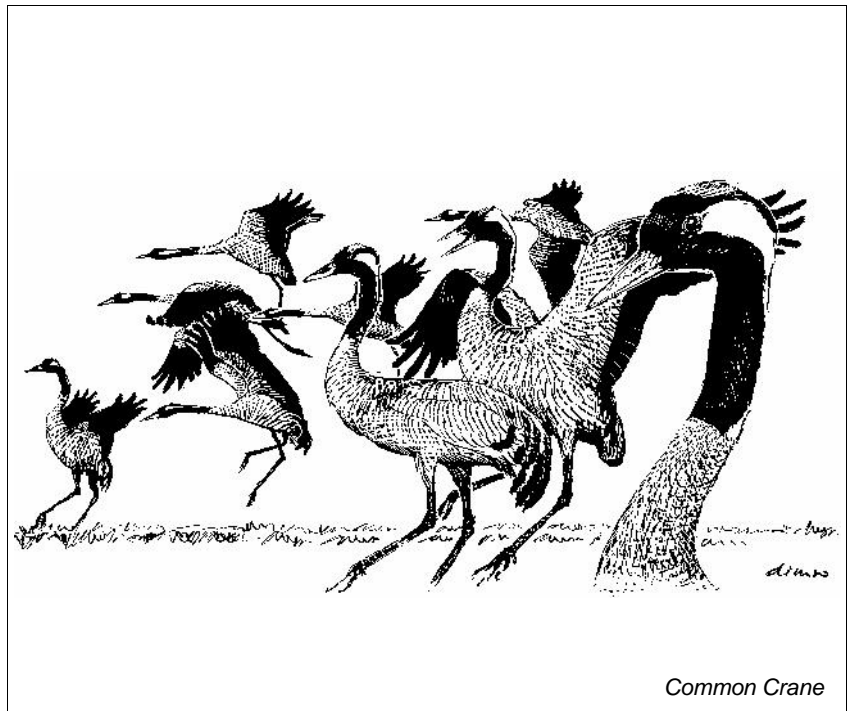


# HUNGARY IN THE AUTUMN

*one of the greatest European bird spectacles*



Common Crane

This tour comprises an exciting blend of woodland, wetland and grassland birds and is timed to coincide with the

spectacular passage of tens of thousands of Common Cranes through the east of the country. At this time of year a huge number of wildfowl also stop off in the Hortobagy on their way south, including the rare Lesser White-fronted Goose. We will see the Hortobagy at its peak, as one of the great European migration staging posts, and widely regarded as one of Europe's best birding areas. In October the grasslands (the famous 'Puszta') and huge fish pond systems of this vast plain are the hunting grounds of various rare birds of prey. Great Bustards are doing well here and provide one of the highlights of the trip.

In the Zemplen foothills we will search, with the help of local guides, for owls, woodpeckers and much more. Woodland birds like Hawfinch that are often thought of as scarce and difficult are common and widespread here. This is also a very good area for birds of prey such as Goshawk and Eagle Owl.

The gentle pace of life gives rural Hungary a peaceful ambience. The evening quiet of the Hortobagy is broken only by the horse-drawn farm carts trundling home. Then the distant calling of the cranes begins. Thousands upon thousands pass by overhead en route to a traditional roost site, providing one of the most moving and evocative experiences in the natural world.

We will spend two nights in the Zemplen Hills and five nights in the Hortobagy. Finally before leaving Hungary we may have time for a little sightseeing in the elegant city of Budapest, which is actually two cities, Buda and Pest, one on either bank of the river. We are happy to organise a city break extension if anybody wants to spend a few nights in Budapest. Please contact us for details.

Throughout, we will have the guiding skills of a *Sakertour* bird-guide, and official access to the best sites with support from various wardens. *Sakertour* is Hungary's premier birdwatching holiday organiser.

## ITINERARY

### ZEMPLEN FOREST RESERVE

From Budapest we will drive three hours to the Carpathian mountains. We will spend the first two nights at the Solyomvar Hotel, near the village of Komloska, close to the forest. This reserve is one of the most easterly points in Hungary and one of the most charming too. Distinctive churches rise above the landscape virtually untouched since the last days of the Hapsburgs. Horses pull farm equipment across ancient meadows dotted with haystacks evoking an era long gone in Britain. Driving through this idyllic landscape

we soon reach the Zemplen Forest Reserve where one of our prime targets will be the huge Ural Owl. Outside the breeding season it is not easy to find this beautifully camouflaged owl, but we have a good chance in this prime habitat, with the help of our local guide. The list of other species found here is impressive and includes eight species of woodpecker; Black, Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted, Great Spotted, Grey-headed and with luck White-backed Woodpecker. Green and Syrian Woodpeckers can be found just outside the forest. Other woodland species may include Hawfinch and the pretty white-headed form of Long-tailed Tit.

We will scan for raptors in the wide open valleys of the Zemplen foothills where there is a very good chance of Eastern Imperial Eagle and Goshawk. On one evening we will look for Eagle Owls in a quarry. Time permitting, we will also include a wine-tasting in the famous Tokaj area.

### **HORTOBAGY NATIONAL PARK**

From the Zemplens we will take the picturesque drive to our lodge at Nadudvar in the heart of the Hortobagy National Park, for a stay of five nights. This World Heritage site is famous for its culture and wildlife.

The shallow wetlands and fishponds are the great birding epicentres of the Hortobagy National Park, providing feeding and roosting for many migrant birds. Thousands of shorebirds, ducks and geese feed out on the extensive steppe and among the crop fields, coming to the ponds mostly to drink and roost. Flocks of Dunlin, Ruff, Spotted Redshank, Curlew and Black-tailed Godwit can be found on the muddy shores of empty fishponds. Amongst the Great Crested and Little Grebes in the deeper ponds we will look for Black-necked Grebe, Black-throated Diver and Ferruginous Duck. Other species found here include Great and Pygmy Cormorants, Bittern, Spoonbill, Wigeon, Gadwall, Teal, Mallard, Pintail, Shoveler, Pochard, Water Rail, Moorhen, Coot, Avocet, Grey Plover, Lapwing, Greenshank, Black-headed, Common and Yellow-legged Gulls and Kingfisher. Even Great White Egrets gather in flocks of several hundreds on the drained mudflats. Hunting White-tailed Eagles disturb these concentrations from time to time, sending up huge flocks of wildfowl and waders. Hen Harriers glide low over the reeds where Penduline and Bearded Tits abound. Damp meadows attract migrant Common Snipe at this time, often accompanied by a few Jack Snipe.

The globally threatened Lesser White-fronted Goose is found in small numbers among the large goose flocks which are dominated by White-fronted, Greylag and Bean Geese. More birds to be found in this area include Stock Dove, Crested Lark, Water Pipit, Tree Sparrow and Corn Bunting. Against a background of feeding cranes we will look for trips of Dotterel, en route to their wintering grounds. At the edge of the steppe on the freshly cut alfalfa fields Great Bustards are gathering in flocks at this time of year. With special permission we will watch these strictly protected birds without disturbing them.

Around the barns and picturesque farmsteads Little Owls and Black Redstarts can be found. Flocks of Fieldfare are arriving on the steppe while Northern Grey Shrikes watch from their treetop perches. If we are lucky we can find one or two of the scarce winter inhabitants of the Artemisia steppe such as Twite, Lapland Bunting or Snow Bunting. The rich rodent population ensures a healthy number of predators. Among the many Common Buzzards and Marsh Harriers we should see Peregrine, Merlin, Rough-legged Buzzard and Hen Harrier from the north and perhaps a few wandering Long-legged Buzzards from the east. This is one of the few places where you can see these three buzzard species together. There is also an excellent chance of Saker, perhaps Europe's most enigmatic falcon. One afternoon we will go to see Long-eared Owls at a daytime roost; sometimes over a hundred birds are to be found, giving incredible views.

Amongst the thousands of migrants, a few unexpected species are usually found. This season is the peak time for Hungarian rarities; you never know what might turn up.

One evening we will take a short drive into the steppe to see the massive influx of Common Cranes (up to 50,000) flying over our heads to their roosting areas. Initially they appear far away on the horizon, flying towards and eventually low over us, in long lines, to their roosting place on the drained fishponds. The steppe is quiet at this time of day, the sun is setting and the wild evocative calls of the cranes grow louder and louder as they approach. Eventually there is a concert of thousands of calling and flying birds making this an unforgettable wildlife experience.

On day eight after breakfast we will take in some good birding habitat on our way to Budapest where, given time, we will finish our tour with some sightseeing in the capital, an exquisitely laid out city, on either side of the Danube.

### **CLIMATE AND PACE**

Hungary often experiences an Indian summer, with mild, sunny conditions late into the year, although it is normally chilly first thing in the morning. We have only rarely experienced rain. Breakfast will be taken about 8am most mornings. Optional pre-breakfast walks will be possible in the vicinity of the hotels. Basic fitness is all that is required. There will be a certain amount of uphill walking on one or two days but this will be at a relaxed pace.

### **ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD**

Full board accommodation is provided with two nights at the Solyomvar Hotel, near the Zemplen Forest Reserve and five nights at the excellent Trofea Lodge in the Hortobagy. Both are good quality traditional hotels. All rooms have en suite bathrooms. Food is excellent. Some days we will take picnics, but on others we will lunch at traditional inns.

### **PRICE INCLUDES .....**

All birdwatching excursions with expert leader and local guide, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 9<sup>th</sup>, ending with lunch on 16<sup>th</sup>), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, local transport by mini-bus, international flights.

### **WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED**

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

### **INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS**

Return flight from Leeds/Bradford to Budapest using the scheduled services of Jet2. Outbound flight departs early afternoon, return flight arrives back early evening. Corresponding flights may also be possible from London Heathrow. Please telephone for details.

<b>7 nights:</b>	<b>9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> October 2015</b>
<b>Principal leader:</b>	<b>Andy Woodall</b>
<b>Local guide:</b>	<b>Zoltan Ecsedi/Sakertour</b>
<b>Maximum group size:</b>	<b>13 clients with one leader and a local guide</b>
<b>Cost with discount (if you book before 26<sup>th</sup> June 2015):</b>	<b>£1560 per person sharing (£140 single supplement)</b>
<b>Full Cost:</b>	<b>£1660 per person sharing</b>
<b>Deposit:</b>	<b>£300 per person</b>