



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Hungary
24 – 31 May 2016

Holiday participants

Barry and Denise Madden
Rita and Wilkie Harrigan

Leader

Gábor Orbán

Our hosts at Kondor Lodge: Gábor Orbán and Andrea Katona.

Ecotours www.ecotours.hu and Kondor Ecolodge and <http://www.kondorecolodge.hu>



Report and photos by Barry Madden www.easternbushchat.blogspot.co.uk
with plant list by Wilkie Harrigan.

Photos in this report were all taken during the course of this holiday.
Cover: Red-footed falcon; arable wild flowers: mayweed, poppies and larkspur.
Above: at Kondor Lodge. Below: the group.



This holiday, as for every Honeyguide holiday, also puts something into conservation in our host country by way of a contribution to the wildlife that we enjoyed. The conservation contribution this year was £200, £40 per person topped up by gift aid from the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust. It was for the Kiskunság Bird Association, which is based at the National Park's Lake Kolon Bird Observatory.

As at June 2016, the total for all conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 was £108,126.

DAILY DIARY

Imagine waking up to the sound of golden orioles wolf whistling in the rustling poplars, nightingales stridently clattering behind screens of billowing ash and the 'thrip thrip' calls of bee-eaters slicing through the cool dawn skies. All of this bathed in morning sunlight caressing miles of dew-spangling grasslands bejewelled with myriad wild flowers. Sounds good, doesn't it? In fact almost too good to be true, but these things happened every morning of our stay at Kondor Lodge in the Kiskunság National Park of central Hungary. There were times when literally the only things that could be heard were the calls of wild creatures; the chirruping of crickets, the croaking of frogs and the aforementioned birdsong which provided pleasant background music all day long. There were seldom any man-made noises to intrude. But I race ahead of myself and should really begin at the beginning and recount the events of our week long Honeyguide holiday to this beautiful area as they unfurled.

Day 1 – 24 May

There were four participants on this trip. Barry and Denise had flown to Budapest a few days earlier and met Wilkie and Rita at the airport for the pick up by Gábor and Andrea, our hosts, guides and caterers for the week. Unfortunately almost as soon as we loaded our cases into the minibus the heavens opened to produce a substantial downpour for the duration of our drive to Kondor Lodge, our base for the week. We did stop once or twice en route to look at the architecture of a traditional Hungarian village and to see if we could spot a few birds, but the rain was never far away and always drove us back to the sanctuary of our wheeled transport before we had time to see much. That said, it was heartening to note that a lot of turtle doves were being flushed from the road as we progressed and there were tantalising glimpses of red-footed falcons hawking insects over the damp fields. Promises of good things to come.

Settled into our accommodation, we enjoyed the first of our filling and tasty home cooked meals washed down with a rather good local red wine. Suitably replete it was time to have a quick tour of the lodge grounds in the gathering dusk hoping to catch sight of a nightjar that occasionally come to the pond to drink. No luck tonight. With the sound of crickets ringing all around and early moths floating around the grasses we retired for the night. With nothing but a nightingale breaking the silence I for one was soon soundly asleep.

Day 2 – 25 May

I was wide awake and sitting in the sunken hide by the pond by 6am. With the dawn came the birds: tree sparrows, greenfinches, a nuthatch and a family party of great tits tucking into the sunflower seeds liberally scattered on the bird tables. A honey buzzard caused momentary alarm when it appeared twisting through the woodland and away over the meadow and occasionally a grass snake would swim strongly from one reed lined edge to another. The highlight awaited me as I left the hide for there, sitting unmoving in a nearby ash, was a multi-hued hawfinch caught resplendent in the strengthening light. All this and it wasn't yet breakfast time.



Hawfinch

After that leisurely meal (one virtue of Honeyguide holidays is the relaxed nature of the activities), we stepped across the road and entered a lost world; a world of yesteryear invoking visions of what the countryside at home must once have looked like before the age of intensive farming, 'tidy' woodlands and manicured lawns. Here in such a sparsely populated area nature held sway. Everywhere there were rafts of pastel-coloured wild flowers where butterflies danced from bloom to bloom supping the abundant nectar. Striding through the knee-high sward would catapult grasshoppers in all directions and every step would disturb a moth from its daytime roost.

Our walk took us along sandy tracks where a male red-backed shrike flitted along fence posts and more golden orioles teased us from every stand of poplars where turtle doves purred their love song.

It wasn't long before we came upon a small group of bee-eaters that were nesting in holes they had excavated at ground level at the edge of the track. These burrows seem very exposed and vulnerable, but extend some way laterally, ensuring the nesting chamber is out of reach of any passing vehicle. Nonetheless the colony seems most precarious but the birds more than beautiful. We were able to watch these aerial pirates hawking dragonflies and other flying insects against a pure azure sky. So colourful, so manoeuvrable and so deadly. But this is what we had come for: to see wild landscapes and wild creatures we could no longer encounter at home.



Dragonfly ID helped by bee-eaters: left, with a Norfolk Hawker; right with a Lesser Emperor.

Presently we arrived at what until recently would have been the shores of a sizeable lake. Lake Kondor began to mysteriously empty in 2010 and has not since refilled. Reasons for this dramatic transformation from open water to open grassland are unclear, but some disturbance to the fragile geology of the site would seem likely. In any event where once water birds; terns, herons, wildfowl and reed dwellers abounded and lone fishermen made a tenuous living, now the gently rolling landscape is home to jangling corn buntings, hovering kestrels and bright-chested yellow wagtails, while over all skylarks pour forth their liquid symphony. In the more low lying areas reed still grows, and here great reed warblers crash out their grinding notes while marsh harriers float above. Cuckoos call from every stand of scrub and insects abound. Gábor expressed a fervent hope that one day the lake would return, but his neighbour regards the newly formed pasture as heaven sent grazing for his cattle. It is an ill wind.

It dawned on me that being of good Norfolk stock I felt very much at home in this flatland environment which reminded me very much of Broadland and the transition zone between the Norfolk & Suffolk Brecks and the Fenlands. Not totally flat and featureless like the agricultural Fens around the Wash, but rather a complex tapestry of differing habitats merging to form a rich mosaic. The soil was very sandy and most of the grassland areas dry and well drained. But an under layer of alluvial deposits facilitate the formation of small lakes and reed fringed channels interspersed with wet woodland or commercial stands of poplar with a healthy understory of ash and birch. All rather pleasant, and with organic farming methods being widely employed wildlife is allowed space to thrive.

Upon completing the loop, we returned to Kondor Lodge, boarded our minibus and headed out to explore. Our afternoon turned out to be rather interesting both from a wildlife spotting perspective and also from a meteorological one. Thunderstorms were looming. However our first visit was to an area of Puszta – a local term for large areas of steppe-like grasslands – a couple of kilometres from the lodge. By slowly driving along the sandy tracks we were able to get very close to a large colony of nesting bee-eaters. These birds were busy excavating their burrows, courting, mating and generally going about their business. And we could watch it all by using the minibus as a hide. The rainbow colours of these excellent birds were seen to stunning effect when sunlit against the backdrop of brooding storm clouds. It was interesting to note that the birds were catching dragonflies in numbers, among them good numbers of Norfolk hawkers. I mentioned this to Gábor who informed us that he too refers to the insects by that name – evidence, he teased, that English should never have been adopted as a default world language. We did plan to drive around more of this habitat but the dark, angry looking clouds were approaching fast. Plan B kicked in and we returned to the lodge for a cuppa before deciding where best to resume our trek. This turned out to be a good move since no sooner had we put cup to lips than the heavens opened to unleash a storm the likes of which we had seldom seen. The rain simply bulleted from the sky for 30 minutes or so. Biscuits helped relieve the frustration.

Once the initial storm abated we spent the remainder of the afternoon dodging further storms by the simple expedient of aiming the minibus at any patch of blue sky. Gábor's intimate knowledge of the area gave this strategy focus as he was able to concentrate efforts on the specialist birds and animals he knew were present. In this way we were able to obtain glimpses of black woodpeckers, and listen to the songs of both grasshopper and Savi's warblers both reeling at the same time. A very instructive comparison. More importantly we avoided getting wet while all around torrential rain fell.

Back at the lodge it was interesting to note the numbers of moths that had been dislodged from the thatched roofs by the rain. Several white ermines were now roosting in full view together with riband wave, yellow shell and several micros I could not identify. Later that evening another guest produced a dead clearwing species (a wasp mimic) he had discovered on the nearby track. Evidence of the great diversity of life inhabiting this area.

Day 3 – 26 May

Today's pre-breakfast stroll revealed a family party of black redstarts that had recently nested on one of the Lodge's roof supports together with a lovely spotted flycatcher in the process of doing the same. As I pulled back the cloth flap of the pond hide I disturbed a large grass snake that had been resting in the cool interior. That specimen slithered away before I could have a closer look, but several newly hatched individuals provided very close encounters as they swam in the shallows and sometimes investigated the dark opening to the hide. On more than one occasion I had to give them a gentle tap to discourage them actually entering the hide; I was more concerned for their safety than mine. These bright, inquisitive creatures provided great entertainment as they silently explored every niche of the pond surround, while the nightingales, golden orioles and hoopoe enriched the scene with their song.



Grass snakes.

The main focus of the day was exploration of the oxbow lakes of the River Tisza. Our first activity here was to spend a pleasant hour or so slowly walking through well-preserved woodland looking for woodpeckers amid the towering oak, poplar and ash. It wasn't long before we had satisfying views of both Syrian and middle spotted woodpeckers that nest commonly in natural holes in the impressive stands of mature trees. We also were lucky to be able to watch a pair of great spotted woodpeckers feeding young in a nest cavity close to the track. Other birds of note here were wood warbler, short-toed tree creeper and of course the ever-present nightingales. The swarming mosquitoes were not welcome however with recent rains providing ideal breeding conditions.

Once out of the forest, a short walk across a damp meadow rich in wild flowers – meadow buttercups, ragged robin, cotton grass and yellow flag iris – led us to a raised platform from which we had a commanding view across a clear oxbow lake, richly carpeted with flowering lilies. The scene was one of intense activity with masses of whiskered terns gathering nesting material and hawking insects all around. These dainty marsh inhabitants danced around us allowing close appreciation of their silver-grey plumage offset by jet black underparts. Lovely creatures. Dabbling among the prolific water plants were small numbers of ferruginous ducks, two drake garganeys, fishing purple herons and the special bird we had come to see: the pygmy cormorant. These diminutive fishermen seem to be expanding their range in this region and certainly seemed at home feeding in the rich freshwaters of the lake.



Whiskered terns, and the female marsh harrier which came very close to the watchtower.

From our elevated vantage point we had the ability to scan the skies through 360°. Being able to pick up moving objects over a considerable distance allowed us to add an immature white-tailed eagle soaring over the river valley together with both common and honey buzzard, kestrel, black stork and marsh harrier to our growing day list. On one occasion a lovely female marsh harrier came very close to the watchtower providing exceptional views. Such majestic birds.

We ate lunch in the shady tranquillity of a local churchyard. Here we noticed large numbers of bright red firebugs gathered on the weathered stone, as well as being able to see cardinal fritillaries flying strongly over the sun-dappled grass. In the quiet area behind the church we were able to at last get good views of an obliging male golden oriole and a pair of lesser spotted woodpeckers feeding newly fledged young.

From the high point offered by the churchyard we were then able to scan over another large wetland. The volume of egrets and herons was most impressive at this site where mixed rookeries were in full swing; the raucous hunger calls of the young drifting up to us from the thick stands of willow. We descended to get a closer look but found high water levels limited access to the major part of the lake. Even so we were able to obtain great views of night herons and eventually a penduline tit that teased us with its high-pitched call from thick cover. A further surprise appeared in the form of a high flying party of nine common cranes, a species that does not usually inhabit this area during the breeding season.

As the afternoon progressed we were treated to the sight of saker falcons nesting in a box specially placed on a tall electricity pylon. With the aid of a telescope we were able to see an adult and two young panting in the stifling heat. This was a privileged sighting made all the more poignant due to its surroundings. There we were watching such uncommon birds while all around us fields of corn rippled in the afternoon breeze. But these fields were not like those at home. Here they were full of wildflowers: cornflowers, corn cockles and swathes of bright scarlet poppies with fritillaries, skippers and painted ladies dancing above. Was it once like this back home? If so we have surely lost so much and are the poorer for it. By way of contrast Gábor then drove us to another lakeside which was in the process of being overexploited by local inhabitants as a kind of water playground. Not surprisingly the numbers of water birds here were very low, competing as they have to with swimmers, boaters, fishermen and the general hubbub caused by such human encroachment. Hopefully such activity can be capped at a reasonable level and contained to this site only. But the resilience of nature always surprises and it wasn't long before two more woodpeckers, a bounding green woodpecker and a lovely wryneck made their way onto the list. Scope views of a hawfinch brooding young on a nest and a song thrush belting out its song from the top of a telegraph post concluded our wildlife watching day. And what a splendid day it had been.

Day 4 – 27 May

We headed west today, firstly to investigate a number of small ponds where red-footed falcons hawked dragonflies and the ubiquitous nightingales blasted forth from every tangle of dense scrub. Our main quarry here was nesting penduline tits, but unfortunately a party of local fishermen had set up camp beneath the nesting tree. Undeterred, Gábor engaged the chaps in conversation, pointing out the nest and the need to allow the birds a bit of peace and quiet. The message was gracefully received and we all stood watching these masked architects put the finishing touches to their woven work of art. Many smiles ensued with promises to look after the birds.



Penduline tit nest; great reed warbler.

At this site we were lucky to encounter a lesser purple emperor butterfly and some banded demoiselle damselflies that lazily flapped around the reed fringed margins of the ponds. The reeds themselves held a good population of great reed warblers that despite much patience failed to show themselves. And all around courting golden orioles fluted high in the poplars, sometimes offering a glimpse as they chased one another through the sun-dappled canopy.

Across the road from these ponds lies an area of vast open Puszta comprising lush grasslands interspersed with shallow saline and freshwater lakes, some of significant size. We took a leisurely lunch in a small picnic zone beside Böddi-szék, a large waterbody housing a number of small reed fringed islands. Another watchtower gave an opportunity to scan over a wide area for birds and other wildlife. By this method we could log spoonbill, black-winged stilt, avocet, redshank and a beautiful pair of black-necked grebes in full summer garb. There were also good numbers of shelducks inhabiting the area. This species is a relatively new coloniser and until recently merited special mention in bird census reports. Happily it now appears to be well established and represents a colourful addition to the local fauna.

The grasslands around the picnic site held a large variety of wild flowers and insects; many butterflies, beetles and crickets. These provide a banquet for the squadrons of swallows and sand martins nesting in the area as well as an important food source for the next species we saw at close quarters, the simply stunning red-footed falcons.

Being a mainly open habitat, the scattered groups of stunted and dying trees provide much sought after nesting sites for a variety of predatory birds. To assist with breeding success, the park wardens have allowed nest boxes to be set up in suitably undisturbed spots which have proved to be very popular not only with the red-footed falcons but also kestrels and owls. At one such location, we parked the minibus and sat patiently watching the antics of these avian delights. We had excellent views of both male and female red-footed falcons at the nest and once again were surprised to see Norfolk hawker dragonflies as a regular prey item. A stunning pair of rollers engaged in a loud, grating bout of courtship nearby and a pair of kestrels fed their well grown young. Such a treat to be so close to such animals and be able to intimately watch them go about their lives.

While we were sitting unobtrusively at this spot we delighted in hearing a bittern booming from a nearby reed bed and were also fortunate enough to catch sight of squacco heron, purple heron, great white egret and white stork. With whiskered terns gracefully twisting over the shallows in search of emergent insects we left the grasslands to visit an area of total contrast.

The National Park is full of surprises, none more so than the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible habitats. How can an area of lush verdant wetland be bordered by an area of dry, shifting sand? But such is the case here with a few minutes' drive bringing us to the latter zone baking in the afternoon heat. The Fulophasa sand dune system is one of great ecological and geographical importance containing a variety of specialist plants and insects that have adapted to this ever changing landscape. But sadly it is under threat from a number of alien invasives, especially the milkweed, an introduction from North America. There it is a revered plant, preserved due to its association with the monarch, or milkweed, butterfly; here it is an unchecked pest which dominates large areas of disturbed ground to the detriment of all other plant life. Large areas of the drier Kiskunság are now being colonized by this unwelcome intruder and little seems to be happening to prevent its spread. Highlights of our circular walk were large numbers of the southern festoon caterpillar, crested lark, a singing woodlark, yellowhammer and once again those cheeky golden orioles chasing one another through the poplar stands.



Souselik; roller; poplar hawkmoths.

Such is the wealth of wildlife here though that no drive along the sparsely populated roads is without interest and just before we reached the lodge Gábor brought the minibus to a halt so we could admire a close-up view of a charming souselik. These little rodents, a kind of ground squirrel, are common inhabitants of the more cropped areas where they can frequently be seen standing on their back legs, meerkat style, as they keep a watchful eye out for the ever present buzzards, kestrels, sakers and harriers. We had encountered several of them on previous drives, but none so close as this particular individual. With its large dark eyes constantly scanning the skies for those hungry birds we could watch the animal feed on the abundant grasses before it disappeared from view, diving into an unseen burrow and sanctuary. A large buzzard was patrolling the field.

Once weary but happily back to base a further surprise awaited us in the form of a mating pair of poplar hawkmoths. Sometimes it was simply impossible to tear yourself away from the animals.

Day 5 – 28 May

Gábor was working on construction of a water level feeding station in the pond this morning, so the pre-breakfast stroll concentrated on moths. A simple tap on any stand of vegetation was likely to disturb a few insects from their daytime hiding place allowing closer scrutiny. Among the many micros too small or mobile to photograph and/or identify we did see several pyralids, a white plume moth, magpie moth, heart and dart together with a rather splendid and boldly-marked speckled yellow. An encouraging start to what promised to be a most exciting day.

A party of ringers had arrived at the lodge from the Czech Republic to spend the weekend investigating the contents of some 300 nest boxes they had erected throughout the park. The essence of this programme, which is undertaken on a purely voluntary basis, is to increase the breeding population of rollers and it has been a resounding success. This enthusiastic team visits Kondor Lodge at intervals throughout the breeding season to monitor usage of the nest boxes and to ring adult birds and young. Although rollers are the main occupants of the boxes, they do also attract a variety of other species. We asked whether we could tag along for a little while and were welcomed with gusto. Amid vast fields of swaying grasses and wild flowers we spent the morning following the ringing group as they checked on various boxes. We were even allowed to climb a ladder to take a peek at a group of well grown little owls that glared at us with baleful yellow eyes as we gazed down at them with a sense of privilege.



Little owl chick in a nestbox.

Being out there in the unspoiled Pusztá was an experience almost beyond the ken of a modern day UK based naturalist. The sheer profusion of plant and insect life was overwhelming. Back at home typing this account, it is not easy to convey the sense of abundance. Suffice to say anyone with an interest in botany or entomology could spend hours here discovering its inhabitants with a big smile on their faces. Over the course of the week we certainly did.

It was time to leave the ringers to their long, tiring work. Handshakes all round and we were off heading north to explore another aspect of the park. But hang on, what's that bird floating lazily over the sward? Binoculars rose hurriedly to reveal a most handsome male Montagu's harrier. And what's that smaller, pale bird on the wires? Tawny pipit. Another raptor, no two, three! A pair of honey buzzards and a common buzzard. And that bird on the fencepost? A stunning male cuckoo with another further along. What with those birds as well as corn buntings, turtle doves and hoopoes arresting our attention, progress was sometimes blissfully slow.

Our first target site for the afternoon was an area of wildflower-strewn high ground, a man-made island in fact, created as a refuge when in historic times the whole flood plain of central Hungary was periodically under water. From here we had a commanding view for miles over a modern sea of grasses that rippled and flowed in the breeze to create an ever-moving vista. While munching our sandwiches and gooey cakes we scanned the skies for raptors. First up a close flyover of a common buzzard. Next, among the sprinkling of more remote buzzards, a larger more robust bird appeared spiralling on wide oblong wings, long primaries fingered for effortless flight. The bird was distant, but through the scope its diagnostic projecting head shape and golden sheen revealed it to be an imperial eagle. How lucky was that? We watched the progress of this bird for some time but unfortunately it didn't come close enough for a really good look. No matter, for upon retracing our steps back down to the minibus a saker falcon, complete with souslik clasped in its strong talons, sped past; no doubt heading back to its insatiable young somewhere close to.

Next stop was at a bee-eater colony nesting in a low sandy wall. Sitting quietly on the opposite bank gave us a marvellous opportunity to watch these incredibly agile birds at close quarters. As always at these kind of wildlife spectacles it takes a little while to settle down and fully appreciate what is going on, there is so much action that it is sometimes difficult to know where to look. At this time of year most of the bee-eater nests have eggs and the off-duty birds were busy collecting food items to deliver to their incubating mates. Some were still engaging in courtship rituals, perched side by side with a food present, a dragonfly or on one occasion a red admiral butterfly, being offered by the male. Trying to photograph birds in flight is always a challenge, especially so when they are so close and so swift. But it is always a privilege and great fun. Not wishing to disturb the colony unduly we crept back to the minibus after 15 minutes and left these beautiful birds to their domestic duties.

Farther along the quiet roadway Gábor pulled the minibus to a halt to point out a majestic male great bustard he had somehow noticed posing on the edge of a field of corn. Through the scope the wide neck and great size of this bird could be fully appreciated. Another target bird we had been promised safely in the bag. We were doing rather well here, so well in fact that we decided a reward would be in order.

A few minutes later five hot, sweaty, binocular- and camera-draped birders could be found contentedly eating a generous helping of refreshingly cold, calorie-laden ice-cream in the nearby village. We attracted a few polite and inquisitive glances but not anything like the stir a local wedding party was creating. We soaked up this burst of local culture and colour which seemed to involve most of the village in parading the newlyweds up and down the main street in a horse-drawn carriage. With the sun blazing down, the wedding party properly photographed and made a fuss of and our stomachs pleasantly full we felt able to resume our explorations.



Wedding party.

A paper chase of gulls following a plough included a single Mediterranean gull among the black-headed gulls as we drove along more dusty tracks towards an area of large reed-fringed fishponds. Slow driving and frequent stops at likely spots allowed close views of great reed warbler and purple heron before we eventually reached a pond which had recently been drained to reveal a large expanse of mud. This pond contained literally hundreds of birds of many species, herons, geese, waders and terns. Special sightings here included ferruginous duck, good numbers of red-crested pochards, a few immature little gulls, black terns and a lovely summer plumaged grey plover. All too soon our time was up and we left the area to its reeling Savi's warblers and clattering great reed warblers to drive back to Kondor Lodge, tired and happy, for yet another sumptuous home cooked meal and then bed for well-earned slumber.

Day 6 – 29 May

Our pre-breakfast stroll took us to the area across the road from Kondor Lodge where even at this early hour the sunshine was warm enough to tempt many butterflies to begin their day. Some of these hung motionless from grass stems, small droplets of dew clinging to their wings and antennae, waiting for their bodies to heat sufficiently for them to take wing. And all around the bee-eaters, red-backed shrikes and golden orioles sang and fed. The most interesting incident was the distinct booming of a bittern which came from the lowest, and presumably dampest, area of the old lake bed. Perhaps water is slowly returning to Lake Kondor after all.



Red-backed shrike; Queen of Spain fritillary; white stork.

The main portion of the day was spent exploring a lake very much filled with water. Lake Kolon has been subject to a large restoration project with extensive areas of dense reed cover cleared to create a richer diversity of wetland habitats. We were taken by a boat fitted with a quiet electric motor along a tranquil channel covered in white water-lilies – a sure sign of good water quality – to the main lake area to see for ourselves how the lake has been rejuvenated.

Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust is a proud supporter of the researchers here, working as part of the Kiskunság Bird Protection Association, who undertake an intensive ringing program for various species, particularly the moustached warbler whose migratory patterns have until recently been poorly documented. The ringers set up to a mile of mist nets among the reedbeds during the season, and have already had several ringing recoveries which is beginning to build a picture of the migration routes and wintering areas of these vulnerable birds. It is hoped that data gathered in this way will help to conserve the habitats in key staging posts and the wintering grounds themselves.

We were hoping to catch sight of a moustached warbler today, but sadly that was not to be. The reedbeds did hold several species whose squeaks and warblings constantly accompanied our progress, but the lake itself was noticeably devoid of birds. We saw not a single duck, goose, grebe, gull or tern. A rather unexpected and eerie situation, especially since folk enjoying the last Honeyguide trip to this region experienced excellent views of a variety of species. We questioned our guide about this and discussed the potential problems of eutrophication (as applies to much of the Norfolk Broads), pollution, predation and such like but all parties seem mystified as to why the seemingly perfect nesting, breeding and feeding spot has been abandoned. Apparently for the first two years after the restoration work the lake was teeming with all kinds of birds; now nothing. The contrast is stark. The main theory at present is that there are many large predatory fish in the lake which effectively harvest young water birds. That may be a partial explanation as regards the smaller breeding species but would not seem to explain the total absence of loafing non-breeding geese or feeding terns, for example. Let's hope research can shed light on this problem and a remedy found because it is otherwise a fascinating area with great potential.



Yellow-spotted Whiteface.



Cardinal.

Once back on dry land we spent some time on our walk back to base in search of dragonflies and butterflies. In this we were quite successful and had close encounters with a lovely yellow-spotted whiteface and more familiar four-spotted chasers and Norfolk hawkers. Butterflies came in the form of various browns, skippers and fritillaries including several newly emerged and pristine cardinal fritillaries – stunning insects – that were busy supping from the mineral-rich soils. The common name of this species is derived from the blaze of red found on the underwing but they are fast and strong flyers making photography something of a challenge.

Lunch was spent in the shade of the researchers' headquarters, after which we were treated to a trip to a nearby watchtower from which we had far reaching views of the lake area and the adjacent sand dune system. In the latter habitat, researchers are involved in a nightjar ringing programme, again to discover information on migratory habits. The fragile sand dune system is under constant threat from invasive species and agricultural demands, so being able to demonstrate how important it is for vulnerable wildlife is key to its protection.

Onwards then to another vast area of mixed dry and wet Puszta, where from a high wooden tower we could watch a colony of red-footed falcons at very close quarters. The birds had of course seen us arrive and those closest to the platform flew around calling in protest at our invasion of their space. Not wishing to overly stress the birds, we didn't linger too long here, but long enough to have another excellent encounter with a great bustard as well as watching those simply beautiful falcons swooping with easy grace over the meadows. I snapped away for all I was worth and obtained some of the best images I've ever managed of a bird of prey. If that isn't worthy of a big smile I don't know what is. Well, maybe a lesser grey shrike sitting atop a dead branch, or a red-backed shrike glowing in the afternoon sun, maybe the rollers that lit up the sky as they flushed from roadside wires or perhaps the common buzzard and white stork looking for easy prey in a recently harvested field? All these we encountered on our drive back to base to conclude another exceptional day of wildlife watching. It was sometimes almost too much.

Day 7 – 30 May

The week had been full of incident and interest, and the heat at times intense. Over breakfast we discussed today's plans with Gábor (always accommodating of our requests and very flexible), and decided we would actually quite like to spend a little time in and around the grounds of Kondor Lodge. It always seemed so peaceful here but we had not really had time to simply relax and fully absorb its ambience. Gábor was very happy with this idea and devised an itinerary that allowed a short drive in the morning and most of the afternoon relaxing at Kondor.

But first we went in search of local owls that inhabit the higher ground of what used to be Lake Kondor. Here there are stands of small trees and shrubs together with a dilapidated and abandoned fisherman's cottage. Abandoned that is except for a pair of little owls that have found the thatched roof and eaves much to their liking. We saw one bird perched conspicuously on the roof as we approached, and also discovered the likely nest hole. No obvious sign of young birds though. We also looked in vain for a long-eared owl that last year nested close by, but had to content ourselves instead with watching a pair of yellow wagtails (blue-headed race *flava*) hawkling insects over the waving fields of steppe grass. A quite acceptable second prize.

Our local drive took us once again over wide areas of Puszta to a local farm where we were able to sit in the shade, sip locally-produced, fragrant white wine, indulge in ample supplies of a local bread supplied by the farm owners and generally bask in a slice of yesteryear. I found the whole complex quite nostalgic, reminding me vividly of the kind of places my friends and I used to ramble around as children. Rustic barns where swallows dived in to feed their young in mud nests sited on the cross beams, shady corners where wagtails, flycatchers and black redstarts fixed us with a wary eye, wildflower patches where butterflies tripped among the blooms and over all a sweltering sky of blue.

In keeping with the plan, we spent the afternoon lazing around the grounds of the Lodge looking for dragonflies and frogs in the pond, listening to the golden orioles serenade us and dozing in the soporific summer warmth. A beer or two may have contributed to the inability to keep our eyes open.

Day 8 – 31 May

Our flights back to the UK did not leave until the afternoon allowing us a leisurely breakfast and an unhurried drive back to Budapest. We even had time to visit the bee-eater nesting cliff, and this time we were able to use the minibus as a hide and therefore stay a little longer. I cannot get enough of bee-eaters and their colourful presence will remain an abiding memory of this holiday.

Sadly it was soon time to say our goodbyes, and with a heartfelt handshake/hug we parted from Gábor and his partner Andrea to board our flights home.

I would urge anybody with a love of wildlife and wild places to visit Hungary. The people are most friendly, the cuisine wholesome, healthy and satisfying, the sense of space and timelessness priceless. Thank you Honeyguide for a very enjoyable, informative and relaxing holiday. Thanks to Gábor and Andrea for their hospitality and guidance, and thanks to the birds, butterflies, plants and other colourful creatures for gorging our senses. It really was, literally, a most welcome breath of fresh air.



WILDLIFE LISTS

BIRDS H = heard

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
Mute Swan			3		1			
Greylag Goose			3	✓	✓			
Shelduck				✓				
Mallard		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Garganey			2					
Red-crested Pochard					10			
Ferruginous Duck			4		2			
Quail		H			H			
Pheasant		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black-necked Grebe				2				
Little Grebe			✓		✓			
Great Crested Grebe			✓		✓			
Cormorant			✓					
Pygmy Cormorant			10			10		
Bittern				✓		✓	✓	
Night Heron			✓	3				
Squacco Heron				2		2		
Little Egret			✓	✓		✓		
Great White Egret	2		✓	4	✓	2		
Grey Heron		1	✓	2	✓	✓	✓	
Purple Heron			1	2	5	1		
White Stork		5	1	✓		✓	✓	
Black Stork			1					
Spoonbill			3	✓				
White-tailed Eagle			1					
Imperial Eagle					1			✓
Marsh Harrier		5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Montagu's Harrier					1			
Common Buzzard		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Honey Buzzard		6	2		✓		4	
Sparrowhawk			1					
Kestrel		3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-footed Falcon	2			6		4		
Saker Falcon			3		1			
Coot			✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Crane			9					
Great Bustard					1	2		
Avocet				5	✓			
Black-winged Stilt				10	✓	✓		
Grey Plover					1			
Lapwing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redshank				3	✓	✓		
Black-headed Gull	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull					1			
Yellow-legged Gull			1		2			
Little Gull					2			
Common Tern				1	1			
Black Tern			2		2			
Whiskered tern			200	25		15		
Feral Pigeon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stock Dove		2						
Woodpigeon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Collared Dove		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Turtle Dove	8	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cuckoo		3	✓	✓	2	✓	✓	
Little Owl					4		1	
Swift	✓							
Hoopoe								
Bee-Eater		100	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	30

Roller		10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Woodpecker		2						
Green Woodpecker			1					
Great spotted Woodpecker		2	3					
Syrian Woodpecker		1	3	1				
Middle spotted Woodpecker			1					
Lesser spotted Woodpecker			3					
Wryneck			1					
Skylark		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Crested Lark				1	2	1	1	
Woodlark				H				
Sand Martin				✓	✓		✓	✓
Swallow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Martin		✓	✓					
Tawny Pipit					1			
White Wagtail	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Yellow Wagtail (<i>flava</i>)			✓		✓		✓	
Robin	✓	✓				✓	✓	
Nightingale	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	
Black Redstart	3	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wheatear	1							
Stonechat		3	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush		H	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Blackbird			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Blackcap	H	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Whitethroat	H		H					
Sedge Warbler			2			✓	✓	
Grasshopper Warbler		2H						
Savi's Warbler		2H			2H	H	H	
Reed Warbler					✓	✓	✓	
Great Reed Warbler	H		2H	3H	✓	2	✓	
Wood Warbler			1					
Chiffchaff	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
Wren			H					
Spotted Flycatcher			2		1	✓	✓	
Great Tit		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Blue Tit		1	✓					
Long-tailed Tit				1				
Penduline Tit		H	1	2				
Nuthatch		1	2	✓		✓		
Short-toed Treecreeper			1					
Lesser Grey Shrike		2				1	2	
Red-backed Shrike		3	3	1	4	✓	✓	
Magpie		✓	✓	✓		✓		
Jay		2	✓	✓			✓	
Jackdaw		✓		✓		✓		
Rook		✓		✓		✓	✓	
Hooded Crow		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Raven						2		
Starling	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Golden Oriole		6	3	H	H	H	H	H
House Sparrow		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tree Sparrow		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chaffinch		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Linnet		2				✓	✓	
Goldfinch		✓	✓			✓		✓
Greenfinch		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Hawfinch		1	1			1		
Reed Bunting		2						
Yellowhammer				1				
Corn Bunting		2	✓		✓	✓	✓	

MAMMALS		
Roe Deer	Souslik	Brown Hare

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS			
Grass Snake	Edible Frog	Green Lizard	European Pond Terrapin

BUTTERFLIES			
Large Skipper	Cardinal Fritillary	Marbled White	Common Blue
Ringlet	Lesser Spotted Fritillary	Painted Lady	Green-underside Blue
Small White	High Brown Fritillary	Large Heath	Silver-studded Blue
Brimstone	Queen of Spain Fritillary	Small Heath	Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper
Red Admiral	Meadow Brown	Large Copper	
Lesser Purple Emperor	Wall Brown	Brown Argus	

MOTHS				
Riband Wave	White Ermine	Blackneck	Poplar Hawkmoth	Mother Shipton
Burnet Companion	Cream-spot Tiger	Magpie Moth	Heart & Dart	Latticed Heath
Speckled Yellow				



Mother Shipton moth; bug orchid; speckled yellow moth.

DRAGONFLIES AND DAMSELFLIES			
Lesser Emperor *	Four-spotted Chaser	Yellow-spotted Whiteface	Banded Demoiselle
Norfolk Hawker *	Broad-bodied Chaser	Black-tailed Skimmer	

* in the mouth of a bee-eater, identified from photos – see page 4.

PLANTS
 Compiled by Wilkie Harrigan. Dates refer to the first occasion the plant was seen on this holiday.
 N.B. Because the main focus was birdwatching, this is not complete,
 e.g I ignored plants such as dandelions and daisies.

25 May	
<i>Mercurialis perennis</i>	Dog's mercury
<i>Populus alba</i>	White poplar
26 May	
<i>Centaurea cyanus</i>	Cornflower
<i>Cichorium intybus</i>	Chicory
<i>Ajuga</i> sp.	Bugle or blue bugle
<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>	Common or corn poppy
27 May	
<i>Thymus</i> sp.	Thyme
<i>Hyssopus officinalis</i>	Hyssop
<i>Glechoma hederacea</i>	Ground ivy
<i>Euphorbia cyparissias</i>	Cypress spurge
28 May	
<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>	Yellow rattle (fields of!)
<i>Galium verum</i>	Lady's bedstraw
<i>Tragopogon pratensis</i>	Goat's beard (beautiful seeding heads)
Also the following, but date first seen on the holiday was not recorded.	
<i>Coronilla varia</i>	Crown vetch
<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Bird's foot trefoil

<i>Vicia cracca</i>	Tufted vetch
<i>Symphytum</i> sp.	Comfrey
<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>	Ragged robin
<i>Morus alba</i>	White mulberry
<i>Gentiana</i> sp.	Gentian of unidentified species
<i>Asclepias syriaca</i>	Milkweed
<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Yarrow
<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>	Yellow flag
<i>Tussilago farfara</i>	Coltsfoot
<i>Viola arvensis</i>	Field pansy
<i>Melilotus officinalis</i>	Ribbed melilot
<i>Verbascum ?thapsus</i>	Mullein (?Great mullein)
<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	Meadowsweet
<i>Rosa canina</i>	Dog rose
<i>Anchusa azurea</i>	Large blue alkanet
Additions from photos:	
<i>Orchis fragrans/coriophora</i>	Bug orchid
<i>Linum perenne</i>	Perennial flax
<i>Stipa borysthenica</i>	A feather grass