



EUROPEAN CONSERVATION ACTION NETWORK

CONSERVATION VISIT TO HUNGARY
BIRD REPORT
2009



11th May – 30th May

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In 2007 The European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) was created by the The Kingcombe Trust – a registered conservation charity (Reg. 1054758) - which operates from the The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset. The initiative is in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation and is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme. Since its conception EuCAN has gained partners in France, Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary and is currently developing further EU partner countries. For further information contact Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559; email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk), or visit www.kingcombecentre.org.uk.

Introduction

EuCAN conservation projects set out to fulfil a range of social, cultural and environmental objectives as part of its mission and, as a result, provide the opportunity to create trips which are both personally stimulating and collectively worthwhile. This holistic approach to environmental conservation and cross-boundary lifelong learning, consequently targets a wide demographic and a spectrum of backgrounds and interests. The May visit to Hungary was designed to follow on from previous practical conservation trips in the Aggtelek National Park – a forested foothill region of the Carpathian Basin which contains a mosaic of broadleaved and coniferous woodland, broken up by species-rich limestone grassland and scrub. Our group consisted of fourteen volunteers, ranging from environmental professionals to individuals with no previous conservation experience. The trip was led by Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson of the Kingcombe Centre.

Background

Our aim was to carry out focussed field research on a recently re-classified butterfly species (*Melatea telona*) under the guidance of PhD student Jánosh Toft and his doctoral supervisor Prof. Zoltán Varga of Debrecan University. The data collected from the mark-recapture work will be used to equip the parks' ecologists and land managers with the necessary ecological information needed to preserve and improve the habitats required for this butterfly as well as other Hungarian Wildlife. In addition, the group also produced species audits including plants, mammals, insects, herptiles and birds. With a background in ornithology I decided to keep a diary of all bird species encountered from the start of our trip in Kent up until our final day in Hungary, with the participation of the rest of the group, the Aggtelek ecologists and particularly are group leader Nigel, who was already familiar with the regions birdlife and also an accomplished birdwatcher.

Bird Diary

09/05/09 Saturday

Day one of the trip began at a campsite in Selsted, East Kent where our bird list kicked off with some common songbirds, including singing **Song Thrush**, **Robin** and **Wren**, with male and female **Tawny Owls** calling throughout the night.

10/05/09 Sunday

A very chilly morning awakened the group bright and early, and tents were quickly bundled away in order to catch our 8:30 ferry crossing from Dover to Calais. A beautiful clear blue sky, sparkling white cliffs and a flat calm channel - anyone with binoculars was on deck to make the most of our only opportunity to add seabirds to our list. Several **Fulmars** were gliding around as the ferry left dock and small parties of **Gannet** were observed throughout the crossing, along with all five common gull species. **Kittiwakes** followed the wake of the ferry half way across and a few **Common Terns** were noted, as were a couple of **Sandwich Terns** and several **Cormorants** as we approached Calais's shoreline.

On to the minibus and a swift drive through northern France where Nigel managed to pick up the distinct contact call of a **Zitting Cisticola (Fan-tailed Warbler)** as we passed by a small scrubby roadside reedbed on route to Belgium. Group member Jonathan spotted **Grey Partridges** as we passed through agricultural areas, and **Common Buzzard** was frequently seen as we made our way to a service station near Aachen, Germany. As we arrived at our campsite at Dreifelder Weiher near Deirdorf south of Köln, the startling sound of calling **Fieldfare** greeted us - a male was zealously guarding its breeding territory and was a prominent feature of the evening's camp activities. Adjacent camp-side lakes yielded common waterbirds, including **Grey Heron**, **Pochard** and **Great-crested Grebe**. A couple of **Redpolls** flew over while we were eating Pizzas on the restaurant patio.

11/05/09 Monday

A planned birdwatching morning at our campsite was cancelled due to heavy rain, so a decision was made to get back on the road again and head to Austria. Torrential rain followed us throughout the day, but we still managed to see several **Black Kites** along the way from the minibus windows. Our destination was a campsite in Passau on the Austrian border on the shores of the Danube. Heavy downpours meant tents were hastily erected in double quick time, though Nigel still managed to notice a pair of **Spotted Flycatchers** in a nearby tree. After a goulash supper, a few members of the group observed a pair of **White Storks** fly overhead following the course of the Danube.

Fertő-Hanság National Park

12/05/09 Tuesday

Another early start allowed for some time to explore the campsite before continuing with our journey. A female **Black Redstart** was busy collecting food for her young in one of the nearby houses, and more good views of the **Spotted Flycatchers** which entertained us while we sipped hot coffee around the stove. We left at 9:30am and headed for Hungary, stopping at a very fine Austrian service station on the way. Two members of the group noticed a couple of larks speeding across the car park which turned out to be **Crested Larks**. Fine views were had as they foraged around the tarmac reminiscent of **Pied Wagtails**. The temperature climbed as we continued south-east towards the Hungarian border where we had good roadside views of **Marsh Harriers**, **Great-white Egrets** and **Turtle Doves** as we drove through low-lying marshland and vineyards.

We arrived at our first youth hostel in Fertő-Hanság National Park and became quickly aware of the rich bird life around us. Unloading the minibus trailer I could hear the evocative song of a **Golden Oriole** within feet of us. Some of us could not resist looking for it and had instant views of a male flying back and forth from tree to tree. While watching him, an **Icterine Warbler** made an appearance along with a singing **Wood Warbler**, foraging **Black Redstarts** and the delightful jingle of **Serins** perched on overhead telephone wires. **Nightingales** could be heard singing from any areas of dense scrub along with **Common** and **Lesser Whitethroats**. There was an obvious air of excitement in the group and everyone was keen to spend the rest of the daylight hours peering out of the hostel windows to see what other delights could be found. A flock of **Spoonbills** flew past as did **Black-tailed Godwits** and more **Great-white Egrets**, while **Marsh Harriers** quartered the wet grassland around us.

Three of us decided to get up early the next morning to make the most of this incredible place with the short time we had here. A damp and drizzly start did not prevent us from seeing spectacular birds today, which kicked off with more **Golden Oriole** views and superb views of **Corn Buntings** singing from prominent perches and fence posts as we walked slowly up the road to inspect the wader pools. A statuesque **White Stork** was loafing in the middle of a field while the rain steadily fell. As we tentatively approached the pools we were instantly greeted with the loud, scratchy song of **Great-reed Warblers** which were singing constantly with several **Bearded Tits** flying around in close proximity. Seeing **Avocets**, **Ruff**, **Redshank** and **Greenshank**, and also beautiful **Spotted Redshank** in full sooty black breeding plumage was a sheer delight. The male **Ruff** had their splendid ruffled head feathering and were challenging one successful male to gain the attention of the smaller, duller females. We then focussed on the smaller waders and counted good numbers of **Wood Sandpiper** along with a few **Green** and **Common Sandpipers**. Flocks of wheeling **Dunlin** and **Golden Plover** could be seen in the distance and an encounter with a **Peregrine** made for dramatic viewing as we were now surrounded by breeding bird activity. As we slowly continued up the road we took time to admire striking **Blue-headed Wagtails**, **Stonechats**, a pair of **Hobbies** and groups of handsome **Red-crested Pochard** on the water. We then

decided to head back, trying to grimly identify the various flattened snakes, frogs and toads that had been unfortunately run over.

Nigel had arranged a couple of hour's birdwatching for all the group at the same locality for the rest of the morning, so we were lucky to return and show everyone what was out there. As we piled out the van a very obliging **Grasshopper Warbler** showed well and performed its constant reeling song in front of us. By this time a number of **Black Terns** had joined in with the hundreds of **Swallows**, **Swifts** and **Martins**, feeding on the plentiful amount of airborne insects. Among the **Red-crested Pochards** and the more common ducks and geese, Nigel picked out small groups of **Garganey** to round off what had been the most wonderful morning at these salt marshes in eastern Hungary before setting off for the Szálámándrá Ház – our base hostel for the next two weeks.

Aggtelek National Park

14/05/09 Thursday

After a very long day travelling and a long evening of 'merriment' the night before, we all awoke surprisingly early to enjoy the first morning in the Aggtelek National Park and were duly serenaded by **Golden Orioles**, **Nightingales** and the constant call of **Cuckoos**. Roland Farkas, one of the park's ecologists and ornithologists, arrived and informed me that the constant cricket-like reeling we had been hearing since we arrived was not a cricket, but a **River Warbler**! Later on Roland took all of us for a short trek up the forested hillside behind the hostel to show us the ruined Szádvár Castle so we could get our first taste of Aggtelek wildlife and history. It was sensory overload for us all, with new plants, butterflies and reptiles to be identified and photographed. However, Roland still managed to pick up the song of a **Collared Flycatcher** which obligingly alighted on an open branch near to our footpath. As we entered further into the wooded hillside, **Wood Warblers** could now be heard, along with the drawn out cackle of a **Grey-headed Woodpecker**. As we continued to climb we approached the distinctive cries of **Great-spotted Woodpecker** chicks in an pecked out tree hole, eagerly awaiting their next mouthful of caterpillars. The walk culminated at the top of the castle with spectacular views overlooking the nearby village of Szögliget and the surrounding foothills, while Swallowtail butterflies danced around us.

15/05/09 Friday

A wet start to the first of our survey days, we decided to spend the morning at the Rákóczi caves and walk to the top of Esztramos Hill and explore its disused limestone quarry plateau. On the way up a pair of **Nuthatches** were attending to young and calling loudly as we got close to their nest hole. **Nightingales** were calling everywhere as were the continued song of **Golden Orioles** and purring **Turtle Doves**. As we slowly picked are way through the quarry rubble and boulders, a **Woodlark** sang and displayed from a piece of leftover quarry machinery. Despite the alien landscape many familiar birds were seen including **Blue Tits**,

Great Tits, Chiffchaffs, Yellowhammers and Reed Buntings. Several **Crested Larks** scurried around the rocks and a **Tree Pipit** carrying food was also nice addition. It was while waiting for half the group to return from their cave tour that group member Stephanie and I were treated to a resplendent singing male **Rock Bunting** within a few metres of where we were standing. This is a key species to the Aggtelek National Park and is a specialist bird of rocky hillside and montane habitat in Southern and Eastern Europe.

16/05/09 Saturday

A beautiful warm sunny morning meant that we could begin day two of the survey work straight away. I went with half the group to carry out the mark-recapture work at the Perkupa Vineyards with János and Attila, another of the park's ecologists. Today was 30 degrees Celsius and the climb to the survey site was steep and tiring, although the walk took us through some of the most stunning wooded hillside rides which were teeming with butterflies and lined with a cacophony of singing **Nightingales**. During survey breaks to apply sun cream and drink water, **Red-backed shrikes** were active and vocal all around us, as was a male **Golden Oriole** which gave great views perched upon patches of grassland scrub. As the day moved on, a pair of large raptors were riding thermals on a neighbouring hillside, which we think were most likely to be **Lesser-spotted Eagles**. As we stopped for lunch, two **Barred Warblers** gave teasing glimpses as they commuted from bush to bush, only to pause for a quick burst of territory singing. The survey day was rounded off by the unusual site of a male **Yellowhammer** and a male **Corn Bunting** singing from the same branch with only a few inches between them!

17/05/09 Sunday

A 5:30 start was in order to take half the group out for a dawn chorus bird walk outside the hostel. **Ravens** could be heard immediately and became a regular feature in the mornings, though often remained on the higher reaches of the surrounding hills. As we slowly walked up the lane heading north, a **River Warbler** began reeling in front of us and showing amazingly well considering most members of this genera (*Locustellidae*) remain hidden and skulking. Yet more **Red-backed shrikes** were present which was to become a permanent feature wherever we went in the Aggtelek National Park. A small group of **Hawfinches** flew past and several more were located at the top of a tall conifer, though never got close enough for good views. Many warbler species were singing well including **Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Wood Warbler, Whitethroat** and **Barred Warbler**. As we headed back to the hostel a **Black Woodpecker** could be heard nearby and **White Wagtails** were busy chasing flies along the road.

After lunch we headed out to the home and farm of a wealthy cattle owner in Komjáti, a village situated in one of Aggtelek's larger valleys. As we pulled up to Joseph Szalló's impressive villa, a lucky few had a brief glimpse of a **Hoopoe** as it took flight from his

driveway fence. Two graceful **White Storks** were circling high on thermals above the sun-drenched valley while **Black Redstarts** and a large noisy colony of **Tree Sparrows** foraged around the farm buildings and livestock enclosures. We were on our way to visit the nearby Tornaszentandrás Church and admire its beautiful frescoes when the sight of three roadside birdwatchers caught our attention and keenly pointed to a **Lesser-spotted Eagle** which landed in a field close to the road and allowed the whole group to marvel at one of the parks most enigmatic of birds – absolutely superb.

18/05/09 Monday

Today the group split up into four and carried out work on our targeted butterfly mark-recapture work, timed butterfly transect counts and also habitat surveys in the same location near the village of Tornakápolna. On this occasion I was asked to record all the bird species encountered on a specific grassy slope where some of the mark-recapture work was being conducted. The non-stop calling of **Cuckoo** was again inescapable along with the continued aerial singing of **Skylarks** from the grassland interior. **Corn Buntings** also appeared common here along with **Yellowhammers** and **Chiffchaffs** from the field margins. As I made my way down the slope I picked up calling **Quail** for the first time, identified by their distinctive ‘wet-my-lips’ song from deep within grassy cover. Where patches of scrub were negotiated **Lesser Whitethroats** were observed as were two pairs of **Red-backed Shrike** which were catching large insects on the wing. As the afternoon progressed, and the temperature peaked to well over thirty degrees, group members Richard, Nigel and myself conducted a walked butterfly transect to round off what had been a productive day’s work. **Golden Orioles, Nightingales** and **Whitethroats** were around us as we accidentally flushed **Skylarks** from the grass, recording each butterfly species as we went. As we made a way back to meet up with the rest of the group, a **Barred Warbler** began to sing and put in a brief appearance as we were making our way back to the mini-bus.

19/05/09 Tuesday

The ungodly hour of 4:00am was how three of us began our day in the Aggtelek National Park. While the rest of the group dreamt about butterflies, group members Sam, Jess and I headed off bird ringing with Roland in his ‘go anywhere’ Land Rover. A damp and drizzly morning meant that mist-net captures were fairly slow, although the first birds caught were a pair of **Red-backed Shrikes** which took revenge on Roland by attempting to remove his fingers using their superbly designed, lizard-tearing beaks. A steady stream of more familiar birds followed such as **Robin, Blackbird, Dunnock, Greenfinch, Chaffinch** and **Yellowhammer**. To my delight, we then caught a **Barred Warbler** which was one bird I hoped to get a good view of during this trip, so being able to handle it was close indeed! Two more **Barred Warblers** followed including a cracking mature male, complete with striking yellow eyes and distinctly barred body plumage. **Long-tailed Tits** followed next, which incidentally were the continental sub-species *europaeus* – having different head markings

than our British equivalent (*rosaceus*). As the rain fell heavier we had to call off the ringing, take the nets down and load up the Land Rover before we got drenched, with just enough time to enjoy a rather smart **Icterine Warbler** in a riverside willow while tuning in to a calling **Hoopoe** and **Black Woodpecker**.

Roland suggested we then head off to Rakaca Lake to look for some wetland birds and find some of the region's rarest plants which were located on the adjacent hillsides. Three **Marsh Harriers** gave good views as they drifted over the reedbeds and several **Great-reed Warblers** showed well next to the lake side path. I chose the wrong moment to take a photo of the scenery when Roland shouted "*Ixobrychus minutus*", unfortunately my knowledge of bird latin let me down on this occasion and it seem to take an eternity for Roland to describe the bird I had just missed – a **Little Bittern** it turned out! Once recovered from the trauma of missing out on seeing this unusual species, we then drove to another part of the lake to look for **Penduline Tit** nests in the marginal willows. We did not locate the nests, but did get to see a close, but brief view of a **Penduline Tit** as it flew across the reedbed and disappeared out of site.

An exhausting but thrilling morning we headed back to our hostel for a good rest and wait for the rest of the group to return from their morning butterfly foray in the hills above Szin. This gave me a good opportunity to explore the bird life in the hostel grounds for a couple of hours. More good views of **River Warbler**, **Jay**, **White Wagtail**, **Grey Wagtail**, nesting **Black Redstart** and the noisy colony of **House Martins** nesting under the eaves of one of the storage buildings meant that there was continued bird activity throughout the day at the Szálámándrá Haz.

The evening was spent visiting the hostel's Lesser Horseshoe Bat roost, and as nighttime fell, we mist netted along the stream which ran by the hostel road and caught five more species of bat. We ended the day by heading off road with conservation director, Sandor Boldogh, to listen for the remarkable mechanical song of **Corncrake**, accompanied by a pair of screeching **Little Owl**.

20/05/09 Wednesday

A morning of surveying ahead, we arrived at the flower rich slopes of the Jósavaf

vineyards and again concentrating on specific areas to conduct the mark-recapture work on. Another hot day, regular water breaks enabled me to do take the opportunity to look for birds that were calling tantalisingly close to us. A **Wryneck** persistently called but managed to evade my wilted efforts of locating this cryptic creature, although others were more fortunate. Close by, a **Syrian Woodpecker** was far more confiding and allowed for good enough views to separate it from the very similar **Great-spotted Woodpecker**.

The afternoon was spent at the historic cultural village of Gömörasz

s where we had a guided tour of traditional Hungarian farming and textile buildings which had been preserved for visiting educational groups and foreign visitors. Like many of the region's villages, Gömörszőlős had **White Storks** nesting in its streets and I was lucky enough to find a very large black and white flight feather which had been dropped by one of the birds.

21/05/09 Thursday

Another beautifully warm morning with unbroken skies, today we returned to the Tornakápolna site to continue with the butterfly work. On this Occasion Roland Farkas joined us and arranged to take any botany enthusiasts on an excursive plant walk over the hills of Zabanyic-hegy and Bokány-tető to list the flora found in some of the less recorded and accessible areas of the National Park. Kathy and I duly obliged and we set off to botanise are way through an amazing variety of woodland, grassland and scrub escarped alkaline habitats. Although for the most part we had our heads glued to the floor - marvelling over new and unfamiliar plants and attempting to put a name to them - we was never far away from bird activity during the trek. **Grey-headed, Green and Black Woodpeckers** could be heard from the woodlands along with **Nightingale** and **Golden Oriole** from the thicker understorey scrub. Male **Cuckoos** rang out continuously and occasionally a female would reciprocate by delivering a remarkable bubbling trill, quite unlike anything else. The avian highlight of the walk was when a pair of **Honey Buzzards** began circling beneath the hill below us; gliding effortlessly over what we presume would have been their breeding territory. This raptor is rather uncommon in north Hungary and Roland was very excited to get such good views of them....so were we!

By mid mid-day we returned to the group and all headed back to Jósavaf

for a well deserved and much needed ice-cream. Despite being hot and exhausted from the daily field work, several of us often took the opportunity to walk the couple of miles back to the hostel, which allowed us to saunter through the peaceful, pretty streets of Szögliget and soak up its lazy halcyon atmosphere. The chatter of **Serins** and **House Sparrows** were usually the most vocal of residents as we followed the main road out of the village and into the hills.

22/05/09 Friday

The day began with continued butterfly work at the Jósavafő vineyards with group member Sam. The lack of fritillary species on site meant that we could be distracted by other sights and sounds. In between attempts at catching Green Lizards, Sam and I tried to locate **Wryneck** that was moving through a vineyard next to our mark-recapture sight, but again no luck. In the afternoon several of us opted for a trip to Abod to find the Scarce Large Blue butterfly, **Black Stork** and a colony of **Bee-eaters**. Under a humid, cloud thickening sky we failed to find the Scarce Large Blue butterfly in an area of flat mixed arable marshland that

had been described. Several **Marsh Harriers** were spotted through the scope and **Quail** and **Corn Bunting** could be heard close by. The **Black Stork** still remained elusive, though this was to be expected because of the few breeding pairs in the area in addition to their solitary nature. As the storm clouds approached we quickly made tracks to look for the **Bee-eater** colony at Galvács. We marched purposely to the small sand quarry with huge amount of anticipation, and within seconds, we spotted our first **Bee-eater** perched on a branch at the colony entrance. Just as we raised our binoculars, a male **Golden Oriole** unexpectedly perched alongside it for a brief moment, leaving us momentarily spellbound. The colony consisted of around 20 pairs and was also inhabited with **Starlings** and **House Sparrows**, so there was a great deal of activity around the site. This was undoubtedly one of the highlights of the trip and we all felt privileged to have seen one of Europe's most exotic birds during the breeding season – truly unforgettable.

23/05/09 Saturday

Today was our free day of the trip, so group members Tim, Sam and I met up with local expatriates Simon Hursthouse and his partner and guest for a 50km bike ride around the Aggtelek National Park. As I was keen to keep my eyes glued to the road I thought there would be few birding opportunities today apart from **Common Buzzards** and **Kestrels** in adjacent fields. However, it was when I decided to stop for a well earned breather that I noticed a Shrike species perched on an overhead wire running contiguous with the road. I stopped directly underneath the bird and, to my delight, **Lesser-grey Shrike!** (Rhyme not intended). The afternoon was spent looking for **Black Stork** again around the Rakaca Lake area, but once again to no avail. While we stopped here for a quick wonder around the lake margin, I noticed a **Nightingale** singing from an open perch. This was a great chance to set the scope up and allow everyone to have brilliant views of this highly audible but often reclusive bird.

24/05/09 Sunday

A wet start meant that we paid a visit to the ruined Martonyi Monastery which was set amongst some fine ancient woodland. More birds were heard than seen hear due to the lack of visibility of the woodland interior. **Woodpeckers, Wood Warblers, Nuthatches, Marsh Tits** and **Coal Tits** could all be heard as we ambled towards the monastery. Nigel had managed to pick up the song of a **Common Redstart**, which, incidentally, is not a common species in north Hungary. This bird, however, was fiendishly difficult to locate due to the enclosed topography of the site, which somehow appeared to disperse the Redstart's song around the ruin, making it hard to pinpoint. Shortly before leaving, eagle-eyed group member Wendy discovered an owl perched up in a tree outside the ruin. One bird suddenly became three as we all focused on the tree. First suggestions were that these birds were 3 juvenile **Ural Owls**, but after a huge amount of deliberation, head scratching, discussion and indicative reading, we all collectively decided they were in fact juvenile **Tawny Owls** – very

similar to Ural juveniles but somewhat smaller. However, it was still a great sight and bird highlight of the day nonetheless.

Following a visit to the impressive V

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s-to Cave, we spent some time searching for Fire-Bellied Toads at a nearby lake in the warm afternoon sunshine. Along with the charming croaking of the toads and accompanying Marsh Fogs; in the adjacent scrub, **Cuckoo**, **Turtle Dove** and **Nightingale** were still singing heartedly. We spotted 3 **Hawfinches** making a quick dash over the lake while several of us deliberated who should wade in the pond to catch a Fire-bellied Toad. Needless to say we failed miserably.

25/05/09 Monday

The last surveying day for the *Melaleuca* fritillaries, the party was once again split up into smaller groups and we headed to Tornakápolna and Jósvalfö. Yet another beautifully species rich site, this time I was partnered with group members Tim and Wendy. We were kept entertained all day by a displaying male **Tree Pipit** which was occupying our transect area and was making repeated territory fights from several isolated shrubs. It was conducting parachuting, singing displays above each of its territory markers like a cross between a **Skylark** and a **Lesser Whitethroat** display flight. Again, woodland bird song filled the air around us as we became distracted with catching Scarce Swallowtails, Black-veined Whites, Adonis Blues and the jewel-like Rose Chafer Beetles that bumbled from flower to flower. Afterwards we had to make our way on foot to meet up with other group members at a nearby village, which gave Nigel and I just enough time to locate and watch a **Mash Warbler** singing energetically from a small *Phragmites* reed bed.

26/05/09 Tuesday

Today most of the group geared up for the much anticipated Wolf walk in the forested hills above Jósvalfö with expert Adam Szábo. The trek began with more teasing **Wrynecks** calling from Jósvalfö village gardens, but sadly I could not connect with this bird once more. It proved to be the trip's bogey bird for me, every trip has one! As we proceeded through a grassy valley and into the woodland, all observational efforts were channelled in on finding Lesser Purple Emperor butterfly. We went one better and located the spectacular and rare Poplar Admiral, which for many of us, was the butterfly highlight of the trip. A couple of them paraded around us in search of fresh horse dung deposited on our path. Further time was spent searching rocky streams for toads, frogs and Fire Salamanders as Adam took us to the spot where there had been a recent Wolf kill of a Red Deer. We continued further into the woodland when a huge owl flew across our path. This time it was a **Ural Owl** and it was evident the bird was agitated. It was soon apparent that we had stumbled upon a family unit

and we were treated to great view of both parents and young. However, excitement was also coupled with concern as **Ural Owls** have a reputation of aggressively defending their young if you get to close. We eventually managed to skirt around the birds and marched onwards with scalps intact. **Nuthatches, Wood Warblers, Treecreepers** and many other species were present throughout the trek, which coincided with the great invasion of Painted Lady butterflies which had moved en masse through Hungary from the Mediterranean.

27/05/09 Wednesday

Our last full day in the Aggtelek National Park and a free day to do what we wished in the local area. Tim, Sam and I decided to return to the magical Szádvár castle ruin to hunt for amphibians, reptiles, butterflies and of course birds. Today was hot and humid, and our attempts to catch an adult Green Lizard proved unsuccessful. We did manage to find a few juvenile salamanders hiding under rocks in a nearby stream though. As we approached the castle I noticed several tits and finches vigorously alarm calling. I knew a large threat was present and instructed Tim and Sam to focus in on the danger. Suddenly a adult **Ural Owl** took off, flew and then alighted a few metres along a line of scrub at the foot the castle wall. By this time the area was full of noisy, busy *passerines*, forcing us to frantically search through them for possibly our last opportunity to add a new species to our trip list. A woodpecker appeared below us, I quickly realised it was not **Great-spotted**, and then I ruled out **Syrian**. This was a similar size but very different markings – “ahh wait, wait” I cried – it’s a **White-backed Woodpecker!** We could not believe we had added a new woodpecker on our last day. No sooner had we drawn breath when another woodpecker appeared the other side of the castle. There was no mistaking this tiny bird – **Lesser spotted Woodpecker!** – Yet another new bird to add to the list, and a notoriously elusive species to see anywhere throughout its range. We had just been spoilt with two superb birds with which to conclude our avian adventure in the Aggtelek.

28/05/09 Thursday

Our time in the Aggtelek National Park had come to an end and an early start was required for the long journey back through Europe. The morning was spent packing, organising and saying goodbyes to our super hosts at the Szálámándrá Ház. I bid farewell to many of the feathered characters I had occupied the hostel grounds with over the fortnight; the **River Warbler**, the **House Martins**, the cheeky **White Wagtails**, and who could forget our nesting **Black Redstarts** that embellished our laundry drying area.

Acknowledgements

For me this trip was spectacular from start to finish, which enabled me to experience so many wildlife ambitions among kind and generous people from all walks of life. I feel this conservation initiative is unique in this respect and I truly believe that anyone who is fortunate to be part of this programme will contribute, not

only to European conservation and cultural exchange, but also in learning something new about themselves, and discover a sense of purpose and personal achievement. So I say a heartfelt thank you to all those who made this trip a reality, including the Kingcombe Trust, Butterfly Conservation, European Lifelong Learning Programme, Aggteleki Nemzeti Park staff, Szálámádrá Ház staff and all my terrific butterfly capturing companions I had the pleasure to spend 3 weeks with. Special thanks of course go to Nigel and Kathy who I'm greatly indebted to and who make the trips the success that they are.

David Norfolk