

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE

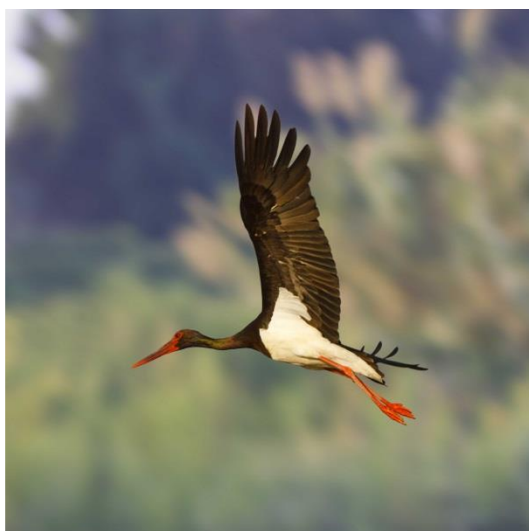


Tour Report

Austria – Around Lake Neusiedl

17-24 August 2019

Black stork



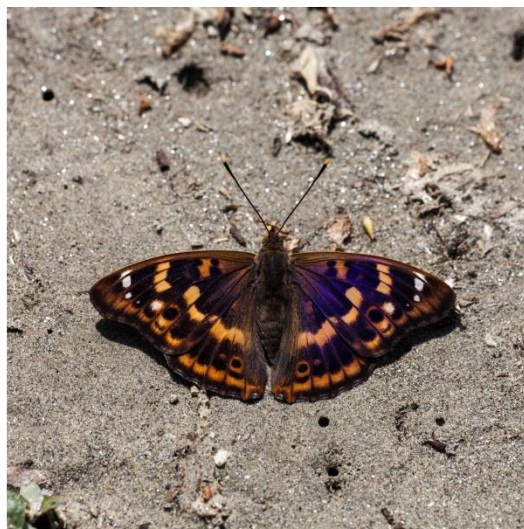
Red-backed shrike



Temminck's stint



Lesser purple emperor



Compiled by: John Muddeman

Tour Leader: John Muddeman with four participants

Austria is traditionally thought of as a country of mountain and forests, but tucked away in the south-east is one of Europe's wildlife jewels, rich in a wide diversity of wildlife. Since our first visit here back in the late 1980s, our natural history holiday in late summer 2019 was centred in the south-east corner of the country in the Burgenland region. Here, between the Alps and the Hungarian *puszta*, lies a unique landscape on the western side of the Little Hungarian Plain – the *Kisalföld*. The national park of Seewinkel in Austria and the adjacent Fertő–Hanság National Park in Hungary contain a mosaic of salt-marsh, wet pastures, grazing meadows and a huge belt of reedbed that encompasses the 320 square kilometre Lake Neusiedl. The lake has an average depth of just 1.5m, and to the south and to the east lies the *Hanság*, a former fen, now covered by woodlands and wet meadows.

The whole area is an important European breeding ground for birdlife as well as providing rich feeding for migratory species that pass through central Europe. Special projects to preserve ancient domestic livestock are being carried out in various locations and throughout the landscape one can come across rare breeds, such as Hungarian grey cattle, Mangalitsa pigs, white donkeys and Przewalski's horses. But with access to the woodlands of the Danube and March Rivers – forming the boundary with the Czech Republic and Slovakia to the north, plus visits to the limestone cliff and pinewoods of the Hohe Wand ('High Wall') and alpine habitats of the Schneeberg just a little further to the west, the trip encompasses a superb range of habitats present in the region, with a correspondingly wide array of birds, in particular.

The late summer weather is usually quite hot, but unpredictable, and this trip was no different, with the first half of the week sometimes stiflingly hot in the afternoon with high humidity, but with the last three days much cooler and overcast: in general, excellent birdwatching conditions.

Day 1: Warmblutterköppel

Saturday 17 August 2019

Weather: Very warm & still with high thin cloud

We met easily in the arrivals hall of the (to me) rather changed Vienna airport; as I'd had time to organise the vehicle already, we were soon away. After a light lunch en route, we checked into our hotel, and then adjourned for an hour out in the field nearby.

Given that it was a very dry year, we headed straight past the dry Zicklacke and continued down past numerous cycling tourists and a few cars on the approach to a nearby marina. After parking on the roadside, we took the short walk to a raised hide overlooking a quite large open expanse of water and mud bordering the vast Neusiedl reedbeds, which is a magnet for many bird species. The very warm conditions had enticed a fine comma butterfly out onto the sunny side of the woodland as we approached, while a young great spotted woodpecker betrayed its presence as it tapped on a dead branch, before sneaking up through the leafy treetop and dropping quickly away out of the far side.

The area was attracting thousands of common starlings. These, understandably, are considered a real pest by the local grape wineries, though they made an impressive sight swarming across the short turf before rising up in clouds to head out on their next grape-stealing excursion! A few common woodpigeons adorned the dead snags in the local treetops, though it was out on the extensive mud and shallow water in front that most of our attention was focused.

Hundreds of ducks (mainly dowdy eclipse mallard) lined its edges, but a smarter and more colourful Eurasian wigeon stood out amongst them and the muddy expanses supported a fine cast of waders, albeit many at long range. Northern lapwing, little ringed plover, a super adult Temminck's stint, distant ruff and (still) black-bellied dunlins, with a few wood and common sandpipers rushing around, along with a

scattering of common greenshank, plus common and a few spotted redshanks made for good measure, with a rare marsh sandpiper of particular note.

The nearby steppe had attracted plenty of white and a couple of western yellow wagtails, while the fences and bushes made perfect perching sites for a superb male red-backed shrike and a still begging offspring. Perhaps the stunning adult European turtle dove which posed completely out in the open on a small dead trunk took the prize for the prettiest bird, but single great and a few pygmy cormorants, a purple heron and a couple of great white egrets flying over the reedbeds firmly reminded us that this was eastern Europe!

Day 2: Graurinderköppel, Warmsee, Biological Station, Illmitz Marina & Tadten plain

Sunday 18 August 2019

Weather: Hot & sunny with occasional light cloud; 33°C max.

Leaving Illmitz in already very warm and sunny conditions, we commenced our exploration 'proper' of the surrounding Seewinkel area and its wildlife. The road down from Apetlon took us quite close to the Lake Neusiedl shore, where such low water levels this summer (given the low ground water levels from a lack of rain to the west), meant that the lake shore here was completely dry, as indeed were virtually all the area's lakes this year! Massed common starlings looking like dead leaves adorning a small copse of dead trees, a fine red-backed shrike on the edge of a vineyard and a brief western yellow wagtail made for an interesting start along the access track. Some early cloud still persisted, enabling us to take a gentle walk along to a fine raised hide without too much heat, looking out over adjacent grassland and fields. Birds were restricted in number, though a remarkable number of Eurasian kestrels were evident, hovering over the meadows or scattered across the dry grasslands. The closest though, was actually a juvenile red-footed falcon, which provided a great start, while another raptor, this time at considerable distance of the edge of the reedbed to the south, also caught my eye due to being persistently mobbed by a kestrel, and the broad wings, very pale underside and pale upper wing patches confirmed it was a short-toed snake eagle – a very scarce visitor to the area!

Virtually nothing else was seen until we were in the shade of the hide, with a brief Eurasian tree sparrow and male great spotted woodpecker dropping into a nearby elder bush, while at least four Eurasian curlews on the grassland in front looked slightly out of place in the very dry conditions.

Some 'prooping' calls coming from overhead as we returned gave away the presence of a small party of high-flying European bee-eaters, though they were simply too high for most of the party to observe!

We decided to try our luck at a deeper nearby lake which I knew would hold water, but the levels were bizarrely almost too high, with only limited muddy edges available for birds! Additionally, a couple of Sunday trippers were out with their dogs which were wallowing in the shallow water at different spots along the accessible shore, having frightened off any birds present; the large numbers of greylag geese were hiding at the very back in a quiet inlet in the reeds. Seven Eurasian curlew flew off as we arrived at the far end, but a short walk out produced a small flock of perched Eurasian tree sparrows, a few swimming common teal and, best of all, a small flock of pied avocets feeding in the shallows, which gave lovely views in the telescope.

Given the increasing heat, we tried a quick trip to Illmitz Marina, though this was now a bit breezy and busy, so we turned and headed to the National Park Information Centre for a quick visit and break instead. There, we got an up-to-date map to help with another day's planned visit later in the tour, albeit in Hungary. We returned to the marina, where a nice relaxed lunch was taken at one of the restaurants, before returning to the hotel for a siesta.

The late afternoon was filled with our first look at Hanság, where a crested lark heralded our arrival by dropping for a few moments onto the road in front. Next a couple of impressively large European hares ran across the road – the first of several during the visit – and we ended the day with an extended stop for views from one of the bustard towers. Despite being very warm and there being subdued bird activity, kestrels abounded, a few common buzzards and plenty of western marsh harriers were present, and plenty more red-backed shrikes showed, proving that the latter are still pleasingly common here. As luck would have it, a couple of short-eared owls were flushed by a tractor working one field, though frustratingly these were too brief and distant for the group; however, as the temperature began to fall, so a few more birds began to move. A super adult male Montagu's harrier was spotted by one of the group as it cruised past at the back of the first field to one side, while some large birds in the far corner of another were part of a significant group of great bustards, which again in the telescope, gave good views. A fine end to our first full day!

Day 3: Schneeberg & Podersdorf

Monday 19 August 2019

Weather: From cool to warm on the Schneeberg, where increasing cloud pm; hot & muggy by the lake

With mixed forecasts showing for the mountains for almost the remainder of the week, we opted to take the delightful 'fire salamander' rack and pinion railway train up the Schneeberg, at the eastern extreme of the Alps, this being not very far from Vienna. Being mid-August in fine weather meant the crowds were there, which clearly affected what we saw in the end, and the generally very warm and sunny conditions didn't help either.

That said, we still enjoyed an interesting selection of bird species, quickly finding abundant northern ravens, a couple of soaring common buzzards and common kestrels. On a small knoll, we saw a fine water pipit, already molting into non-breeding garb, which we observed creeping across the turf. The first of several black redstarts and a flighty common chiffchaff in the dense scrub of dwarf mountain pine were next, while a few of us looked at a lesser redpoll through the scope, though both dunnock and a surprising (given the habitat) juvenile Eurasian bullfinch sat atop their respective bushes. Both remained surprisingly hard to spot, however.

Plenty of butterflies were on the wing during the sunny periods, with a small tortoiseshell by the station, then a few ringlets dancing low through the sward as we progressed, though only one stopped briefly enough to take a look and their identity remains unresolved. The flowers were remarkable, including large numbers of Austrian gentians, swathes of tiny eyebrights, scattered spikes of deep blue chunky-flowered wolfsbane, dainty Alpine asters and many others, forming a fine sight. A noisy family party of coal tits appeared next, but then it went quiet, particularly as we went for a leisurely lunch in a gasthof some way up the trail towards the peak.

With possible storm showers forecast for later in the afternoon, we headed back, aiming for the 3.45pm train down, with a wandering Eurasian sparrowhawk passing the group's frontrunners (this was another new species). We headed to the little chapel which sits perched on the edge of the mountain top and has commanding views back out to the east (including to Lake Neusiedl) beside it. Luckily, I stayed outside for a while, and a pair of birds high up caught my eye, with a pale common buzzard mobbing a moulting adult golden eagle a fine reward.

The journey down through the spruce forests was uneventful, though the heat in the bottom of the valley was appreciable, even though it had clouded over. This cloud soon cleared above us as we headed back, though as the sun sank behind the intensifying clouds to the west, we had a great opportunity to take a quick look at the lakeside near Podersdorf. Some captive woolly-haired Mangalitsa pigs there caught the group's attention most, but with European bee-eaters adorning a dead tree, a couple of juvenile Eurasian

golden orioles chasing between the poplars and a few waders in the sliver of water out towards the reeds including common, wood and green sandpipers, plus two remarkably colourful juvenile red knot, it was a fine end to the day's observations.

Day 4: Podersdorf, Breitenbrunn, Rust & St Margarethen

Tuesday 20 August 2019

Weather: Warm, breezy start; later very hot in sun & humid with some high cloud; 32.5°C

Hoping to catch up with the European bee-eaters we'd seen the evening before, we returned first to near Podersdorf. It was rapidly clear though, that the nearly three hours between dawn and our arrival meant that they were long gone. Indeed, it was very quiet on all fronts, though a short walk through the seemingly birdless woods here revealed that a few were present, including our first common chaffinches, while a calling grey-headed woodpecker, which clearly comes to hammer out beetle larvae from deep within a decaying stump we noted close to the track, steadfastly refused to reply to my attempted whistles and kept out of sight. Two wood warblers in nearby poplars, our first real sign of small bird migration, simply disappeared up into the canopy at our approach, where the stiff breeze meant finding them again amongst the quivering leaves was impossible.

A couple of stops to overlook a thin strip of water close to the lake was far more rewarding, however. The most notable birds were a group of four eclipse garganey, while single colour-ringed wood sandpiper and common redshank. We also watched a couple of dunlins and a fine ruff alongside a few other waders.

The skies cleared of some early cloud and the temperature rose rapidly. Indeed, by the time we'd made a comfort stop and arrived at the start of a walk through the reedbeds near Breitenbrunn, the sun was pounding down. Not surprisingly, it was consequently very quiet given the conditions, but a couple of scolding Savi's warblers, two very furtive and brief separate moustached warblers and a couple of close Eurasian reed warblers in the adjacent reeds showed that birds were present, even if only some of the group only saw the latter. At least a couple of fine marsh frogs in one of the channels, where a small grass snake swam around hunting for frogs was a good find, and one of the group managed to hear the 'pinging' calls of a bearded reedling.

A bit frazzled by the heat, we headed down to Rust for lunch. We found a very pleasant gasthof on the edge of town, after passing a number of fine buildings complete with empty storks' nests on roof platforms. By now we were learning how to order reasonable sized lunches too! Our little detour was nicely rounded off as we watched (from a shady position) 20 or so white storks on the edge of reeds nearby, plus nearly 80 common teal.

Our last stop, once I'd reoriented to find it, was very much more productive. Indeed, we hadn't even pulled off the road when the first European souslik was spotted on the roadside, ignoring the cars passing by just inches away. Plenty of these gorgeous little rodents were present across the rather battered piece of grassland, though they were far less happy to let us approach on foot, compared to the plenty of passing cars and bicycles!

The day's bird highlight came at dinner. A thin piping call was coming from one of the large trees in the courtyard of the hotel as we crossed to the dining room for dinner. Then when we'd nearly finished, I noticed a small drab bird flutter down and brush against a door window, before disappearing into a corner. Walking out we found a beautiful fledgling European serin clinging to the window ledge, and after gently putting my hand around it, it jumped onto my outstretched finger to gather a little strength before flying more purposefully back up into the tree and to safety. It was an excellent encounter and the only serin we saw all week.

Day 5: Hohenau & Rabensburg areas, via Slovakia!

Wednesday 21 August 2019

Weather: Windy, with thick grey cloud at start, breaking slightly to finer & stiller pm; 20.5°C

Waking up to cool, windy and overcast conditions made for quite a welcome change. The fledgling serin could be heard piping from the tree in the courtyard which was very gratifying. With our longest drive of the week ahead of us, the SatNav was employed and revealed it wouldn't be much longer than it used to take from Neusiedl-am-See; and, as we hit a fine stretch of new motorway going north, this seemed great. As it slowly swept round to the east and headed for Slovakia though, I realised that it wasn't going through Austria, as assumed, but indeed largely through Slovakia. Whoops! A short stop at the border to pick up the toll payment was necessary, but we were then off through Bratislava and heading rapidly north towards the Czech Republic.

A black kite off to one side, and then a black stork going directly over the minibus, as we progressed were good records, though we concentrated on getting back across into Austria for the birdwatching. A narrow bridge had replaced the old ferry crossing, much to my relief, and a series of small fishermen's buildings along the edge of the river beside the crossing – with static square cantilevered fishing nets on long poles – made a remarkable sight.

Almost no sooner had we crossed the border than a large raptor crossed overhead, but just as quickly disappeared behind the trees. We stopped for a short walk and noted calmer conditions than near the lake, with a few small birds actually making an appearance. A healthy flock of European goldfinches, a couple of noisy fly-by Eurasian nuthatches, a 'yaffling' European green woodpecker and a 'pikking' great spotted woodpecker, which came to land in view, and even a couple of 'tchacking', but unseen, blackcaps were good. A small group of ladies walked past and pushed a fine group of red-crested pochards out onto the middle of the lake in front, while at the far end a fine group of mute swans graced the water – incredibly, our first!

The flowers were rich along the top of this bank, including the lovely mix of blue chicory, purple Pannonian sage and the dainty white and pink *Gypsophila*. We were soon distracted though by the appearance of a flock of raptors spiralling up nearby, and with ten common buzzards and an immature black stork too keeping a close watch on a similarly circling adult white-tailed eagle, it was some sight. Another, young white-tailed eagle followed suit just moments later before they cruised off over the forest.

A drinks and comfort break was soon taken, followed by a return to look at the area of some old settling pits. A couple of 'new' hides tempted us up a steep bank, with a few new birds including little grebe and Eurasian coot, but of most note were at least 45 grey herons lined up along the far bank.

Time was rushing along and when we found that another site nearby was now out of bounds, we made a quick exit and continued north. Another area, this time of extensive arable fields checked 'on spec', was just too vast to do justice to without more specific information, however, so we headed for a latish lunch. Despite my inadequacies with German, we all decided on the house menu, which turned out to be an ample and very tasty option.

It was slightly warmer as we walked down towards the March River floodplain and a brief common kingfisher added an exciting splash of colour over a murky backwater on the way. Lots more flowers caught our eye as we walked along the track topping the floodbank, including a purple mullein, tansy, an impressively large-flowered mallow and both lady's and common bedstraws amongst others. Abundant barn swallows were feeding in the lee of a tall belt of trees, while numerous European bee-eaters adorned the scattered bushes across the huge meadows. A solitary great grey shrike, a rare bird here nowadays, posed on the tip of a dead branch before flying off and disappearing for almost an hour, reappearing as if

by magic close to where we'd last seen it and allowing us telescope views as it devoured what appeared to be a small lizard. Closer, a juvenile (and so truly spotted) flycatcher graced a fence close to a red-backed shrike, while a black redstart tail-quivered nearby as if to gain attention. A rather scruffy black and white woodpecker here was intriguing, having a broken cheek-bar like a Syrian cross great spotted would have, but only gave us brief views while working its way through a few walnut trees in the gardens just below us.

There were raptors here too, with at least a dozen common buzzards almost continuously flying back and forth over the area in twos, threes and fives, while at least three red kites drifted effortlessly over, or perched in a skeleton tree out in the huge meadow. A single European honey buzzard drifted high above us, while two white-tailed eagles went over much lower affording fine views, and a few common kestrels rounded off the list.

We returned via the 'old' route though eastern Austria, enjoying the sights of numerous typical small towns and villages as we passed.

Day 6: Warmblutterköppel, then Fertőújlak & Bősárkány (Hungary)

Thursday 22 August 2019

Weather: Generally cloudy with occasional very light rain am; less cloudy from 11am onwards; very warm at Bősárkány; 16°C start, rising to 23.5°C in the evening

With a day closer to our base in front of us, we started with a trip down to the edge of the Illmitz reedbeds again. After working our way through a fine range of waders, including a few red knot, curlew sandpipers, spotted redshanks and a fly-by black-winged stilt, we continued the short distance down to look for birds of deeper water, quickly finding two pygmy cormorants perched low above some open water, albeit by peering over the near bank of reeds using the inverted telescope.

We headed south over the Hungarian border, complete with the now long-abandoned border post, then doubled back on ourselves to head to an artificially flooded wetland lying just south of Austria. We stopped en route to take pictures of a fine herd of Hungarian longhorn cattle, also noting a couple of pied flycatchers in a nearby hedge and a large flock of common swifts that materialised overhead just after light rain had passed through.

A strange sight met us at the wetland, with probably a couple of dozen small mesh traps out in the shallows, complete with a scattering of false waders standing around in different poses. Perhaps wader ringing goes on here or it's some sort of monitoring for avian diseases? Whatever, it certainly helped to bring some birds to the near shore; though it was some of the over 400 pied avocets present that caught our eye first. A few common shelduck graced the water too (our first), so we headed for a viewing platform nearby to get better views over much more of the water and see what else was present. A passing Eurasian hobby put considerable numbers of the smaller birds into the air just as we arrived, though just as quickly disappeared, and we then set about systematically scanning the large lake in our search. Large numbers of rather drab moulting ducks included mallard, northern shoveler and Eurasian teal, and three common pochards flew over at one point. New waders included a smattering of black-tailed godwit and eight very distant grey plover, though the black bellies contrasting with snow white crown and neck sides could still be seen. A juvenile Temminck's stint crept around near some juvenile and immature yellow-legged gulls, while at least half a dozen juvenile black terns skimmed the water, dipping for prey morsels as they went. Common and spotted redshanks, common greenshank, northern lapwing, ruff, Eurasian curlew, common snipe (including one drumming!) and a common sandpiper kept us busy for some time.

We finally called it a day after looking for any other unusual species and after also enjoying a couple of migrant whinchats on a nearby fence, another sign that 'autumn' migration was starting.

A comfort stop and drink was taken en route round to a new area for me, though it's an outlying part of the national park and can be interesting, particularly in drier years such as this. A flock of eight hawfinches sped noisily overhead as we had our drinks, as if they were trying to tell us this was a good spot to stop.

We ate our picnic lunch beside an old pump house next to a lovely canal full of clean water and aquatic plants. A small flock of red-crested pochard ducklings was hiding under the vegetation just opposite, but came out after a short wait. Indeed, the junction of two canals was very interesting for dragonflies too, with a stunning male white-tailed skimmer perching on the concrete slope below us and a lesser emperor cruising the channel, both being new species for the summer tour here. Large green marsh frogs peered goggle-eyed up from the abundant floating vegetation, also confirming the high water quality. Smaller birds heard calling from the surroundings included European greenfinch, Eurasian linnet, European reed bunting – one of which we finally saw hiding amongst the reeds – plus Eurasian tree sparrow and (for me) a 'wheating' common nightingale. The quite hot and humid conditions meant that the birdlife was keeping a low profile though, even including a black woodpecker which called from willows behind the pump station, only to noisily fly off in the opposite direction, calling as it went, before we could try and see it.

We started the walk along to the wetland and reedbeds, but with a rather manicured lake to one side and tall dense bank of willows and poplars on the other, birds were scarce. Our only Eurasian jay of the trip called, unseen, from over the canal, and a couple of European green woodpeckers 'yaffled' in the distance. A couple of very flighty map butterflies, and a rather better couple of lesser purple emperors, a lovely butterfly to see, were more active and visible, while a female sand lizard gave most of us a decent view before finally disappearing to safety down a vole hole. A brilliant red male ruddy darter was easy to identify, but not so many of the other darters were present: these appeared to be vagrant darters in some cases. It was quite slow going, so when we reached a viewing platform, albeit with nearly vertical steps, I cautiously made my way up, only to discover a few open pools beyond dense reedbed, with lots of greylag geese, and nothing else of interest. We decided to skip the extra walk to the next pool and head back to the Austrian side instead.

The Tadten plain was somewhat better in the generally overcast conditions and, after finding an immature male Montagu's harrier quartering the fields from the first hide, we had time to continue down to the commemorative bridge over the Einser Kanal. This marks the true boundary of the former Iron Curtain and spy swaps were even once made at the then remote bridge, but it is rapidly changing. Hungarian fishermen in their cars were well spaced out along the Hungarian side of the channel, and the patches of reed which once lined the canal now looked like the thin ghosts of former times. Indeed, the vegetation had been completely mown down in a strip along the top of the bank and down its sides into the edge of the water. While this was a disappointment, it did mean that a common kingfisher working its way up and down the canal was noted briefly, and we even noted a small, still stripy wild boar piglet totter out of the taller vegetation and into the open for a few minutes, later being replaced by a super young European hare which lolloped some way towards us before finally turning back.

Time was marching on, so we continued round the loop, only to come across six great bustards, with three on each side, feeding in the meadows adjacent to the road and giving fine views. A terrific finish!

Day 7: Breitenbrunn, Hohe Wand (lower & upper); Vienna

Friday 23 August 2019

Weather: Generally hot, but cool when breezy above the Hohe Wand; sunny am; mostly cloudy pm

As we were still lacking a few of the 'common' Lake Neusiedl birds, we started with a return to the Breitenbrunn area to take a look, this time earlier in the day, aiming to make use of the quite thick cloud that still persisted, even though this started to clear out just as we arrived.

A few quiet 'checks' and 'chacks' were emanating from the reedbeds, and despite choosing a spot with views across the water to where reeds entered the lake across a straight front, nothing wanted to move or at least be seen. We moved along to where a small bridge gave views along a reed-choked channel, and as pure luck would have it, a small group of moulting bearded reedlings was hopping about and feeding on the remains of an old wooden bridge not far away and kept us entertained for some time. Quite what they were feeding on we never worked out, but they were very insistent and gave excellent extended views. A couple of us also had the good fortune to see an inquisitive great reed warbler which came and perched in the shadows of a small tree emerging from the reeds nearby, but neither the moustached warbler 'chacking' almost below us nor the 'chinking' Savi's warbler away to our left would respond further or come out to give us views.

An hour later we reached the base of the Hohe Wand in dull conditions, though there was enough warmth to tease out a number of butterflies on a patch of open grassland and edge of our track crossing it. The butterflies on the open slope were the most numerous of the trip so far, with common, Adonis and chalkhill blues present, plus several impressive silver-washed fritillaries and a praying mantis a treat. But with just a breath of wind and large numbers of human visitors to the site, plenty of them paragliding (or learning to) both above and below us, it was really no surprise that there was no apparent bird activity. A short walk into nearby woodland quickly got us away from the crowds, and things seemed good when a song thrush flew up in front of the group forerunners, a European robin ticked from the undergrowth where a Eurasian wren scolded and a great tit also 'complained', though none were visible. Nor, to start with, a 'pitchu-ing' marsh tit, though this did finally come to give good views as it fed on a thistle head, unlike the plaintively piping Eurasian bullfinch which refused to show. A superb firecrest suddenly appeared though, and despite furtively flicking about in the vegetation was well seen by most. The woods were generally rather quiet, so after looking at the purple cow-wheat and a brief red squirrel, we walked back, pausing for speckled woods, a brief great banded grayling and another male praying mantis before jumping in the car and disappearing uphill.

We walked to the edge of the forest and found a fine display of cyclamen in flower, and the flora once again became more important in the absence of birds. A purple lettuce was still in flower, though in some nearby meadows along a quiet track, things were more varied, including large stemless carline thistles and the peculiar Jupiter's distaff amongst more. The butterflies were good too, with several Scotch argus giving a fine display, while both hummingbird hawkmoth and Jersey tiger were on the wing and behaved for the cameras as well. Great banded grayling and a mobile marbled white were less obliging, but pleasing observations. A flighty common winter damselfly was an odd but also very welcome find. A male peregrine falcon spiralling up over the forest was a good find as we returned for lunch near the car park.

Birds were again very scarce after lunch, but a fine European honey buzzard was interesting to observe from above as it flew along parallel to the cliff well below us as we peered down from the skywalk. A few rock climbers approached from below, while numerous paragliders were sailing back and forth along the ridge at quite close range, and a Spanish singer with two guitarists was being filmed singing almost on the cliff edge – it was a somewhat bizarre scene!

We rounded off with another hour's drive to a remarkably public site with the aim of finding something special. After buying the appropriate parking ticket we walked along the edge of the site to find the access gate, only to spot three of our quarry in quick succession feeding on the grass between 10 and 20 metres away over the fence. European hamsters! This now rather rare and declining species may have once occurred in an almost continuous distribution from east central Asia west to extreme eastern France, but it has suffered a population collapse since about 1970 and lost at least 75% of its overall population, with habitat fragmentation and poor breeding success compounding its problems. And yet they were abundant here in this manicured urban area. We spent almost an hour trying to get good views and pictures, though they were naturally a little shy, but the excellent numbers meant we all saw them well in the end.

All in all, this was a pleasant week of birdwatching and nature appreciation with good weather in a very pleasant central European destination. John would like to thank you all for being such appreciative guests, especially given my deficiencies with German, though I always think it adds to the experience, and the European sousliks and especially the European hamster were particularly special experiences.



Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	BIRDS	AVES								
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
2	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>					✓	✓		
3	Common shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>						✓		
4	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>				✓				
5	Northern shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					✓	✓		
6	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				✓				
7	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓							
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
10	Red-crested pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>					✓	✓		
11	Common pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>						✓		
12	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					✓			
14	Black stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>					✓			

15	White stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
16	Eurasian spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		✓						
17	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Purple heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	✓					✓		
19	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
20	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓		
21	Pygmy cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>	✓					✓		
21	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓							
22	European honey buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
23	*Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓					
24	Eastern imperial eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>						✓		
25	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					✓	✓		
26	Western marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
27	Montagu's harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		✓				✓		
28	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>					✓			
29	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>					✓	✓		
30	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
31	Great bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		✓				✓		
32	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					✓	✓		
33	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					✓			

34	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>						✓		
35	Pied avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓				✓		
35	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
36	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						✓		
37	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	✓			✓				
38	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		✓		✓		
39	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>						✓		
40	Red knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			✓			✓		
41	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	✓			✓		✓		
42	Curlew sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>						✓		
43	Temminck's stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>	✓					✓		
44	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓		✓		
45	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓					✓		
46	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleuca</i>	✓			✓		✓		
47	*Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			✓	✓				
48	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓			✓		✓		
49	Marsh sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	✓							
50	Wood sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓		
51	Spotted redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓		
52	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓			✓		✓		

53	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
54	Yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
55	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓					✓		
56	Black tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>						✓		
57	Rock dove/feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
58	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59	European turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
60	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
61	Common swift	<i>Apus apus</i>						✓		
62	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>					✓	✓		
63	European bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
64	Lesser spotted woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>					H			
65	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Black woodpecker	<i>Dryocopos martius</i>						H		
67	European green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				H	H	✓	H	
68	Grey-headed woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>				H				
69	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
70	Red-footed falcon	<i>Falco vespertinus</i>		✓						
71	Eurasian hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		✓			✓	✓		
72	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>							✓	

73	Red-backed shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
74	Great grey shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>					✓			
75	Eurasian golden oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>			✓	H	✓			
76	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>						H	✓	
77	Common magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Eurasian jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓	✓				
79	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
80	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			✓	✓				
81	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Common raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓				✓	
83	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			✓				H	
84	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					✓		✓	
85	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓	H	H		
86	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	H			✓	✓	✓	
87	Bearded reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>				H			✓	
88	Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓		✓	✓			
89	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓		
90	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
91	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
92	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>					H	✓		

93	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓		H	H	H	
94	Great reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>							✓	
95	Moustached warbler	<i>Acrocephalus melanopogon</i>							H	
96	Eurasian reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>						✓		
97	Savi's warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>				H			H	
98	Garden warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>						✓		
99	Lesser whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>			✓					
100	Common whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>					✓			
101	Common firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>							✓	
102	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>							H	
103	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓				✓		✓	
104	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
105	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			✓		✓	H	✓	
106	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>						H	✓	
107	Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>					✓	✓		
108	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>							✓	
109	European pied flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>						✓		
110	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>			✓		✓	✓		
111	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>						✓		
112	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓						

113	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
114	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓			✓			
115	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓					
116	Western yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
117	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
118	Water pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>			✓					
119	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>				✓	✓			
120	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					✓	✓		
121	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓				H	
122	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓			
123	Common linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		✓		✓		✓		
124	Lesser redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>			✓					
125	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>					✓	✓		
126	European serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				✓				
127	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>					✓			
128	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>						✓		
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA								
1	European hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓				✓		
2	Eurasian red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>						✓	✓	

3	European souslik	<i>Spermophilus citellus</i>				✓				
4	European hamster	<i>Cricetus cricetus</i>							✓	
5	Least weasel	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>		✓						
6	European mole	<i>Talpa europaea</i>						✓		
7	Eurasian wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>						✓		
8	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>						✓		
9	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓			✓	✓		
	REPTILES	REPTILIA								
1	Sand lizard	<i>Lacerta agilis</i>		✓				✓		
	AMPHIBIANS	AMPHIBIA								
1	Common/European tree frog	<i>Hyla arborea</i>		H				H		
2	Marsh frog	<i>Pelophylax ridibundus</i>				✓		✓		
	BUTTERFLIES	LEPIDOPTERA								
1	Mallow skipper	<i>Carcharodus alceae</i>		✓				✓		
2	Large skipper	<i>Ochlodes sylvanus</i>						✓	✓	
3	Large white	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓						
4	Small white	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>	✓			✓	✓		✓	

5	Pale/Berger's clouded yellow	<i>Colias hyale / alfacariensis</i>				✓				
6	Wood White	<i>Leptidea sinapis</i>							✓	
7	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>					✓		✓	
8	Adonis Blue	<i>Lysandra bellargus</i>							✓	
9	Chalkhill Blue	<i>Lysandra coridon</i>							✓	
10	Lesser purple emperor	<i>Apatura ilia</i>						✓		
11	Camberwell beauty	<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>			✓					
12	Red admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓				✓		
13	Painted lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	
14	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>	✓	✓						
15	Map butterfly	<i>Araschnia levana</i>						✓		
16	Silver-washed fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>							✓	
17	Speckled wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>							✓	
18	Wall brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>				✓				
19	Small heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>					✓		✓	
20	Scotch argus	<i>Erebia aethiops</i>							✓	
21	Meadow brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Marbled white	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>							✓	
23	Great banded grayling	<i>Brintesia circe</i>							✓	

	MOTHS	LEPIDOPTERA								
1	Hummingbird hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>		✓					✓	
2	Jersey tiger	<i>Euplagia quadripunctaria</i>							✓	
	DRAGONFLIES	ODONATA								
1	Western willow spreadwing	<i>Lestes barbarus</i>		✓						
2	Common winter damselfly	<i>Sympecma fusca</i>							✓	
3	Common bluetail/blue-tailed damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>				✓				
4	Migrant hawk	<i>Aeshna mixta</i>				✓				
5	Lesser emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>						✓		
6	White-tailed skimmer	<i>Orthetrum albistylum</i>						✓		
7	Red-veined darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>				✓				
8	Ruddy darter	<i>Sympetrum sanguineum</i>				✓		✓		
	OTHER INVERTEBRATES									
1	Roman snail	<i>Helix pomatia</i>						✓		
2	Rose chafer sp.	<i>Cetonia ?aurata</i>							✓	