

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



Tour Report

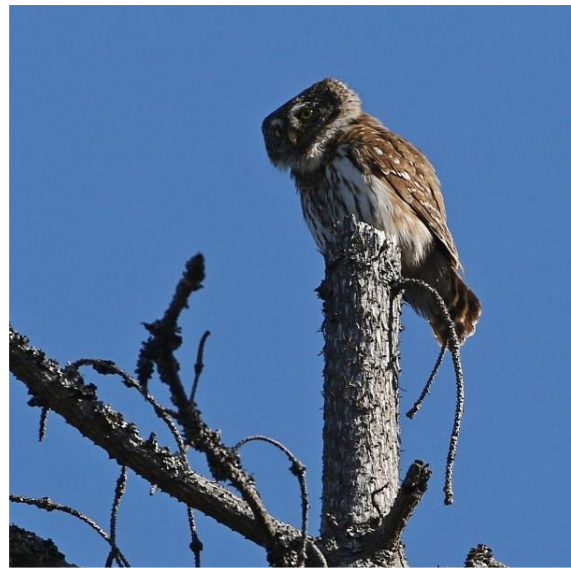
Slovakia – Spring Birding in Slovakia

11-16 April 2022

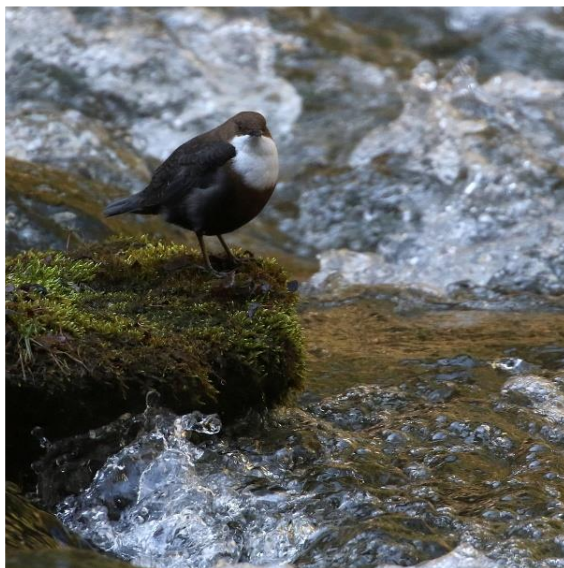
Ural owl



Eurasian pygmy owl



White-throated dipper



Camberwell beauty



Compiled by Attila Steiner

Tour Leader: Attila Steiner

Day 1: Arrive Kosice, travel to Liptovsky Jan

Monday 11 April 2022

We met at Kosice Airport, where a pair of fieldfares were very noisy outside the car park. We boarded our comfortable van and started driving towards our first hotel crossing Kosice and Presov. We stopped for coffee along the motorway, where we saw the first of many chaffinches and heard yellowhammer singing. Our next stop was below the snow-covered High Tatras overlooking a small lake where we saw mute swans, mallards and a pair of great crested grebe on the lake before arriving at our hotel at 18:00.

Day 2: Janska Dolina, Liptovska Mara Reservoir, Low Tatras

Tuesday 12 April 2022

After breakfast, we drove to the end of the village and started walking along the stream in a picturesque valley, where a pair of grey wagtails were busy hunting for insects in the stream. We watched both goldcrest and firecrest singing in the same tree giving great comparative views. Soon we enjoyed crested tits calling and then showing for a long time joined by a couple of coal tits and the white-headed Eastern subspecies of long-tailed tit. Mistle thrushes were singing in the treetops and a Eurasian jay appeared shortly. We also heard European bullfinches - one bright male with two females - and it took us some time to find them eating seeds below the spruces. On the walk back we had distant views of a golden eagle and just before reaching the car park, we finally glimpsed a white-throated dipper and then had great views of two birds dipping and sunning themselves on the shore.

We moved on but stopped soon along the way as we heard European green woodpecker calling. A nice male was quickly located high in a poplar tree, and there was also a reed bunting singing in a small reedbed next to the road.

We reached Lake Besenovka around noon, as we got out of the van there were garganeys and Eurasian teals located along the lake shore, good numbers of tufted ducks and goldeneyes further inside and a few northern shovelers were seen too. Many black-headed gulls were flying and swimming and we had good scope views of adult and immature Caspian gulls. While walking on the dyke we had a mixed flock of yellow and white wagtails busy catching insects, two male black redstarts chasing each other, and we had good views of a nice male linnnet too. Then a large raptor was spotted, our first adult white-tailed eagle! What a majestic bird.

While we were having lunch in the sun, we also spotted a goshawk that started circling above the lake. After lunch, we drove to the large reservoir of Liptovska Mara and saw a female hen harrier along the road. We first stopped near a small harbour where we had a group of goosanders, an adult yellow-legged gull, little ringed plovers displaying and four green sandpipers on the mud. the reservoir was empty, but we had good views of nuthatch during the walk on the shore.

We then drove higher up in the Low Tatras in search of high-elevation birds where we spotted another golden eagle on the drive that was giving better views than the first sighting. Then we reached the first snow-covered slopes where we had great views of about a dozen ring ouzels along with fieldfare, mistle and song thrush. Where the snow melted hundreds of purple crocuses were growing. We drove further into the mountains and stopped at a place overlooking forested slopes and after a while, we watched two spotted nutcrackers in the treetops giving spectacular views. It was a great end to a day filled with good birds.

Day 3: Oravská Magura, Black Orava marshes, Orava Reservoir, Mountains above Oravsky Podzámok

Wednesday 13 April 2022

We had an appointment with our local guide Dusan - a well-known ornithologist in Slovakia working with mainly owls and woodpeckers - in the morning. First, we drove with him to the top of Oravská Magura in search of three-toed woodpecker. The forest here, as in most of Slovakia, had a lot of damage due to spruce bark beetle, which on the other hand means three-toed woodpeckers have a more suitable habitat as they depend on dying spruces. While we were walking and looking for the woodpeckers Dusan suddenly heard a Eurasian pygmy owl. After some playback, the owl was sitting out right above our heads attacked by goldcrests, coal tits and chaffinches. What a great sight! We moved on to the next territory and after walking on the snow-covered slopes, we finally had an obliging pair of three-toed woodpeckers showing very well. The male was drumming next to us high in dead spruce and the female silently flew in next to him.

Then it was time to leave the mountain. Our next stop was at the Black Orava marshes shared between Poland and Slovakia. As we were walking, we crossed the border several times. We were in search of citrine wagtail that started nesting here 10 years ago and now has an increasing population in the area - the only nesting site in Slovakia. We were scanning the inundated meadows when suddenly a male citrine wagtail flew into our view and perched atop a dead willow. Sadly, it soon dropped, and we lost sight of it. We then walked to the shore of the Black Orava where we soon located another bird that showed for a bit longer. Above us, there were barn swallows and with them a sand martin and a few house martins. In the distance two lesser spotted eagles were thermalling and a white stork landed in the marsh. We heard marsh frogs and saw their eggs in the shallow water but unfortunately, we couldn't find any bright blue males - these frogs turn from brown into an azure blue for a week in the mating season. Dusan told us the Black Orava marsh is the only remaining site for them in Slovakia. After a while, we managed better views of the citrine wagtails and also had a skylark in song flight.

We had lunch on the shore of Orava Reservoir overlooking Bird Island, home to hundreds of pairs of Caspian and black-headed gulls. The first common terns of the season were also flying around the island, and we saw two graylag geese. It is thought that there are two pairs nesting on the island, a new breeding locality for the species in Slovakia.

After lunch, we drove into the mountains again. As the road was covered with thick snow, we had to walk a few miles looking for woodpeckers. In the end, we saw four different male black woodpeckers, mostly in flight, but also perched and calling loudly, however, white-backed woodpecker remained only heard. A bird was drumming above us on the slope, but too far to locate. On the walk back to the van we met the director of Birdlife Slovakia who was surveying the mountains.

Our last new bird for the list was a group of pretty willow tits showing next to the road. We had a tiring but very successful day and we thanked Dusan for being with us and sharing his vast knowledge.

Day 4: Janská Dolina, Strbské Pleso, travel to the Slovak Karst, fishponds near Trnava

Thursday 14 April 2022

After breakfast, we said goodbye to our hotel and loaded the van. We drove back to Janská Dolina, but this time we started walking uphill on another trail. The best new bird for the trip list was Eurasian treecreeper, but we also had a close golden eagle, two black woodpeckers, crested and willow tits and a very showy Eurasian wren singing its heart out for us. It was beautiful walking in a tranquil valley surrounded by birds and several Camberwell beauties on a wonderful sunny morning.

Then we left for the High Tatras and Strbské Pleso, a highland resort nestled around a lake. Well, the lake was frozen and there were about 40 centimetres of snow. The landscape was beautiful, but birds were scarce,

so we only spent a short time there. We then had lunch in a scenic car park overlooking the Low Tatras and while eating a sparrowhawk flew below us giving great views.

Then it was time to drive south across the mountains. On the way, we stopped to take photos of the recently renovated magnificent Krasnahorka Castle before exploring Hrhov Fishponds. There is now a tower overlooking the eastern pond that was drained, and we saw greenshanks and little ringed plovers on the mud. In the fields, we saw a big flock of several hundred migrating wood pigeons and stock doves.

Our last birding stop was at Trnava Fishpond which was also drained to our surprise. We saw garganeys, lapwings, common and wood sandpipers, common snipes and lots of yellow wagtails on the mud. Star of the pond, however, was a great bittern that was standing at the edge of the reeds, well camouflaged.

Day 5: Trnava area, Jasov Valley, Hrhov Fishponds

Friday 15 April 2022

We went down to the drained pond before breakfast for an hour and were greeted by the song of nightingale in the bushes and soon enough we had good views of a singing bird. The pond had the usual assortment of waders, including great egrets and there were at least three pairs of marsh harrier flying around the pond. We heard the call of wryneck from the nearby trees and soon we were watching one of these strange woodpeckers calling from the treetop. A grey-headed woodpecker was also heard, but it was too far for us to see.

After breakfast, we met our local guide for the day, Stefan. First, he took us to a meadow that has a population of sousliks where we saw a couple of these lovely-looking ground squirrels. Then we drove to a nearby quarry where we watched a Eurasian eagle owl sitting on its nest on a ledge. An osprey flew past as we were walking back to the vehicle.

We then drove to a long line of poplar trees that had an eastern imperial eagle nest and we stood a few hundred metres away to not disturb the nesting female. There were two imperial eagles in the air, but far away until suddenly the male appeared and started circling above us giving fantastic views.

Jasov Valley is part of Slovak Karst National Park. It has beautiful old mixed oak, beech and coniferous forest that's home to many woodland birds. As we started walking, we heard a collared flycatcher singing, but we couldn't find it high in the canopy. Then Stefan heard the alarm calls of blackbirds that lead us to a magnificent Ural owl perched in a beech tree. We had fantastic telescope views and then went closer for photos although the owl didn't pay much attention to us. Stefan then heard a grey-headed woodpecker and soon we were looking at the male with its grey head and thin black moustache. It started raining and we decided to walk back to the van, to our great surprise a Ural owl now sat in a pine tree next to the road. We enjoyed this fabulous sight for a few minutes and as the rain got heavier, we continued walking and another Ural owl was seen on the other side of the road! It had a darker face than the first owl we saw, and we could hardly believe our luck, especially since this year was very poor for Ural owls because of the lack of rodents. Back at the van, we ate our sandwiches and then tracked down middle and lesser spotted woodpecker at the valley entrance.

After lunch, we were birding around Moldava and Bodvou and saw crested lark, the first turtle dove for the season and serin among others. We then decided to look for rock bunting on the slopes below Trnava castle. Soon enough we found two delightful male rock buntings that were showing very well.

It was then time to say goodbye to Stefan after a very successful day. We still had an hour until dinner and decided to check the other side of Hrhov Fishponds. We first walked to the pond that had water and reedbeds fringing one side and here we heard Savi's and common reed warblers singing and water rail calling. In the willows, birds were moving and we had good views of a wood warbler that was singing from time to time. A

female collared flycatcher was also found. We then went down to the shore of the drained pond and were surprised by a flock of seven avocets, as we found out later, it was a local rarity. In addition, there were pintails and shovelers seen and an unexpected single common shelduck. It was then time to return to our hotel after a day full of great birds and surprises!

Day 6: Trnava Fishpond, Hungary, Hornad river valley

Saturday 16 April 2022

The weather turned cold and windy during the night. We went down to the pond one last time and there were now even more great egrets on the mud and a black stork flew in and joined them. A young white-tailed eagle made a few rounds above the lake and we also had a new wader with four black-winged stilts walking in the shallow water on their ridiculously long legs - it was another unexpected wader! The fact that two fishponds were drained meant that we saw a good selection of waders during the holiday and many of them had to be added to the list. There were good numbers of wood sandpipers and ruffs present too.

As we were almost two miles away from the Hungarian border, we decided to make a short excursion into Hungary. Photos were taken at the border signs, and we made a short stroll along a stream, enough to produce a list of birds for Hungary on eBird. As we were on the border a lesser spotted eagle was discovered above us in the sky.

Our last stop was south of the airport where we checked agricultural fields and pylons for saker falcon. By now the wind was so strong we had to hide behind the van in the wind shade. Unfortunately, the weather was really bad for birding and we only saw a few lapwings and marsh harriers and a subadult imperial eagle next to the road before it was time to drive to the airport.

Slovakia once again proved to be a great destination with beautiful scenery, a fantastic selection of birds, good food and beer.

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	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	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Northern pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					✓	
9	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓			✓	✓
10	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓			✓	
11	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓				
12	Common merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				✓	✓	✓
14	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
15	Black stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>					✓	✓



16	White stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Eurasian bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>					✓	
18	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				✓	✓	✓
20	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓			✓	
21	Western osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>					✓	
22	Lesser spotted eagle	<i>Clanga pomarina</i>		✓				✓
23	Eastern imperial eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>					✓	✓
24	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓		✓		
25	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓	✓	
26	Northern goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		✓				
27	Western marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓				
29	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓				✓
30	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					H	
32	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓			
33	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>						✓
34	Pied avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>					✓	
35	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				✓	✓	✓

36	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
37	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>					✓	✓
38	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				✓	✓	✓
40	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
41	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				✓		
42	Wood sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>				✓	✓	✓
43	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				✓	✓	✓
44	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
45	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓			
46	Caspian gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	Yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		✓				
48	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			✓			
49	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>				✓	H	✓
51	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	European turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>					✓	
53	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
54	Eurasian eagle-owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>					✓	
55	Ural owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>					✓	

56	Eurasian pygmy owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>			✓			
57	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>					✓	✓
58	Eurasian wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>					✓	
59	Eurasian three-toed woodpecker	<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>			✓			
60	Middle spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>					✓	
61	Lesser spotted woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>					✓	✓
62	Syrian woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>				✓		
63	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓		✓	✓
64	White-backed woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>			H			
65	Black woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>			✓	✓		
66	European green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓			✓	H
67	Grey-headed woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>					✓	H
68	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Eurasian hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>					✓	
70	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓			
71	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Spotted nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>		✓				
74	Western jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓			✓
75	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓

76	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	European crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓	✓	✓		
80	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓			✓	
81	Willow tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>			✓	✓		
82	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
83	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
84	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>					✓	✓
86	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓			
87	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓		✓	
90	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			✓	H		
91	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Wood warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>					✓	
93	Eurasian reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>					H	
94	Savi's warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>					H	
95	Eurasian blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				✓	✓	✓

96	Lesser whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>					H	
97	Common firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓	✓			
98	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓	✓		
99	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	H	
100	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓	✓		✓	H
101	Eurasian treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>				✓	✓	
102	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Ring ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>		✓	H			
104	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
105	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
106	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
107	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓			
108	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓				
109	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	H
110	Common nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>					✓	H
111	Collared flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>					✓	
112	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
113	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			✓			
114	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
115	White-throated dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓		✓		

116	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
117	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				✓	✓	✓
118	Western yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
119	Citrine wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>			✓			
120	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
121	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
122	Tree pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>					H	
123	Water pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>					✓	
124	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
125	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					✓	
126	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓	H			
127	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>				H	✓	✓
128	Common linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
129	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
130	European serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>					✓	
131	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
132	Rock bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>					✓	
133	Common reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓			
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA						
1	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

2	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓					
3	Eurasian red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>					✓	
4	European souslik	<i>Spermophilus citellus</i>					✓	
	AMPHIBIANS	REPTILIA AND AMPHIBIA						
1	Common toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>					✓	
2	Moor frog	<i>Rana arvalis</i>			✓			
	BUTTERFLIES	RHOPALOCERA						
1	Common brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>				✓		
2	Orange tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>					✓	
3	European peacock	<i>Aglais io</i>		✓		✓		
4	Camberwell beauty	<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>				✓		
5	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>				✓		