

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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**Hungary recce
Kiskunság National Park
11 – 15 June 2012**

This is a report of my 'recce' trip to the Kiskunság National Park in Hungary, to plan a potential holiday here in June 2013. It includes records from Honeyguide leader Paul Tout, who drove from Trieste in Italy to join me in this visit. Chris Durdin, June 2012

Our hosts: Gabor Orban and Andrea Katona www.ecotours.hu and www.ecotours-worldwide.com. We stayed at their Kondor Tanya (Lodge) www.kondorhotel.echt.hu (also www.kondorhotel.webs.com)

Photos by Chris Durdin and Gabor Orban.

Cover montage: Top row – dark red helleborine, Hungarian grey cow; marbled white.

Middle row – Queen of Spain fritillary; entrance to Kondor eco-lodge; red-footed falcon.

Bottom row – collared pratincole, great bustard, Essex skippers on tuberous pea.

Daily Diary

Monday 11 June – Budapest to Kondor

It was pouring with rain at Luton and a very wet walk to the very busy airport included being diverted back outside to a new, additional security check area. Otherwise all was straightforward and it was a smooth Wizz Air flight to Budapest. There I changed a little sterling into Hungarian currency (forints), and by then Andrea was there to meet me so we could take the short walk to where Gabor was with the Ecotours hired minibus, having just dropped off a group at the airport.

The drive south to Kondor Eco-Lodge, in one of the central sections of the Kiskunság National Park, would have been a little over an hour. However we stopped or detoured several times, the first of which was to drive past an old church with a village museum of traditional thatched houses. Moving into the National Park, susliks quickly disappeared into holes as we approached them. Somewhere out on the wide open spaces, Gabor stopped where he knew collared pratincoles were likely, and immediately there was one, then another, flying over a large barley field. The bare habitat they like was provided in the adjacent sunflower field, open patches where the crop hadn't established due to bad weather. A Mediterranean gull flew past – they nest on a gravel pit, I learnt – and a yellow wagtail sang its indistinct song. A little farther on and there was a group of great bustards at the back of a lucerne (alfalfa) field, which marsh harriers quartered. Fields were often yellow with lady's bedstraw and toadflax, and deep purple wild sage *Salvia nemorosa* punctuated road verges.



Kondor Lake area, with a roadside mix of lady's bedstraw, yarrow and wild sage *Salvia nemorosa*; and a redstart which was nesting in the garden of Kondor Lodge.

We might have stopped and started even more but we had a message that Paul Tout had arrived, and we found him just along the road from Gabor and Andrea's Kondor Lodge. This is a group of traditional, thatched buildings, converted into their living place in one building, with accommodation for small groups round the other sides of the central square. We sat there for a while, talking to David and Claire who were staying, interrupted by the common redstart that was nesting outside their room and a male silver-washed fritillary settling in the garden.

Paul and I had a tour of the rooms, several with angled ceilings under the thatched roofs and some with period furniture – 19th or early 20th century. We then had a brief walk before dinner in the early evening sunshine, walking the very short distance to overview what in a wetter season would be a large wetland

– Lake Kondor – across the road from Kondor Lodge. Having paused there earlier we already knew it was largely dry this year: weather patterns in Hungary, like so much of Europe, have been odd in recent months. Even so, earlier when we'd stopped here there had been roller, bee-eaters, great white egret and lesser grey shrike, plus a marsh harrier being mobbed by a large group of lapwings. This time there were sounds of golden oriole, black woodpecker, cuckoo and turtle doves as we looked at some butterflies – short-tailed blue and Bath white – and flowers such as dragon's teeth and downy woundwort. As well as the native species, there was a surprising amount of cannabis (here and elsewhere, mostly on roadsides) and an invasive pink-flowered milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca* that is abundant and probably difficult to eradicate.

Then back for goulash (soup with dumplings), rice with meat and ice cream, the first of several delicious and authentic Hungarian evening meals, and an early night.

Tuesday 12 June – River Tisza oxbow lakes

Rain to start and we headed east in the hope it would be drier there, which it wasn't. First stop took us through woodland which we gathered is rich for woodpeckers. There were a few mosquitoes in the wood, but they were surprisingly untroublesome even though all three of us were in shorts. Later, returning to the minibus, the rain stopped for a while and we found both lesser spotted and middle spotted woodpeckers, plus nuthatch and hawfinch.



Oxbow lake on the River Tisza

The walk took us past an attractive open area and an elegant building used by the National Park, then out into a meadow and to an open tower hide. The hide is roofed, ideal on a wet day, and it overlooks a large oxbow lake. The wide flood plain of the River Tisza has many of these oxbow lakes, abandoned meanders, and this was the first of three we visited. This one had large sheets of white water lilies and a tremendous selection of wetland birds. Immediately obvious were twenty or so pygmy cormorants, flying and perched. On the water were twelve ferruginous ducks, hundreds of coots and one or two garganeys. Five whiskered terns hunted over the lake and squacco herons moved to and fro. Night herons, little and great white egrets, a kingfisher and two black-winged stilts added to the mix. On a different wet patch there were about twenty spoonbills which all appeared to be immature birds. The rain eased off and we re-traced our steps, failing to see the river warbler that was singing.

Moving on a short way, we stopped to eat lunch behind a church, offering a panoramic view over another, even larger, oxbow lake. We walked to down the lake, where there were many more pygmy cormorants, river and Savi's warbler singing and a penduline tit calling. Paul picked up on a black-necked grebe with three small chicks. Then the rain came back and we retreated to the minibus.

We tried a third oxbow lake, more used by people, with a café nearby, which could be a good idea on a dry day. The night herons here seemed especially tame and a roe deer – or was it road deer? – walked across the muddy road. A diving beetle was half-hidden from view, eating inside a dead catfish. But it was too wet to stay and we left, hitting torrential rain towards Kecsekemét, where we didn't stop. We shopped at a large, well-stocked supermarket, where the huge variety of paprika (*right*) caught my eye, then came back for tea and to dry out.



Wednesday 13 June – Kiskunság National Park (various)

Paul and I had an hour out before breakfast, on the track on the other side of Lake Kondor. We found our first whinchats, a brilliant roller on the wire, a rather brief sight and sound of a warbler that we concluded must have been marsh warbler, and two local white storks.

Happily it was dry all day today, though cool for Hungary in June: we needed a sweatshirt most of the time. We started on some grassland and arable edge very close to Kondor. The grassland was colourful with large blue alkanet, viper's bugloss and field eryngo. An interesting find was the sea-lavender *Limonium gmelinii*, an indication of the slight saltiness remaining in many areas, a remnant of the Pannonian Sea that was once across much of low Hungary. On the other side of the track was the thinnest cereal crop you can imagine, with a rich growth of arable wild flowers. Lots of corn cockle was most obvious; there was also cornflower, corn gromwell, scented mayweed and field poppy. We saw a lot more arable today, and none had this rich flora. A male Montagu's harrier drifted past and, as in many areas, there were bee-eaters, a roller and lesser grey shrike.



Arable with corn cockle and cornflower, *Limonium gmelinii*, and invasive milkweed *Asclepias syriaca*

Next stop was a signed area of the National Park at Fulophaza with an interesting habitat, a former mobile sand dune area. After a short stretch of woodland we were into partly open, partly scrubby sand dune, plainly not now mobile. The best flower was a superb spike of dark red helleborine; there was lots of *Euphorbia seguieriana*, for which a faded sign gave the English name of wolf's blood. We also noted common rockrose and *Artemisia elatior*. That same sign mentioned the challenges of invasive alien plants, and for much of what we looked at here – and elsewhere – that was a worrying feature of the area. Most concerning were large, dominant patches of the pink-flowered milkweed *Asclepias syriaca*, which Gabor says has spread rapidly during the last 5-6 years. Here there are no monarch caterpillars or other browsers to exploit and weaken the milkweed and it exudes a nasty sap when broken. Paul and I felt that it needs a substantial eradication project, probably eligible for funding as an EU-LIFE project to save a priority Natura 2000 habitat. Other non-native species very apparent include false acacia, tree-of-heaven, Duke of Argyll's tea tree, false indigo bush, the fleabane *Erigeron annuus* and cannabis.

We moved on to where we had lunch in a large open area with at its core a partly dried lake called Boddi Szek – this year, that is: this was another lake much reduced after a long, dry winter. It's what they call an 'alkaline' lake; semi-saline would be a better description. A copse of false acacia had a few red-footed falcons, thought to be nesting here. From a tower viewing platform we could oversee wet areas with avocets, shelducks and the odd purple heron flying past.

Back at ground level, Gabor used the bucket in a freshwater well to fish out an edible frog (right). We put the frog back, of course.



Our next, fairly mixed area was at Kelemen Szek, overlooking another wetland, where I spent a while photographing Essex skippers on tuberous pea. We then moved to some small fishponds, where there were several night herons and various dragonflies and damselflies, including Norfolk hawkers and many white-legged damselflies. There was no sign here today of the lesser purple emperor butterflies that can occur. We ended the day with a circuit of a large wetland called Zab Szek, surrounded by open grass and arable. We found our first black stork here. The route took us past some pylons on the home run, on which there was a nestbox for sakers, occupied by kestrels, and finally a plantation of elder bushes.

Thursday 14 June – Kiskunság National Park (west and north)

Paul returned to the arable field-edge area before breakfast and found tawny pipit. I walked alongside Kondor Lake and saw our first little ringed plovers and two spotted redshanks.

We headed west to the River Danube. A distant backdrop along the way was a town created in the Soviet bloc era to make steel, then called Sztálinváros, Hungarian for Stalin City or Stalingrad, but now Dunaújváros – Danube-new-city. But our real destination was a cul-de-sac alongside the Danube, to look for butterflies. We were early enough, perhaps only just, for lesser purple emperors to be warming themselves on the road and flying round. In addition, Paul caught a slightly faded Freyer's purple emperor, which is a bit smaller and more angular looking. Gliders – the butterfly – were active (common glider, not the species Hungarian glider, as it happens), and a gloriously tame silver-washed fritillary fed on a cotton thistle flower (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lnhwc_nflSs&feature=youtu.be).



Lesser purple emperor; common glider and silver-washed fritillary

Heading across the northern part of the National Park, we paused by fields with many Hungarian grey cattle, the robust and impressively horned local variety of livestock. We reached a large area of puszta and walked out alongside a river channel to a tower hide. We passed a family party of hovering kestrels, young birds recently fledged, sometimes intermingled with red-footed falcons. From the tower the views were striking: the open puszta was continuous natural or semi-natural habitat as far as the eye could see, without even electricity wires in view. In one direction there were eight great bustards, a bit distant and with the light against us. Through 180°, though, there were seven closer bustards, apparently all males – the local females were, perhaps, on eggs. The grassland here was a naturally species-poor floral community, as for many of the pusztas, presumably partly due to the slight saline influence from the ancient, inland Pannonian Sea. But there were dragonflies and some flowers where we walked, including a patch of cut-leaved self-heal, the yellow scabious *Scabiosa ochroleuca*, lots of yellow and white bedstraws, and Europe's showiest speedwell, *Veronica longifolia* (right).



Moving on, we stopped by a large arable field with a line of pylons, one of which had a large nest box put up for sakers to use. And there they were, three chunky falcons perched on the pylon.

Before heading back, we took a short detour to the pratincole field I'd stopped at on the way south, so Paul could see them too. There were at least four there, and we watched as they mobbed a marsh harrier that was quartering the sunflowers. The harrier was also being chased by two adult hares to deter it, we presumed, as it searched for a leveret. The harrier dropped into the sunflower crop and stayed there, so the outcome wasn't clear.

We struck lucky later when we were able to stop for close views of a female great bustard crossing a track close to the road. Our final stop was a gentle hill overlooking the puszta, thought to be an ancient burial place. As we suspected, this had interesting plants: patches of wall germander, more downy woundwort, and *Scabiosa canescens*, a small-headed scabious with bright purple anthers. High-pitched whistles and holes indicated the presence of susliks, but they stayed out of sight.

Friday 15 June – home

I found a nice Queen-of-Spain fritillary before our usual substantial breakfast, after which Paul headed back to Trieste and Gabor and Andrea dropped me at Budapest airport, a journey of just under 1½ hrs.

WILDLIFE LISTS

Birds (H = heard)

Great crested grebe	Little ringed plover	Whinchat
Little grebe	Lapwing	Stonechat
Black-necked grebe	Spotted redshank	Wheatear
Cormorant	Redshank	Blackbird
Pygmy cormorant	Curlew	Song thrush
Squacco heron	Black-headed gull	Mistle thrush
Little bittern	Mediterranean gull	Savi's warbler H
Night heron	Common tern	River warbler H
Great white egret	Black tern	Sedge warbler
Little egret	Whiskered tern	Reed warbler
Spoonbill	Feral pigeon	Marsh warbler
Black stork	Woodpigeon	Great reed warbler
White stork	Collared dove	Chiffchaff
Mute swan	Turtle dove	Blackcap
Greylag goose	Cuckoo	Spotted flycatcher
Mallard	Kingfisher	Penduline tit H
Gadwall	Bee-eater	Great tit
Garganey	Roller	Nuthatch
Teal	Hoopoe	Lesser grey shrike
Ferruginous duck	Black woodpecker H	Red-backed shrike
Marsh harrier	Green woodpecker	Starling
Montagu's harrier	Lesser spotted woodpecker	Golden oriole
Sparrowhawk	Great spotted woodpecker	Jay
Buzzard	Middle spotted woodpecker	Magpie
Red-footed falcon	Skylark	Jackdaw
Saker falcon	Crested lark	Hooded crow
Hobby	Sand martin	Rook
Kestrel	Swallow	House sparrow
Pheasant	House martin	Tree sparrow
Quail H	Tawny pipit	Hawfinch
Coot	Yellow wagtail	Chaffinch
Great bustard	White wagtail	Greenfinch
Stone-curlew	Robin	Goldfinch
Collared pratincole	Nightingale H	Corn bunting
Black-winged stilt	Redstart	Reed bunting
Avocet	Black redstart	Yellowhammer

Mammals

Roe deer

Suslik

Brown hare

Reptiles and amphibians

European pond terrapin

Sand lizard

Edible frog

Tree frog H

Butterflies

Essex skipper
 Swallowtail
 Large white
 Small white
 Bath white
 Brimstone
 Lesser purple emperor
 Freyer's purple emperor
 Painted lady
 Red admiral
 Peacock

Silver-washed fritillary
 Queen-of-Spain fritillary
 Marbled white
 Meadow brown
 Small heath
 Short-tailed blue
 Holly blue
 Common blue
 Silver-studded blue (probably – can't rule out
 Idas blue)

Dragonflies and damselflies

Norfolk (green-eyed) hawkler
 Four-spotted chaser
 Common darter
 Black-tailed skimmer
 White-tailed skimmer
 Banded demoiselle
 White-legged damselfly
 Blue-tailed damselfly

Aeshna isosceles
Libellula quadrimaculata
Sympetrum striolatum
Orthetrum cancellatum
Orthetrum albistylum
Calopteryx splendens
Platycnemis pennipes (right)
Ishnura elegans



Other notable invertebrates

Crab spider *Misumena vatia*

Roman snail *Helix pomatia*

Pollen chafer *Oxythyrea funesta*



Roman snail



Pollen chafers on greater knapweed

Plants

Noted here are the more notable or showy species seen, rather than a complete list. Most are in *The Wildflowers of Britain and Northern Europe* by R Fitter, A Fitter and M Blamey, but we also briefly looked at a flora – words only – of the Kiskunság National Park.

* plants not in Fitter, Fitter & Blamey **A** = alien **nif** = not in flower

Dicotyledons – APIACEAE – umbellifers	
<i>Eryngium campestre</i>	Field eryngo
ARISTOLOCHIACEAE – birthworts	
<i>Aristolochia clematitis</i>	Birthwort – including a southern festoon caterpillar on one
ASCLEPIADACEAE – milkweed	
<i>Asclepias syriaca</i>	Common milkweed A
ASTERACEAE (COMPOSITEAE) – daisy family	
<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Yarrow
<i>Ambrosia artemisiifolia</i> (<i>A. elatior</i>)	Ragweed nif
* <i>Artemisia elatior</i>	a wormwood
<i>Carduus nutans</i>	Musk thistle
<i>Centaurea scabiosa</i>	Greater knapweed
<i>Chicorium intybus</i>	Chicory
<i>Chamomilla recutita</i>	Scented mayweed
<i>Erigeron annuus</i>	Annual or daisy fleabane A
<i>Onoropodium acanthium</i>	Cotton thistle
<i>Tragopogon pratensis</i>	Goatsbeard
BORAGINACEA – borage family	
<i>Anchusa azurea</i>	Large blue alkanet
<i>Buglossoides arvensis</i>	Corn gromwell
<i>Cynoglossum</i> sp. nif	a houndstongue. <i>C. hungaricum</i> is the species listed in the National Park flora
<i>Echium vulgare</i>	Viper's bugloss
BUTOMACEAE – flowering rush	
<i>Butomus umbellatus</i>	flowering rush
CANNABACEAE – hop and cannabis	
* <i>Cannabis ruderalis</i>	A split, not everywhere accepted, from <i>C. sativa</i>
CARYOPHYLLACEAE - pinks	
<i>Agrostemma githago</i>	Corn cockle
<i>Arenaria serpyllifolia</i>	Thyme-leaved sandwort
* <i>Dianthus diutinus</i> or <i>D. carthusianorum</i> .	A pink that needs further study. If the former, it's 'sub-endemic' to the Pannonic flora
* <i>Gypsophila paniculata</i>	Gypsophila (baby's-breath to florists)
<i>Silene otites</i>	Spanish (Breckland) catchfly
CISTACEAE rockroses	
<i>Helianthus nummularium</i>	Common rockrose
CRUCIFERAE – cabbage family	
<i>Sisymbrium</i> sp	A widespread rocket, difficult to pin down: could be <i>S. altissimum</i> or <i>S. polymorphum</i>
DIPSACACEAE - scabiouses	
<i>Scabiosa canescens</i>	a scabious
<i>Scabiosa ochroleuca</i>	yellow scabious
EUPHORBIACEAE – spurges	
<i>Euphorbia seguieriana</i>	
FABACEAE (Luguminosae) - peas	
<i>Amorpha fruticosa</i>	False indigo A
<i>Astragalus cicer</i>	Wild lentil
<i>Coronilla varia</i>	Crown vetch
<i>Lathyrus tuberosus</i>	Tuberous pea
<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Birdsfoot trefoil
<i>Lotus tenuis</i>	Narrow-leaved birdsfoot trefoil
<i>Lotus uliginosus</i>	Greater (= marsh) birdsfoot trefoil

<i>Melilotus officinalis</i>	Ribbed melilot
<i>Ononis spinosa</i>	Spiny restharrow
<i>Tetragonobulus maritimus</i>	Dragon's teeth
<i>Trigonella</i> (now <i>Medicago</i>) <i>monspeliaca</i> probably	
<i>Vicia cracca</i>	Tufted vetch
GERANIACEAE – storksills and cranesbills	
<i>Erodium cicutarium</i>	Common storksbill
<i>Geranium pusillum</i>	Small-flowered cranesbill
GUTTIFERAE	
<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>	Perforate St John's-wort
HYDROCHARITACEAE – frogbits	
<i>Trapa natans</i>	Water chestnut
LABIATAE (Lamiaceae) - labiates	
<i>Salvia nemorosa</i>	Wild sage
<i>Leonurus cardiaca</i>	Motherwort
<i>Marubium vulgare</i>	White horehound
<i>Prunella laciniata</i>	Cut-leaved self-heal
<i>Stachys germanica</i>	Downy woundwort
<i>Stachys palustris</i>	Marsh woundwort
<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i>	Wall germander
LINACEAE - flaxes	
<i>Linum perenne</i>	Perennial flax
PLUMBAGINACEAE – sea-lavender family	
* <i>Limonium gmelinii</i> (= <i>L. hungaricum</i>)	
RANUNCULACEAE – buttercups	
<i>Consolida orientalis</i>	Eastern larkspur - abundant
<i>Consolida regalis</i>	Forking larkspur - occasional
ROSACEAE – roses	
<i>Agrimonia eupatoria</i>	Agrimony
RUBACEAE – bedstraws	
<i>Galium verum</i>	Lady's bedstraw
<i>Galium album</i> (<i>G. mollugo</i> subsp. <i>erectum</i>)	Upright hedge bedstraw
SCROPHULARIACEAE – figworts	
<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>	Yellow rattle
<i>Veronica longifolia</i>	
Mulleins	
These are a bit of a puzzle. According to the National Park flora, these are the mulleins in the National Park: <i>Verbascum austriacum</i> , <i>V. blattaria</i> , <i>V. densiflorum</i> , <i>V. lychnitis</i> , <i>V. nigrum</i> , <i>V. phlomoides</i> , <i>V. phoeniceum</i> and <i>V. thapsus</i> . The following were straightforward:-	
<i>Verbascum phoeniceum</i>	Purple mullein
<i>Verbascum thapsus</i>	Great mullein (often called Aaron's rod, though that name is sometimes used for other species)
Yet: <i>Verbascum speciosum</i>	Hungarian or showy mullein – seems to match the most common, much-branched species that we saw, showing orange stamens with white hairs, which were also features of some unbranched mulleins
SOLONACEAE – nightshades	
<i>Datura stramonium</i>	Thorn-apple
<i>Lycium barbarum</i>	Duke of Argyll's tea plant A
VERBENACEAE – vervain	
<i>Verbena officinalis</i>	Vervain
Monocotyledons LILIACEA – lily family	
<i>Allium vineale</i>	Crow garlic
<i>Muscari comosum</i>	Tassel hyacinth
ORCHIDACEAE - orchids	
<i>Epipactis atrorubens</i>	Dark red helleborine
<i>Epipactis helleborine</i>	Broad-leaved helleborine nif