

TRIP REPORT

Naturetrek group 08 to the 16 May 2004



Chocske hills and Besenova lake



Spissky castle overlooks the whole region

Participants:

Derek Benton, Frank White, Jim Coyle and Linda Pritchard, Pam and Bill Nicks. Martin Hrouzek as a tour leader.

Day 1 Transfer

Group was met after arrival to the Kosice airport. The journey to our first hotel set amidst Slovak

Day 2 Chocske hills

Some of us went out every day before breakfast. Both hotels offered good quality birdwatching just outside the door.

With our local guide, we headed for a mountaineous forest with prevailing beech and spruce trees. We intended to walk until 3pm and our pace was leisurely. Passerines were all around and we often watched or heard some of the typical forest species. We spotted many Crossbills roaming around and feeding high in the conifers. Crested Tit and Firecrest were seen well and close. Other common birdlife was represented by Collared Flycatcher, Ring Ouzel, Meadow and Tree Pipit. Goshawk and White-backed Woodpecker were heard but finding them proved to be difficult this time. **Black Woodpecker** seemed to be our companion for the day and we watched no less

Tengmalm's Owl watching us from its nestbox



Our group at Tengmalm's Owl

mountains at an artificial lake (water reservoir) lasted 4 hours with a brief lunch stop at the magnificent Spissky castle ruin.

Dinner at 7:30 suited everyone well. We went to bed early in order to be ready for a day walk the next day.

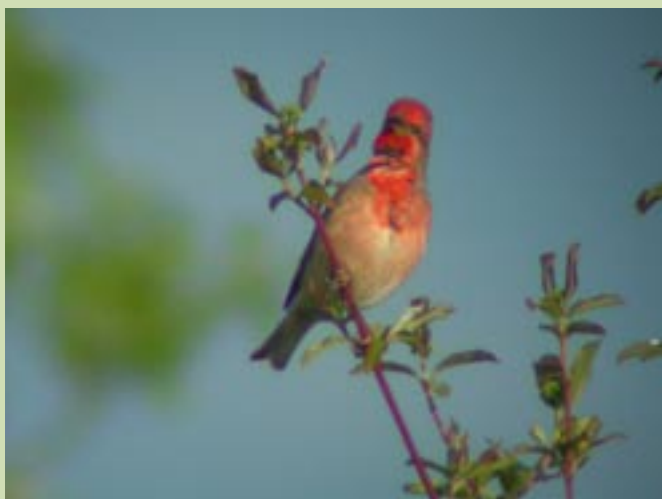




Once found Pygmy Owl is always seen well and close

than 4 of them and a fresh nesthole at the road was found. We took a brief rest at a forest clearing and it was there where our mad hour started. **Golden Eagle** passed by a prominent cliff and got in view several times. Two minutes far our guide pointed at a nestbox. Female **Tengmalm's Owl** popped out and looked at us for a few minutes. Another Owl was calling beyond the curve, this time it was **Pygmy Owl** looking down at us fearlessly for minutes that seemed to be an hour. Grey-headed Woodpecker called and crossed the clearings a few times but it was only seen briefly in flight.

This male Common Rosefinch defended its territory every day at our first hotel



Our way back turned into the search for Three-toed Woodpecker. It was glimpsed eventually by Frank and Derek though the views were not satisfactory in any way. Just before we reached the car rain started to pour down and we got soaked wet in a minute. Dipper at the stream was our last bird in the mountain valley.

We stopped briefly at Besenova lake to add some water birds. Water level fluctuates there quite often and it was high when we arrived. Goldeneye and Teal were perhaps the only birds worth mentioning. We were all happy to cut off half of our target species on the first day in the field.

Day 3 Velka Fatra

Pre-breakfast walk yielded our first **Common Rosefinch**. As usual, it sang just a minute far from the main hotel entrance. Other observed birds where Turtle Dove, Fieldfare, Stonechat, Whinchat, Grasshopper and River Warbler.

We went out to walk through a nice mixed forest.

Mid-sized Brown Bear as it was seen by all of us

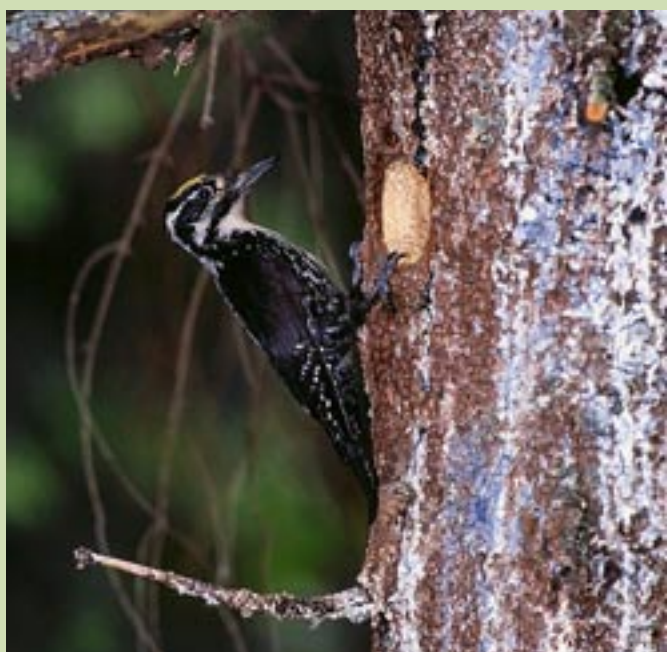


Spruce, fir, beech, and other trees of all ages were all around us while we followed a comfortable and flat road. There was much traffic in the forest due to recent calamity and not many birds were heard singing. **Nutcracker** landed atop of the tall fir a few times, Willow and Marsh Tits were plentiful and soon we found a nice spot with **Red-breasted Flycatcher** flying around us for ten minutes or so. Collared Flycatchers were many but our target was Three-toed and White-backed Woodpecker. We were looking for them in vain again though conditions were not bad.

Passerines seen included Mistle Thrush, Crossbill, Long-tailed Tit, Siskin, and good views of **Ring Ouzel**. Golden Eagle passed by the other side of our valley. Black Woodpecker was noted but not much else and we better decided to visit a well preserved UNESCO village some 10 minutes away and saw Grey Wagtail on our departure.

The plan was to finish birdwatching sooner than the other days. We were expected at a bear hide appr. 40 minutes away from hotel. Our friendly

Three-toed Woodpecker was the hardest one to find but was seen very well eventually



guide showed bears to every one of some 15 groups that visited in 2004. And luckily, we were no exception! We were based for hour and a half in a comfortable hideout reached by foot in 3 minutes. Rather close and nice views of two medium heavy (120 – 150kg) **Brown Bears** in good light conditions pleased everyone. Driving back we saw Red Deers crossing the road a few feet far from us and later 6 Wild Boars in moonshine running in the field close to the road again.

Day 4 Chocske hills and Besenova lake

There were two key species left on our list for this day – Wallcreeper and Three-toed Woodpecker. Neither of them was seen despite our hard search. Nutcracker showed well in the morning. At one moment, just as we wanted to move on, a few interesting raptors turned up. There were two Golden Eagles, one of them being mobbed by



Lesser Spotted Eagles are common in the north and east Slovakia

Goshawk and Raven. While watching them a Hobby was spotted and Black Kite was soaring over the village, apparently a bird on passage.

Another forest walk left our notebook pages blank. Common Buzzard bred in Goshawks nest and it was overall quiet in the forest.

Last planned stop was the lake again – Common Terns, Shelduck and Black-necked Grebes were our best finds before we went to have a rest in the hotel bar.

Day 5 Transfer + Senne ponds

We changed hotels on this day. Once we left the first one we drove round our lake towards the

Roads or paths leading among all ponds at Senne enable to approach very close



High Tatras – the highest part of the Carpathian mountain range. There we stopped at the foothills for 40 minutes or so. Five minutes away from the

car the **Three-toed Woodpecker** was eventually found. It was a female drumming 5 meters from us in the full light. A freshly excavated nesthole was spotted so no wonder we decided to go after 10 minutes before she finished her drumming. As it



Middle Spotted Woodpecker is common in oak forests of east Slovakia

turned out it was a very key species for some of us and we devoted more than 9 hours to search for it on previous days. What a relief!

We parked our car appr. 300 feet further and located **Great Grey Shrike** on the wire. Many Fieldfares and some other passerines including Pied Flycatcher were round.

We continued straight to the east with several brief stops. **Lesser Spotted Eagle** was seen circling low above the road and at 3PM we arrived to our

Ural Owl as we saw it breeding in an old beech



second hotel. We had an hour long break to refresh ourselves and then left for the Senne ponds. The

weather was sunny and despite the fact there was not much time left for a detailed inspection we were pleased to watch many water birds - Purple and Night Herons, Great and Little Egrets, Spoonbills, Black Stork, Avocets, Great Reed and Savi's Warbler, Penduline Tit, Marsh Harriers, all three **marsh terns**, Sand Martins, Black-tailed Godwit, Grey and Ringed Plover, Little Gull, Wigeon, Garganey, Shoveler, and heard Water Rail and Bearded Tit and saw Muskrat.

Many Blue-headed Wagtails were sitting on the road and thistles and Golden Orioles were chasing themselves in clumps of trees.

Day 6 Vihorlat hills + East Slovak lowland

Carpathian beech forest in May



We met our guide some fifteen minutes after our departure from the hotel. He took us to a park on the outskirts of the town. First bird we observed really well was **Middle Spotted Woodpecker**. Others were to come later but it seemed that **Grey-headed Woodpecker** was taking rest and we could not find it for some 20 minutes. Eventually, it appeared on a v-shaped dead branch. It stayed there motionless for a few minutes together with male Green Woodpecker, an ideal moment for comparison of these two species. Great Spotted Woodpecker was around as well. Collared Flycatchers, Icterine Warbler, Wryneck and Syrian Woodpecker were calling but didn't show up.

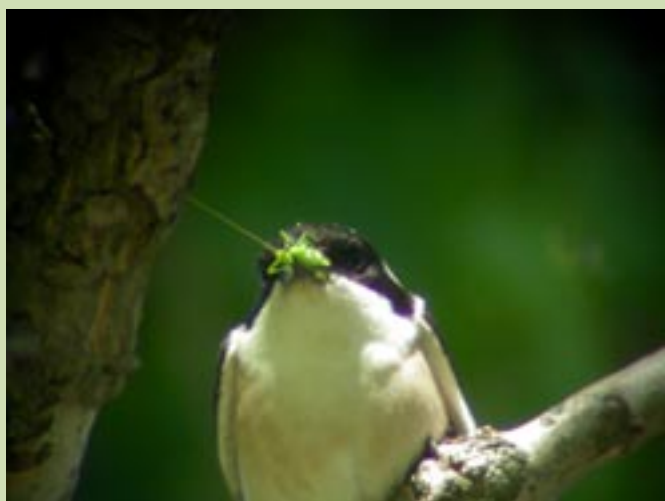
We drove quite far from there to try **Ural Owl** on its nest. Adult birds usually do not stay with their young so late in the season but we were lucky after a 30-minute walk. Female and 4 young were sitting on the nest in a beech tree and provided excellent



We had close-up views at small village lake ...



... like this Red-necked Grebe on the nest



Lesser Grey Shrike at the nest

views for us all. Many Collared Flycatchers were singing, Stock Doves and Wood Warblers were plentiful and Hawfinch turned up briefly. Hoopoe calling from the forest clearing could not be located. Male **Barred Warbler** was singing atop of a dead rose bush near our bus while Honey Buzzard

was soaring in the sky. Puddles on the track were full of Alpine Newts and Yellow-bellied Toads.

We transferred ourselves back to the vicinity of our hotel and were taken to a small meadow amidst local oak-beech forest. Corn Crane and Barred Warblers were vocal and **Sea Eagle** glided



Pool at Latorica river

over our heads. It was mobbed by Raven and a Sparrowhawk passed by. Birdwatching was interrupted by a shower and we moved on towards an Imperial Eagle site. The wind was extremely strong and all we could see was a female's back barely visible in the nest. No sign of the male and we decided to have a coffee at nearby services. There we found the male but it was literally hanging above the few clouds in the sky some half a mile high up! No hope for a change of weather and we were made to go back to our base. Kingfisher was seen at Michalovce town. Derek and Frank made up a little for the afternoon. They saw some Hawfinches, **Syrian Woodpecker**, Wryneck, Red-backed Shrike and heard Tree Frog. All that close by before dinner.

Day 7 Southeast Slovakia + Latorica marshes

9:00 – 18:00

Some of us had a successful morning with heard Whryneck and seen Sea Eagle and Nightingale on their credit. Nevertheless, the weather was bad, with clear sky but strong wind.

The day started with another search for an **Imperial Eagle**. Again, we were looking at the nest above railway in a strong wind. The female was barely visible and the male was gliding in a long distance but still approaching. It came as close as 100 feet and inspected us showing no interest



Tokaj wine area in the southeast Slovakia

and flying very low above the ground. This lasted nearly 10 minutes and we left earlier than him. A pair of Crested Larks was flying around.

Second stop was an abandoned limestone quarry where we watched Green Lizards, Wheatears, Redstart, Woodlarks and Bee-eaters. It was a little late for **Eagle Owl** and we were shown only two young in the nest below us. Then we continued to a sandy wall with many Sand Martins and Bee-eaters nesting in it. One adult Crane low above our heads was a surprise while we were watching Bee-eaters and Souseliks at our lunch spot. We found three **Lesser Grey Shrikes** alongside the road after lunch.

Our scheduled final stop took place at a pool



Black Woodpecker was seen several times

by a village in the Hungarian speaking area. Hard to believe such a small water surface held breeding Black-necked and **Red-necked Grebes**, **Little Bittern** looking out of its nest hole (!), many breeding Whiskered Terns, a few Black Terns, Marsh and Great Reed Warbler, female Montagu's Harrier and male Syrian Woodpecker on a dead tree in the water.



Squacco Heron at Senne Ponds

We had no time left but all of us decided to stop one more time. A heronry found in the village was placed below us. Grey and Night Herons and Little Egrets showed skilful movement between branches while Spotted Crake was calling.

We headed then straight for our hotel but challenged our luck the last time one mile from it. One of us found an adult **Eagle Owl** perching on a stone and it even took off as the dusk was falling soon followed by its partner.

Day 8 East Carpathians

Štefan 9:30 – 18:00

After a one-hour drive we reached the far northeast of Slovakia close to the Polish and Ukrainian border. We used to visit beautiful local valleys in order to pick up species not found on our list yet and to enjoy the countryside where time stands still. We spent much time looking for the **White-backed Woodpecker**. We had several brief views of both male and female – some of us better some worse. **Collared** and **Red-breasted Flycatchers** posed well and **Black Woodpecker** called a few times. We left a primeval beech forest

and headed for a beech/oak plantation to look for White-backed again. Sadly, we found only active nesthole of Great Spotted and saw Middle Spotted and Syrian Woodpecker. A pair of Lesser Spotted Eagles soared low over our heads and Black Stork passed by. We had more Collared Flycatchers,



Barred Warblers are common in the low-lying areas

Red-backed Shrike, Corn Bunting, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and a calling Corn Crake. Last site was a riverside of Cirocha. Willows were full of life and while Martin was driving the local guide back home, the others enjoyed views of at least three [Thrush Nightingales](#), [River](#), Marsh, Garden and Icterine [Warbler](#). Black and White Storks were flying low fields - that was all and we pushed ourselves back to our hotel for a dinner at 8pm as usual. As Derek pointed out, we have seen all pied woodpeckers today.



Zemplinska Sirava reservoir

Day 9 Transfer + Senne ponds

Goosander was seen at the hotel before we left after breakfast. Checking out was fast and in forty minutes (including fuelling with Crested Lark) we arrived to the Senne ponds (09:15 – 12:00) again

to see what was new there. Indeed, we added a few species to our list despite the very windy weather. We stayed longer than planned and so the stop at a Saker nestbox had to be skipped. The weather was bad again anyway and our chances were low because of it.

As we started a lone Tunstone landed on an empty pond. Osprey was present as well as Squacco Herons, Yellow-legged Gulls plus many birds that were seen during the previous visit. The species new to our list were 3 Sanderlings, 7 Temminck's Stints and Oystercatcher. Red-necked Grebe, three marsh terns, Wigeon 10+, female Montagu's Harrier, Night Herons and Black-necked Grebes, Spoonbills and Purple Herons were all enjoyed for the second time. [Black Stork](#) 5 m above us was a sudden thrill.

A [Bittern](#) sunbathing on a concrete stair some 30feet away from the coach was a farewell to our holiday that had been hopefully enjoyed by all members of the group. A total of 188 species was not a bad deal indeed.

We left Senne and arrived to the Kosice airport in 1h20minutes, just 1 hour before scheduled departure which is a sufficient leeway at this small but ever growing airport.



Male Little Bittern was well hidden but found by our local guide