

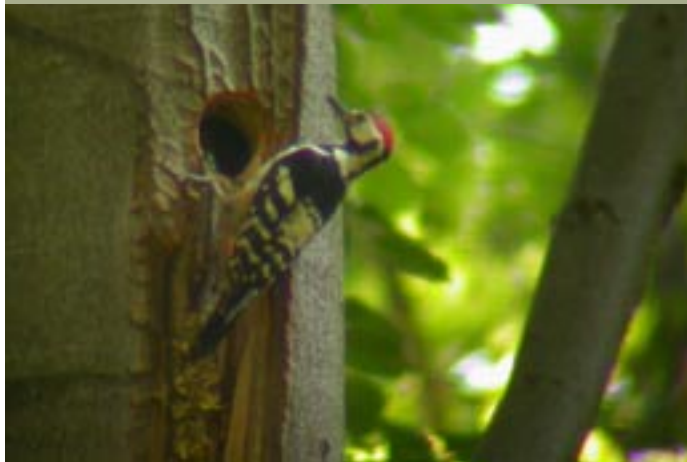
TRIP REPORT

Ornitholidays group 01 to the 08 May 2004



Environs of our first hotel

“Slovakia-what can you see there?”- that’s the question I asked myself when I was given the opportunity to visit the country. Not much seems to be known about the country and it is largely ignored by



The shiest of woodpeckers, the White-backed

English birders in favour of the surrounding countries of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary - well, think again, as the following account shows it is a country well worth visiting!

Day 1

We flew from Heathrow to Vienna and were picked up by our local guide and then embarked on a five hour journey east to Bratislava and then North to Ruzomberok. This was Slovakia’s first day in the EU so the border formalities were minimal and we were soon speeding past Bratislava and through vast tracts of flat farmland. The first excitement was a



The Low Tatras

Saker Falcon soaring over the road but we could not stop on the dual carriageway so only those in the front seats saw it-frustration!! After a couple of hours we stopped for lunch in a parking area and began scanning the skies- within minutes we saw a Hobby and a couple of Common Buzzard’s and then an immature **Eastern Imperial Eagle** was picked up gliding along a nearby hillside closely followed by two White Storks-not a bad roadside stop! We pressed on up into the Velka Fatra mountains and eventually arrived at our hotel near Ruzomberok. The hotel was situated on the banks of a large lake backed by snow-capped mountains and offered marvellous views in all directions. After checking-in we quickly got back in the vehicle and started birding. A short drive took us



Three-toed Woodpecker is usually rather tamed

to a small lake nearby where Garganey and Black-necked Grebe were common.

Day 2

The next morning we were out early around the hotel finding many Whinchat's, Serin's and a beautiful male Red-backed Shrike. After breakfast we set of



Collared Flycatcher is common throughout Slovakia



Pygmy Owl in a former Gr. Spotted Woodpecker hole

for an extensive area of forest as short drive away, picking up our local guide on the way. As always in forest habitat birding proved hard work with isolated sightings of **Goshawk**, **Ring Ouzel**, **Golden Eagle** and **Black Woodpecker** proving the highlights. Then we suddenly had a mad hour starting with the finding a Black Woodpecker excavating a nest hole and then a **Tengmalm's Owl** nesting nearby. A Golden Eagle glided just over our heads and then we heard a distant drumming **White-backed Woodpecker** but our progress towards it was halted by a calling **Pygmy Owl** in a tree just above us! Eventually we tracked down the woodpecker and good views of male White-backed Woodpecker were had by all. **Grey-headed Woodpecker** called and showed briefly and then we discovered a female **Three-toed Woodpecker** which showed down to 10 metres for ten minutes or so. All this was curtailed abruptly as a thunder storm rolled in and we made a hasty return to our hotel for some very cheap Slovakian beer.

Day 3

Again we were out early around the hotel the next morning finding **Montagu's Harrier**, Grasshopper Warbler, Black-throated Diver, Corn Bunting and **Syrian Woodpecker** before setting off for a gorge near the village of Prosiecka Dolina. We climbed up a rocky path for an hour or so seeing **Nutcracker** on the way and then found ourselves looking at massive limestone cliffs-we scanned these for an hour or so but



Tengmalm's Owl in a hole that formerly belonged to Black Woodpecker

could not find the elusive Wallcreeper so decided to press on to the head of the valley in search of raptors and Lesser spotted eagle in particular. We had been told it was a steep climb but no-one had explained that some parts were vertical and that the only way up was using ladders and chains set into the rock face! Anyway, we eventually made it to the top and came



Limestone cliff where Wallcreepers often feed

out into a beautiful world of alpine meadows. The first thing we saw was a Marsh Harrier and the second

was some ominous black thunder clouds coming our way. A quick decision was made—we had to get down quickly or the steep rocks would be very dangerous when wet. Taking on the persona of mountain goats we negotiated the ladders and chains and headed



Our resting group before the sudden rain came

down only to be caught in a massive thunder storm with hailstones and everything. By the time we got to the bottom it had stopped but we were thoroughly drenched. The sun came out and we sat down to dry out and above us a **Golden Eagle** displayed for all to see. Having had our fill of mountain passes for the day we retreated to the small lake near our hotel and found twenty-two Black Tern's, one **White-winged Black Tern**, two Little Gulls and a female **Red-footed Falcon** had arrived!



Juvenile Red-footed Falcon

Day 4

The plan for the next day was to look for **Lesser Spotted Eagle** again at another site but this plan soon disintegrated when we flushed one from the side of the track to the hotel—it flew up from the roadside and landed in a bush next to a second bird not 100 metres away. One bird was still sitting there an hour later

after we had had breakfast! Plan B was now put into action and we headed for another small valley nearby and were successful in finding **Wallcreeper** this time, together with **Peregrine** falcon—still a rare bird in this area. It was now time to leave Slovakia and head back to Austria—but then where did we go the next day?—back to Slovakia of course! We were disappointed at not seeing Saker properly and our guide had made arrangements to take us to a site where we couldn't fail—and we didn't. We were treated to a magnificent display from a pair of **Saker's** nesting in a nest box near to Bratislava. The birds performed brilliantly for about an hour and their mastery of the sky was a joy to watch. We were informed that there are only twenty-three pairs of these magnificent birds left in Slovakia and twenty of these are in nest boxes and doing well.



Telegraph poles are now favourable nesting base for Slovak population of Sakers

So now I know what you can see in four days in Slovakia - 14 species of raptor, seven species of woodpecker and some of Europe's scarcer owls together with many other good birds. There are many people devoting a lot of time and energy to conserving Slovakian birds with little financial help and little publicity so why not give it a try? Budget airlines are planning to fly to Bratislava so that will make things easier and don't forget the beer is cheap too.

Gordon Ellis

Ornitholidays tour to Slovakia and Austria, May 2004