

BELARUS AND HUNGARY MAY 2012

Introduction

After the publication of an article in Dutch Birding Magazine (nr.31-03) the *macroura* subspecies of Ural Owl was indicated as a potential split (Carpathian Ural Owl). In the autumn 2011 I started to investigate the possibility to do a short trip to Hungary or Slovakia to see this potential split. I started by contacting Gábor Orbán of www.ecotours.hu (beware of very similar named companies!). Gábor told me it was possible to see Ural Owl in autumn, but also that it was usually much easier to find in spring when birds are nesting.

His company also organizes tours to Belarus, where I still needed Azure Tit. Most tours to Belarus are usually 8-10 days and take place in spring of which only a few days are spend in the area where Azure Tits occur. Although Belarus has undoubtedly very nice areas with very nice birds, I didn't have time to do a 8-day trip to Belarus for 'just' Azure Tit and seeing a lot of birds I have seen before. Because of the proximity of Hungary to Belarus I therefore examined the possibility to combine Hungary and Belarus to see Azure Tit and *macroura* Ural Owl in a short (2x3 days) private trip.

After a lot of searching on the internet, I found out Austrian Airlines had a good connection between Budapest and Minsk, with the nice airport of Vienna acting as an efficient hub. Gábor also had a few days between tours in Belarus available to do a private trip in Belarus and arranged a guide in Hungary to see Ural Owl.

The itinerary was quite complex with 6 flights and 3 different accommodations in 7 days but worked out fine. Both targets were found on the first days in the field, leaving time to do some general birding.

I used the following itinerary:

Sa 5	train to Schiphol afternoon flight KL1977 (KLM) from Schiphol (14.35) to Budapest (16.35) taxi-transfer to hotel Budapest (1 night)
Su 6	taxi-transfer from hotel to airport Budapest flight OS718 (Austrian) from Budapest (07.00) to Vienna (07.45) flight OS687 (Austrian) from Vienna (09.50) to Minsk (12.40) transfer to Pripyat-area, hotel Turov (2 nights), evening birding (Azure Tit)
Mo 7	full day Pripyat-area (Azure Tit)
Tu 8	afternoon visit forest-area east of Turov, in the evening drive back to Minsk
We 9	flight OS690 (Austrian) from Minsk (05.10) to Vienna (06.05) flight OS713 (Austrian) from Vienna (09.45) to Budapest (10.35) transfer to Bükk-hills, guesthouse Tard (2 nights), afternoon/evening birding (Ural Owl)
Th 10	full day Bükk-hills
Fr 11	morning birding south of Tard, afternoon drive back to Budapest flight KL1978 (KLM) from Budapest (17.35) to Schiphol (19.45) and taxi home

Belarus

For Belarus you need a visa and this can only be applied with an invitation letter from a local (Belarusian) company. Gábor did a great job by providing this, as well as transport, food, accommodation and guiding for the whole trip. The application for my visa (in Holland) was rather straightforward despite the many (irrelevant) questions in old communist style. I expected the entry to Belarus to be problematic (maps, camera, optics, etc.) but this was not the case except for the fact I was first sent back by a border-official to buy an apparently compulsory health insurance for Belarus (2 euro for the 3 days). I met Gábor and his wife and driver outside the airport terminal and we started the 3,5 hour drive to Turov, along the Prypyat-river in southern Belarus, close to the Ukrainian border. The same evening we went to a site where all tour companies apparently go to see Azure Tit. We quickly found a singing male Azure Tit here, much to my relief, after missing this bird in the Ural Mountains in Russia in June 2009.

After a nice meal and good night of sleep in the only private hotel in Turov we returned to this site the next day and found another (nesting) pair of Azure Tit which we could see as long as we wanted. In the evening we went to a lek of Great Snipes and saw about 6 birds, something I had never seen before. I somehow expected to be the only birdwatcher in the whole of Belarus but was amazed to see how many birdwatching groups were around. Belarus is at the moment certainly an emerging birdwatching destination, and for good reason.

On the last day in Belarus there was a lot of rain in the morning that aborted any attempt to birdwatch. The morning was spent to catch up some sleep and making notes, leaving little time for birdwatching in the afternoon. Before I was picked up by a private taxi that took me back to the Minsk airport, we visited an old forest east of Turov in the afternoon. Except for a lot of annoying mosquitos we only saw some of the commoner birds including a nice singing Red-breasted Flycatcher.

Hungary

After a long night at the Minsk airport I arrived the next day in Budapest. A local guide (Atilla) picked me up from the airport and after a drive of about 1,5 hour we arrived at his local guesthouse in Tard, just south of the Bükk National Park. The same afternoon he showed me a nest of a Ural Owl which held a recently fledged young and an adult. This nest was close to a road and the bird was used to humans which made it less aggressive than usual. We had prolonged and great views of the owl and saw the dusky facial disk well, typical of the subspecies *macroura*.

The next day we did a long walk (15 km) in the Bükk National Park and saw a lot of the characteristic birds of the area like Red-breasted- and Collared Flycatcher, Wood Warblers, Hawfinch, 8 species of Woodpecker, Rock Bunting, etc. The nicest sighting was however a Badger in broad daylight, my first one ever I saw alive and well.

On the last morning we first had a walk around the grounds of the guesthouse where we saw Garden- and Common Dormouse in nestboxes. Before I flew back to Amsterdam we spent the rest of the morning in the puzta-area called 'little Hortobagy', south of the highway M3 (Debrecen-Budapest). Here we searched for Crested Lark and Reed Bunting (both new subspecies for me) and also saw birds like Saker Falcon, Ferruginous Duck, etc. One of the last birds I saw in Hungary was a Lesser Spotted Eagle soaring low over the guesthouse in Tard. A nice way to end this successful tour.

Birds seen (BY=Belarus, HU=Hungary)

	BY	HU	
Great Crested Grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus cristatus</i>		X	
Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis</i>	X	X	
Bittern <i>Botaurus stellaris stellaris</i>	X		
Great Egret <i>Casmerodius albus albus</i>	X		
Grey Heron <i>Ardea cinerea cinerea</i>	X	X	
Purple Heron <i>Ardea purpurea purpurea</i>		X	
White Stork <i>Ciconia ciconia ciconia</i>	X	X	
Black Stork <i>Ciconia nigra</i>	X	X	
Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos</i>	X	X	
Gadwall <i>Anas strepera strepera</i>	X		
Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>	X		
Garganey <i>Anas querquedula</i>	X	X	
Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>	X	X	
Ferruginous Duck <i>Aythya nyroca</i>		X	About 30 were seen at fishponds between Gelej and the highway M3.
Tufted Duck <i>Aythya fuligula</i>		X	
Lesser Spotted Eagle <i>Aquila pomarina</i>		X	
Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus aeruginosus</i>	X	X	
Montagu's Harrier <i>Circus pygargus</i>	X		
Buzzard <i>Buteo buteo buteo</i>		X	
Goshawk <i>Accipiter gentilis gentilis</i>	X		
Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus nisus</i>		X	
Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus tinnunculus</i>	X	X	
Saker Falcon <i>Falco cherrug cherrug</i>		X	One adult was seen sitting in a pylon near Gelej.
Corn Crane <i>Crex crex</i>	X		About 8 heard near Turov.

Pheasant <i>Phasianus colchicus ssp.</i>		X	Introduced species.
Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus chloropus</i>	X	X	
Coot <i>Fulica atra atra</i>	X	X	
Avocet <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		X	
Little Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius dubius curonicus</i>		X	
Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula / tundrae</i>	X		Probably migrating <i>tundrae</i> .
Golden Plover <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	X		
Lapwing <i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	X	X	
Wood Sandpiper <i>Tringa glareola</i>	X	X	
Common Sandpiper <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	X	X	
Redshank <i>Tringa totanus totanus</i>	X	X	
Spotted Redshank <i>Tringa erythropus</i>	X		Several in full breeding plumage.
Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa limosa limosa</i>	X		
Great Snipe <i>Gallinago media</i>	X		About 6 in the evening on a lek near Turov.
Common Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago gallinago</i>	X		
Ruff <i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	X		
Black-headed Gull <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus ridibundus</i>	X	X	
Common Gull <i>Larus canus canus</i>		X	
Herring Gull <i>Larus argentatus argentatus</i>	X		
Common Tern <i>Sterna hirundo hirundo</i>	X	X	
Little Tern <i>Sternula albifrons albifrons</i>	X		One inland near Turov.
Black Tern <i>Chlidonias niger niger</i>	X	X	
White-winged Tern <i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	X		Common near Turov.
Whiskered Tern <i>Chlidonias hybrida hybrida</i>	X		About 20 near Turov
Wood Pigeon <i>Columba palumbus palumbus</i>	X	X	
Stock Dove <i>Columba oenas oenas</i>		X	
Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto decaocto</i>	X	X	

Turtle Dove <i>Streptopelia turtur turtur</i>		X	
Cuckoo <i>Cuculus canorus canorus</i>	X	X	
Tawny Owl <i>Strix aluco aluco</i>		X	Several were heard during the day and one briefly seen in the Bükk-hills.
Ural Owl <i>Strix uralensis macroura</i>		X	An adult was seen very well near a nest with one chick on 09-05-2012 in the Bükk-hills.
Swift <i>Apus apus apus</i>		X	
Hoopoe <i>Upupa epops epops</i>	X	X	
Bee-eater <i>Merops apiaster</i>		X	
Black Woodpecker <i>Dryocopus martius martius</i>		X	Several seen and heard in the Bükk-hills.
Green Woodpecker <i>Picus viridis viridis</i>		X	
Grey-headed Woodpecker <i>Picus canus canus</i>		X	One seen well in the Bükk-hills.
Great Spotted Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopus major major</i> <i>Dendrocopus major pinetorum</i>	X	X	<i>Major</i> in Belarus and <i>pinetorum</i> in Hungary.
Syrian Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopus syriacus syriacus</i>		X	Several seen in the countryside near Tard.
Middle Spotted Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopus medius medius</i>		X	One seen in the Bükk-hills.
White-backed Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopus leucotus leucotus</i>		X	Several heard and glimpsed in the Bükk-hills. Early spring is a better time to see this often elusive bird.
Wryneck <i>Jynx torquilla torquilla</i>		X	
Skylark <i>Alauda arvensis arvensis</i> <i>Alauda arvensis cantarella</i>	X	X	<i>Arvensis</i> in Belarus and <i>cantarella</i> in Hungary. The subspecies <i>hungarica</i> (if valid) in central Hungary has become very rare nowadays.
Crested Lark <i>Galerida cristata tenuirostris</i>		X	We found several near the village of Mezőkeresztes (!) and further south. A new subspecies for me.
Sand Martin <i>Riparia riparia riparia</i>	X		
Barn Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica rustica</i>	X	X	
House Martin <i>Delichon urbicum urbicum</i>	X	X	
White Wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i>	X	X	
Blue-headed Wagtail <i>Motacilla flava flava</i>	X	X	
Grey-headed Wagtail <i>Motacilla thunbergi</i>	X		Surely migrant birds.

Grey Wagtail <i>Motacilla cinerea cinerea</i>		X	
Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes troglodytes</i>		X	
Robin <i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>		X	
Nightingale <i>Luscinia megarhynchos megarhynchos</i>		X	
Thrush Nightingale <i>Luscinia luscinia</i>	X		Common in Belarus, mostly heard.
Black Redstart <i>Phoenicurus ochruros gibraltariensis</i>	X	X	
Whinchat <i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	X		
Song Thrush <i>Turdus philomelos philomelos</i>		X	
Fieldfare <i>Turdus pilaris</i>	X		
Blackbird <i>Turdus merula merula</i>	X	X	
Barred Warbler <i>Sylvia nisoria nisoria</i>		X	One heard and briefly seen near the Bükk-hills.
Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla atricapilla</i>	X	X	
Lesser Whitethroat <i>Sylvia curruca curruca</i>		X	
Whitethroat <i>Sylvia communis communis</i>	X	X	According to 'Sylvia Warblers' the subspecies in Belarus and Hungary is <i>communis</i> and not <i>volgensis</i> (contra BWP)
Sedge Warbler <i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	X		
Savi's Warbler <i>Locustella luscinioides luscinioides</i>	X		
Reed Warbler <i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus scirpaceus</i>		X	
Great Reed Warbler <i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus arundinaceus</i>	X	X	
Willow Warbler <i>Phylloscopus trochilus acredula</i> <i>Phylloscopus trochilus trochilus</i>	X	X	<i>Acredula</i> in Belarus and <i>trochilus</i> in Hungary.
Wood Warbler <i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>	X	X	
Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita abietinus</i> <i>Phylloscopus collybita collybita</i>	X	X	<i>Abietinus</i> in Belarus and <i>collybita</i> in Hungary.
Spotted Flycatcher <i>Muscipapa striata striata</i>	X		
Red-breasted Flycatcher <i>Ficedula parva parva</i>	X	X	
Collared Flycatcher <i>Ficedula albicollis</i>	X	X	

Pied Flycatcher <i>Ficedula hypoleuca hypoleuca</i>	X		
Bearded Tit <i>Panurus biarmicus ruscicus</i>		X	
Long-tailed Tit <i>Aegithalos caudatus europaeus</i>		X	
Marsh Tit <i>Parus palustris stagnatilis</i>		X	
Willow Tit <i>Parus montanus salicarius</i>		X	Easily separated from Marsh Tit by voice, here at the southern limit of the distribution of this subspecies.
Crested Tit <i>Parus cristatus mitratus // cristatus</i>	X		In Belarus grades into <i>cristatus</i> .
Coal Tit <i>Parus ater ater</i>		X	
Blue Tit <i>Cyanistes caeruleus caeruleus</i>	X	X	In Belarus several birds were seen in a mixed forest east of Turov. Azure Tits were seen in totally different habitat: on the edge of marshy areas with reeds, scrubs and small(er) trees.
Azure Tit <i>Cyanistes cyanus cyanus</i>	X		Two pairs were seen near Turov.
Great Tit <i>Parus major major</i>	X	X	
Nuthatch <i>Sitta europaea caesia</i>	X	X	
Treecreeper <i>Certhia familiaris familiaris</i>	X	X	
Penduline Tit <i>Remiz pendulinus pendulinus</i>	X		
Golden Oriole <i>Oriolus oriolus oriolus</i>	X	X	
Red-backed Shrike <i>Lanius collurio</i>	X	X	
Magpie <i>Pica pica pica // fennorum</i> <i>Pica pica pica</i>	X	X	In Belarus grades into <i>fennorum</i> .
Jay <i>Garrulus glandarius glandarius</i>	X	X	
Jackdaw <i>Corvus monedula soemmerringii</i>	X		
Rook <i>Corvus frugilegus frugilegus</i>	X	X	
Hooded Crow <i>Corvus cornix cornix</i>	X	X	
Raven <i>Corvus corax corax</i>	X	X	
Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris vulgaris</i>	X	X	
Golden Oriole <i>Oriolus oriolus oriolus</i>	X	X	
House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus domesticus</i>	X	X	

Tree Sparrow <i>Passer montanus montanus</i>	X	X	
Chaffinch <i>Fringilla coelebs coelebs</i>	X	X	
Linnet <i>Linaria cannabina cannabina</i>		X	
Goldfinch <i>Carduelis carduelis carduelis</i>	X	X	
Greenfinch <i>Carduelis chloris chloris</i>		X	
Siskin <i>Spinus spinus</i>	X		
Serin <i>Serinus serinus</i>	X	X	
Hawfinch <i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	X	X	
Yellowhammer <i>Emberiza citrinella erythrogenys</i> <i>Emberiza citrinella citrinella</i>	X	X	<i>Erythrogenys</i> in Belarus and <i>citrinella</i> in Hungary.
Rock Bunting <i>Emberiza cia cia</i>		X	A beautiful male was seen in a quarry in the Bükk-hills, here at the northern limit of their distribution in eastern Europe
Reed Bunting <i>Emberiza schoeniclus schoeniclus // ukrainae</i> <i>Emberiza schoeniclus stresemanni</i>	X	X	Birds in southern Belarus are intergrades between <i>schoeniclus</i> and <i>ukrainae</i> . Several were seen at fishponds between Gelej and the highway M3. The slightly thicker bill of the subspecies <i>stresemanni</i> is clearly visible in the field. A new subspecies for me.
Corn Bunting <i>Emberiza calandra</i>		X	

If you would like more information please contact:

E.J. Alblas, the Netherlands.
ej.alblas at kpnplanet.nl