

SLOVAKIA: Birds & Music

“After the atypically cold weather in 2010, the Indian Summer in Levoča festival (Babie Leto in Slovak: Old Wives’ Summer) reverted to form this year and was exactly what it said on the tin – pleasantly warm, blue skies, clear mountain views, and a kaleidoscope of autumn colours.

Senné ponds, as ever, provided a splendid selection of birds for our first day. Welcomed by a couple of Kingfishers, we enjoyed flight views of Pygmy Cormorant and Bitterns whilst a flock of at least fifty Ferruginous Ducks shone coppery in the bright light, Penduline and Bearded Tits flitted through the reedbeds, a particularly obliging Water Rail walked alongside us, and overhead were White-tailed Eagle, Osprey, and a party of Cranes. But the most memorable scene had to be the gathering of 400 Great Egrets interspersed with Grey and Purple Herons, Black Storks, and assorted waders (Black-tailed Godwit, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank) and gulls (Caspian, Yellow-legged, Herring, Common, Little). Passerine extras ranged from Great Grey (Northern) Shrike to Stonechat and Tree Sparrow. And to round off our day the nearby Zemplén lowlands provided a perched Eastern Imperial Eagle.

Our quest the following morning in the beechwoods of Poprichny mountains on the Ukrainian border was White-backed Woodpecker and, after a brief warm-up act by a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, our target species performed at length on a sunlit branch: the best possible experience we could have wished for in this habitat – although equally exciting in its way was the sudden sight and sound of two Red Deer stags too absorbed in chasing a hind to notice us as they crashed past only a few metres away. A picnic in Stefan Danko’s amazing garden in Priekopa village concluded our time in Eastern Slovakia before we transferred to the delightful gothic and renaissance town of Levoča – with a good hour to shower and change our attire and attitudes before attending an informative talk by festival director Dr David Conway and an inspiring opening concert in the Old Town hall by the Zemlinsky Quartet and Trio In Modo Camerale with Carlos Jans, followed by the mayor’s reception and finally dinner at our hotel.

Not only is Levoča listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site but so are nearby Zehra church (with its 14th and 15th century frescoes), Spis castle (at over four hectares the largest in Eastern Europe), and Spisska Kapitula cathedral and monastic village. So our first morning at our new home was devoted to some impressive sightseeing before a traditional shepherd’s dish at a lively local restaurant and yet another change of clothes and pace. The afternoon concert at Pechy castle, Hermanovce, hosted by the delightful Countess Kay Wettstein, was a particular favourite, with the open-air setting complementing the Zemlinsky Quartet’s sensitive rendering of Beethoven, Zemlinsky, and Smetana. A sumptuous Italian buffet and the presence of a Syrian Woodpecker added to our satisfaction. All too soon it was time to transfer to the Old Town Hall and last night’s oboe, clarinet, and bassoon wind trio and accompanying flautist for yet another pleasing mix of the familiar (Mozart, Martinu, and Beethoven) and the not-so-familiar (Varese, Schulhoff, Grethen, Françaix) followed by a sustaining soup to ward off night starvation.

Appropriately, a pre-breakfast Green Woodpecker performing in the town square was the prelude to our morning in the Levoča woodlands where our first target species (Spotted Nutcracker) greeted us at our parking spot and the others (Black Woodpecker, and Crested and Willow Tits) followed soon after on our gentle walk amidst the autumn colours. Lunch at the Three Apostles, a visit to St James’s church to view the magnificent altars of Master Paul (including the largest carved wooden altar in the world), free time to enjoy the town, afternoon and evening concerts in the Congress Hall interspersed with another talk by David Conway, and dinner at the Arkada filled our afternoon and evening – and once more the innovative programming presented us with something new in the form of Kagel’s second piano trio ‘an eerie march through livid and fantastic landscape’ in addition to the Beethoven and Dvorak, all beautifully rendered by the Vienna Piano trio.

SLOVAKIA birds and music: Bird List...2

The following day brought two more concerts in the Congress Hall (featuring the Polish pianist Tomasz Kamieniak and the Hungarian diva Klara Kolonits), a private tour of the Conways' beautifully restored town house and another two-part dinner at our hotel. But first a visit to Zakovske ponds in the Tatras provided the opportunity to compare three species of pipits (Meadow, Tree, and Water) and Stara Lesna woodland another selection of passerines (Trecreeper, Crested Tit, Goldcrest) – although more memorable than any one species was surely the beauty of the High Tatras framed by so much red and yellow foliage.

The High Tatras (Tatranska Javorina) was also the location for our final (and longest) walk of the week – and again the scenery was the star attraction, although we were delighted to see Golden Eagle, Dipper, and Ring Ouzel plus the local race of Alpine Chamois (*atrlica*: IUCN Red List, endangered).

Then, after the first course of dinner at U Leva, came our final concert – and what a magnificent and fitting grand climax with the Slovak Sinfionetta, Jonathan Powell, and the Vienna Piano trio combining the unfamiliar (Vořšek's Symphony in D 'the Beethoven symphony that Schubert never got round to writing') and the well-known: Liszt's Malediction and Beethoven's wonderful Triple Concerto. As with all the concerts in this intimate and friendly festival, an extra dimension was the close physical involvement with the musicians affording such exceptional views of the fingerwork and technique that the music was not merely heard but seen. Somehow composer, artist, and audience became one in a way impossible in a large concert hall. And of course another bonus was the opportunity to meet the musicians and discuss the compositions. So too with our fellow concert-goers. As one Sunbird client observed 'This is like being on a cruise. Before the end of the week the entire audience are friends'. But on a cruise you don't get eagles and woodpeckers in the mornings – and although the species list was not particularly long compared with other birds-and-music tours (just 116 species) the quality continually made up for the length and the entire birds-and-music experience in such congenial company added up to a very happy week." – *Bryan Bland*

Bird List:

Column A = number of tours on which this species has been recorded
 Column B = number of days recorded on the last tour
 Column C = greatest daily count on the last tour
 H = heard only

A		B	C	
2	Little Grebe	1	50	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
2	Great Crested Grebe	2	20	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
2	Red-necked Grebe	1	6	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>
1	Black-necked Grebe			<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
2	Continental Cormorant	2	100	<i>Phalacrocorax (carbo) sinensis</i>
1	Pygmy Cormorant	1	2	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>
1	Common Bittern	1	2	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>
2	Little Egret	1	1	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
2	Great Egret	1	400	<i>Egretta alba</i>
2	Grey Heron	1	50	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
2	Purple Heron	1	5	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
1	Black Stork	1	2	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
1	Spoonbill			<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
2	Mute Swan	1	12	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
2	Greylag Goose	1	17	<i>Anser anser</i>
1	Wigeon	1	30	<i>Anas penelope</i>
2	Mallard	6	30	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
2	Eurasian Teal	1	100	<i>Anas crecca</i>
2	Gadwall	1	12	<i>Anas strepera</i>

SLOVAKIA birds and music: Bird List...3

2	Shoveler	1	20	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
2	Pochard	1	18	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
1	Ferruginous Duck	1	50	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>
2	Tufted Duck	1	6	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
1	White-tailed Eagle	1	1	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
1	Osprey	1	2	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
2	Marsh Harrier	1	8	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
1	Hen Harrier			<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
1	Goshawk			<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
2	Sparrowhawk	4	3	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
2	Common Buzzard	8	60	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
2	Eastern Imperial Eagle	1	1	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>
1	Golden Eagle	1	1	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
2	Kestrel	8	7	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
1	Hobby			<i>Falco subbuteo</i>
1	Peregrine Falcon			<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
1	Hazel Grouse			<i>Bonasa bonasia</i>
2	Pheasant	1	2	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
2	Common Crane	2	92	<i>Grus grus</i>
1	Water Rail	1	1 +H	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
1	Spotted Crake			<i>Porzana porzana</i>
2	Moorhen	1	2	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
2	Coot	1	50	<i>Fulica atra</i>
1	Ringed Plover			<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
2	Grey Plover	1	10	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
2	Lapwing	2	50	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
2	Little Stint	1	4	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
2	Temminck's Stint	1	5	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>
2	Dunlin	2	50	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
2	Ruff	1	7	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
2	Common Snipe	1	9	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
1	Black-tailed Godwit	1	11	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
1	Spotted Redshank	1	8	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
2	Greenshank	1	5	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
1	Green Sandpiper	1	1 H	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
1	Wood Sandpiper			<i>Tringa glareola</i>
2	Little Gull	1	1	<i>Larus minutus</i>
2	Black-headed Gull	2	200	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
2	Yellow-legged Gull	3	6	<i>Larus (cachinnans) michahellis</i>
1	Caspian Gull	1	30	<i>Larus (michahellis) michahellis</i>
1	Herring Gull	1	1	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
2	Common Gull	1	4	<i>Larus canus</i>
1	Black Tern			<i>Chidonias niger</i>
2	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	8	40	<i>Columba livia</i>
1	Stock Dove			<i>Columba oenas</i>
1	Woodpigeon	6	34	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
2	Collared Dove	8	30	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
1	Pygmy Owl			<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>
2	Kingfisher	1	2	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
1	Grey-headed Woodpecker			<i>Picus canus</i>
2	Green Woodpecker	2	2	<i>Picus viridis</i>
2	Black Woodpecker	2	1	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
2	Great Spotted Woodpecker	2	1	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
2	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	1	1 +H	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
2	White-backed Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>

SLOVAKIA birds and music: Bird List...4

1	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	1	1	H	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>
1	Syrian Woodpecker	1	1		<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>
1	Three-toed Woodpecker				<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>
1	Skylark	2	10		<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
1	Crested Lark				<i>Galerida cristata</i>
1	Barn Swallow	1	10		<i>Hirundo rustice</i>
1	Water Pipit	1	3		<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
1	House Martin	1	1		<i>Delichon urbicua</i>
1	Tree Pipit	1	4		<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
1	Meadow Pipit	1	5		<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
1	Pipit Sp	1	30		<i>Anthus sp</i>
2	Grey Wagtail	1	2		<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
2	White Wagtail	8	20		<i>Motacilla alba</i>
2	Wren	1	1		<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
1	Spotted Flycatcher				<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
2	Dipper	1	1		<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
2	Robin	3	4		<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
2	Dunnock	2	1		<i>Prunella modularis</i>
2	Black Redstart	7	8		<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
1	Redstart				<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
1	Whinchat				<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>
2	Stonechat	1	2		<i>Saxicola torquata</i>
1	Northern Wheatear				<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
2	Blackbird	6	6		<i>Turdus merula</i>
1	Ring Ouzel	1	3		<i>Turdus torquatus</i>
2	Fieldfare	5	20		<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
1	Song Thrush	1	1		<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
2	Mistle Thrush	3	40		<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
2	Blackcap	1	1		<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
2	Chiffchaff	7	20		<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
2	Goldcrest	3	10		<i>Regulus regulus</i>
2	Bearded Tit	1	10		<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>
1	Long-tailed Tit				<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
2	Crested Tit	3	4		<i>Parus cristatus</i>
2	Marsh Tit	1	1		<i>Parus palustris</i>
2	Willow Tit	1	4		<i>Parus montanus</i>
2	Coal Tit	4	20		<i>Parus ater</i>
2	Blue Tit	4	10		<i>Parus caeruleus</i>
2	Great Tit	7	4		<i>Parus major</i>
2	Nuthatch	5	5 +H		<i>Sitta europaea</i>
2	Eurasian Treecreeper	1	3		<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
2	Penduline Tit	1	12		<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>
2	Great (Northern) Grey Shrike	2	2		<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
1	Red-backed Shrike				<i>Lanius colluno</i>
2	Jay	7	5		<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
2	Magpie	7	30		<i>Pica pica</i>
2	Nutcracker	1	16		<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>
2	Jackdaw	2	20		<i>Corvus monedula</i>
2	Rook	3	30		<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
2	Hooded Crow	5	10		<i>Corvus cornix</i>
2	Raven	7	30		<i>Corvus corax</i>
2	Starling	7	'00s		<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
2	House Sparrow	7	50		<i>Passer domesticus</i>
2	Tree Sparrow	1	50		<i>Passer montanus</i>
2	Chaffinch	6	20		<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>

SLOVAKIA birds and music: Bird List...5

2	Serin	1	1	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
2	Greenfinch	3	10	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
2	Goldfinch	6	100	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
2	Linnet	1	20	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
2	Siskin	2	10	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
2	Bullfinch	1	3	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
2	Hawfinch	1	2	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
1	Crossbill	1	6	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
2	Yellowhammer	2	4	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
2	Reed Bunting	2	20	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
1	Corn Bunting			<i>Miliaria calandra</i>