

Eastern and Central Slovakia 2022 by Gordon Shaw

Beata and I visited Eastern Slovakia between 14th May and 30th May 2022. This wasn't a dedicated birding trip, but I did do a lot of birding. My comments below are intended document this, and to help anyone planning to go birding in Slovakia, based on experience of this trip and 23 years of visits to this country, or just for interest if you are not. Others' experiences and the official line may differ. Comments and opinions are my own, based on experience, not preconceptions. Happy to assist anyone who might require more info or basic guiding, my e-mail contact is at the bottom.

Planning, Site Information and Guides

Slovakia is a beautiful rural country, but not really on the international birding map, which is a pity. I only really know the East of the country, and my experiences are mainly confined to the around the city of Kosice and further East and North. We are always based in Beata's home village of Kokšov Bakša, about 6 KM Southeast of Kosice. There is first class birding within walking distance along the banks of the adjacent River Hornad and so long-distance travel is not necessary to see good birds. I have only used a guide once, in the distant past, and he showed me a few sites that I have visited again since. To find additional sites, I have used the Gerald Gorman's "Birding in Eastern Europe", and the preceding book "Where to Watch Birds in Eastern Europe", plus a few old trip reports, scrutinizing a large scale road map, recommendations of "nice places for a walk" and following your common sense. This has allowed me to build up a repertoire of local sites that can keep me busy for a full week's birding.

Flights

Flew directly with Wizz air from Luton to Kosice. Recently unreliable and prone to cancellation at short notice. Ryan air also fly there directly from Stansted.

Covid

No impact to the travelling tourist, almost like it hadn't happened.

Hotels and Food

We stayed in our house all the time so cannot comment much on hotels, except for our visit to the Tatras, where we stayed in the Pension Lesna (<https://www.booking.com/hotel/cz/pension-lesna.en-gb.html>) which we can whole heartedly recommend. Family run Pensions are the best bet throughout the country. Food is basic and hearty. Partial vegetarianism is normal out of necessity by a population that largely lived off their gardens and raised and slaughtered all their own livestock until very recently. Meat was often only consumed about once a week and was seen as a luxury, therefore held in high regard. Menus in most restaurants are only in Slovak, so unless you are with a local, ordering might become a bit Fawlty Towers. If you are invited into a Slovakian house, don't plan on driving home as the drink driving laws are strict. Nazdrave!

Car Hire

We have a car in Slovakia so didn't rent a vehicle, although I have done in on previous visits for various reasons. My experience in the past is that major rental companies will charge you extra for even what they perceive to be the slightest damage to the vehicle. If you need suggestions on who to avoid, please mail me.

Driving

Roads are mostly comparable with rural areas in Western Europe. However, the advent of powerful modern cars has changed driving habits. Speeding, tailgating and near suicidal overtaking are far too common. An electronic permit, available at petrol stations is needed for driving on motorways, and your access is controlled by ANPR, there are no toll booths.

People

People are very civilised, though I've found them a bit suspicious of outsiders at times in rural areas, which is understandable, expect to be stared at. Few people over 35 have any knowledge of English, more of an issue 20 years ago than now. I have found that my bit of creaky German can help here, other than that, just smile and nod. They won't reciprocate, but no harm will be done.

Police and security

Slovakia is very safe and civilised. There may be some tension near certain obvious Roma settlements, but these can be driven past without stopping, and I have never felt in any danger. Considering interactions with the authorities, Cold War style incidents, with a level of intrigue reminding one of the prisoner exchange in "Bridge of Spies" were not uncommon 25 years ago, but now the local Police seem to spend a lot of their time on traffic control. On the spot fines are used, so keep within the speed limits. It is a legal requirement to always have ID, so carry a passport and driving licence. In one incident many years ago, I was intercepted by two border guards near Skaros (see below). They were obviously bored and the presence of a foreigner laden with high powered optics near a border aroused some suspicion. Showing my bird book helped, but I finally called Beata who explained who I was. The fact that the Border guard local commander was a close friend of my father-in-law moved the process along rapidly. I was immediately promoted from potential spy to best mate and cleared to go where I liked. Incidents like this would be unusual these days, with open access across the Hungarian border. I was once also denied access to Poland across a small border crossing east of the Tatras, since it was not an "international border", and open only to locals, the logic of which I have never been able to work out.

The current war in Ukraine (as at May 2022) has not made any visible impact, other than more Ukrainian plated vehicles on the road. Even close to the border at Senne, there was nothing out of the ordinary, apart from a couple of clapped-out old army trucks on the road. The airport at Kosice has a huge runway, but there was no sign of military activity there either.

Birding sites

Kokšov Bakša. As noted, there is first class birding within walking distance along the banks of the River Hornad, walking East from the church, and then along the flood bank. Birds seen in and around this area that are not on my list below are: -

Winter. Hen harrier, merlin, rough legged buzzard great grey shrike, waxwing, Northern long tailed tit ss A. c. caudatus

Passage. Crane, white tailed eagle, osprey, steppe buzzard, honey buzzard, redstart, tawny pipit hoopoe, sedge warbler, and what may have been a Pechora pipit.

Summer. Quail, red footed falcon, river, great reed, Savis and barred warbler.

Year round. Black, grey headed, lesser spotted, great spotted woodpecker, hawfinch.

Our garden, despite the demise of the walnut tree, has an excellent list including many of the birds noted above and below, with breeding black redstart in the outbuildings. This may be improving as it is fully fenced and the dog has the run of it and keeps cats off.

The peace is about to be shattered with a construction of a motorway to the North of the village, so the "well done" to the EU to promote greater use of cars and habitat destruction. 😞

The Slanske Hills run North to South just East of our village, and look promising, but difficult to access. I have always done well on the road through the village of Skaros (check Google maps), to the Southeast of our village. Following the road through the village, leaving the Russian war memorial on the right – look for a T34 tank poking out of the woods, the road curves upwards to the right, then runs straight for a mile to the Hungarian border. Park carefully as to not to block any tracks and explore along the tracks perpendicular to the road. Like most forest areas, time of day and year are important. We were there in May 2022 for an evening and the woods had a magical feel to them. Hawfinch is very common hereabouts, and I have seen black, middle spotted, grey headed, white backed woodpeckers, collared flycatcher, Ural owl, black stork, honey buzzard, lesser spotted and Eastern Imperial eagles in this area, but all are challenging, and this was over many visits. It's not a place for a quick clean up.

Senne Fishponds. This is East Slovakia's jewel in the birding crown. Took me a while to find but best was follow the main 19/E50 road to Michalovce, right round the ring road, past Tesco's, then right down road 555 as far as the village of Palin (no statue as yet), then left here to the village of Senne, then keep going until you hit a T junction, then turn left and there is a grassy car park. Bring supplies for the day, as there is nothing going on in any of the villages around here. There is a birdlife Slovakia centre here, currently being renovated, run by a friendly, English-speaking warden. Details here.

<https://www.birdingplaces.eu/en/birdingplaces/slovakia/senne-fishponds>. Access is only along the adjacent roads and tracks, as it's privately owned.

High Tatras. Looking like a huge, misshapen stollen from the air, this is Slovakia's Alpine area with species to match. This year was our first visit since 1999. It's a hard area to work, I found the walk up to Popradské pleso to be the best for birding, as the path was metalled and wasn't like walking upstairs for 5 KM as some tracks are. Some specialities are hard to see. Devastated in storms in the noughties, regeneration seems to be more broadleaved trees than the previous conifers probably due to climate change. Large animals are about, as per the security camera footage noted below. At first pass, there may seem to be not much about, but steady watching from the hotel balcony produced a lot of wildlife. I strongly recommend the hotel we stayed in, and they can help you with a map of local tracks.

Perin Perínske rybníky. I found this place by accident, looking at a road atlas. To access, E71 / 17 to Kechnec, then right through the industrial park, through the village to Perin Chym, left then right. The fishponds are North of the road. Parking is by the barred road then walk down. There is a nice new observation tower here. Species seen in the past and not on the list below include ferruginous duck, white tailed eagle, little bittern, ruff, little crake, long eared owl, middle spotted woodpecker. great reed and Savi's warbler. Scan any drained fishponds carefully for waders.

Stos Saddle. E58 / Route 16 to Moldava nad Bodvou, then right on route 550 / 548 to Jasov, Medzev, Stos, follow the hairpins to the ridge line and park at the Chapel on the left. The path is across the road to the right. I have seen Pygmy owl, hazel hen, and very fresh wolf spoor. I believe at one point I was under observation by a wolf here, judging by the hairs on the back of my neck, I think it thought my tripod was a rifle, a tense moment.

Details of any other sites I visit will be added in subsequent trip reports.

Ecology and Other Notes.

Since Slovakia joined the European Union, the ecological catastrophe that is the Common Agricultural Policy has been implemented, resulting in steep declines in many species. Meadows have been ploughed up and comparing bird abundance with the UK, there seems to be a similar pattern emerging. Both red backed shrike and marsh warbler seem to be declining due to "tidying up" and the declines in the tree sparrow and white stork are very noticeable.

Another more subtle impact of this is that more Slovaks have moved overseas to find work, resulting in the village having a more aging population. Fewer people keep small livestock now, resulting in fewer insects about, and probably less mud for martins and swallows to build nests. Adjacent grassy areas are becoming overgrown with scrub with lack of casual grazing, benefiting some species, and impacting others. Disturbance may be less though, with more empty houses and outbuildings. Black redstarts have certainly benefitted from this. The woodlands along the river have developed more, with more orioles and a colonisation by woodpeckers, including black.

A recent plastic bottle and can deposit scheme has resulted in a massive clean-up, this is now one of the cleanest places I have visited. A fine example to other countries.

Some species have increased, my perception being that this is largely quarry species due to lack of hunting because of covid restrictions, not necessarily within Slovakia. Stock dove, woodpigeon, song thrush, fieldfare, and blackbird area are all much commoner than I remember. There seem to be more night herons about as well.

Some videos of the trip on my you tube channel: -

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9mz6bo0LVNchr8cgB5Z-9I5mmZDmlB1b>

Trip Itinerary

Day 1 14th May Travelled to Slovakia from London Luton and arrived late evening

Day 2 15th May Birded around the village and visited relatives in the afternoon.

Day 3 16th May Birded around the village and chilled out in the garden in the afternoon.

Day 4 17th May Visit to the city of Kosice for haircut, new suit, lunch, dentist. Amazing experience as we stopped at a gas station in Barca, the adjacent wooded pasture was alive with birdsong.

Day 5 18th May Journey to Vysoke Tatry and a walk up the mountains, evening in Kežmarok.

Day 6 19th May Walk up to Popradské pleso.

Day 7 20st May Walk halfway up to Popradské pleso, and journey back home via some friends.

Day 8 21st May Full day travelling and birding at Senne Fishponds reserve.

Day 9 22nd May late start to travel to and walk Stos Saddle. Late afternoon walk around village.

Day 10 23rd May Work day.

Day 11 24th May Work day. Early morning walk around the village.

Day 12 25th May Work day. Evening walk around the village.

Day 13 26th May Work day. Evening walk to Skaros and 2 fly over night herons whilst sitting in the boozier in the nearby village of Zdana.

Day 14 27th May Work day.

Day 15 28th May Perínske rybníky in the morning then attended our niece's wedding in the afternoon and evening, arrived home at 3 AM somewhat worse for wear.

Day 16 29th May Slept off the aftereffects of the wedding, prepared ourselves for the journey home, had a walk around the village before we received a text message that the flight had been cancelled.

Day 17 30th May Worked, up until the airport departure and a long-delayed journey home finally arriving after midnight.

Systematic List.

1. Mute Swan. Common at Senne and Perínske rybníky.
2. Greylag goose. Several pairs with young at Senne, they looked very wild.
3. Mallard. Common at Senne and Perínske rybníky.
4. Gadwall. Noted at Senne.
5. Northern Shoveler. Noted at Senne and Perínske rybníky.
6. Garganey. 1 male showed beautifully at Senne.
7. Pochard. 20+ at Senne.
8. Ferruginous duck. At least 20 at Senne and easy to find. Was really pleased to see these as I hadn't expected them.
9. Tufted duck. Common at Senne.

10. Common Quail. Several calling at Senne and one heard from the garden in Kokšov Bakša on morning. Might have even been in an adjacent garden as it was quite close.
11. Pheasant. Odd ones around the village, origin unknown.
12. Little Grebe. A few at Perínske rybníky
13. Great Crested Grebe. Perínske rybníky and at Senne. One at Perin had young riding on its back.
14. Great Cormorant. Seen at Perínske rybníky, Senne, around the village and along the river, though not in numbers.
15. Pygmy Cormorant. 1 flew over high at Senne.
16. Night Heron. An adult and juvenile at Senne, 3 adults Perínske rybníky, 1 flying over Kokšov Bakša early one morning, and two seen from a bar in Zdana one evening whilst we were in the pub.
17. Squacco Heron. 1 seen briefly at Senne
18. Little Egret. 2 noted at Senne, 1 at Perínske rybníky, probably more about than this.
19. Great Egret. 1 at Senne and 2 at Perínske rybníky.
20. Grey Heron. At all wetland sites, and around Kokšov Bakša, often seen in flight over the village.
21. Purple Heron. At least 4 at Senne.
22. White Stork. Breeding pair in Kokšov Bakša, with a dead chick under the nest. Evidence of a decline noted, and also noted birds foraging very close to roads and on verges, presumably due to food shortages.
23. Black stork. 1 by the river in Kokšov Bakša, and one in the mountains near Medzev. Always seems to be seen flying dangerously close to overhead electric wires.
24. Eurasian Spoonbill. 2 at Senne just as I arrived, and another showed well from the viewing platform.
25. White tailed Eagle. 1 bird showed very well at Senne as I was leaving.
26. Eastern Imperial Eagle. 1 near the village on Sunday, followed by a full adult pair displaying on Monday. 1 at Senne which looked like another subadult.
27. Lesser spotted eagle. 1 near Kokšov Bakša, and another from the motorway near Presov as we were returning from the Tatras.
28. Western Marsh Harrier. Noted at Perínske rybníky, Kokšov Bakša and at Senne. A wide variation in plumage was noted.
29. Buzzard. Fairly common around the country, quite widespread, but nowhere near as common as it was. There were often 6 or more visible at once around our garden at once whereas now I am lucky if I get one.
30. Honey buzzard. 1 along the River on the first day near the village.
31. Eurasian Sparrowhawk. Seen a couple of times near the village
32. Common Kestrel. Common and noted daily.
33. Eurasian Coot. Perínske rybníky and at Senne. Also on a pond in the Tatras.
34. Black winged stilt. 2 at Senne
35. Little Ringed Plover. 2 on drained fishpond at Perínske rybníky
36. Grey plover. 2 on drained fishpond at Perínske rybníky. 1 in full summer plumage, 1 apparently in winter plumage.
37. Lapwing. Seen on drained fishpond at Perínske rybníky, near road at Moldava nad Bodvou, a few around our village, and at Senne.
38. Dunlin. 1 on drained fishpond at Perínske rybníky.
39. Wood Sandpiper. 2 at Senne.
40. Redshank. 1 at Senne, though others heard.
41. Ruff. 1 at Senne.
42. Black headed gull. At least 10 Perínske rybníky, some at Senne but did not count.
43. Caspian Gull. Assumed this species at Senne, though did not pay them much attention.
44. Little gull. At least 6 at Senne.
45. Common Tern. Occasional birds seen fishing in the River Hornad.

46. Black tern. At least 10 at Senne.
47. White winged black tern. At least 2 at Senne.
48. Whiskered Tern. At least 20 at Senne, and another 5 at Perínske rybníky.
49. Stock dove. Common, seems much increased.
50. Woodpigeon. Common, seems much increased.
51. Eurasian Collared Dove. Very common seen daily in villages.
52. European Turtle Dove. Common all over, but for how long?
53. Common Cuckoo. Very common and noticeable in all areas.
54. Barn owl. 1 seen briefly in Kezmarok .
55. Owl sp. Flew over the road at 3 AM in Cana returning from the wedding seen only by Beata as I was" tired and emotional". Probably tawny, LEO or Ural.
56. Common Swift. Some numbers in Kosice. Surprisingly seems to have increased in Kokšov Bakša with at least 6 about, probably breeding the church tower.
57. European Bee-eater. Seen at Perínske rybníky, Senne, and around the village where at least 4 present.
58. Black woodpecker. 1 distant drumming and calling near pension Lesna, 1 on Stos saddle, heard calling but not seen. Plenty of evidence of devastated old trees about caused by this apex species whose hole making habits benefit many other species.
59. Green Woodpecker. 1 seen by the river Hornad near the village and heard a few times also.
60. Great spotted woodpecker. Heard in the Tatras. Occurs more in large tracts of woodland than around towns and villages, where replaced by Syrian.
61. Syrian woodpecker. The woodpecker around the villages, but elusive when breeding. Seen in several places on this trip. Looks like a GS woodpecker but appears darker above and redder below. The call is higher pitched than a GSW and sounds a little hollower. I have this on the garden list in KB until the old walnut tree we had was cut down.
62. Three toed woodpecker. On the climb up to Popradské pleso, we found a large area of dead conifers, just past, by a sharp left-hand bend in the track, over a river. We heard heavy and persistent drumming similar to a black woodpecker, and finally saw the bird flying away. We had a brief glimpse when we returned the following day.
63. Skylark. A few noted around agricultural areas.
64. Crested Lark. As always an elusive bird. Noted around the bottom of our garden, even perching on houses. Also at Kechnec around the industrial polygon. Have seen them in the past from the train on the railway sidings at the border crossing.
65. Sand Martin. Fairly common at wetland sites and over the village.
66. Barn Swallow. Common, but seemed to be fewer than previous years.
67. House Martin. Common, but seemed to be fewer than previous years.
68. Water pipit. 1 seen on the frozen lake at Popradské pleso.
69. White wagtail. Several noted in various locations.
70. Blue-headed Yellow Wagtail. Seen in the Village, Senne, Perínske rybníky and surrounds.
71. Grey Wagtail. Seen in the stream on the walk up to Popradské pleso
72. European Robin. Noted in the Tatras
73. Common Nightingale. Very common and vocal throughout.
74. Common Redstart. 1 noted from the hotel window in the Tatras
75. Black Redstart. Very common around all urban areas. A pair nested on the window ledge in our potato cellar looked precarious, but the presence of the dog may have kept predators away, and they appear to have fledged two young.
76. Whinchat. A few birds around the village, decline noted.
77. European Stonechat. A few birds around the village, decline noted.
78. Song Thrush. Common and much increased, seems to have colonised more suburban areas.
79. Mistle Thrush. A few noted in the Tatras.
80. Fieldfare. The surprise of the trip seemed to be breeding in high numbers everywhere.

81. Common Blackbird. Very common and seemingly increased.
82. Blackcap. Very common, with a great variation in song. 1 bird singing at Stos was so different I did think it might have been a different species until I saw it.
83. Whitethroat. Fairly common in all areas.
84. Lesser whitethroat. Widespread. Probably commoner than it seemed as quite elusive.
85. Sedge warbler. Common at Senne and Perínske rybníky.
86. Savi's warbler. Senne and Perínske rybníky
87. Reed warbler noted at Senne and Perínske rybníky
88. Marsh warbler. Several noted in appropriate habitat around the village.
89. Great reed warbler. Heard singing at Senne
90. Icterine Warbler. 1 or 2 singing around Kokšov Bakša, and seen well on a couple of occasions.
91. Willow Warbler. Singing birds noted in many areas, seemed common at Senne.
92. Common Chiffchaff. Noted in several places, still singing in the mountains.
93. Goldcrest. Heard a couple of times in the Tatras
94. Wren. Heard in one or two places.
95. Spotted flycatcher. Several pairs in Tatras and one in the churchyard in Zdana waiting for the wedding party to arrive.
96. Great Tit. Common in all areas.
97. Coal tit. Noted anywhere where there were conifers.
98. Blue tit. Noted in the Tatras and around Kokšov Bakša.
99. Crested tit 1 seen badly in the Tatras.
100. Long tailed tit. A pair of the ss *A. c. europaeus* in the village.
101. Penduline tit. Heard calling at Perínske rybníky.
102. Red backed Shrike. Noted in all areas but did not seem to be as common as in the past.
103. Golden Oriole. Very common anywhere there were poplars, as always impossible to see except in flight, when I saw three chasing each other around near the village.
104. Magpie. Fairly common, seems to be commoner than in the past.
105. Jay. A few noted in widespread locations.
106. Nutcracker. 2 seen on the walk up to Popradské pleso posed nicely for photos.
107. Jackdaw. Noted on the outskirts of Kosice.
108. Rook. Noted in several places, seems to be common on the edge of Kosice.
109. Hooded Crow. A few seen in scattered locations, mainly around Kokšov Bakša.
110. Carrion crow. 1 seen and photographed near Kokšov Bakša.
111. Northern Raven. A few seen in various places.
112. Starling. Very common around Kokšov Bakša and in other places
113. Golden Oriole. Very common wherever there were poplars, 3 seen chasing each other by the river Horad, indicating a high density.
114. House Sparrow. Common but seems not to be as common as I remember
115. Tree Sparrow. As house sparrow.
116. Chaffinch. Common, especially in the Tatras.
117. Linnet. Noted around Kokšov Bakša.
118. European Serin. Noted Kokšov Bakša, favours ornamental conifers in villages for breeding.
119. Goldfinch. Fairly common and widespread.
120. European Greenfinch. Fairly common and widespread.
121. Siskin. Heard a couple of times in the Tatras
122. Bullfinch. Several seen in the Tatras
123. Hawfinch. 1 seen well at Skaros, normally common at this location, but probably at the "elusive" stage of their breeding cycle.
124. Reed bunting. Noted at Perínske rybníky, Kokšov Bakša, and at Senne.
125. Yellowhammer. Common along the river bank.
126. Corn bunting. Noted at Senne.

Mammals

1. Red squirrel one seen in the Tatras from hotel room balcony looked nearly black in colour.
2. Roe deer noted near the village, at Senne, Skaros and Perínske rybníky.
3. Beech marten one seen in the Tatras from hotel room balcony, and mammal tick for me.
4. Brown bear – Not seen but the pension Lesna owner showed us some security camera footage of one wandering around outside their hotel during the lockdown!

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