

Birdwatching In Eastern Europe

BRITISH WILDLIFE ENTHUSIAST WORKING IN HUNGARY

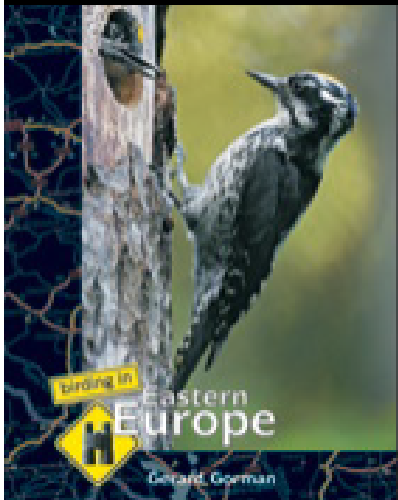
"Birding in Eastern Europe" by Gerard Gorman. 284 pages, covers 11 countries from the Baltics to Bulgaria and is available from WildSounds, price GBP 19.99 (approx EUR 30). ISBN 1-8986-6507-9. www.wildsounds.com

BY KESTER J. EDDY

IT WAS MAY, 1985, when Gerard Gorman, a young British bird and wildlife enthusiast then on a scholarship in Hungary, took a train from Budapest to Dinnyes, a village on the shores of Lake Velence, 30 miles south-west of the Hungarian capital.

This pioneering trip for the young Gorman arguably changed his life.

"This was my first Hungarian and 'Eastern European' birding trip, and what a day it was! There were Little Bitterns, several booming Great Bitterns, dozens of Purple Herons exploding from the reeds, displaying Garganeys, stunning male Ferruginous Ducks, more Western Marsh Harriers in an hour than I'd ever seen before, white-spotted Bluethroats singing from the tops of cut reeds, a reeling Savi's Warbler every 50 yards and



White Storks bill-clapping and peering down at me from their electricity pole nests. I also 'ticked' an otter and family of Russians fishing in a canal," Gorman writes in his latest book, "Birding in Eastern Europe." Such was the satisfac-

tion of that day that he quickly began to explore further afield, first the Hungarian countryside, and later across the region. Gorman now lives in Hungary, and two decades and perhaps a thousand or more trips later, is master of his trade, with five books to his name and hundreds of fellow birders grateful for his guidance, advice and experience.

Much of this is evident in Birding in Eastern Europe, a 284-page pocket book (at least for the wider pockets of most field jackets) that guides the visitor to some 235 sites in 11 countries, from the Baltics in the north to Bulgaria and Slovenia in the south.

With the principal exception of Bulgaria, Gorman says this is the only book in English covering these countries for birders. Naturally Hungary, his adopted homeland, is well-represented; whether it

Do not ignore the capitals!

Gorman's book details the wide-ranging birdlife in and around CEE's leading cities. There can't be many European capital cities where globally-threatened species can be seen. Yet a mere ten-minute walk in mid-winter from the center of Bucharest is likely to yield just that; for from December to February there are typically 15 pairs of Pygmy Cormorant in Carol Park, just to the south of the Romanian parliament. Indeed, as Gorman details in his volume, throughout the course of 12 months, the many gardens, parks and

lakes within Bucharest are fairly blessed with birdlife, with such visual beauties as the Golden Oriole, Red-backed Shrike, Great Egret and Common Kingfisher relatively easy to spot at the right time of year. Throw in a bunch of songbirds, several species of owl, raptors and up to seven of Europe's ten species of woodpecker, and the list becomes seriously impressive. The good news is that Bucharest is not alone among the region's capitals for having what for some visitors, eg from the UK and North America, would consider quite spectacular birds regularly occurring within minutes of the city center.

PHOTOS | Courtesy pictures

be details of the many warblers of Lake Fertő and the odd Great Bustard still surviving in the Hanság (both in northwestern Hungary) or the Red-footed Falcons and Long-eared Owls around the lakes and puszta of Biharugra (on the Romanian border in the southeast) this chapter alone could keep the keen birder busy for months.

EQUAL TREATMENT

But even more importantly, Gorman covers other countries equally, if not in greater detail, as he sees fit. Thus Slovenia, a country just one fifth the size of Hungary, has such striking topographical variations (namely a coastal region, lakeland, karst, plains, forests and alpine mountains) that it is home to roughly the same number of species (200) resident or regular migrant birds as its larger neighbour.

Slovenia therefore warrants descriptions of 20 sites that include locations for the Three-toed Woodpecker (the one woodpecker species Hungary lacks) and alpine delights such as the Ptarmigan.

Similarly Estonia, just half the size of Hungary, is so rich that Gorman lists 25 sites to find species as different as the Common Rosefinch, Nightjar and the threatened Great Snipe.

In view of this, somewhat curiously, Poland, the largest country in the region and one which Gorman rates very highly in birding terms, receives just 22 entries, equal to Hungary.

Gorman approaches each country with a few pages of introduction, with details of the landscape, habitat, climate and seasons, a few paragraphs on travel conditions, the state of conservation and an address or two of local birding associations. The bulk of each chapter (typically 20 pages or so) then gives the key birding sites, including access notes and

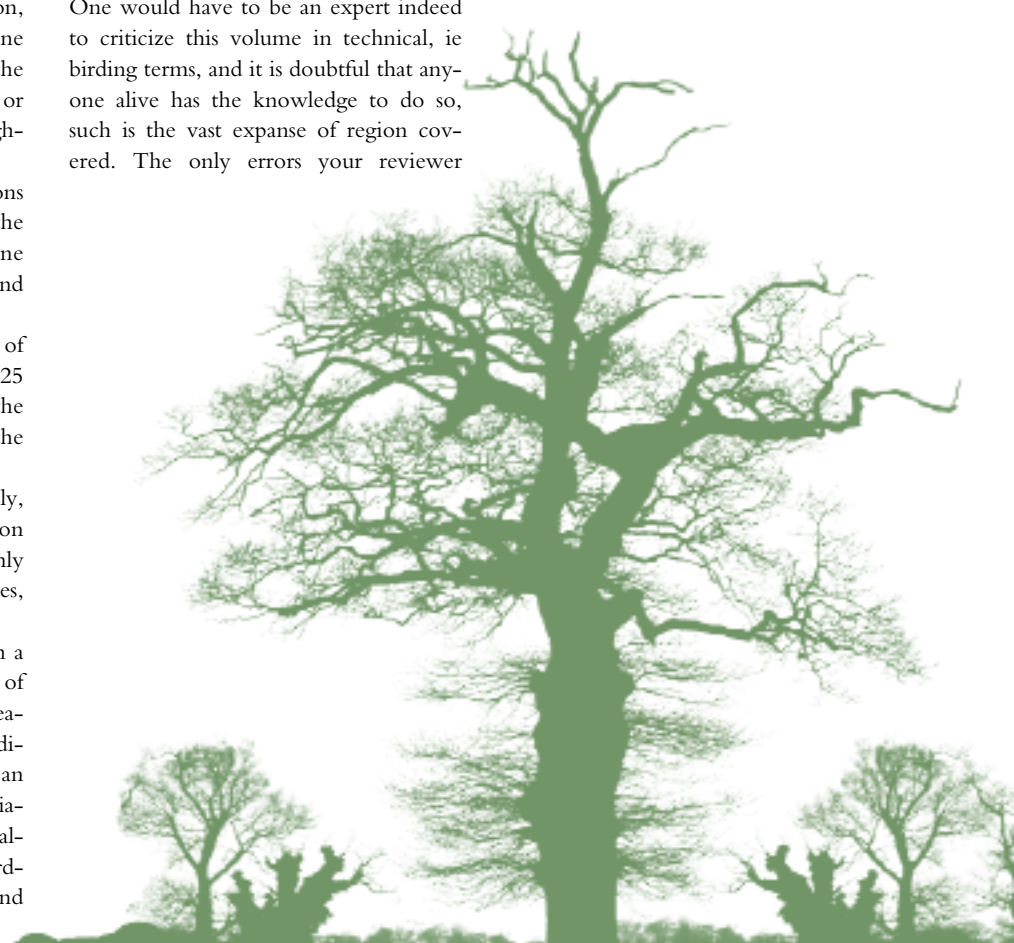
species to be seen. The author also notes other wildlife which might be encountered; most of this is incidental, such as the endearing dolphins that might be spotted off the islands of Croatia, or the beavers of Lithuania.

Other such information could be potentially life-saving; eg in the Polana Mountains, of central Slovakia, Gorman warns in no uncertain manner that some local wildlife is not to be messed with. "Because some [Brown Bears] have taken to visiting settlements in search of food, you may encounter one. If you do, never approach it - the Brown Bear is a large carnivore of uncertain temper."

One would have to be an expert indeed to criticize this volume in technical, ie birding terms, and it is doubtful that anyone alive has the knowledge to do so, such is the vast expanse of region covered. The only errors your reviewer

could find related to historical detail in the general introductions, eg the last Soviet troops left Hungary one year after, not before, the first democratic elections in 1990. Similarly, the Lithuanians did not adopt the Euro on Jan 1 of this year, while the Slovenes have done so.

Such errors, however, are of little relevance to the matter in hand, namely knowing where, when and how to go for the best birding sites across the region. If you are anywhere between Riga and Rijeka and a dedicated twitcher or even just a casual but interested wildlife observer, this book is one for your pocket. 🍷



And as part of a standard approach to each country he covers, Gorman kicks off his guide chapters with a description of the species likely to be seen and how to access these sites for each of the respective 11 capitals. This is a feature which many readers - particularly business folk and diplomats who typically find themselves in such cities with a few hours to spare - will probably find the most useful of all. Take Warsaw, as another example. Gorman describes the city as having "some of the best birding [locations] a European capital could possibly have. A whole book could be devoted to sites in and around this city." In his new book, he

restricts himself to just over one page, with an impressive list of about 40 notable species to be found within easy reach of the Polish capital. These include such attractions as the Lesser-spotted Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Marsh Harrier and Bluethroat. While Bucharest and Warsaw are home perhaps to the most wide-ranging list of feathered species in the region, Gorman makes it clear that no capital is without its attractions, whether it be the bitterns just outside the Latvian capital Riga, the Hazel Grouse said to be in the Medvendica Forest, just north of Zagreb, or the woodpeckers, finches, owls and warblers in the parks of Budapest.