Eastern Austria, mid-May 2006

In checking out birding opportunities that might come my way while attending ECCV in Graz in early May I had no real idea of what Eastern Austria had to offer. A few trip reports from a place called Neusiedler-see about 2 hours from Graz tantalizingly suggested there was a possibility of a few lifers and some other tasty birds if I could get the time to travel there. Also a note to Eurobirdnet soliciting help for Graz itself drew a few useful responses, and had the added virtue of putting me in in touch with local birder Leander Kihl who was able to give me invaluable info about birding by foot and public transport in Graz. The timing of the conference and subsequent workshops proved serendipitous: I could do some local birding in Graz in the evenings, and use Thurs evening and Friday all day for a trip to Neusiedl and the area near the Hungarian border known as Hansag. It would be a manic day and a half, but potentially worth it.

7th May 06 Stadtpark (Montclair allee)

I arrived in Graz mid-afternoon and having dumped my stuff at the hotel I walked across the

town the 30-40 mins or so to reach the Stadtpark and to explore the area around Montclair Allee. A couple of hours wandering the park and then up the Shlossberg – castle hill - (and then directly on to the conference opening reception, in a converted war-time bunker in the middle of the Schlossberg) was a great start.

Despite the warm afternoon, lots of Blackbird, Blackcap and Chaffinch were singing away, and several Nuthatches were uttering their tweet-tweet song and zipping about in various spots. Hooded Crows



were the first less English fare; a few were seen cruising over the park. Then, after about 20 minutes wandering an unfamiliar song attracted me. After a short hunt with bins wondering what I was hearing I was delighted to find a cracking male **Collared Flycatcher** in the upper branches of a nearby beech. Initially its pose made the white collar difficult to see but over the next 30 mins I sat on a bench and watched and listened to its comings and goings getting fantastic views of the charismatic stonker. This bird had only a small white patch at the base of the primaries, suggesting that perhaps it was a first summer bird. Later in my walk I encountered another male, this one with the larger patch characteristic of a full adult.

In between the two Collared Flycatchers I had **Great Spotted** and **Green Woodpeckers**, and then a family of **Short-toed Treecreepers** put on a show giving great close views. I then walked up to the Castle hill (Schlossberg) where **Blue** and **Great Tits** were seen along the way, followed by another male **Collared Flycatcher**, and a pair of its **Spotted** cousins. A pleasant and amazingly productive city walk.

8th May, Gosting

Encouraged by my successful Sunday afternoon walk, I solicited further information from

Leander. I wondered if Red-breated Flycatcher could also be seen anywhere, especially if accessible by public transport. Leander was able to point me to a site from the #85 bus that had held breeding R-B Fly in the past (though no sign so far this year, nor last) but which is also potentially good for Black Woodpecker. A very pleasant walk yielded another **Collared Flycatcher** and a **Wood Warbler** (heard only), but nothing else of note.

9th May, Lustbuhel

An alternative site suggested by Leander was on the west of the city. It had produced a number of rarities, including 5 records of R-B Fly in the last three years. I decided to check it out with another post-conference evening walk. Once again a very nice area, but which failed to produce anything of great significance. Best bird was a **Wryneck**, but sadly this was heard only.

10th May, nr Gosting

This afternoon Leander suggested I accompany him looking for the local Eagle Owls which have been regular breeders in a disused quarry north-west of the city. Too good an offer to refuse, I met him outside my hotel and we caught the bus to a spot on the same route as my Monday evening trip. A short walk later and we were squeezing under the barbed wire installed by the hunters who control this area - Leander assured me he never had a problem previously. For the next 30-40 minutes we scanned the quarry from various locations without much luck and seemingly with diminishing chances – this was Leander's first visit this year so we had no confirmed gen of presence or breeding – until he noticed through bins what he thought might be a crow's carcass and feathers on a ledge. Borrowing my scope to look, his exclamation was clearly more excited than a dead crow warranted and he immediately informed me he had the **Eagle Owl** chicks. I took over with the scope and delighted to see two rather small downy chicks, all massive eyes, periodically poking their heads over the ledge. Sadly no sign of the adults, but still a great trip record.

11th May, Neusiedlersee

The previous two days I had used the wireless facilities at the conference to try to find a place to stay and book a car. Both were more effort than I expected, but come 4pm Thursday I had left the conference was on the autobahn heading north from Graz towards Vienna.

With little time in the field I decided to go directly to the area known as Hansag, next to the Hungarian Border, rather than detour to find my hotel in Illmitz. Following the loop road south from Tadten I stopped after only a couple of kms at a small roadside copse, noting a **White Stork** in a ditch en-route. The trees in this copse, as everywhere in the area, were alive with birds and birdsong. **Turtle Doves** purred everywhere. Two woodpeckers, glimpsed briefly in flight were probable **Syrian Woodpeckers**. The views *were* tickable – I had got enough to clock the open white



area on the cheek, Syrian lacking Great Spotted's black stripe joining the malar stripe to the

nape - but slightly unsatisfactory for a lifer.

A few km on I encountered a couple of birders with scopes trained south-east. Though they spoke no English and I speak no German, they pointed at *Otis Tardis* in the field guide. I quickly whipped out the scope and was delighted to see 10-12 **Great Bustard** on the plain at about 800m range, a couple of them males in full white-ball-of-feathers display.

Eager to use all the light available, and complete a recce of the area I pushed on to a spot one or two km from the border where there was an observation tower. On the opposite side of the road a small marsh held singing **Great Reed Warbler** and **Gropper**, and I tried for some time – eventually successfully – to see both for the trip list. In retrospect this wasn't the best use of time since both were seen in some numbers and with some ease: the former in the roadside reed-beds on Illmitzstrasse and the latter buzzing away atop various low bushes all around Hansag.

A scan from the tower revealed the Bustards again as well as distant – and not-so-distant – raptors: **Common Buzzard** and **Marsh Harrier** were both abundant, and **Kestrel** and **Hobby** hawked over the field with the Bustards, while **Sedge Warblers** were chuntering away in the ditch below. Several **Curlew** and numerous **Lapwing** also noted, and every upstanding stalk seemed to be occupied by a **Stonechat** or **Winchat**. Another German birder in the tower muttered something about Imperial Eagle earlier in the week, but in sufficiently broken English that I was not sure the message I received was the one he intended to convey.

The road south from here, only another 1-2 km to the border seemed to be covered with **White**, and especially **Yellow Wagtails**, until the last few metres before the border, when I encountered a party of 12 **Bee-eaters** hawking around and resting on the road. Next stop was at the memorial tower next to the Andau Bridge over the Einserkanal that separates Austria and Hungary. This bridge, restored in 1996, was the site of a mass exodus from Hungary during and after the Hungarian revolution in 1956 (Wikipedia suggests there is a James Michener novel about the events called "The bridge at Andau"). Signs indicate that one may cross the bridge, passport in hand, but go no further: during the Cold War it was the Hungarian soldiers preventing people crossing to Austria, but now Austrian soldiers guard the area, presumably to stop illegal immigrants crossing – and also presumably why the need for a passport.

Nightingales sang here in abundance (and one or two were seen well) but I was here after a different quarry. Leander had flagged this as a good site for one of my most-wanted, River Warbler, and reeling from across the canal induced me to cross and to explore probably further than was prudent. However when I finally pinned the voice down to an identity I was disappointed to see another 'gropper; not only because it was not the hoped for lifer, but at my own poor ability to distinguish the songs. I returned to the car to refresh my memory of River Warblers curious mechanical reel, and for some respite from the swarms of mozzies.

I now drove north along the eastern leg of the loop towards Andau and stopped after a few km to try to get a view of the Bustards from this side. The sun was not in my favour, but the birds were closer and I had excellent, albeit rather silhouetted views of the dozen or so birds strutting across the setting sun. As I again returned to the car another unfamiliar warbler alarm call, "trrrr", attracted my attention. Though I could not identify it immediately, a briefest of glimpses of the bird confirmed the thought that perhaps this was a potential lifer, **Barred**

Warbler. During a series of further brief glimpses I noted large size, grey head with whiter throat, slight barring of underparts. The bird's instant response when I played the song on the laptop to remind myself clinched the i.d.

Other birds seen this evening included **Tree Sparrow**, **Reed Bunting**, ubiquitous **Pheasants**, and **Hooded Crow**.

The light was now fading fast and I headed for Illmitz along the straight, flat, fast rural roads that join the small towns in this part of Burgenland. The Hotel Post, near the centre of the village on the road towards Apetlon was a curious place. I was met by the proprieter in the bar. Two old locals were drinking and smoking, but the place seemed otherwise devoid of guests. As I was shown to my room, some distance away along various empty corridors to the back of the establishment, it was apparent I was indeed the only guest. The room itself was clean and comfortable, but returning to the bar to ask about food I couldn't escape a sensation that I was somehow intruding. To my surprise they *could* do me a meal: it being "spargelsaison" I ordered what I thought was a light snack of asparagus, ham and cheese and sipped my lager reflecting on an excellent start. My "snack" turned out to be a very tasty and quite substantial dish. I retired soon afterwards in preparation for very early start the next morning.

12th May, Neusiedlersee

In order to make the most of my one whole day in the field I had set my alarm for 4.30 to be up and out by sunrise. Though it was some effort, I forced myself up, and was in the car heading the ½ mile or so from the centre of the village to Illmitzstrasse, the street that heads to a campsite and the lake edge. First good bird was a **Black Redstart** on the roof of an inn at the top of the strasse. I pulled in at an observation tower overlooking the Zicklacke and spent some time here scanning the lake.

Kentish Plovers were scuttling about on the near side of the lake, and a Bittern boomed from the far side. Six Black Tern skimmed the lake surface and numerous Black-winged Stilt and a few Avocet were present, along with various duck species and hundreds of Greylag Geese.

After a while hoping in vain that the Bittern might be seen in flight I set off on foot towards the main lake. The road was flanked by vines (Burgenland is a major wine growing region, though very little of the product ends up outside Austria) before a small wood on the right, after which the road becomes a causeway across an extensive reedbed to the lake edge. **Red-backed Shrike** were common amongst the vines. Having only ever seen one of this exceedingly smart, charismatic species previously (campsite near Baden-Baden, 1996), to have them in such numbers was a real treat and one of the highlights of the trip.

The sun had only just made its way over the horizon and the still morning air filled with the dawn chorus. Making for wood and reeds, a low disyllabic buzzing, "zhhrrrrr-zhr-zhhrrrr-zhr-zhhhrrrr" that I had been subconsciously hearing for a minute or so, suddenly made its way to a more prominent part of my brain and I realised that this time I really could hear a **River Warbler**. I approached between a rows of vines to a rather unlikely looking cluster of low bushes and a few trees. As I got closer extra notes, a high-pitched, rapid metallic tinking

became audible, superimposed on the background buzz and matching the sewing machine description of the field-guides perfectly. Despite being no more than 15m away with it still singing strongly I could not locate it in the single low patch of scrub where it had to be. After 5 minutes of this frustration things got worse as it stopped singing. A small brown dart flicked across a gap and was probably it, but with numerous Sparrows also present I couldn't be sure. After a further 20 mins of deepening gloom I decided to carry on towards the lake, and try my luck back here this evening – it had clearly given up singing for the morning, reducing my chances of seeing it to nil.

Hoopoe and **Golden Oriole** were both heard from the road, singing in the wood, but I didn't enter, instead carrying on the few more metres to bring me to the edge of the reed-beds.

The reeds stretch for about a km to the lake-edge where there is a caravan park and I walked this slowly, stopping to take in the various avian offerings. **Great Reed** and **Savi's Warblers** were both easily seen and **Sedge Warblers** were abundant. This latter species made my job – ultimately unsuccessful – of tracking down one of my main targets, Moustached Warbler, rather tricky. At one point I got onto a bird that seemed good for Moustached: general impression of coloration was of a darker, less streaked brown cap and whiter supercilium; but my views were brief, fairly distant, and I failed to note other crucial features such as short primary projection, neat bib, wide, square-ended white super', etc. Of course the usual continental wetland fare was present: **Purple Heron**, **Marsh Harrier**, etc. Another nice addition was **Bearded Reedling**, but by 9am it was already getting warm and I returned to the car to check out some of the other local lakes.

First stop was Warmsee. A few **Kentish Plovers, LRP** and one or two **Temminck's Stint** were scuttling about on the banks of the lake, but more unusual were curious rodents, a few of which poked their heads out of little burrows. These turned out to be Sousliks (European Ground Squirrel), and their population is completely local to Warmsee. The various duck species noted here and other lakes including Zickelacke and Langelacke included **Garganey** – a number of smart pairs noted - **Pochard**, 100s of **Red-crested Pochard**, and **Ferruginous Duck**, a great addition to the trip list.

After a circuit around the lake and then back to Illmitz for breakfast at the Hotel Post I decided now to head to the Hansag plain again for some raptor watching. This turned out to be an excellent choice. On arrival at the tower there were two German birders present who claimed a large eagle a few minutes ago. They claimed (Eastern) Imperial on the basis of range, but couldn't match the bird to the adult pictures in their copy of Jonssen. I was torn between being skeptical and slightly gripped. Imperial Eagle would be an unusual but not outrageous record here. While they sat down for a sandwich and drink I scanned to the north and west of the tower.

After a few minutes I locked onto not one, but two, distant raptors. From their slow, powerful wingbeats even at range it was clear these were huge birds, and, pulse racing, I announced to the Germans that I had the Eagle again. For a while both birds came closer and afforded decent views, and I tried to take in as much detail as I could for later reference to field guides. Structurally the birds were clearly large, powerful eagles, with large "fingered" hands, and longish, narrow tail. The secondaries, unlike Golden Eagle, but like Spanish Imperial, did not bulge, giving the wings an square, even look, though the trailing edge of the wings were slightly ragged, perhaps due to wear or moulting. There were three immediately obvious

plumage details: the upper wing coverts were pale above and had scruffy look about them, contrasting markedly with the most of the rest of the plumage which was a dark brown; the inner primaries were pale all the way to the tip, forming an almost translucent wedge, again contrasting significantly with the other flight feathers; finally the tail was dark, other than a prominent light greyish arc at the base. After 10-15 mins both drifted further away. One, apparently hunting, now picked up speed and landed with some purpose after a shallow stoop, but out of sight. The other drifted to a nearby tree and landed but in the scope was no more than tiny blurry dot. Giving up on the scope I now pulled out my trusty copy of the Collins Bird Guide and it was immediately clear that the birds were imm. 3rd yr **Eastern Imperial Eagle**. Magic!!

It was now approaching 1pm. For the afternoon I had arranged to meet local birder Roman Matz, whom I had contacted through birdingpal.org, in the hope that he could help with some local knowledge. We agreed to meet back at my hotel so headed back there and waited in the bar with a snack and a beer. He duly arrived and we headed back out to the various smaller lakes on the East side of Neusiedlersee via his parents' house in Apetlon to drop his daughter off.

First stop was a lake off the beaten track just out the back of Apetlon – Roman's local patch. Another nice wetland, teeming with nice birds: **Wood Sandpiper**, lots of **Black-winged Stilts**, two **Pintail**, a pair of cracking summer plumaged **Spotted Redshank** and amazingly, another booming **Bittern** – despite it now being 2.30pm and quite warm! Roman picked up a pair of Pintail but these flushed when a rifle went off before I was on them. We drove from here the few km for my second visit to Warmsee, and then to the Eastern edge of Lange-Lacke, where we picked up the standard array of good wetland birds, but no new species.

Having already got Imperial Eagle, my preferred targets for the afternoon were Red-footed Falcon, and above all, Saker. I discovered during the afternoon that Roman's interest in birds rather concentrated on waders almost to the exclusion of other genera, but he had sought some gen from a colleague who suggested some areas of the Parndorfer Platte that were "reliable" for Saker. We therefore drove north and spent the next few hours exploring back roads, periodically stopping and scanning at a good vantage point. At one stop near a deserted farm building a **Nightingale** hopped out obligingly, while on another farm track we spotted two small dark falcons in the distance. Somewhat to my amazement Roman immediately swung his banger into the rough overgrown tractor ruts at the side of the field for a closer look. Though we did get closer, my best views were still dark and distant, with the bright sky turning both birds into silhouettes and hiding any meaningful plumage details. Structurally good for R-F Falcon but not satisfactory even for a trip-tick. As late afternoon approached we cruised the high-tension wires near the motorway in the hope of raptors perched on the pylons but eventually I suggested to Roman that I'd like to head back to Hansag. I was guite staggered to learn that Roman hardly ever comes here, and that he had never, prior to this evening, seen Great Bustards – he told me it was enough for him to know they were there. Chacun a son vie!

As well as the **Bustards** we had lovely views of a **Hobby** hawking low over the fields as on the previous evening, but as the evening drew on I decided I wanted to make a move back to Illmitz to see if "my" River Warbler from this morning had decided to start singing.

Roman dropped me back at the Hotel Post and headed off to pick up his daughter. Still not

finished for the day I went back down to Seestrasse and parked near the small wood. I wandered in looking for a **Golden Oriole** that was singing, and in the hope that I might pick up an Icterine Warbler – no such luck – then walked back along the reedbeds. This area is supposed to be good for Little Crake, and there were three or four birders out looking and listening as it grew darker. I chatted with an Austrian birder about my experiences of the day. When I mentioned the Bustards of Hansag he suggested that an alternative site was the area near the Slovakian border north of Nickelsdorf. The claim was of as many as a hundred birds, but also a note of caution – hunters use the area and guard it jealously, and there is no love lost between birders and hunters in this part of the world. I filed the info away, maybe for use one day, but I would not have time this trip even if I did want to brave the hunters. While chatting we noted most of the various wetland species I'd seen in the morning, as well as 4-5 **Spoonbill** flying over to roost – a new sp. for the day.

As the light faded, he stayed on to listen for Little Crake and I headed back towards the hotel via the morning's River Warbler site. There was no sign this evening, but the sight of an "eared owl" -- either Short-eared or Long-eared ghosting through the vines rounded off a great day.

13th May, Neusiedlersee

Another day, another early start. No point in wasting my last morning lazing in bed. Dawn, and I headed first for yesterday morning's River Warbler site. Today, though it was a silent as the previous evening, so I decided, around 7am to head back to Hansag and the bridge at Andau.

This being my fourth visit in just over a day, I knew exactly how to get there. The fast, flat roads were largely unoccupied and in no time I was pulling up near the tower. Though the area was alive with birdsong (and mosquitoes!) a quick recce by the bridge yielded no River Warbler singing, and began to resign myself to dipping on this elusive "most-wanted". I decided to stay in the car and drive slowly, east of the tower along the narrow track parallel with the canal. Still no RW. At one point, however, a melodious and varied warbler song attracted my attention and focusing bins on a low patch of scrub and reeds next to the track I saw what I at first took to be a Reed Warbler. All of a sudden I had another revelatory moment like the previous morning as I realised the "Reed Warbler" banging out this richly complex song was in fact a lifer **Marsh Warbler**. This was some compensation for my likely River Warbler dip, and enthusiasm renewed I decided on a walk across the bridge anyway.

On my return to the tower next to the bridge a couple of soldiers had arrived. I pointed at my bins and they gave the nod for me to cross. As I started to cross a black and white woodpecker darted across the canal. Again, not the greatest view, but had to be **Syrian**, and it was seen again a couple of times shuttling across the canal. Then, fantastically, that mechanical di-syllabic reel that I had been hoping to hear came drifting across the water. I scanned with bins but panic set in as I struggled to locate it, fearing a repeat of the previous morning. I gradually moved carefully closer narrowing down where it could be. After a couple of minutes, worry become deeper and deeper set, I finally picked up a LBJ in high branches of a tree next to the canal path, out in the open. Clearly it was what I was after, since I could correlate its turning head with the strength of the song, but now I struggled with tripod then scanned frantically - more haste, less speed - until just as I settled on it for a definitive scope view, it dropped down out of sight, and apparently into the thick forest scrub. My heart sank.

If this were a repeat of the previous morning I had just had my entire lot, and I kicked myself for the time wasted setting up the scope and finding it. A little more calm and I would now be basking in the afterglow of a successful encounter. Instead now I had that twisted feeling of what might have been. I lifted the scope and started to walk back towards the bridge.

Miraculously as I made to leave the reeling started again. I turned and almost instantly located it, again on a high branch. This time I took careful stock of where it was and deliberately set the scope. Now I had cracking views of **River Warbler**, belting out its sewing machine impression.

Up to now I had not bothered with any digiscoping. The lab Coolpix was in use in the lab (oh, the irony), and though I had brought Nikki's cheap fixed-lens digital camera, it had seen no use. I did have it in my pocket though, so now I made an attempt at a record shot. The results were not too bad, and I even managed a short movie, just by holding the camera up to the eyepiece of the scope.



A final good bird at this site was a **Wryneck**, chattering away above me and scoped well, though sufficiently mobile as to elude my further attempts at digiscoping with the lxus.

With the Bustards less than half a mile away, and with the morning light in my favour, I drove north towards Andau for one last encounter with these quite literally "Great" birds. From a birding tower I fired off a few record shots of a displaying male before calling it a day.



And what a great day and a half it had been. Of my main targets I had missed only Saker and Moustached Warbler, with Red-footed Falcon, Bluethroat and Icterine Warbler lesser dips. On the plus side I'd got my top two targets, River Warbler and Imperial Eagle, and four further lifers to boot, as well as a cracking array of mid-European species.

Utterly content, I headed back to the Hotel Post for breakfast and to settle my bill, and then, rather reluctantly, turned the car north, en route back to Graz for the flight home. Although I harboured thoughts of a brief detour back to the Parndorfer Platte for a final crack at Saker, sense prevailed and I trundled without stopping around Neusiedlersee and back onto the motorway.

Systematic list

- 1. Great Crested Grebe
- 2. Cormorant
- 3. [Bittern]
- 4. Great White Egret
- 5. Grey Heron
- 6. Purple Heron

one or two, LN a few, Hansag, Andau bridge one heard booming early am at Zicksee and one near Apetlon at 14.30 common at LN

a few at LN

 White Stork Spoonbill Mute Swan Greylag Goose Shelduck Mallard Gadwall {Pintail} Shoveler Gargapov 	singles at SS and Hansag several going to roost at SS 100s
 16. Garganey 17. Pochard 18. Red-crested Pochard 19. Ferruginous Duck 20. Imperial Eagle 21. Marsh Harrier 22. Montagu's Harrier 23. Buzzard 24. Kestrel 25. Hobby 26. Pheasant 27. Coot 	a few at WS (?) common a coupe at WS (?) 2 imm., Hansag common 1, Hansag common common
28. Great Bustard 29. Avocet 30. Black-winged Stilt 31. Little-ringed Plover 32. Kentish Plover 33. Lapwing 34. Temminck's Stint 35. Little Stint 36. Wood Sandpiper 37. Common Sandpiper 38. Redshank	12, Hansag
 39. Spotted Redshank 40. Black-tailed Godwit 41. Curlew 42. Black-headed Gull 43. Yellow-legged Gull 44. Common Tern 	2, summer plumaged birds
45. Black Tern 46. Rock Dove 47. Wood pigeon 48. Collared Dove 49. Turtle Dove 50. Cuckoo	6 Zickelacke
51. Eagle Owl 52. Short-eared Owl 53. Swift 54. [Hoopoe]	2 chicks, Graz (nr Gosting) evening (maybe Long-eared??)
55. Bee-eater	12+ Hansag, 1 Hansag

56. Green Woodpecker Graz 57. Great Spotted Woodpecker Graz 58. Syrian Woodpecker Hansag 59. Wryneck Hansag, Andau bridge also [Graz, Lustbuhel] 60. Barn Swallow 61. White Wagtail 62. Yellow Wagtail various races, common on roads in Hansag 63. Grey Wagtail 64. Robin 65. Nightingale common, good views on Parndorfer Platte 66. Black Redstart 67. Whinchat 68. Stonechat 69. Song Thrush 70. Blackbird 71. Barred Warbler Hansag 72. Blackcap 73. Sedge Warbler 74. Grasshopper Warbler 75. River Warbler 76. Savi's Warbler 77. Reed Warbler 78. Marsh Warbler 79. Great Reed Warbler 80. [Wood Warbler] Gosting 81. Chiffchaff 82. Spotted Flycatcher 2, Schlossberg, Graz 83. Pied Flycatcher 84. Collared Flycatcher Graz 85. Great Tit 86. Bearded Reedling 87. Nuthatch 88. Short-toed Treecreeper 89. Red-backed Shrike 90. Magpie 91. Starling 92. Golden Oriole 93. House Sparrow 94. Tree Sparrow 95. Chaffinch 96. Linnet 97. Goldfinch 98. Greenfinch 99. Serin 100. **Reed Bunting** Yellowhammer 101. 102. Corn Bunting