

Romania

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Participants:

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Leader:

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Picture: Wallcreeper

Day 1: The British Airways flight arrived at Otopeni airport in reasonable time. Before heading into the city there was time for some late afternoon birdwatching - all except John, who was smothered in kisses from a large Romanian lady and whisked off into the city! Our first port of call was the much-dammed valley of the River Cociovalistea - not a name to conjure with after a few Romanian plum brandies! Strolling along an embanked road overlooking a small reed-bed we had fine close views of Great Reed Warbler and Little Bittern. Shy children asked if we were some kind of strange breed of fishermen, joining the usual Saturday afternoon anglers on the bank. A retired lady walking back to the bus stop from her week-end cottage passed the time of day. It was time to move on and so we drove along the valley to Caldurasani Monastery, seeing a European Roller and a Lesser Grey Shrike on the way. This wonderful building overlooking a lake on the edge of a forest was site of the wedding of Bjorn Borg and Mariana Simionescu - a tragic pairing that ended when she, having had cancer diagnosed left him and died alone. Exploring the woodland margin near the monastery gate, we soon had fine close views of Middle Spotted Woodpecker and a Common Buzzard flew along the forest ride. All too soon it was time to head south into the city in the evening sunshine, past the elegant villas along the tree-lined Chaussee Kiseleff and the site of the focus of the 1989 revolution. The evening was cool and we ate inside at a pleasant Italian restaurant.

Day 2: The day was a transit day, travelling from the middle of Bucharest to the middle of the Danube Delta, with as much birding to be fitted in as we would on the way. The vast arable plains of Wallachia revealed the predictable huge rookeries among the poplars and false acacias; away from Bucharest most of the villages had White Storks nesting. Crossing the mighty Danube at its lowest crossing point, at Harsova, we passed numbers of fishermen making some very strange gestures at us. Apparently they were explaining the size of the fish they could sell us - later we saw sturgeon for sale. Just over the Danube and now in the province of Dobrogea, we stopped for some birding at Lake Hasarlac, where Black-crowned Night and Purple Herons flapped over the reeds and the air was alive to the eerie sound of the audible "Mexican Wave" effect of the chorus of thousands of Marsh Frogs. Onwards we drove, through the forest of oaks and limes and across the rolling steppe country of Dobrogea, now much of it under arable. Suddenly the frequency of Lesser Grey Shrikes and European Rollers on roadside wires increased sharply. European Bee-Eaters, Tree Sparrows (a refreshingly common bird in Romania) and Red-footed Falcons were passed. At last we reached the city of Tulcea - and drove straight through it to park by the quay. A lady called Louisa joined us briefly, we moved our bags down a jetty and

suddenly, no sooner had we reached the town than it was slipping astern of our boat as we made our way downstream into the Delta. Our transport for the next few days was a large steel launch - plenty big enough for a group five times bigger than ours and with a crew of three. Steaming steadily east into the Delta down the Sulina Channel we all had wonderful views of a full adult male Montagu's Harrier as it flew quite low, right over our boat. Next we were in for an even greater surprise as a rather unseasonable Common Scoter raced away from us across the water. Although this was billed as a journey into the Delta rather than actual birdwatching, the usual Danube Delta "cast" soon showed, with over-flights by Glossy Ibis, Pygmy Cormorants, Greylag Geese and Eurasian Spoonbill. Common and Whiskered Terns hunted over the water and Little Egrets stalked the banks. We were treated to views of White-winged Black Terns in their spectacular breeding plumage. Still in full daylight we moored at the quay of the Lebada Hotel. We were staying here because the group was too small (five plus the leader) to be able to hire our own twenty-berth private hotel-boat. Isolated and standing on a spit between the "Old Danube" and the Sulina Channel, in fact it was the perfect birdwatcher's base. Barn Swallows were nesting above the reception desk and were flying round the dining-room for most meals. A large modern thatched building in some disrepair, nevertheless it functioned well. There was hot water on most of the occasions we wanted it and good food was served with a smile; there were few other guests. The bar had plentiful cold beer and none could quibble at the rough local Cabernet Sauvignon, considering the price of the stuff.

Day 3: Early-morning birding on foot around the Lebada Hotel gave us wonderful views of Grey-headed Woodpecker. A pair of Common Redstarts were nesting in a hole in the thatch above the entrance and a flock of Black Terns were hawking in the air of the Sulina Channel. What more could one wish for before breakfast? Fortified by omelettes, lots of bread and butter and jam with plentiful hot tea we re-embarked into our boat. James checked that we had the requisite stock of food and beers for our picnic and we made our way south, past the houses of the village of Crisan. Settlements in the Delta have no road access at all, but are served by public transport ferries plying the major waterways. Beyond Crisan we found ourselves in something of a backwater; the water level was still high, with little in the way of exposed mud for waders. There were repeated views of Western Marsh-Harriers, Ferruginous Ducks and Squacco Herons, many of the latter showing their breeding plumage complete with blue bill. Eurasian Hobbies were quite amazingly common - one of the most frequently-encountered birds all day. A family of Red-necked Grebes in a side-channels waylaid us and eventually we reached the village of Caraorman. Here a series of shallow pools north of the village were a happy hunting ground for parties of Eurasian Spoonbills and Great White Pelicans. Pied Avocets flew overhead and scolded us and then returned to harrying the other birds around, concentrating largely on the Black-winged Stilts. There were small parties of Curlew Sandpipers and Ruff; the former were in a mixture of plumages with few yet in the full brick-red splendour seen high their high-latitude breeding grounds. There were Little Ringed Plover and Wood Sandpipers. A pause for lunch cooked by our crew on board preceded further exploration ashore, encountering distant views of a White-tailed Eagle over the village, the Blue-headed race of Yellow Wagtail and the distant singing of Grasshopper Warbler. In the late afternoon we made our way back to the Lebada (it means "Swan") Hotel for a good supper of Carp and jam pancakes and some so-so wine.

Day 4: This was to be a day of travelling and birding at the same time. From Crisan we made our way north-west, upstream along the course of the Old Danube to the village of Mila 23, home to a substantial Russian population and the most rustic and isolated settlement anyone could wish for. The Russian inhabitants are known as Lipovani and left Russia in the reign of Catherine the Great; their villages are distinctive with their onion-tower churches. We continued west to Lake Furtuna, via quite superb views of an adult White-tailed Eagle perched in a willow. Eventually it flew off, impressing all with its vast wingspan. By now we were beginning to get used to repeated close views of Common Cuckoos - almost as much seen as heard. The essence of the voyage were sightings of Pygmy Cormorants and Glossy Ibis, hundreds of Great White Pelicans in their impressive soaring flocks as well as fishing, superb views of wetland species close to our boat and the sheer volume of sound from massed Great Reed Warblers memorable in itself. There were good views of a Dalmatian Pelican, with its "cold" grey-washed plumage more different from Great White Pelicans than many field guides show. Making our way

past the Romanian navy's river fleet of gunboats emblazoned with "Onoare si Patria" and most of them apparently named after heroic military figures, we rounded a bend in the channel and the unprepossessing waterfront of Tulcea hove in sight. Our "Delta experience" was over. Whilst not primarily a lister's hunting ground - it is just too vast and inaccessible - it had provided the most impressive possible birdwatching experience. Alighting on the quay, we bade farewell to our cheery boat crew and checked in to our hotel. That evening we had the best meal yet of the tour at a restaurant called Calypso. There was a noticeable up-turn in the quality of the wine served with some very fine Merlot that seemed to evaporate in the glass!

Day 5: This was our day of making our way south along the Black Sea shore to the resort of Eforie Nord. Leaving the hotel in Tulcea, we headed south; first stop was the impressive European Bee-eater colony at Enisala; numbers of the strange little ground squirrel (European Souslik *Citellus citellus*) scuttled around the short grass. On the other side of the village the cross-country capacity of James's minibus (not to mention his driving) was tested as we made our way off the road to a series of pools and along the raised banks that separated them. Several pairs of Red-crested Pochard were an immediate highlight, together with Garganey, Ferruginous Duck and Northern Shoveler. Pied Avocets scolded us; several were on nests, as were Black-winged Stilt. Both species of pelican were apparent and, as over every reed-bed we visited there was the inevitable Western Marsh-Harrier in its low hunting flight. There were excellent near views of a pale phase Booted Eagle near the old castle. We continued to Histria where we paused for drinks - very welcome in a long day's birding. Among numbers of waders a few Kentish Plover skulked on the muddy shores of the pools among the small parties of Little Stint and Dunlin. At Vadu there was more of the same, with the addition of Wood Sandpiper and the ever-present Whiskered Terns. Making our way around the concrete horrors of Constanta we arrived in the pleasant, leafy resort of Eforie where we stayed in a hotel as near the sea-front as it was possible to get.

Day 6: Our day out from Eforie took us first to Lake Techirghiol to see the Black-necked Grebes and Mediterranean Gulls. From here we headed down the coast to Mangalia ("Mongolia spelt wrong"). A Black Kite was circling over the rubbish-tip just east of the town. From here we continued inland to Hagieni Forest, where Ortolan Buntings sang from a wire beside the track. We parked on the edge of the trees and walked to a viewpoint south towards the border with Bulgaria. After a pause our "target bird" appeared - a Levant Sparrowhawk. We were treated to a memorable moment as a male Levant flew right across the valley below us, with a pair of Golden Orioles in hot pursuit. Next was a European Honey- Buzzard circling low nearby and distant views of Long-legged Buzzard. The air was alive with the happy call of European Bee-eaters and we managed to find Barred Warbler in the scrubby woodland edge. Our picnic was eaten in the bottom of the rocky valley and James produced a Spadefoot Toad, a European Pond Terrapin and a pair of Lesser White-toothed Shrews from a hole! Our picnics eaten in the field (in this instance briefly accompanied by an Olivaceous Warbler) were becoming something of a high point to the day, with pates, smoked fish, taramasalata, smoked fish pate, smoked hams, salami and other sausages, a huge variety of different local cheeses (from sheep's milk and cow's milk - cottage cheese, smoked cheese, cheese with herbs etc. etc.) and various traditional breads. After this we had fruit and sometimes little sweet pastries. Returning to Eforie, we paused on a windswept beach between Mangalia and Saturn and were treated to unexpected views of a lingering (probably non-breeding) Grey Plover, also a wandering Lesser Black-backed Gull. On island on the shallow lake just inland was a small party of Dunlin, a few Ruff and more Curlew Sandpiper, among an impressive colony of Common Terns.

Day 7: This was our day of travelling to the mountains. Heading west across the flat lands of Dobrogea, crossing the infamous "Death Canal" built during the communist regime, we saw Crested and Calandra Larks beside the road, as well as the now unremarkable Lesser Grey Shrikes and European Rollers, also a Tawny Pipit and Golden Orioles. Just after the oil-town of Ploiesti we joined the main road from Bucharest to the mountains, notable for some lunatic overtaking from drivers impatient to be in the Carpathians for the week-end. All of a sudden we were driving up through a steep valley covered in vast beech forests in the late afternoon sunshine and found ourselves in the resort of Sinaia where the air was noticeably cooler. After brief refreshment at a rather baronial bar we checked into our rooms and set off for a pre-dinner bird walk on the forest margin. Fieldfares

were carrying food from the grass to their nests in the trees and a Black Redstart sang scratchily from the roof of the restaurant. A Lesser Whitethroat sang lustily, a European Serin faintly and a Eurasian Nuthatch was remarkably tame. Before strolling back for dinner we encountered Great Spotted Woodpecker, Grey Wagtail, Blackcap, Long-tailed and Coal Tits, Common Raven and Eurasian Goldfinch. After dinner we set off up the hill in the minibus to a large clearing in the forest where we searched with a spotlight for bears. Eventually we found a total of three Black Bears, getting good views.

Day 8: There was a definite sense of anticipation as we made our way along a very rough track over a high mountain ridge, first through Beech forest, then spruce and finally above the tree line. Our first "target" location was a small limestone gorge hidden away in a remote valley. No sooner had we got out of the minibus than we saw a Wallcreeper. We had perhaps grown a little tired of James telling us about his "hundred percent record" of showing Wallcreeper to visitors. Now we saw what he meant! Time flew as we enjoyed the finest possible views to within ten yards range. This was perhaps the most memorable birding moment of the holiday, vying with the Levant Sparrowhawk versus Golden Oriole "dogfight" over Hagieni Forest. In the afternoon we drove up onto a grassy sheep-grazed plateau of the Bucegi massif at an altitude of about six thousand feet. Here Water Pipit was much the commonest bird; Tree Pipits sang from the tops of the highest Spruces on the tree line and Eurasian Linnets dashed among the rocks. After a little searching Alpine Accentors were found, foraging near the top station of a cable-car. On the forest edge we found the remarkably pale race of Ring Ouzel in some numbers, also Common Crossbills and several Spotted Nutcrackers.

Day 9: Our final day in Romania gave us the chance to do some morning birding on some different paths in and near the forest. The forests around Sinaia were remarkable, with plenty of fallen trees and some enormous specimens of Beech and Norway Spruce. We were now in the company of James's Romanian-born wife Elena, as easy on the eye as she was sharp-eyed. It was she who found us a very fine male Collared Flycatcher, just behind the old Royal summer palace of Peles Castle. There was a brief view of a Hawfinch. All too soon it was time to load up for the hour-and-a-half journey to Bucharest airport and our British Airways flight home.

Summary: This first Birdfinders tour to Romania was certainly a great success. A total of 165 bird species were encountered; almost all of these were well seen although a very few were heard only. This was despite missing such key species as Lesser Spotted Eagle, any owl, Short-toed Lark, Black-headed (Yellow) Wagtail, Sombre, Marsh and Willow Tit, either treecreeper, Paddyfield Warbler, Black-headed Bunting - all of them mysterious omissions. Transport was good - a newish western European minibus with room for far more than our small group. There were some very potholed roads in the coast area but much evidence of work being done to improve matters here so subsequent Birdfinders groups should not be shaken as badly! The accommodation was good - perhaps better than many had anticipated. Much the same can be said of the food, especially the buffet picnic lunches which far exceeded all expectations. The weather could have been expected to have been better - and usually is in May. With higher temperatures and less cloud cover we could have expected more species. Whilst it is not primarily a "lister's" destination, Romania provides some first-class birding and a glimpse of some excellent habitat and delightful landscapes. There is not the network of local birders passing on information about "finds" as happens in Britain. The tour depends upon research by James and his associates. Birdfinders tours in subsequent years can be fairly confident of adding Lesser Spotted Eagle, Scops Owl, Sombre Tit, Paddyfield Warbler, Short-toed Lark, Pied Wheatear, and have a reasonable chance of seeing Ural Owl, Alpine Swift, White-backed and possibly Three-toed Woodpeckers.