

ROMANIA
THE DANUBE DELTA &
DOBRUDJA PLAIN
28TH MAY - 4TH JUNE 2005
TOUR REPORT



CELTIC BIRD TOURS
&
GLAMORGAN BIRD CLUB

TOUR LEADER

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PARTICIPANTS

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28TH

The group met at London Heathrow except Gerry who was meeting us upon arrival in Bucharest. Our flight left slightly late and was held up by thunderstorms over Romania and we eventually landed approximately 40 minutes late. We met with Gerry and Marian who accompanied us on the five hour journey to Tulcea.

The first birds of the trip were noted as we travelled and our first stop for a drink at Cazanisti produced White Stork, Green Woodpecker, Black-crowned Night Herons, Lesser Grey Shrikes, Hooded Crow, a very obliging Honey Buzzard, Hobby and Eurasian Sparrowhawk. We left just as a tremendous thunderstorm struck the town that also produced forked lightning. A little further down the road, our driver was stopped by the local police for speeding - it's the same the world over!

A twenty minute stop at Lake Hasarlic produced some excellent roadside birding. Five Bee-Eaters flew over the bus, a pair of Golden Orioles chased each other over the forest, a couple of Hoopoes showed briefly and a displaying male Little Bittern was seen well. On the lake a couple of Common Terns, Great Crested Grebes, Ferruginous Ducks and Pochard showed well and a Purple Heron flew over.

Moving on, we added more Lesser Grey Shrikes from the bus, a couple of Red-footed Falcons, a small flock of Rose-coloured Starlings, our first European Rollers and two Red-backed Shrikes before we arrived in Tulcea as the sun was setting.

The Hotel Select was better than anticipated, with large rooms and served an excellent meal, though the air conditioning did little to reduce the stifling heat. We met our guide Eugen for a brief chat about what lay ahead before retiring after a long days travelling.

29TH

Sometimes, birding throws up one of those days that sticks in the memory forever. This was most definitely three of those days! It is almost impossible to describe the experience that we had, but as we found out during the whole of our stay, the Danube Delta is an incredible place and that this was no coincidence. After a while, the numbers of birds we encountered became meaningless, as we struggled to try and count each individual of each species and these numbers are therefore probably very conservative estimates, bearing in mind that our attention was constantly being drawn to other birds!

We began by transferring to the motor boat until lunchtime on day one, when we boarded the floating hotel that was to be our base for the next six nights.

The weather was very hot with clear blue skies throughout our stay and this undoubtedly enhanced the experience, as birds were active, though it may have been a different story in poor weather.

We began with a very showy Syrian Woodpecker that perched in the riverside trees as we boarded and things just went from there really and a short land based walk later on day one produced excellent views of both Olivaceous and Icterine Warblers and a further three Syrian Woodpeckers.

In between, we drifted through channels filled with water lilies and willow trees and reed beds the size of counties in the UK, as well as steaming along the Danube proper before mooring in places for the night that produced incredible cacophonies of sound from birds, frogs and insects. Such pristine wetlands are rare indeed and the whole of the delta is a UNESCO biosphere reserve, the scale of which has to be seen to be believed.

The first squadrons of White Pelicans thermalled over the skies, totalling 100 or so and small numbers of Dalmatian Pelicans were later found amongst them. Much of the interest in the reed beds and lakes was provided by herons and today's totals were approximately as follows: Purple Heron [70+], Great White Egret [35+], Black-crowned Night Heron [100+], Squacco Heron [45+], Little Bittern [10] and Glossy Ibis [100+]. In addition, at least 200 Mute Swans, 150 Great Cormorants and at least 200 Pygmy Cormorants were noted. At least 400 Whiskered Terns were seen in various flocks, 30 or so Red-necked Grebes included several feeding young chicks and smaller numbers of Common Terns were also present. Amazing counts of 25 Golden Orioles, five Hoopoes, five Black Woodpeckers, three Grey-headed Woodpeckers were more than many of the group had ever seen before, and all showed really well, but this was truly dwarfed by the number of Rollers that were seen - we stopped counting at 100, but it was probably more like 150 and they were seen displaying, feeding or just resting on wires almost every time you looked away from the water - a truly incredible experience... Up to 20 Marsh Harriers patrolled the skies and an adult and second year White-tailed Eagles sent flocks of birds in all directions as they circled over the reeds, giving excellent views. A couple of Savi's Warblers showed well as did half a dozen Bearded Tits and later four White-winged and one Black Tern graced the skies as we watched two distant White-tailed Eagles perched on an enormous nest. Ferruginous Ducks and Common Pochard were constantly flushed by the boat and large numbers of Yellow-legged Gulls were joined by a few Black-headed and two Mediterranean Gulls.

Flocks of Red-footed Falcons dashed across the skies in courtship routines or feeding forays from their waterside colonies and probably totalled 100 or so birds, with smaller, but significant numbers of Hobbies also noted. Two Green Sandpipers were a surprise, a Water Rail showed very briefly and every bush or wire held a Cuckoo with 250 estimated to have been seen today! A few Kingfishers flashed by the boat in an explosion of colour and we also saw or heard good numbers of Great Reed Warblers, Common Redstarts and Garden Warblers and two flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings amounted to about 60 in total. Five Great Bitterns were heard, but not seen and a couple of Eurasian Spoonbills and White Storks were also noted. Finally, three Baillon's Crakes were heard calling alongside the boat after dinner, but as is usually always the case, they couldn't be found, but nobody was in the remotest bit disappointed after a magnificent birding experience.

30TH

Another scorching day, spent birding from both the motor boat and the floating hotel. It's often the case that one outstanding day can lead to a couple of day's disappointment after such a wealth of birds - no such problem here!

While some species were undoubtedly present in smaller numbers than yesterday; Cuckoo [100], Roller [32], Whiskered Tern [130+] and Glossy Ibis [73] others were counted in higher numbers including Great White Egret [54], White-winged Black Tern [22], White Pelican [329] and Dalmatian Pelican [11].

We again heard Baillon's Crake after breakfast, but as expected didn't see any and despite extensive searching along the banks of water lilies, we couldn't find any Little Crakes either. The delta looked glorious and we soon added Pygmy Cormorant [167], Black-crowned Night Herons [68], Purple Heron [76], Squacco Heron [80], Marsh Harrier [22] and Great Reed Warbler [22] as we steamed along. - Its hard work this birding from boats! We counted 24 Savi's Warblers and our first five Sedge Warblers and a couple of Reed Warblers, whilst 75 Ferruginous Ducks was a very good count. Two White Spotted Bluethroat showed very well as they sang and a couple of Icterine Warblers were also noted as we moored on a small backwater. The highlight here though was a pair of Penduline Tits that were feeding young in the incredible dome shaped nest at very close range; we also saw several others along the route. We moored in the late morning at Letea, where four Red-backed Shrikes, seven Hoopoes, a pair of Black Redstarts were present and our first Blue-headed Wagtail was found perched on a garden post. Another Syrian Woodpecker was found and we also added three Northern Wheatears, along with more Red-footed Falcons, Hobbies and Icterine Warblers.

We chugged back for lunch before sailing down the Danube to Caroroman, where we moored for the evening. Cores more herons, egrets and ibises could be added to the totals above and we counted 26 Eurasian Spoonbills, 11 Garganey, a Greenshank, Syrian and Grey-headed Woodpeckers en route, along with a lone Red-necked Grebe, Gadwall, Common Terns, Yellow-legged Gulls and very good numbers of House Martins and Barn Swallows. We took a short excursion to a Sand Martin colony and also to a Mediterranean type Salinas, where a few pairs of Avocets and Black-winged Stilts were added to the tour list. A couple of Wheatears were also noted here and a flock of six White Pelicans waddled out to roost on some grass; the first we had seen on land and it was only now that the true size of the se birds was evident. Two Curlew Sandpipers were resplendent in breeding plumage and these were joined by a group of eight Little Stints.

Six drake Red Crested Pochard were noted on the lake next to our mooring spot and large numbers of Whiskered Terns were breeding here. We watched a fabulous sunset while eating yet another delicious meal while our wildlife serenade continued outside.

31ST

Following an al fresco breakfast, we set off on the long journey back to Tulcea on another very hot day. As ever, herons, egrets, ibises, terns and Cormorants accompanied us all along the route. We also added a couple of trip ticks in the form of a Spotted Flycatcher perched on a village side wire [well done John!] and three Ringed Plovers on an island in the river. A very distant White-tailed Eagle was perched on a small dung heap, a Black-tailed Godwit posed obligingly, small flocks of pelicans and several Garganey and Kingfisher were also noted.

We took the small boat out for an hour or so, visiting a channel with remarkable numbers of Squacco Herons - 150+.

We also found a large mixed Whiskered and Black Tern colony on the lily pads and at least 20 pairs of stunning Black-necked Grebes were present. Good numbers of Ferruginous Ducks and Pochard included a lone male Tufted Duck - a good bird for Romania! A flock of 200 or so White Pelicans circled overhead as we made our way to a floating island. Searching for passerines from a boat isn't the easiest way to find them, but we did reasonably well, finding our first Blackcap of the trip that was mobbing a pair of Red-backed Shrikes, and Olivaceous Warbler that showed very briefly and we heard more Garden and Icterine Warblers. One or two Golden Orioles flew out across the water to an adjacent island and we also saw our first Blackbird, having previously heard a couple.

The remainder of the day was spent steaming along the Danube and in truth it was rather quiet compared to the bird fest we had enjoyed over the previous couple of days. However, quiet here was relative and we still saw good numbers of Rollers, Red-necked Grebes, a couple of Honey Buzzards and all the usual wetland species. Small groups of Swifts were new for the tour and these in turn attracted a Red-footed Falcon or two and a few Hobbies, and several hoopoes were also seen. A large, long-billed gull that took off from the water in front of the boat was almost certainly an adult Caspian Gull, but the views were too brief and inconclusive to claim it as a definite, but with a paler mantle than a Yellow-legged Gull and no Herring Gulls in the area, it's hard to see what else it could have been - sadly for once the boat worked against us, as it was this that flushed it off the water.

We passed the Romanian Naval Fleet as we entered Tulcea and one or two managed to see a male Black Redstart as it hopped from ship to ship. We arrived just as dusk fell after ten hours sailing at full steam.

1ST

Our first day of land based birding was met with a stiff and cool northerly breeze, overcast skies and the probability of rain - a bit of a shock after the previous three days. As it happens, it stayed dry as we birded the first areas of the massive Dobrudja Plain.

Our first stop was at Samova, where we enjoyed close up views of Bee-Eaters at a colony and two small flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings. Roller, White Stork, Hobby and our first Sky Lark were also noted here and at a site nearby, we saw our first Lesser Whitethroat, Corn Buntings and Linnets. Several Lesser Grey Shrikes were feeding young and we also encountered Turtle Doves, Golden Orioles and our first Long-legged Buzzard, which hovered roadside as we passed. Finally, an Icterine Warbler frustrated the group by singing loudly above our heads, but showed only very briefly and a male Kestrel was seen carrying a Lizard in its talons.

We moved the short distance to Teleta; an area of sparsely wooded hillside and which provided some excellent birding. Three singing male Ortolans and a couple of Wood Larks perched up in one tree; a supremely obliging Tawny Pipit was in another, while four Hoopoes showed well in the general area.

We moved to the opposite side of the hill for some raptor watching, which despite the by now chilly and very dull skies, provided us with plenty of activity. Seven Long-legged Buzzards, six Honey Buzzards, a large female Goshawk, a Common Buzzard and a very obliging pale morph Booted Eagle kept everyone looking skywards, but we couldn't find our main target bird - Levant's Sparrowhawk.

A couple of Wrynecks showed very well, as did several Red-backed Shrikes, a couple of Hawfinches flew over calling, another Wood Lark perched up obligingly and a Grey-headed Woodpecker flew over as we headed for the bus and lunch. We drove the very short distance to Celic Dere, had just stopped the bus and poured the coffee, when Ann called a couple of raptors. Lunch was abandoned as we enjoyed tremendous views of two Black Kites. Amazingly, another smaller raptor began mobbing them.

This bird had a jizz somewhere between a Sparrowhawk, a falcon and a miniature Honey Buzzard and before long, we realised that we were watching a female Levant Sparrowhawk - fantastic and as it turned out our only one of the tour, well done Ann!! Lunch was an excitable affair after this stroke of good fortune as we discussed the species finer points, and as we left, we also saw a male Stonechat and more Hoopoes. A roadside stop at Jijila produced another Tawny Pipit and our first Crested Larks and nearby a dark morph Booted Eagle flew over the bus. Several more Long-legged Buzzards were also noted as we travelled.

We arrived at Macin in the late afternoon, where the gorge produced brief but very acceptable views of a pair of Pied Wheatears, a family party of Black Redstarts and at least 15 Isabelline Wheatears. A flyover Calandra Lark was not seen by all and unfortunately neither was a brief Eagle Owl that was disturbed from a roost site while searching for a very unco-operative Barred Warbler. Thankfully, all got on to the three Rock Thrushes that were seen here, including a very showy male that allowed us to scope it up as it sat on a rock and then a fence wire before flying off into the rocks - fantastic!

At Greci, several more Isabelline and Northern Wheatears were seen side by side, and a Stone Curlew gave flight views as it flew, calling past the bus before it disappeared into the steppe. We saw good numbers of Souslik here, a Quail was heard, but as almost always, not seen and a male Blackbird showed briefly. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew out of the gorge, scattering huge numbers of hirundines, which enabled Wayne to pick out our only Red-rumped Swallow of the tour. A couple of Syrian Woodpeckers were also seen here, but we had to admit defeat as there was no sign of any Saker which breed in the area; though we did see the nest crag. As we left, a flock of Spanish Sparrows in roadside Poplars called for an abrupt stop and the journey back to Tulcea was a succession of Lesser Grey & Red-backed Shrikes, Turtle Doves, Rollers and the odd Corn Bunting. Despite the conditions, it had been a superb introduction to the land based part of the tour.

2ND

Another hot, sunny day. Our first stop was at Denis Tepe - not a second division Romanian footballer, but an area of steppe that produced good numbers of Calandra Larks, a couple of Short-toed Larks and our first Black-headed Wagtails. Also noted here were a couple of Long-legged Buzzards, Sky Larks and Tawny Pipits.

It was hot as we stopped Babadag Forest, where Song Thrush and Wood Warblers were heard but not seen and where a male Middle Spotted Woodpecker showed very well. Sadly, there was no sign of any Red-breasted Flycatchers. Both Honey and Common Buzzards flew over, an Icterine Warbler showed briefly and a Golden Oriole sang.

By late morning, we arrived at Histria - what a place!!! Flocks of Collared Pratincole hawked the marsh, and there may have been a Black-winged amongst them, but the strong light made certain identification impossible. Avocets, Black-winged Stilts and Kentish Plovers all had chicks and migrant shorebirds included 15 Little Stint, 14 Black-tailed Godwits and at least five elegant Marsh Sandpipers. Ruddy Shelducks, Red Crested Pochards, Garganey, Greylag Geese and our first Shovelers of the trip provided the wildfowl interest. A large flock of 300 or so White Pelicans and three Dalmatians drifted over, an adult Mediterranean Gull flew through the haze and a small colony of Little Terns was present. A couple of Gull-billed Terns were seen initially in flight and then resting on the sand and good numbers of Common Shelducks were on an island. Other species noted included three Little Bitterns, Great Reed Warbler, Hoopoe, Isabelline Wheatear and a heard Savi's Warbler. The star bird here though was a Paddyfield Warbler that after it had given outstanding views, decided it wanted to try and join us in the minibus as we left - superb!! Another five or six were seen earlier, but not so well in the keen breeze.

We headed to the lagoons at Vardu on the Black Sea, and were in for another absolute treat. Two drake Teal were new for the tour, a flock of 250 Little Gulls swam in the brackish water, where up to 25 breeding plumaged Curlew Sandpipers and 10 Little Stints were also present. More Black-winged Stilts, Avocets and Marsh Sandpipers [15+] fed amongst a large mixed colony of Collared Pratincoles and Common Terns that all went noisily skywards as a Marsh Harrier flew over. Three Sandwich terns were also present here and a couple of Rollers rounded things off here. Driving out to the sea, we encountered a flock or family party of Hoopoes, which numbered at least seven birds and which gave fantastic close up views. Two Grey Plovers were on the shoreline, as were small numbers of Kentish Plovers, whilst a Black-throated Diver on the sea was a major surprise given the time of year. Streams of Great Cormorants were flying out to sea and an offshore fishery had small numbers of perched White Pelicans, but the main interest here was provided by a large gull that was seen by all except Eugen. The combination of plumage features and a process of elimination meant that only one species was possible and all were happy to accept the bird as a first summer Pallas's Gull - a tick for most and a rare visitor to the Black Sea. An excellent record and a magnificent bird to round off a magnificent day. The drive home produced more Calandra Larks and good numbers of Lesser Grey Shrikes - they really are common here!

3RD

Our final day began with clear skies and no wind and gradually warmed up throughout the day. Our first stop was at an area of steppe outside Babadag Forest, where we were soon watching the regular shrikes, Honey Buzzard, Crested Larks, Hoopoe and a fly over Steppe Buzzard. A juvenile Lesser Spotted Eagle by the roadside was very obliging before dropping behind a ridge. We moved a short distance where we had good views of Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipits, Isabelline Wheatears, a male Ortolan, while a fly past Nuthatch was new for the tour. A Black Kite showed very well before being mobbed by Hooded Crows and drifted behind a hill. At Beduad, we added a second Lesser Spotted eagle and more Lesser Grey Shrikes and Tawny Pipits.

We took a roadside lunch at Cheia Gorge and were soon enjoying superb views of displaying pairs of Pied Wheatears, alongside Northern Wheatears for comparison. A Short-toed Eagle patrolled the sky right above our heads, a couple of Cuckoos chased

each other around the rocks and very close adult Long-legged Buzzard allowed scope views as it perched on a rock, with several others seen soaring over the forest.

A Balkan Green Lizard was seen in short grass and a Jay flew over the gorge. A couple of the group saw a Nightingale, with others heard and Kestrels flew back and forth among the crags feeding unseen young. Two male Blackbirds and a Song Thrush were also seen here.

At Gura Dobrogoa, we enjoyed spectacular views of a displaying male Barred Warbler, accompanied by a Red-backed Shrike and a male Sparrowhawk caused a flutter as it drifted overhead - not a Levant's though! Bee-Eaters were actively feeding overhead in the hot sun and several Lesser Grey Shrikes were gathering food, whilst we also enjoyed good views of another Short-toed Eagle and Long-legged Buzzards. A Golden Hamster ran across the track in front of the bus and many Souseliks were seen here, as was a Whip Snake that quickly slithered off a bridge into the long grass.

At another area of steppe, a couple of Marsh Harriers were joined by two 'ringtails' and after intense study for an hour or so, we were able to clinch the identification of both birds as immature female Pallid Harriers, based on a number of field characteristics, but also by jizz for those more experienced with Montagu's Harrier. Very good numbers of Calandra and Short-toed Larks here included displaying birds and a Hobby flew quickly through.

We ended the day again at Babadag Forest, but were unable to find any Sombre Tits - just a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Blackbird showed. Once again, we had enjoyed a tremendous day's birding in this remarkable country. We said our farewells to Eugen this evening as we were entertained, and I use that word loosely, by a couple of local musicians, free jugs of wine and an exploding cake!! It doesn't get much better than this!

4TH

We left the boat at 08.00 and following an uneventful journey with the same stops as our first day [similar birds too], we arrived at Otopeni Airport in Bucharest right on time for the flight, which also took off on time. One disappointment was the lack of any decent shops at the airport and this is something that should be remembered for future tours - get your souvenirs elsewhere if possible.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

- 1 Black-throated Diver
- 2 Little Grebe
- 3 Great Crested Grebe
- 4 Red-necked Grebe
- 5 Black-necked Grebe
- 6 White Pelican
- 7 Dalmatian Pelican
- 8 Great Cormorant
- 9 Pygmy Cormorant
- 10 Great Bittern
- 11 Little Bittern
- 12 Black-crowned Night Heron
- 13 Squacco Heron
- 14 Little Egret
- 15 Great White Egret
- 16 Grey Heron

17 Purple Heron
18 White Stork
19 Glossy Ibis
20 Eurasian Spoonbill
21 Mute Swan
22 Greylag Goose
23 Common Shelduck
24 Ruddy Shelduck
25 Mallard
26 Gadwall
27 Northern Shoveler
28 Eurasian Teal
29 Garganey
30 Common Pochard
31 Red Crested Pochard
32 Ferruginous Duck
33 Tufted Duck
34 White-tailed Eagle
35 Lesser Spotted Eagle
36 Short-toed Eagle
37 Booted Eagle
38 Black Kite
39 Marsh Harrier
40 Pallid Harrier
41 Long-legged Buzzard
42 Common Buzzard
43 Honey Buzzard
44 Eurasian Sparrowhawk
45 Levant Sparrowhawk
46 Northern Goshawk
47 Common Kestrel
48 Red-footed Falcon
49 Eurasian Hobby
50 Quail [H]
51 Common Pheasant
52 Water Rail
53 Baillon's Crake [H]
54 Moorhen
55 Common Coot
56 Pied Avocet
57 Black-winged Stilt
58 Stone Curlew
59 Collared Pratincole
60 Ringed Plover
61 Kentish Plover
62 Grey Plover
63 Northern Lapwing
64 Curlew Sandpiper
65 Little Stint
66 Green Sandpiper
67 Common Redshank
68 Greenshank
69 Marsh Sandpiper
70 Black-tailed Godwit
71 Ruff

72 Black-headed Gull
73 Mediterranean Gull
74 Yellow-legged Gull
75 Pallas's Gull
76 Little Gull
77 Little Tern
78 Sandwich Tern
79 Gull-billed Tern
80 Common Tern
81 Black Tern
82 White-winged Black Tern
83 Whiskered Tern
84 Feral Pigeon
85 Stock Dove
86 Wood Pigeon
87 Collared Dove
88 Turtle Dove
89 Common Cuckoo
90 Eagle Owl
91 Common Swift
92 Hoopoe
93 Common Kingfisher
94 European Bee-Eater
95 European Roller
96 Black Woodpecker
97 Green Woodpecker
98 Grey-headed Woodpecker
99 Great Spotted Woodpecker
100 Syrian Woodpecker
101 Middle Spotted Woodpecker
102 Wryneck
103 Sky Lark
104 Crested Lark
105 Wood Lark
106 Short-toed Lark
107 Calandra Lark
108 Sand Martin
109 Barn Swallow
110 Red-rumped Swallow
111 House Martin
112 Tawny Pipit
113 White Wagtail
114 Yellow Wagtail
115 Nightingale
116 Thrush Nightingale [H]
117 White Spotted Bluethroat
118 Common Redstart
119 Black Redstart
120 Northern Wheatear
121 Isabelline Wheatear
122 Pied Wheatear
123 Stonechat
124 Rock Thrush
125 Song Thrush

126 Blackbird
127 Barred Warbler
128 Garden Warbler [H]
129 Blackcap
130 Lesser Whitethroat
131 Sedge Warbler
132 Savi's Warbler
133 Reed Warbler
134 Paddyfield Warbler
135 Great Reed Warbler
136 Icterine Warbler
137 Olivaceous Warbler
138 Wood Warbler [H]
139 Chiffchaff [H]
140 Spotted Flycatcher
141 Great Tit
142 Blue Tit
143 Long-tailed Tit [H]
144 Bearded Tit
145 Penduline Tit
146 Nuthatch
147 Red-backed Shrike
148 Lesser Grey Shrike
149 Black-billed Magpie
150 Eurasian Jay
151 Jackdaw
152 Rook
153 Hooded Crow
154 Common Starling
155 Rose-coloured Starling
156 Golden Oriole
157 House Sparrow
158 Tree Sparrow
159 Spanish Sparrow
160 Chaffinch
161 Linnet
162 Goldfinch
163 Greenfinch
164 Hawfinch
165 Reed Bunting
166 Ortolan Bunting
167 Corn Bunting

OTHER WILDLIFE

Marsh Frog
Edible Frog
Whip Snake
Souslik
Brown Hare
Water Buffalo
Red Fox
Sand Lizard
Balkan Green Lizard
Water Terrapin

Medicinal Leech
Grass Snake
Water Snake
Meadow Brown
Painted Lady
Common Blue
Broad-bodied Chaser
Banded Demoiselle
Caddis Fly
Grey Hamster

Large numbers of unidentified dragonflies were also noted and one or two species of fritillary also remained unidentified.