



# Honeyguide

## WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Romania, 10 – 21 June 2017  
Danube Delta and the Carpathians

### **Participants**

Jean Dunn  
Wendy Corben  
Mary Laurie-Pile and Brian Austin  
Ian Holmes  
Michael and Jean Bishop  
Barry and Denise Madden

### **Leaders**

This holiday is run in partnership with Ibis Tours [www.ibis-tours.ro](http://www.ibis-tours.ro) and the leaders were Eugen Petrescu in the Danube Delta and Dobrogea area, with botanist Mihai Petrescu, and Laurentiu Petrencu in the Carpathians.

Report, wildlife lists and photos by Barry Madden; all photos were taken on this holiday.

Cover: white pelicans in the Danube Delta; meadow in the Carpathians.

Below: group photo taken in the Carpathians, so missing two group members who returned to the UK after Danube Delta and Dobrogea, and Delta sunset.



As with all Honeyguide holidays, part of the price was put towards a local conservation project, in this case for Falco Cherrug ('the saker'), a young naturalists' group which is providing the delta's conservationists for the future. The group is run by Eugen Petrescu, the Romanian Ornithological Society's representative in the delta who this year was also one of our holiday leaders from Ibis. This year's conservation contribution of £40 per person was supplemented by gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, resulting in a donation of £370 and bringing the total given in Romania since the first Honeyguide holiday here in 1999 to £6,812. To July 2017 the total for all conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 is £117,457.



Romania: what does it conjure up for you? A country torn apart by world wars and communist rule? Romany gypsies in colourful carts? Impossibly slight and supple gymnasts of the mid-1970s? Transylvanian castles haunted by vampires? Well, quite possibly all of these; we'll explore some of that later. But most importantly as far as this report is concerned, it is also home to some amazing wildlife, has stunning and diverse scenery, good cuisine, fine wines, friendly, accommodating people and many miles of unmolested and unspoiled wetland, steppe and coast. Let's go and take a closer look.



## DAILY DIARY

### Day 1, Saturday 10 June 2017 – Stansted to Tulcea

A slight technical fault, 'Nothing to worry about ladies and gentlemen', resulted in us nine Honeyguiders missing our allotted departure slot from Stansted to arrive in Bucharest 90 minutes later than scheduled. We were met by representatives from Ibis Tours, our specialist ground agents and hosts, and were shortly whisked away across the great central Romanian plain in a slightly north-easterly direction towards our rendezvous point with the Ibis floating hotel at Tulcea. The journey of some 280k took a little over 4½ hours and because of the delayed arrival we had no time for birding stops, just the one break for a cuppa and loos. The landscape on the first leg of the journey was one of a seemingly never-ending parade of large agricultural fields growing oil-seed rape, sunflowers and wheat. The landscape was reminiscent of the East Anglian fens, but on an altogether vaster scale. Wildlife spotting was not easy, however the lucky ones among us (those either with a window seat and/or on the right side of the minibus) managed to clock up a few bird species; white stork, roller, common buzzard, several kestrels and a fleeting glimpse of a little owl. A good start, we thought.



White stork and roller: both seen on the journey to Tulcea.

Once safely at the dockside in Tulcea we transferred to the floating hotel. After tentatively downing the welcome drink – a local concoction that made your toes curl – and with our cases in our allotted cabins, we reconvened to enjoy a sumptuous dinner. After dinner Eugen, our guide and entertaining dining companion for the duration of our stay in the Danube Delta, explained the itinerary for the forthcoming days by way of mapping our planned route on a wall chart. It sounded exciting. Whiskered terns, Caspian gulls and swallows could be watched from the comfort of the dining room or later on deck where we were able to witness the sunset, spread golden across the skyline of the city. Welcome to the Honeyguide 2017 holiday in Romania.

### Day 2, Sunday 11 June 2017 – Danube Delta

Today dawned bright and sunny as we headed out from the overnight docking point into the delta. Breakfast; cereal, cheeses, meats, eggs, bread and delicious homemade jams was taken on the move, watching the hub that is the Danube come to life. The initial traffic of cruise boats and working barges tailed off and disappeared altogether as we entered the quieter, less frequented area.

Once safely moored in a channel in the northern section of the delta, we boarded the day boat to explore the quiet waterways of this immense wetland wonderland. It is hard to think of a more relaxing way to discover the secret delights of this vast network of reed-fringed, lily-lined, channels, pools and lakes. Perched at the front of the boat in the sultry heat emanating from a fierce June sun, the full wealth of wildlife inhabiting this mosaic of fens, marshes, dry islands and lakes could be appreciated. Birds were the most obvious creatures; huge numbers of white pelicans soaring in the heavens on two-metre wingspans, squacco herons, many sporting gorgeous breeding livery, springing from every patch of lilies, rollers swooped across our path, their startling blues and russets drawing gasps of delight while pygmy cormorants, whiskered terns, red-necked grebes, ferruginous ducks and iridescent kingfishers provided a supporting cast. Above it all sailed majestic white-tailed eagles, surveying their vast domain on impressively huge wings.

Kingfishers featured heavily in the first section of our near silent cruise. Steep, muddy banks provided ideal nesting sites for several pairs that delighted all as they allowed close approach before arrowing away in a bolt of sapphire blue. One interesting aspect of birding in foreign lands, I think, is the realisation that species that may be difficult to find at home can sometimes be prolific abroad; so commonly encountered as not to merit a second glance from the locals. Such it was with these kingfishers; drawing 'oohs' and 'aahs' from the tourists but simple smiling indulgence from the guides.

Of course it's never just about birds. All around us danced dragonflies, butterflies and myriad aquatic insects. Marsh frogs hopped from lily pad to lily pad in search of mates and to see off rivals. Their high-pitched croaks and whistles were to be a heavy feature of nights to come. A dice snake wriggled alongside the boat for a few seconds and flowering plants provided some interesting identification challenges. A close scrutiny of books compared against photographs would help solve the mysteries during afternoon downtime.



Squacco heron; ferruginous ducks.

2pm: Lunch. Taken aboard the mothership with which we rendezvoused at another location, that vessel having moved during the morning to meet us. Very efficient. The heat of midday lent itself to a couple of hours of soporific relaxation before we once more embarked the day boat to explore another branch of the river system. Here with the sun losing some of its intensity and slowly throwing a softer, warmer light over the watery world we traversed, we could really appreciate how unspoiled and prolific this area was. Floating noiselessly along traffic-free canals you could be forgiven for thinking you had entered another world. A secret world of gently rippling water, carpeted with flowering yellow lilies where fish played and dragonflies danced. Highlights of this outing were approachable black-crowned night heron, purple heron, lovely singing male redstarts and rollers actually rolling in the sky above us as they chased dragonflies alongside starlings and gulls.

We returned to the mothership in time to have a quick shower before dinner at 8pm. Another sumptuous meal washed down with very pleasant local wines. Conversation was lively, funny and interesting; the group had already gelled very well.

### Day 3, Monday 12 June 2017 – Danube Delta

A different aspect of the delta today with a morning visit to dry land, an area of sand dunes in fact upon which a now derelict mineral works leaves an ugly scar. During the communist period under Ceaușescu, a scheme was hatched whereby minerals could be mined and loaded to barges at this point. Huge cranes were put in place but were never commissioned and have since been removed. The works was abandoned before ever becoming fully operational and the shell of the factory left to crumble. As is often the case however, nature has moved in to use what remains, so now swallows, kestrels, wagtails and sparrows chirrup and twitter pleasantly about the place bringing some beauty to what would otherwise be a simple square of ugly concrete.

Between the abandoned factory and the village of Caraorman there are some shallow embanked ponds with a number of raised islands, this was our main target for the next couple of hours. A different cast had assembled here meaning we added several ticks to our already quite impressive bird list. The most obvious inhabitants were breeding black-winged stilts and avocets boldly mobbing us and any other perceived threat to their fluffy young. Bee-eaters – can you ever tire of them? – ‘thripped’ overhead while several ducks including a pair of splendid garganeys hid among the emergent vegetation. Little gulls, Caspian terns, greenshank (seen by half the group) and lapwings vied for our attention with some excellent cardinal fritillaries and carder bees sipping nectar from the large pinkish/purple heads of thistles. Eugen told us of his ideas to enhance the site to raise water levels to prevent predation from mammals, including the local villagers. However he concluded that any such work would only serve to draw undue attention to the area which could exacerbate existing problems. Best to leave alone perhaps and maintain a low profile.

One instance that sticks in my mind is of walking back to the boat when large shadows swept across the ground around us. Gazing upwards we were able to witness the impressive sight of both white and Dalmatian pelicans soaring across the white orb of the fierce midday sun. There's not many occasions when I've been alerted to a bird by having its shadow interrupt my progress.



Once back aboard the day boat, we went about the task of locating a penduline tit's nest. Eugen knows every nest site along the waterways and was able to take us to a wonderfully constructed nest where the adults were busy feeding young. The male bird gave splendid views as it sang to see off a rival. Such colourful birds these, looking for all the world like miniature red-backed shrikes and one that perhaps is destined to colonise the UK before much longer. I hope so. Next up was a little bittern site where the female of the pair eventually played the game having been lured into sight by a recording of the male's barking love call. Everybody's happy so off back to the mothership for lunch.

During our meal the tug pulled the boat for an hour or so to another location from where we boarded the day boat for a ride along some quiet, willow- and poplar-lined canals looking for woodpeckers. With the aid of lures playing woodpecker calls we eventually had fantastic close views of both black woodpecker and grey-headed woodpecker perching in overhead trees looking around enquiringly for the non-existent interloper. Impressive birds and life sightings for most of the group.



Night heron; Dalmatian pelican; penduline tit.

After another excellent dinner we watched the sun set in a blaze of glorious golds and reds over the lake on the margins of which we had moored for the night. Later, the sultry heat meant windows were left open to allow some cooler air into the cabins resulting in a cacophony of frog chorus to flood in. Thousands of amphibians singing in some syncopated rhythm invading the aural senses. Sleep seemed impossible amid such a noise, but within no time the world outside faded and merged into our dreams.

#### **Day 4, Tuesday 13 June 2017 – Danube Delta**

After the usual rather relaxed and civilised routine of breakfast at 8, we boarded the day boat at 9am for our final excursion into the delta. The first half of the morning was spent slowly chugging across a shallow lake where, in the distance, large numbers of whiskered terns were nesting. Unfortunately, but quite correctly, we were not allowed to get very close to the colony but compensation was on offer with a very obliging fishing party of white pelicans. One of these individuals sported full breeding garb including, there's no other way to say this, a bright red knob on its bill. The pelicans, together with their acolytes, pygmy cormorants, Caspian gulls and a few terns, were herding the fish before them. When satisfied sufficient mouthfuls had accumulated, the birds would dip their heads into the water in a synchronised ballet scooping up the poor fish before they knew what had hit them. Any stray morsel would be gulped down by the other birds. Not much escaped.



Pelicans with their 'acolytes'.

Eugen has a soft spot for the pelicans, which have become the iconic species for the delta. The birds are very vulnerable at their breeding colonies which in times past were visited by fisherman who at certain times went about systematic slaughter of the competition. The damage they caused was not limited to the squabs they got their hands on though, for when pelicans clumsily flee from their nesting grounds, eggs and small chicks get unceremoniously throw from the nest and perish. In essence a single disturbance from man can virtually wipe out a nesting colony. Happily in these more enlightened times the birds are strictly protected and numbers seem at least stable. Delta dwellers still regard these ultra-efficient fishermen as competition and always inflate their estimated numbers when authority calls. If it wasn't for the likes of Eugen and his team who provide a more balanced and scientific analysis who knows what mayhem would ensue.

In this regard the support Honeyguide provides is so much greater than the actual financial value; it provides the means for enlightenment, education and a long-term legacy. The team on the ground, Eugen and 'his boys and girls', are immensely grateful for the support and said so on numerous occasions.

During the course of the morning we were constantly admiring the large numbers of frogs hopping out of our way. Eugen took the calls to stop so we could watch them more closely a stage further than we anticipated. He produced a small fishing rod suspended from which was a bottle top on a string. When this brightly coloured, ultra-sophisticated tool was dangled over a lily pad the frogs simply couldn't resist, hopping towards it with great purpose. Of course they thought it was a tasty morsel to be consumed, but as a lesson in frog catching it was most instructive.

Our progress across the lake and beyond was hampered by an accumulation of an alien invasive pond weed that insisted on getting wrapped around the boat's propeller. It seems every sensitive wetland has issues with invasive plants. Here an invasive shrub imported from North America is stifling natural growth along the banks of the channels, and under the water itself explosive growth of weed chokes the waterways. There does not seem to be the will or resources to tackle this problem which will therefore only get worse.

The remainder of the morning was spent on dry land once again, walking along a raised dyke overlooking a large area of drier marsh and agricultural land. This region was drained with the help of Dutch engineers, much like the Fens of East Anglia, to create the classic polder. Although no longer open water, the habitat still contains fringes of wetland with some reed beds interspersed with small ponds. Stands of poplar provide nesting areas for golden orioles whose wolf-whistling call we frequently heard and one we saw.

One feature of the delta, most noticeable to us Brits, is the large number of cuckoos that can be encountered. The area is one of the most important for that species in the whole of Europe with the iconic calls of male birds an ever-present background noise. We were especially fortunate to spot the brown morph female on more than one occasion and to hear its strange bubbling call echoing among the willows. A rare privilege.



Cardinal; black woodpecker; lesser emperor dragonflies 'in cop'.

In this area we were also lucky to be able to watch a trio of red-footed falcons hawking dragonflies and to see a black woodpecker looping between the waterside trees.

It was then the turn of insects to engage our attention. The thistles proliferating among the long grasses played host to many cardinal fritillaries, Bath whites, several day-flying moths and large numbers of beautiful dragonflies. This diversion provided an interesting photographic challenge to those so inclined, just as much as a useful identification record as for the sheer pleasure of being able to capture the moment.

Our afternoon was spent aboard the mother ship as it was towed to a safe docking point a short distance from Tulcea. Some people bird-watched from the decks, white-tailed eagles being a highlight, some folk took time out to research the identity of plants or to complete their day lists. Others simply relaxed with a cool beer. After the evening meal we thanked the marvellous cook and all the staff for looking after us so well. The first leg of our trip had been a remarkable success with wonderful wildlife watching, beautifully serene days drifting among unfrequented waters and great company. Onwards to the second leg, the steppes, wetlands and beaches of Dobrogea.

#### **Day 5, Wednesday 14 June 2017 – Dobrogea – Măcin Mountains National Park**

Early this morning the tug pulled us into Tulcea, thus concluding the water-based element of the holiday. After breakfast we left our luggage for collection and boarded the minibus at 9am for our first excursion into the hinterland of Dobrogea.

First stop a high ridge overlooking the delta from where the immense size of the area we had been exploring for the previous few days could be appreciated. But there was much more to appreciate now, for the ridge and its resultant updrafts provided perfect conditions for hunting raptors. As we stood amid the waving grasses we became aware of a large bird of prey gliding overhead. This proved to be a simply gorgeous long-legged buzzard that entertained us for a few minutes during which we could note its essential characteristics: longer wings than common buzzard, extremely light almost white tail feathering with a distinct rufous terminal band, pale head sporting a hefty bill and rufous underparts. A gem of a bird.



Two impressive birds of prey: a long-legged buzzard and a plummeting pale phase booted eagle.

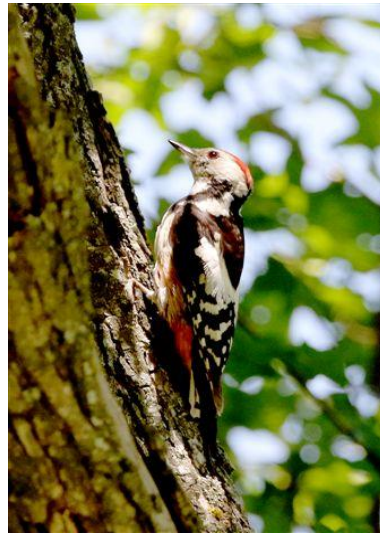
We hadn't long to wait before another impressive bird arrived in the form of a light-phase booted eagle tacking into the wind in its search for lizards, snakes or small mammals. We were even treated to a full dive, the bird tucking its wings tightly against its body to plummet earthwards, talons spread. But more was to come in the unmistakable, albeit distant, form of an immature white-tailed eagle mobbed by a crow that served only to exemplify its immense size and power. Such was the pull of this place that most of the group could have happily sat on the grass, letting the cooling breeze offset the effects of a strengthening sun to see what else would appear. But the itinerary didn't allow for such luxuries so reluctantly with many a wistful eye turned to the sky we returned to the minibus to continue our journey.

As we progressed along what are, by western standards, almost empty roads, the true rural nature of this area became apparent. Horse-drawn carts are commonplace and provide a means for villagers to get around and transport produce. The fields have margins where a mosaic of wildflowers can prosper: cornflower, poppy and ox-eye daisy all grow in profusion here. We stopped along a narrow lane and walked around the edge of a wheat field in the hope of locating a pair of barred warblers. We eventually saw the birds but not before we had sightings of corn bunting, red-backed shrike and heard a singing ortolan bunting. The flowers attracted butterflies, fritillaries and whites, and closer scrutiny of the stalks of wheat and flowers revealed myriad insect life; crickets, beetles, hoverflies among others.

Lunch was taken in the shade of resplendent oak and beech trees growing along a streamside in parkland adjacent to a nunnery. We hadn't stopped by chance as the area was a good spot for many birds especially woodpeckers. With the aid of a sound lure we persuaded middle spotted, great spotted and Syrian woodpeckers to make an appearance and also saw several hawfinches and an obliging icterine warbler. Out in an abandoned orchard we tracked down a wryneck. The day list was growing nicely.



We spent the afternoon in the Măcin Mountains National Park where the group walked up a shaded path before emerging at the foot of impressive rocky outcrops. A few hardy souls trudged on and upwards, scrambling over the scree and rocks in order to track down the elusive rock thrush that is sometimes seen here. Sadly no such bird was showing today although another fine long-legged buzzard was satisfactory compensation.



Syrian (left) and middle spotted (right) woodpeckers.

The final stop of the day was on an extensive area of rough grassland at the foot of the mountain range. Here we slowly cruised the tracks in search of wildlife suited to the habitat of dry, dusty ground, with barren patches sparsely cloaked in low growing grasses and lichens. First up a northern wheatear followed by a much paler bird sitting on a low stem – an isabelline wheatear no less. This was a good bird we thought and then we saw another, and another, until it seemed everywhere you looked pale, tawny-coloured wheatears were keeping a wary eye on us. We saw perhaps 15 of these birds beside the track, but many more must have been distributed across the site making it of great importance for the species. We stopped to stretch our legs in the shadow of scattered trees where more woodpeckers, including a grey-headed, eventually gave up and revealed themselves. Many goats were being herded by the farmers of this impoverished land making us realise how harsh it must be to eke a living here. Romania is still to our thinking a country yet to fully emerge into the modern world. And that, I think is a good thing, certainly for the wildlife.

A scan of the gently sloping fields threw up another long-legged buzzard with prey; a souslik that had been careless or unlucky. These prairie dogs were abundant and form the staple diet for eagles, other raptors and ground predators including jackals. But we were really looking for an altogether different inhabitant and after a slow scrutiny of every mound and rock we eventually espied a pair of stone-curlews – their classic white and black chequered wing coverts giving them away. Success!

It had been a long, tiring day in the field so we headed back to Tulcea to the Ibis Hotel which after the confines of the floating hotel provided much needed space to distribute our belongings. Then a quick shower and a hearty meal with much banter and laughter. The wine helped a little.

#### **Day 6, Thursday 15 June 2017 – Dobrogea**

Today was a day for botany; a refreshing change from the bird-heavy days so far. To assist us we had on board a specialist expert, Mihai Petrescu, whose knowledge of the local flora was profound.

We began by following the road eastwards from Tulcea, along the southern edge of the delta to Bestepe. Here we walked along the side of a hill with a commanding view of the town below to find out something about the plant life that resides in these chalky soils. I find with wildlife watching of any kind that the more you look, really look, the more you see. A simple enough concept, but it is only when you engage your senses fully that you move from simply seeing the big and showy to observing the smaller, sometimes incredibly intricate and beautiful smaller things; the tiny invertebrates for example, or the intricate patterning on a bird's wing, or in this case small, brightly coloured, perfectly formed flowers.

We spent a pleasant hour rummaging through the grasses finding many unusual plants most of which were similar to, but separate from, the related plants of home; wonderfully caramel-coloured foxglove *Digitalis lanata*, a local form of lizard orchid *Himantoglossum jankae*, some plants completely endemic to the region. We moved on.





Lizard orchid *Himantoglossum jankae*; syntomid moth on pyramidal orchid; foxglove *Digitalis lanata*.

Our progression south was pleasantly interspersed with visits to a number of fresh water and saline lagoons sited around the village of Murighoil. Here we could stroll along rough tracks, looking for interesting plants and grasses on the way, until we reached the shores of the lakes from where large numbers of birds could be seen. Black-winged stilts mobbed us persistently, protecting their newly hatched chicks cowering on the mud close by. Avocets, lapwings, gulls and terns were present in numbers, feeding, courting, loafing. But the real prize here was to see a group of Pallas's gulls sporting fine breeding livery; rich dark head, large two-toned beak and in flight the distinctive white, black-tipped primaries. A lifer for most. Other highlights here were breeding collared pratincoles and some distant red-footed falcons hawking dragonflies. But more of those in a moment.

Eugen told us a bit about the conservation efforts he and his team are endeavouring to make here. The essence seems to be one of low key involvement, surreptitiously setting up safe zones and educating local people as to the need to allow wildlife to flourish. It is important not to trespass on the local villager's rights of access and mild exploitation (fishing, grazing etc). The main problem to our British eyes was the unseemly amount of litter and refuse lying about the place. It appears these wilder areas are regarded as worthless and are regularly used as a dumping ground for waste. Even the interpretation board had been stripped of its information sheet. There is obviously a long way to go to match the understanding we have here at home, but recognising the value of the habitat, working with local people to educate and enlighten, encouraging them to enjoy their heritage will, over time, bear fruit.

Onwards then to our lunch stop in a wooded zone amid an active rookery. Here the rooks had almost finished their breeding cycle with only a few pairs still tending well-grown young, thus allowing red-footed falcons to move in and occupy the empty nests. These falcons are quite stunning birds and could be watched hunting flying insects over the wide expanse of agricultural land bordering the wood. Their aerial prowess, swooping, diving, twisting and turning in pursuit of their prey, was a delight to observe. We ate our sandwiches, cake and fruit with their screeching cries reverberating through the wood with the occasional fluting call of a golden oriole thrown in for good measure. Great stuff.



Bee-eater, and hoopoe on the track.

It is hard to think of how things could get better birdwise, but a visit to a bee-eater colony is surely the way to do it. Sitting on a rock watching these flying rainbows is something any lover of nature could surely never tire of. We were able to admire these colourful birds for several minutes as they eventually got used to us, settled and went about their business. I think this may have been the highlight of the day, maybe even the trip for some.

But we must not forget that above all today was a day for botany. Our next stop was at Enisala, a ruined Genoese fortress set at a dramatic location atop a hill with a commanding view of the delta. Some of the group walked over the grass-clad slopes in search of more plants, others took a breather and simply sat on a low wall taking in the stunning vista below. From the lofty vantage point something of the sheer scale of the lakes, reed beds, marshes and fens could be gleaned; certainly it puts into perspective the relatively small size of our wetland reserves at home which are really only fragments of their former glory.

The final stop of a busy day took us along gently sloping pathways lined with well-spaced trees and shrubs. Birdlife was profound with red-backed and lesser grey shrikes seemingly perched atop every bush. Corn buntings and tree sparrows abounded, yellowhammer, ortolan bunting, buzzards and hawfinch completed the cast. As we left a hoopoe bounded across our path and landed on the track to give splendid, photographable views. A great end to a very interesting day.

### **Day 7, Friday 16 June 2017 – Badadag Forest and Black Sea Coast**

Another bright and clear day greeted us as we set off south from Tulcea to visit an area of open mixed deciduous forest at Babadag to search for plants.

The initial drop-off point by the side of a busy road was somewhat disconcerting, but once inside the confines of the forest the whole atmosphere changed and we were able to fully appreciate the beauty of this unspoiled haven. Orchids are stunning plants, showy, colourful, intricate in design. With the help of Mihai we were able to identify several species, unfortunately not all of which were in flower. The ones that were delighted us. We also found a small spur-thighed tortoise here. Butterflies included many cardinal fritillaries, pearl-bordered fritillary, meadow browns and blues. We were also treated to an abundance of nine-spotted (syntomid) moths that could be seen nectaring from the myriad blooms of wild flowers. Birds here included a lovely singing nightingale and a distant displaying Levant sparrowhawk.

We drove southwards towards the Black Sea coast where we found a sheltered spot for lunch while being serenaded by great reed warblers and overhead bee-eaters. Several Dalmatian pelicans and marsh harriers flew above, the latter going about domestic duties attending to their broods secreted in nests within the reeds.

We stopped at Vadu for an ice-cream break, sitting chatting in the shade before moving on to the coast itself. Passing yet another scar on the landscape in the form of a derelict mineral extraction plant from the communist era, we stopped to admire a large colony of common terns using a large embanked lagoon as a breeding site. The terns were constantly being harassed by a hungry marsh harrier, providing an interesting spectacle of how effective mass mobbing can be. Somehow though I think the harrier's persistence must have eventually paid off. We also saw a single curlew sandpiper loafing on the edge of a sand bar together with several avocets, black-winged stilts and a sizeable colony of collared pratincoles which were breeding on the adjacent marsh. The pratincole colony is monitored by local naturalists and has a chequered history: disturbance, predation, adverse weather – the usual suspects. This year numbers are quite high and there is hope at last for a successful season.



Collared pratincole; Honeyguiders paddling in the Black Sea.



Then the highlight of the trip for some – a paddle in the Black Sea itself. The coastline here is protected from development and forms a 100k unbroken chain of shell-strewn soft sand as it curves northwards towards the Danube Delta. Posts positioned for fishing nets provided perches for hundreds of pygmy and great cormorants and a few pelicans. Caspian gulls and common terns fished in the shallow waters while lesser grey shrikes hunted insects from low perches among the dunes. Such an idyllic spot for rolling up your trousers and throwing caution to the wind.

After the thrill of getting our feet wet, we went in search of paddyfield warbler. Eugen explained that great reed warblers are very aggressive towards other would-be inhabitants of the large stands of very tall phragmites that dominate hereabouts, but will not nest in the smaller, more pliant reed familiar to us in the UK. This means the smaller reed warblers can be found reliably in patches of common reed (*australis*) and it was to a patch of such that we diverted our attention. With the aid of a taped lure we had splendid views of a pair of paddyfield warblers that somehow had managed to creep through the cover to within two metres of where we stood before shuffling up a reed stem to investigate the phantom intruder. At such close range the long, bright supercilium and dark eye stripe together with the overall warm brown plumage were very clear. A 'life' bird for all I believe.

Our visit to the Black Sea coast concluded with simply stunning views of a hunting red-footed falcon that swooped and cavorted around the minibus as it chased dragonflies, followed by a close fly-by of a well-marked male marsh harrier. A fitting end to a wonderful day.

#### **Day 8, Saturday 17 June 2017 – Tulcea to Zarnesti**

It was time today for Jean and Wendy to go home, having elected not to undertake the third leg of the holiday to the Carpathian mountains. After saying our goodbyes to these lovely ladies the rest of the group, seven in number, boarded the minivan for the long drive west. Wildlife spotting opportunities were limited, although a stop at a roadside lake produced three flypast little bitterns in quick succession, but much interest was derived from listening to our new guide Laurentiu Petrencu as he explained the cultural, economic and political history of his country from the perspective of a young man growing up in post-communist oppression. Romania has a colourful past!

As we approached the foothills of the Carpathians the skies darkened and thunder rumbled. Rain fell as we wound our way upwards through pretty Alpine villages into the cloud enshrouded uplands. Most impressive and a total contrast to the architecture and environment we had been used to over the past week. Here were tall ranks of conifers marching up steep hillsides with fast-flowing streams cascading along boulder-strewn channels. These would bring their own special mix of wildlife as we discovered over the following few days.

We arrived at our comfortable and well positioned hotel in Zarnesti in time for a very flavoursome and filling dinner before retiring early to get ready for the adventures ahead.

### **CARPATHIANS**

#### **Day 9, Sunday 18 June 2017 – Carpathians**

The hotel in Zarnesti was run by a very friendly and efficient proprietor – Papa Gigi no less who together with his staff ensured our stay in Transylvania was a happy one. After a hearty breakfast we drove the short distance into the Parcul National Park to see if we could locate some specialist mountain wildlife. Unfortunately the weather was not kind to us today with low cloud and some rain inhibiting the emergence of insects and depressing bird activity somewhat. However some idea of the potential of the area was provided within a minute of our parking the minibus when we found a pair of collared flycatchers feeding their fledglings. We also located grey wagtail and a singing firecrest here.



Collared flycatcher feeding a youngster; grey wagtail.

The weather took a turn for the worse so we drove some distance along narrow mountain roads to a high alpine area where we had simply stunning views of the full majesty of the Carpathians; small villages nestled in valleys surrounded by flower-dotted hillsides, loosely bounded fields held a few cattle contentedly grazing on the lush grasses, and covering the mountain tops, ranks of thick sentinel pine. It was to the pine trees that we next gave our attention for our guide had picked up the rasping call of a nutcracker, a bird everyone wanted to see. Sure enough within a couple of minutes a trio of these heavy-billed, liberally-spotted corvids looped across the road and glided into the valley. The grey, murky conditions didn't allow a full appreciation of the plumage, but the birds were nonetheless unmistakable. It was time for a group photo to celebrate.



Dipper.

From the top of the mountain to a narrow gorge flanked by towering sheets of rock at the bottom of which a stream flowed fast and furious. The target species here was wallcreeper, but alas no such gem gave itself up for us. Ample compensation, in fact an amazing sight, was of a dipper that allowed very close approach. Perched on a rock this dapper dipper went about its toilet unabashed that several British wildlife enthusiasts were snapping its every move. What a privilege to get so close. Grey wagtails are simply beautiful birds and we were treated to the sight of several pairs feeding young as we progressed. The bright yellow, black and grey of these stars served to brighten up the gathering gloom which showed no sign of abating. Pragmatic as ever Laurentiu decided that to attempt further birding today was unlikely to bear fruit, so a cultural interlude was suggested and welcomed by all. So during the late afternoon and early evening us minibus-load had

the pleasure of walking around the splendidly preserved town of Brasov. Here the old town buildings are most picturesque contrasting starkly with the newer building constructed during the communist era. Old Town: neat, characterful, ornate and multi-coloured. New Town: ugly, functional, crumbling and grey.

We ended the day wandering around the Ensemble of the Fortified Evangelical Church at Harman. These buildings, largely constructed during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, were designed to provide safe havens for local villagers in times of war. The area was vulnerable to attack by the Turks, necessitating a structural design that not only could withstand siege but could provide shelter, food and accommodation for the local populace as well as mount a robust defence before suitably armed militia could arrive to repel the offenders. Contained within the many small rooms built into the fortifications are displays and artefacts depicting life here through the ages giving a fascinating insight into rural living.

Back to the hotel for another delicious dinner and a healthy watering of local wines. Ah!

#### **Day 10, Monday 19 June 2017 – Piatra Craiului National Park**

A much better day weatherwise soon saw us Honeyguiders trekking along another seriously impressive gorge – part of Piatra Craiului National Park – looking for wallcreeper. We failed, but not for the want of trying with several pairs of binoculars scanning every nook and rock face for signs of movement. A passing hiker said he had seen one further along the valley; he was fortunate indeed. But as ever on this trip there were many things to divert and interest; alpine swifts chasing one another high over the cliffs, brightly coloured fritillaries and mountain ringlets flitting among the flowers, grey wagtails tripping lightly streamside. Plenty to revel in and enjoy.

Because we could not fully appreciate the splendour of the mountain scenery yesterday, we once again traversed the high passes this afternoon to wander around the pretty villages of Magura and Pestera. Today the sun shone clear and bright allowing the full mosaic of fields, hedgerows and wooded copses to show to full effect. It was heart-lifting to see so many wildflowers; ox-eye daisies, buttercups, campions, scabious and clovers cloaking the fields. These fields are still largely cut by hand, the hay stacked on traditional timber frames and left in the fields to dry. The scourge of modern intensive farming methods has yet to reach these remote and rustic lands, so wildlife can thrive. Flowers = nectar. Nectar = insects. Insects = birds and other predators. Small birds, lizards and snakes = large raptors and carnivores; so the wheel of life spins. Long may that continue to be the case.



Gorge in Piatra Craiului National Park



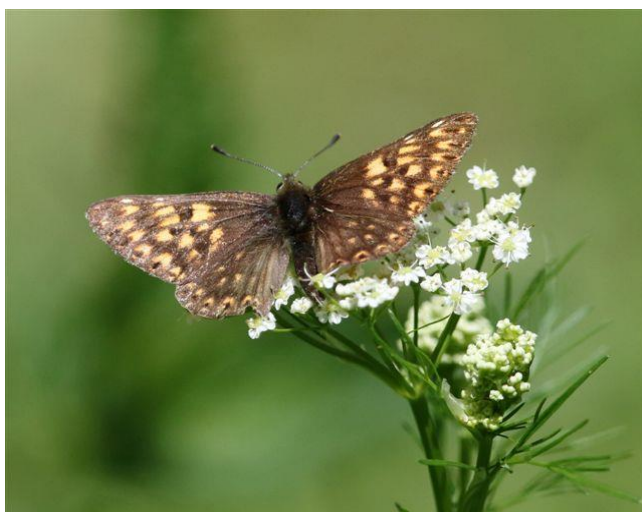
We were in Transylvania where surely no trip can take place without some homage paid to the region's most infamous, if fictitious, inhabitant of old, Count Dracula. The castle at Bran formed the focal point for the remainder of the day where individual fancy, scepticism, lust for the ghoulish could be sated. The simple truth is that the castle is in no way whatsoever connected to the inspiration for Bram Stoker's novel, Vlad the Impaler. He, Vlad, never set foot in it and furthermore Bram Stoker never set foot in Transylvania. Instead he, Mr Stoker, modelled Dracula's castle on a similar castle in another part of the province described to him in letters from a friend. The whole thing is therefore a fraud, but somehow the legend has enough grip to pull you along and inspire fantasies of things that could have been. Certainly the castle has charm as well as being sited in an impressively scenic position above the town, but alas it is but a tourist trap laid bare for all to see. But it is also great fun.

#### **Day 11, Tuesday 20 June 2017**

So we come to the final full day of our journey across Romania. And what a day it turned out to be.

The morning we spent on a quite energetic hike along a stony track leading to the foot of an imposing massif that punched through the cloud-enshrouded peaks. The day was sunny and hot making for sometimes uncomfortable, sweaty progress, especially when unable to find shade on the lower slopes. The discomfort was, however, more than offset by the ability to suck in lung-fulls of pure, clean air, feel the gentle summer breeze on your face and hear nothing but the droning of bees, far-carrying birdsong and the gentle rippling of waves of flower-infused grasses. Common blue and pearl-bordered fritillaries flitted about the flowerheads joined by silver-Y and other day flying moths.

Laurentiu found a yellow-bellied toad by a small pool and showed us how when threatened it would play dead by keeling over as he held it aloft for all to see (*photo in wildlife lists*). Raptors began to be encountered soaring along the cliff face. We tried to turn them into eagles, but had to concede most were common buzzards. But not quite all. One bird we tracked began its display flight, a butterfly-like motion of quick wing flaps followed by a swooping dive: a honey buzzard impressing its mate that must have been secreted among the ranks of pine trees below.



Duke of Burgundy; mountain green-veined white on dusky cranesbill *Geranium phaeum*.

Appetites suitably stimulated we travelled back to the hotel for lunch, a change to normal routine occasioned by the planned evening trip to the bear hide. After taking our fill and having a little downtime, we once again boarded the minibus to drive into the mountains along badly potholed roads through small settlements, dodging small horse-drawn carts and seeing villagers toiling at hay making armed with nothing more than a scythe.

The late afternoon was spent ambling along another rough track watching common buzzards and twice a lesser spotted eagle with prey soar across the sapphire sky. We listened to fluting golden orioles and stood by a hawthorn where a female red-backed shrike perched unconcerned a few metres from where we watched. Swallows swooped, corn buntings jangled, crickets chirruped. And hardly a trace of human activity.

And then the highlight of our trip to this part of the world, a session in a hide positioned deep in the forest to watch brown bears come out to play. In some ways it was a little akin to a teddy bears' picnic; we had our packed sandwiches with us and the bears were present at this location because they were offered treats in the form of a dead animal carcass and piles of biscuits and fruit donated by supermarkets from local towns. We entered the hide hushed and excited, sat down and waited for the show to begin.



A fox creeps toward a brown bear's food.

At first little could be seen and then there was a stealthy movement to the left as a bear approached the clearing through the bordering pines. There were whispered instructions to everyone as to where to look and the likely age of the visitor and then we simply watched. The first couple of bears to entertain us were young ones, inquisitive but alert to any noise. After a short while a much larger animal arrived and at once the younger pair gave way, running off into the shelter of the pines to stop and look back wistfully at the feast they had to leave behind. All the bears have slightly different colourations; some brown, some almost black, some with ginger heads and patches along the flanks. They are deceptively powerful animals though and could shimmy up a tree trunk with complete ease, large, hefty claws making light work of the climb.

As dusk descended, a red fox appeared giving us a chance to witness the interaction between the species. Wary at first, the fox slowly became emboldened darting in to snatch a mouthful of flesh and trotting away presumably to cache it close by. It slinked back every few minutes to repeat the performance, always exiting with a meaty mouthful. A real opportunist. We watched the bears for fully two hours, maybe more. Time seemed to stop. But eventually we made our way quietly back to the minibus, delighted with this climactic wildlife spectacle. But there was one final surprise in store for as we turned back onto the road home we espied a large raptor sitting on a roadside telegraph pole. This turned out to be a magnificent lesser spotted eagle that allowed us to stop the van, slowly get out and take some photographs, simply gazing down at us with hooded, mean-looking eyes, before gliding off to a less public vantage point.



Close encounter with a lesser spotted eagle.

What a fantastic end to a simply magical time in this wildlife-rich, surprisingly varied, always engaging country.

#### HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

Barry	Close encounters with the eagles.
Denise	Watching the interaction between the bears and the fox. The deafening frog chorus.
Brian & Mary	Bee-eaters, pratincoles and Pallas's gulls. Raptors over the ridge overlooking the Danube Delta.
Michael	Bee-eaters, godwits and glossy ibis.
Jean	Bee-eaters, flower-filled meadows, fortified monastery.
Ian	Long-legged buzzard near Enisala.
Jean D & Wendy	Lily-filled lakes.



## WILDLIFE LISTS

Key to Locations: DD = Danube Delta Do = Dobrogea C = Carpathians J = Journey

### BIRDS

Red-necked grebe	Several pairs on quieter lagoons in DD
Great crested grebe	Frequent in DD and on lagoons in Do
Black-necked grebe	Scattered pairs across DD
Great white pelican	Common and impressive resident within DD
Dalmatian pelican	Seen every day in DD in low numbers
Cormorant	Abundant in DD and Black Sea coast of Do
Pygmy cormorant	Abundant across DD
Grey heron	Frequent across DD and Do
Purple heron	Seen every day in small numbers within DD and Do
Great white egret	A few seen in DD
Little egret	Commonly encountered within DD
Squacco heron	Abundant within DD
Cattle egret	Few seen on route to DD
Black-crowned night heron	Regular within DD
Little bittern	5 seen at scattered locations within DD
White stork	Regularly seen on drier fields and at nest sites within Do
Glossy ibis	Small numbers seen DD
Spoonbill	Few within DD
Mute swan	Few within DD
Greylag goose	Few pairs within DD
Shelduck	A pair seen DD
Gadwall	Frequent at larger water bodies within DD and Do
Mallard	Common within DD
Garganey	Few seen within DD
Red-crested pochard	Small population on freshwater lakes at Do
Pochard	Few within DD
Ferruginous duck	Common on waterways within DD
Goldeneye	1 seen DD
Black kite	1 seen Do
White-tailed eagle	Frequent within DD – up to 12 seen
Marsh harrier	Frequent within DD and Do
Levant sparrowhawk	Displaying male Do
Common buzzard	Common across Do and Ca
Long-legged buzzard	Few seen Do
Honey buzzard	Displaying male Ca
Lesser spotted eagle	At least 3 seen Ca
Booted eagle	Few seen Do
Kestrel	Frequent across Do and wider Romanian Plain area
Red-footed falcon	Colony at site within Do, singles and pairs at other sites within DD and Do
Hobby	Few seen DD
Peregrine	1 seen Ca
Pheasant	Few DD
Moorhen	Few DD
Coot	Few DD
Oystercatcher	Pair DD
Black-winged stilt	Common breeder DD and Do
Avocet	Several seen DD
Stone-curlew	Pair seen Do
Collared pratincole	Small colony at Do
Lapwing	Few within DD
Black-tailed godwit	Small numbers DD
Redshank	Few Do
Greenshank	Single DD
Green sandpiper	Several returning migrants DD
Curlew sandpiper	Single Do
Caspian gull	Common DD and Do
Great black-headed (Pallas's) gull	Small numbers at freshwater lake in Do
Black-headed gull	Common DD and Do
Mediterranean gull	Small colony Do
Little gull	Several immatures DD
Caspian tern	2 DD
Common tern	Common throughout DD and coastal Do
Black tern	1 seen DD
Whiskered tern	Abundant at colonies within DD
Feral pigeon	Common town resident
Woodpigeon	Widespread
Collared dove	Common in towns Do and Ca

Turtle dove	Few within DD
Cuckoo	Commonly seen DD
Little owl	1 seen briefly on route to DD
Swift	Commonly seen DD and Do
Alpine swift	Up to 10 in Ca
Kingfisher	Several breeding pairs within DD
Bee-eater	Scattered colonies throughout Do
Roller	Seen daily DD and Do
Hoopoe	Seen daily DD and Do
Black woodpecker	2 DD
Grey-headed woodpecker	1 in DD another in Do
Great spotted woodpecker	Several in Do
Syrian woodpecker	3 Do
Middle spotted woodpecker	At least 2 pairs Do
Wryneck	1 in Do
Lesser short-toed lark	1 Do
Woodlark	1 singing bird Do
Skylark	Several around Black Sea coastal area
Sand martin	1 colony DD
Swallow	Abundant throughout
House martin	Common in villages and towns
White wagtail	Regularly encountered throughout
Yellow wagtail ( <i>flava</i> )	Common on coastal marshes around Black Sea
Grey wagtail	Several breeding pairs Ca
Tawny pipit	1 Do
Goldcrest	Heard Ca
Firecrest	Heard Ca
Dipper	1 seen very close, others seen briefly Ca
Wren	A few singing birds Ca
Blackbird	Few seen throughout
Fieldfare	Few seen in Ca
Song thrush	Few seen Ca
Mistle thrush	2 seen Ca
Sedge warbler	Common DD
Paddyfield warbler	Pair seen on Black Sea coast
Reed warbler	Common in lower stands of reed DD
Great reed warbler	Common in higher reed cover DD
Eastern olivaceous warbler	Several heard DD
Icterine warbler	1 seen well Do
Willow warbler	Few heard Do
Chiffchaff	Several heard throughout
Wood warbler	2 heard Ca
Blackcap	Heard and seen throughout
Garden warbler	Several heard DD
Lesser whitethroat	Few heard DD
Barred warbler	Pair found in Do
Collared flycatcher	Pair feeding fledged young Ca
Robin	Few heard Ca
Thrush nightingale	Few heard DD
Nightingale	1 heard well Do
Black redstart	At least 3 seen Ca
Common redstart	Few seen within DD
Wheatear	1 Ca
Isabelline wheatear	At least 15 Do
Long-tailed tit	Family party DD
Marsh tit	Few seen Ca
Coal tit	Few seen Ca
Great tit	Few seen Do and Ca
Blue tit	Few seen DD
Nuthatch	Few heard Ca
Penduline tit	At least 4 seen DD
Golden oriole	Frequently heard and 2 seen throughout
Red-backed shrike	Common throughout
Lesser grey shrike	Few seen Do
Jay	Present in small numbers throughout
Magpie	Seen daily
Nutcracker	4 seen Ca
Jackdaw	Common throughout
Rook	Common Do
Hooded crow	Common throughout
Raven	1 heard Do
Starling	Abundant throughout
Yellowhammer	Commonly heard and seen DD and Do



Ortolan bunting	Few seen well Do
Black-headed bunting	1 seen DD
Reed Bunting	Few in DD
Corn bunting	Several in Do
Chaffinch	Few DD and Ca
Greenfinch	1 Do
Goldfinch	Present Do and Ca
Bullfinch	1 heard Ca
Hawfinch	Several seen in Do
House sparrow	Abundant throughout
Spanish sparrow	Few seen at white stork nest Do
Tree sparrow	Common DD

MAMMALS	
Roe deer	J
Golden jackal	DD
Souslik	Do
Brown hare	Do
Brown bear	C
Red fox	C
Chamois	C

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS	
Grass snake	DD
Dice snake	DD
Yellow-bellied toad	C
Spur-thighed tortoise	Do
European pond terrapin	DD
Marsh frog	DD
Balkan wall lizard	Do, C



Yellow-bellied toad 'playing dead'; golden jackal photographed from the boat on 11 June.

BUTTERFLIES			
Small white	DD, Do	Cardinal fritillary	DD, Do
Mountain green-veined white	C	Queen-of-Spain fritillary	Do
Bath white	DD	Pearl-bordered fritillary	Do
Ilex hairstreak	Do	Ringlet	Do
Common blue	C	Woodland ringlet	C
Duke of Burgundy	C	Meadow brown	DD, Do
Freyer's purple emperor	DD	Small heath	Do
Red admiral	DD	Small skipper	Do
Painted lady	DD	Large skipper	Do, C

MOTHS		DRAGONFLIES	
Speckled yellow	C	Banded demoiselle	DD
Silver Y	C	Broad scarlet	DD
9-spotted (syntomid) moth	Do	Norfolk hawk	DD, Do
Mullein moth (caterpillar)	Do	Lesser emperor	DD
		Black-tailed skimmer	Do