

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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ROMANIA
THE DANUBE DELTA AND THE CARPATHIANS
2nd – 9th/13th June 2012

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<http://www.ibis-tours.ro/>

Danube Delta report by Norman Sills, with photos edged blue by Judith Wells.

Carpathians report by Suzanne Hunter & Lesley Scott,
with photos edged green by Sue Lewis-Jones and edged brown by Luc D'Hooge.

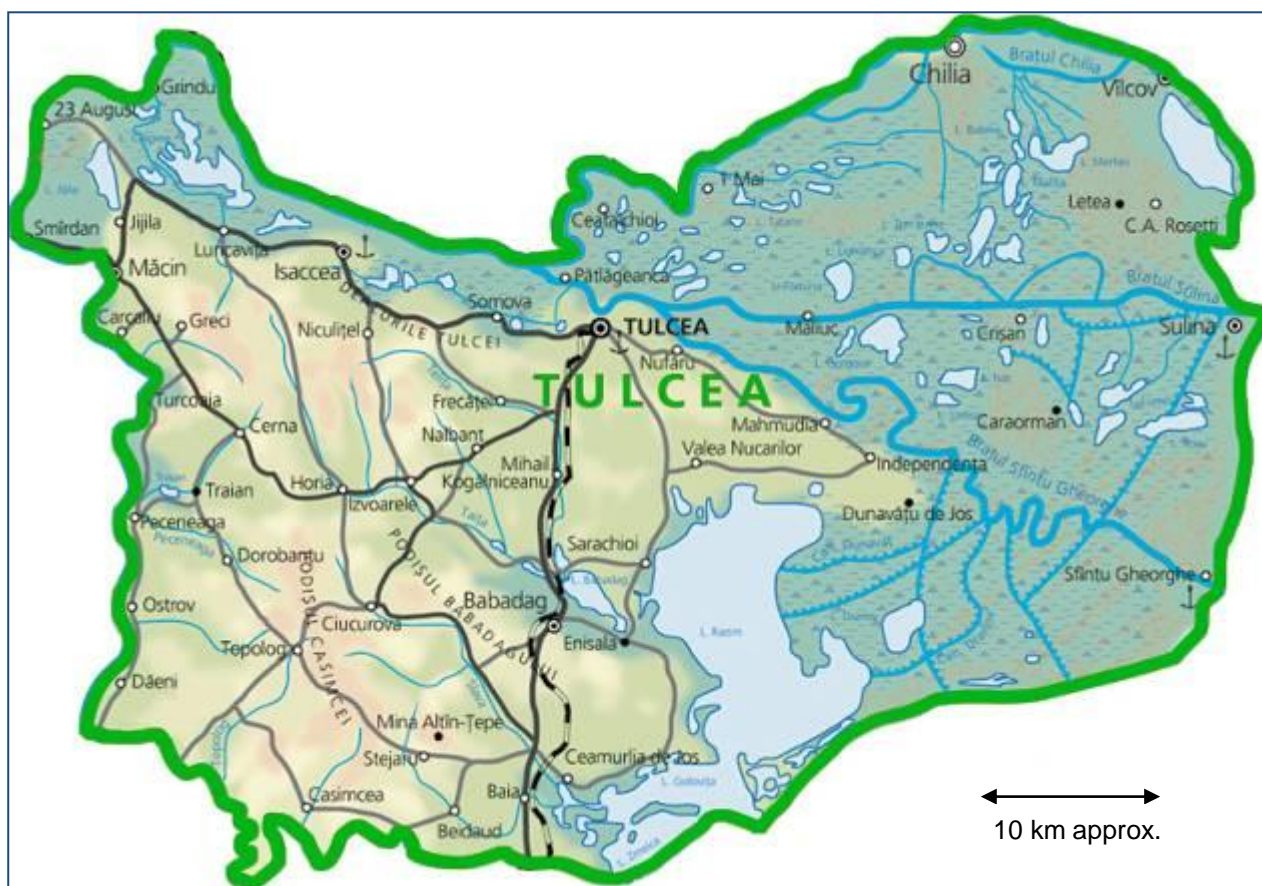
Danube Delta bird list by Norman Sills; other lists compiled from group members' records.

Front cover photos by Judith Wells.

Top row: purple heron, European bee-eater.

Middle row: little bittern, squacco heron.

Bottom row: a Dalmation pelican between two white pelicans, European roller.



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 and one of our holiday leaders from Ibis.

The conservation contribution this year of £40 per person was supplemented by gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, resulting in a donation of £603 (€700), bringing the total given in Romania since the first Honeyguide holiday here in 1999 to £5,950. The total for all conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 was £80,839 as at June 2012.

THE DELTA: June 2nd – 9th 2012

by Norman Sills

Saturday 2nd June

The route from the airport to the Delta probably epitomised present-day Romania. At more than one village, a 4-wheeled wooden cart – pulled by mule and driven by a headscarfed woman – bumped along an ancient track and eventually stopped in the shade of a lone tree. A dozen men and women, each clutching a hoe, dropped down from the cart and, in a casual line spanning a dozen rows, began hand-hoeing the young crop in the vast, undulating field. A mile away, on the far edge of the same field, a loose palisade of tall, white turbines rotated with ease in the light south-westerly. So here were traditional village folk farming the land and modern technology farming the wind. In and between villages were gardens with log-piles and goats, derelict farmsteads, more folk with hoes, smart timber bungalows with satellite dishes, and shepherds with huge flocks of sheep in more vast landscapes, but of grass. Shallow flooding in fields, wide, winding streams and the Danube itself marked the way to our water-dominated destination.

A large, shallow lake *en route* set the tone. Countless whiskered terns, hundreds of white storks, dozens of glossy ibises, and many pygmy cormorants were crossing, probing or just standing in the wetness. With them were Dalmatian pelicans, great white egrets, ferruginous ducks, garganeys, ruddy shelducks, black-winged stilts and, above some nearby crags, a skyful of bee-eaters. The rest of the journey towards the town of Tulcea was punctuated with yet more birds: long-legged buzzard, lesser grey and red-backed shrikes, rollers, hoopoes, black storks, calandra larks and Spanish sparrows in the ‘downstairs’ of white storks’ nests.

At Tulcea we joined our boat and, after a warm greeting involving a tray of drinks, plus a good, fish-based meal, we listened while Eugen Petrescu (our guide for five days) briefly described the formation of the delta and some of the issues linked to it. What he couldn’t describe in just 15 minutes was the wilderness of water and reeds and willows that has escaped ‘improvement’ by Man; it covers more than 2,000 square miles and we were about to tread lightly upon it.

Sunday 3rd June

With the sign of a warm day beneath a cloudless sky, we left Tulcea on a small boat and headed into the labyrinth of channels and lakes of the delta; Eugen knew every confluence and every backwater but we could enjoy the feeling of being lost in an utterly natural, wetland wilderness.



White-tailed eagle.

Glossy ibises were everywhere and so, too, were whiskered terns, rollers, white pelicans, squacco herons, night herons and great reed warblers. Also common, but more familiar to us, were great crested grebes and coots, but then there were many pairs of black-necked grebes as well as several pairs of red-necked grebes with young. These were the background species – some background! Dotted among them were 20+ spoonbills, a dozen ferruginous ducks, a few Mediterranean gulls, two Dalmatian pelicans, purple herons, a distant Savi’s warbler and several kingfishers commuting between willow branch and nest burrow. Apart from some marsh harriers and a kestrel, raptors were several hobbies, two red-footed falcons and two or three majestic but wary white-tailed eagles. In the discontinuous lines of channel-side willows we heard grey-headed woodpeckers, nightingales and thrush nightingales and – interestingly – many chaffinches and almost as many redstarts: how many redstarts do we see in an English marsh? If you were quick, or at the front next to Eugen, you may also have seen a singing olivaceous warbler, a pair of golden orioles and a pair of penduline tits.

While we had been indulging in the delta, our big boat (with sleeping cabins) had moved from Tulcea to some remote spot and had moored – hessian rope to gnarled willow trunk – tight up against some tall reeds. After a meal and another engaging talk by Eugen, we headed to our cabins for our first night actually IN this amazing world of bright water and big skies. Last-light prompted an eagerness for first-light.

Monday 4th June

Dawn was announced by a cuckoo, singing solo, at 5am, right above the boat. A garden warbler joined in; the wetland was waking. From the top deck, the sense of overnight mist and peace was being jolted gently towards another fine day: night herons and pygmy cormorants were leaving their willow-clump colony, whiskered terns were catching their first morsels of the morning above beds of flowering rush and ibises were making their first daily dissection of the sky, from one horizon to the other.

For the morning, we boarded our small boat and headed for the Caraorman reserve, managed by the Ornithological Society of Romania. Those who disembarked quickly and strode to the base of the observation tower were lucky to hear the full-length call of little crane, twice! From the tower we looked across a square kilometre of marsh enclosed by earth banks. There were white pelicans and spoonbills, ferruginous ducks and black-necked grebes, whiskered terns and black-tailed godwits (11) among others. Before returning to the boat, we checked that the tall, yellow-flowered plant that we'd seen alongside many waterways really was fen ragwort; it was ... it is found in only one or two sites in the UK but in the delta it was growing commonly in most damp, or shallowly-flooded, land. It wasn't the only plant to be noticed. Throughout the delta, where (as Eugen would say) "delta water" (ie clear) prevails over "Danube water" (ie turbid), the aquatic plants show that the entire system is based on a relatively low nutrient status. The water-lilies were white, not yellow; the bulrushes were lesser, not greater; and there were long, 5+ metre wide bands of water soldier and frog-bit where the water was not too deep. The pink, umbelliferous, and poorly named, flowering rush added another colour to the channel-side plant life.

Then we headed for a forest. Between leaving the boat and boarding a tractor and trailer, we looked across some brackish-water mudflats. Here were redshanks, little ringed plovers and black-tailed godwits; overhead were bee-eaters buzzing, as it were, above a grassy sand-hill. The hour-long drive by tractor/trailer followed a dirt track into the poplar and oak forest that had become established on the broad sand-bar twixt marsh and sea. There were red-footed falcons, hobbies, a white-tailed eagle, hoopoe, redstarts and garden warblers. It was a brief visit and one could only wonder how much more there was in this expanse of grassy glades and purposely unkempt woodland.

We arrived at the big boat at 1pm and saw, thanks to Eugen, a penduline tit's partly-built nest in a willow bush next to the mooring spot. Despite the very strong and gusty breeze whacking the willow, we saw both adult birds very well; it was an unconventional, but delightful, aperitif before lunch! In the afternoon we investigated some large lakes. First we followed a main channel by big boat – enjoying, on the way, a black redstart in full song on a boathouse roof – and then we used the small boat to creep along channels, across lakes and into other channels. We saw another penduline tit's nest, complete this time but, despite a short vigil, saw neither of its owners. The lakes' surfaces were choppy but were still being inspected by 10 black terns. Ferruginous ducks and grebes rode the waves, great reed warblers sang from the surrounding reeds, while ibises and squaccos added black and white to the blue sky. Eugen tried valiantly to attract black woodpeckers to within view. Great spotted, lesser spotted and grey-headed all appeared before us but the blacks remained hidden in the dark recesses of the tall, dead and well woodpeckered trees. So, no black woodpeckers and, so far, no bitterns in this huge, pristine wetland!



Male penduline tit.

Tuesday 5th June

There was an early mist again, denser this time, so hearing was more important than seeing. Snatches of Savi's warbler song penetrated the mist from two or three directions and, between snatches, there was the very distant, low, sonorous, sound of a male bittern repeatedly advertising his presence until breathless. Four black terns emerged from the mist, flew past the boat and entered the mist again.

The mist had dispersed by 8.30am so we were on the small boat and off to another new part of the delta. We went through many back-channels, with Savi's warblers, great reed warblers, garden warblers, redstarts and golden orioles singing from reed-top, willow bush or poplar tree. We entered a lake and, set back in the expanse of reeds surrounding the lake, there was a thicket of mature willow trees. Here was just one of the delta's many nesting colonies of herons: grey herons and pygmy cormorants occupied the upper branches, night herons in the centre and squaccos down below where the willows tangle with the reeds. It was no surprise that the colony had an attendant bird of prey nesting close by: a white-tailed eagle which, when we saw it, was being harassed by hooded crows.

We continued to a gem of a place where red-footed falcons nested. There were 20 pairs or more nesting in disused rooks' nests and, as the boat stayed quiet and motionless in centre-channel, we looked up and saw birds of every age and plumage. They were in the trees, overhead high and low, catching insects and calling in what amounted to a full red-footed falcon experience. We returned to the big boat, having on the way good views of a female little bittern, a male bearded tit and another pair of white-tailed eagles.

We took lunch on the big boat as it began its journey back, up-river, to Tulcea. The five hour trip seemed to emphasise the size of the delta; and from the top deck we continued seeing or hearing birds that we had seen throughout the vast spread of the marshes: rollers, whiskered terns, hobbies, redstarts and more.

We moored at Tulcea and then a fine chicken risotto followed by apple tart preceded our last night on the river. Once we had thanked Gabriella for her efficient, courteous and kind attention during our 4-day stay, we settled for the night to the sound of water heaving and gurgling between our boat and the next and to the sounds of heavy rain and thunder directly overhead.

Wednesday 6th June

The day dawned brightly with not a cloud to be seen. It was D-day, Dobrogea the destination for the next few days: inland, hilly, mainly dry and certainly a contrast to the flat, water-world of the delta. During the day we made seven stops. The first was to see a bee-eater colony (perhaps 100 pairs) in the sheer side of a hill. They were active: carving arcs in the sky in pursuit of insects and repeatedly entering and leaving their nest-burrows. One burrow had a little owl at its entrance, seemingly sulking beneath the colourful spectacle around it. A corn bunting, singing from a bush-top on a hill-summit, appeared oblivious, simply enjoying the view and the sunshine. Farther on there was a complex of small hills with grass, bushes and an easy-to-see red-backed shrike. A barred warbler was singing continually within the scrub and eventually it performed a short song-flight before flitting between bushes again.

The third place was a shallow lake between hills. Here were lots of stilts, avocets, common terns, red-crested and common pochards, more than 20 black-necked grebes, five little gulls, three Mediterranean gulls and a Caspian tern. Next was a smaller, muddy pool with a fringe of reeds. The anticipated white-spotted bluethroats didn't appear but several wader species did: more avocets and stilts, five little stints, two female ruffs, a spotted redshank and two summer-plumaged marsh sandpipers. Dozens of ferruginous ducks and several garganeys were close enough to give good views.

Rain had recently lashed the fifth stopping place which made impossible the intention to drive along a dirt-track into a wood. So we parked at a road junction and ate lunch while watching a pair of ortolan buntings, tawny pipit, buzzard (steppe?), northern wheatear and a skylark in full song beneath a leaden sky. Then we headed away from the impending storm and stopped by a large area of scattered trees adjacent to a military base.

Lesser grey shrikes were commuting between tree-top and ground next to the road, orioles were singing somewhere among the trees' foliage, a red-backed shrike was dodging about on a fence-top and an icterine warbler was in full voice and full view on an outer branch of a tree next to us. But, best by far (for those who stayed despite the first spots of rain) were, perching and preening in a leafless bush, seven rose-coloured starlings, one of which sported a bright, wedding-cake pink front and a bow-tie-black head and wings. A distant, light-phase booted eagle headed away from us, another rainstorm headed towards us and, just as a military person strode officiously right up to us, we boarded the mini-bus and drove to our seventh stop: a grass and rock summit of a range of hills.



Left: rose-coloured starlings – the bird on the left is in full summer plumage.
 Right: icterine warbler (icterine is a pale shade of yellow, from the Greek for jaundice, *ikteros*).

This was wheatear and lark country: two families of Isabelline wheatears were bouncing between scatters of rocks while woodlarks, short-toed larks and skylarks were singing beneath more leaden clouds. A long-legged buzzard and common buzzard skimmed the hillside towards brighter skies. Finally, Eugen spotted a very distant stone-curlew standing motionless below the darkening horizon.

Then we headed for Tulcea, passing calandra larks and turtle doves in wheat-fields on the way, and arrived at the hotel an hour later, with a glass of Schnapps offered to us on walking through the door! The excellent evening meal – fish, vegetables, wine, profiteroles – was a fine conclusion to an interesting day and the point where we gave heartfelt thanks to Eugen for his engaging attitude, wide-ranging knowledge and endless enthusiasm.

Thursday 7th June

For the next two days, Eugen's place was taken over by two other experts: Laurentiu (birds) and Mihai (plants, history etc). They took us well south of Tulcea, to the Black Sea coast, but stopped at half a dozen places on the way. The first was a hillside with typical steppe vegetation. While Mihai and others examined plants, others walked farther and found more Isabelline and northern wheatears, an ortolan singing, a tawny pipit and a few passing linnets.

At the next stop we entered some mature mixed woodland and the aim of seeing a red-breasted flycatcher was soon realised: a bird with food, perching on a branch just above our heads. Wood warbler and song thrush were singing and an icterine warbler was quite active around its nest fairly high up in a small tree. The track-way was a sheltered sun trap so silver-washed fritillaries and one large tortoiseshell became subjects for those with suitable lenses.

Farther on, Mihai demonstrated that 'good' birds in Romania were matched by 'good' plants, even by the roadside: an *Achillea* and a *Euphorbia* being just two examples of red-listed species or ones endemic to Dobrogea. A short walk into open woodland produced more examples while Laurentiu and others watched ortolans in song and with food, a sombre tit dashing between trees, plus oriole and red-backed shrike.

We were close to the coast for the next stop, to have lunch. Having passed a field with a dozen collared pratincoles above it, we arrived at a semi-tidal reedbed where paddyfield warblers occur ... at other times! However, there was other activity despite the heat: reed, great reed and Savi's warblers in song, many bee-eaters, swifts and sand martins overhead, a few bearded tits on the reed-edge and several black-headed wagtails, plus a hoopoe on a track. A brief stop overlooking a tidal pool was next, where wood, marsh and curlew sandpipers, redshanks and avocets were doing what waders do.



Silver-washed fritillary and large tortoiseshell.

Finally, we came to a cracking place where a large, enclosed lagoon was surrounded by barely-tidal saltmarsh (the tidal range in the Black Sea is knee high to a crab). The lagoon accommodated a colony of common terns, little terns and avocets but among them were two gull-billed terns, a small group of superb white-winged black terns sitting on the mud and 20 glossy ibises. On and over the surrounding land were more, perhaps 50, white-winged black terns, many pratincoles, a booming bittern, turtle dove, little owl and another hoopoe. A red-listed pink, *Dianthus capitatus*, did indeed cap a day of wide-ranging habitats and interests.

Friday 8th June

By daybreak, Thursday's partial cloud had dispersed and, eventually, the temperature reached 30°C. Our destinations were more to the west of Tulcea this time: the Macin hills. At the first place – open steppe again – we saw two new species at the same time. A very cream short-toed eagle was standing on a skyline rock, casting its eyes over the broad landscape, when it saw – no doubt before we did – two lesser-spotted eagles circling high above some distant lowland. It headed in their direction and, perhaps anticipating trouble, the eagles casually drifted off towards the horizon.

By noon we were in the welcome shade of trees in a huge area consisting of steppe, rocky hillsides and open, grazed woodland. Another new species appeared, a female Levant sparrowhawk perching in a tree, and then a pair of them overhead, showing that they are quite dissimilar to our own (Eurasian) sparrowhawks. Three or four long-legged buzzards, three steppe buzzards and another short-toed eagle were the other raptors idling above the hills' steep scarp-edge, perhaps enjoying an up-draught from the hot land below. A stone-curlew, middle spotted woodpecker, hoopoes and icterine warbler were some of the other species seen in and around the woodland.

Farther on, we took lunch under more trees where a Syrian woodpecker was doing the same: hacking its way towards dead-wood beetles. One of us caught a brief glimpse of a rock thrush on a crag and, when we went there soon afterwards, Laurentiu heard its song but nothing more. But there, in a lush patch of bushes and trees straddling a cooling stream, were golden oriole, nightingale, bee-eaters, red-backed and lesser grey shrikes, corn bunting and kestrel. On rocks above, or overhead, were short-toed eagle, black redstart, northern wheatear and, another new one, pied wheatear, but it was very high up and hardly still for a second.

The final stop, by a nunnery 15 miles west of Tulcea, added spotted flycatcher, green, gold and hawfinches to the day's birding, plus a honey buzzard that drifted off over the skyline. We followed, but to the hotel.

After another good meal, Lesley presented a cheque to Laurentiu (for Falco Cherrug's work with young ornithologists) after which two musicians entertained us with traditional music for half-an-hour, one playing an amazing range of woodwind instruments! Then we retired to bed to the sound of a dogs' barking match just across the street or, in at least one case, to the thought of that elusive pied wheatear high up among the rocks of the Macin hills.

Saturday 9th June

On our way to the airport we visited two places, with Alex as our guide. At the first, a large reedbed by a lake, there were some female marsh harriers, hundreds of sand martins, many bee-eaters, the usual reedbed warblers and two Dalmatian pelicans overhead.



Rooks mobbing a long-legged buzzard.

The next place felt like the middle of Derbyshire: two parallel lines of limestone hills with a dry valley in between. In the valley it was hot, so six of us climbed a small, rocky and bushy hill to catch the cooling breeze. An unfamiliar song attracted our attention and a quick search produced a pied wheatear, not high up and dodging among rocks but 20 paces away, on a bush-top and in full voice. Farther along the valley we saw several others, and it was good to meet Eugen again, leading another group, and also looking at the pied wheatears. Overhead, raptors included honey buzzard, Levant sparrowhawk and short-toed eagle and it may have been one of them that caused two golden orioles to erupt from a nearby patch of woodland, a good sign of them nesting there. Red-backed shrikes and hoopoes were carrying food to their young which, together with a flock of about 200 rooks poking about in the short grass, seemed to suggest that time was moving on.

So we began our four hour journey back to Bucharest airport. Mules drawing carts, folk hoeing crops and shepherds idling with sheep were all, again, frequent sights in the roadside fields. That slow pace of life is probably a symptom of Romania's inability, thankfully, to wrest 'profitable development' from the wild wetlands of the Danube Delta.

THE CARPATHIANS: JUNE 9th – 13th 2012

by Suzanne Hunter and Lesley Scott



Saturday 9th June: Tulcea to the Carpathians

We transferred from Tulcea to Zarnesti on June 9th, with panicky checks to make sure that our luggage was going to the Pensiunea Elena and not to the Airport with the early leavers! Our first stop was at Hasarlac where on the water we could see a drake garganey, a great crested grebe, four black-winged stilts, several swallows and sand martins, a night heron, a hobby, four mute swans and a pair of kestrels overhead, also two skylarks. A penduline tit was heard but not seen. There were three species of frog – marsh, pool and green edible, according to our guide Laurentiu.

We had a comfort stop for coffee and ice-cream (Romanian ice-cream is very comforting!), crossed a tributary of the Danube, and were then slowed down by a funeral cortege, with many mourners following a flower-laden hearse led by a man carrying a crucifix covered in flowers high above his head. We finally reached the sordid suburbs of Bucharest with many run-down blocks of flats – reminders of Communist times. There were many trams to be seen. The centre of Bucharest was more attractive, and we were shown 'The People's Palace', the second largest building in the world, with 3,100 rooms. It is still unfinished, and it cost €3.3 billion in 1984 at the whim of the late unlamented Dictator Ceauşescu. It is here that a highly-impressed Michael Jackson flung his arms wide and shouted "Hello Budapest!"

We picked up our new guide Alexi at the railway station, and then went to the airport to drop off Laurentiu, who was meeting another tour. We then proceeded on the 176km route from Bucharest to Zarnesti. It was a long and winding road, and a gradual climb led us to chalets and views of patchy snow on the mountains. We stopped for coffee at the Sinaia Café at 5.15.

Two hours later we reached the delightful Pensiunea Elena, and Lesley and I settled into a large and comfortable twin room looking over the street. We became accustomed to seeing large carts passing below drawn by two horses with a foal trotting alongside. Or sometimes a man in a smaller cart galloped past as in a modern-day chariot race. Not that there was anything too modern about this area: when there was no traffic, we could hear cocks crowing or hens clucking proudly about their egg-laying prowess. Older people in the countryside wore peasant dress, and we even saw a man sitting outside his house on a Sunday in a bowler hat! Most houses in the village had tall solid gates leading into courtyards, giving privacy to three or four houses at a time.

Flowers, vegetables and a house-cow contrasted oddly with the nearby decrepit flats and with empty disused factory buildings. The latter represented the earlier days of Communism (we had heard much about this from earlier guides), followed by the grandiose and unsuccessful projects of the Dictator Ceaușescu who, despite having thrown out the Reds, became both inept and brutal as a dictator.

But the beautiful countryside, birds and animals were what we had come to see. There were never less than 100 goats in every flock, and masses of sheep with traditional herdsmen, also quite a lot of cattle (often mixed Herefords and Friesians and a few Red Polls). All the horses pulling carts had shining coats and were obviously well-tended. Our main street had a veterinary pharmacy rather than a chemist! It was nostalgic to see hay being scythed and then raked up to a horse-drawn cart. It was rare to see even a small tractor in the arable areas which had no hedges, but unending crops of barley, maize, millions of sunflowers, and small vineyards. (We much enjoyed a Romanian wine called 'Feteasca Regala'.)

Sunday 10th June: Zarnesti Gorge, and bears in the Strimba Valley

Our first trip took us into the Piatra Craiului National Park (which covers an area of 14,773 ha., and includes a mountain peak of 2,238m) for a five-mile stint through the Zarnesti Gorge (photos below). A Sunday was not a good day for birdwatchers, as dozens of other people were out, with shouting children, so we did not see too many of the 120 available species! Some people were picnicking, and two lots had lit fires to cook lunch – somewhat dangerous in a thick forest!

We followed a stream which was clear enough for several pied wagtails and one grey one to bob up and down admiring their reflections. Overhead, thick woodland composed of beech, hornbeam, birch, hazel and Norway spruce hid a multitude of birds; most of us were good on birdsong at home, but there were many songs, apart from coal tits and thrushes, that we could not recognize, and we had no Eugen or Laurentiu to tempt them out with a birdcall machine! Butterflies (of which they boast 230 species) abounded, including orange-tips, red admirals and woodland ringlet, one of which hitched a lift for 10 yards on Susi L-J's boot. Others preferred the campanulas, wild roses, dusky cranesbills *Geranium phaeum*, veronicas, astrantias, and even occasional orchids. Eventually we reached some tall rocks where alpine swifts darted about, and a hobby hovered high above. Alexi thought we might see some chamois, but we were no more lucky with them than with



the famous *Tichodroma muraria* (the wallcreeper) which we had come to see. We waited for an hour in dead silence, which was not emulated by the picnickers, but were unlucky. Seeing some climbers courageously venturing up a completely flat, murderous-looking wall, one of our number said sadly, "I am afraid those are the only wallcreepers we are going to see!" On the way back we met a black Cerambyx (longhorn) beetle, some swallowtails and a small black-spotted yellow frog. There was also a jay, and Geoff saw a firecrest.



Late that afternoon we drove up the Strimba Valley to see the bears. We passed some areas of Scots pine, which Alexi said that, although not native, did provide a warm dry habitat for wildlife in winter. Stopping briefly by a meadow, we saw eight jays, then a spotted eagle overhead, and heard many crickets by a stream.

Arriving in the bear area, Alexi advised us “not to be frightened” but to keep close together as he saw “a big fellow” through the trees nearby. We got across a waggly plank in record time, climbed some steps, and found seats in the wooden hide with a large window overlooking an area of long grass, trees and fallen tree-trunks. The warden came out and started to fill up the scooped-out trunks and various other disguised containers. Eighty kilos of corn, nuts and some sort of sweetener were poured into these tempting vessels. He then cunningly covered them all over with poles and other obstacles so as to make it difficult for the bears to get at the food too easily.



After a few minutes, a 2½ year old cub crept out and climbed up a tree which had honey on its branches. A female bear wandered over, pawed her way past all impedimenta, had a good meal and disappeared into the undergrowth, snarling twice at the cub which obviously was not hers. Minutes later another female appeared, plus another cub who scrambled into the now-empty honey tree. The female tried to squeeze into a large round container, and at first we thought she was stuck like Winnie-the-Pooh. But she got out and ambled away.

Nothing happened for a considerable time, and we were about to leave when two more females came out – one very large one who sprawled over one of the tree-trunks and stared steadfastly at the camera-flashes. When the food was finished, they all moved away and so did we, with great care in case they were still hungry! We re-negotiated the plank above the stream and rattled our way home over the pot-holes to eat our sandwiches and fall into bed. An interesting experience.

Monday 11th June

We breakfasted at 7.30 and at 8 am set out with our new guide, Bogdan, to be driven to some beautiful fields a few miles away. We followed a very long, seemingly unending path, onwards and upwards, with a thick forest between us and the mountain peaks, where our guide said one could see lynx and wolves in the winter. For now, we made do with a yellowhammer, tree pipit, a red-backed shrike and a great grey shrike. Geoff counted 15 treecreepers in various places. Cuckoos were heard and a kestrel and a honey-buzzard seen. On every side the grass was rich with blue and pink scabious, blue salvia, yellow rattle, thyme, helianthemum, viola, harebell and flax. Fragrant, burnt tip, pyramidal and butterfly orchids were plentiful. We ate our sandwiches near a stream, then went the long way downhill back to the bus. It was hot!

Bogdan then took us to the almost-finished visitor centre nearby, an intriguing building of organic shape which was designed to trace the outlines of the park itself, and was covered over the outside with traditional diamond-shaped wooden tiles. On view were examples of Romanian national dress, copies of traditional wooden spoons and other utensils, and several botanical and ornithological photographs, three of them taken by Bogdan himself. A bit of heavy humour was a large cartoon at the reception desk, showing a goat in man's clothing milking the underside of a computer into a bucket – probably funnier in the viewing than in the telling! It was presumably intended to show gradual progress being made in the countryside.

We went back to the hotel for a rest, before setting off up the mountain along a winding forest road to Magura village. The hillside was scattered with Swiss-style chalets (below), some of them new with brightly-coloured corrugated roofs. Many were sunk into the ground with only the roof visible – a traditional way of keeping warm in winter and cool in summer.



We walked through richly-flowering meadows which abounded with globe flowers and orchids. There was a large group of ravens, plus a white wagtail, a male redstart, and some baby black redstarts, also Geoff thought he saw a nutcracker (he was usually correct!) A horse-drawn cart (above) passed us, taking some newly-shorn sheep up to higher pastures for summer grazing. And so back to the hotel, worn out by two strenuous walks, for another delicious dinner.

Tuesday 12th June: Valley Borsa-Tomas and a visit to Bran Castle

We had a 9 am start, and another bouncy ride over the potholes. We had all decided that most of our internal organs had shifted from their normal sites over the last few days (a terrible winter had damaged the roads, which had never been introduced to Mr. Tarmac anyhow!) Suzanne's back was suffering from the bone-shaking, so she adorned a tree-stump for a couple of hours, seeing four pied wagtails and one grey one, a jay, a humming-bird moth, and a large green iridescent beetle, while the rest of the party proceeded up the tree-clad mountain slopes. After twenty minutes we turned back, as the path had been washed into the stream by recent heavy rain. We crossed and re-crossed another rushing stream over slippery rocks, hearing robins and goldcrests and seeing two dippers and two long-tailed tits. A clouded Apollo butterfly was seen, plus a comma, and a perfect Camberwell beauty posed for Susi L-J to photograph it. At the bottom we collected Suzanne, who had thoroughly enjoyed her sylvan idyll.

After another good luncheon, we set off for Bran Castle (right), where during the afternoon another hummingbird hawkmoth was seen, a pair of crossbills, a nuthatch and some newts in a pond. The 14th century castle was a much-turreted fairytale type, and fascinating inside once one had got past the many 'catchpenny' souvenir stalls selling Dracula shirts, masks, and mugs. Bram Stoker, who had never even visited Transylvania, got his Count Dracula idea from the legend of Vlad Tepes, a particularly brutal 15th century prince who used to impale his unfortunate victims. Tepes was sometimes called Dracula as a diminutive of his father's name, Dracul. He only spent one night in that castle, and never lived there. Much more important inhabitants were King Ferdinand, son of King Carol I, and his wife Queen Marie, grand-daughter of Queen Victoria, who completely identified herself with the country and was much loved for her efforts to unify all the different ethnic races of Romania. Sadly, her son King Michael was forced to abdicate in 1947. The castle was a maze of galleries, staircases, intriguingly-shaped rooms and courtyards, and there were interesting suits of armour and family portraits, also pieces of Habsburg furniture. (That connection is never far away in eastern Europe, and ownership of the castle, since the end of Communism, has now reverted to a Habsburg grandson who lives in New York.)



On the way home we explored flowering meadows full of marsh thistles, water avens and lady's mantle, with more hummingbird hawkmoths and some lesser whitethroats. As we left, a small pond was the centre of the musical piping of several small black toads with bright yellow mouths, one of which was photographed by Susi L-J.

Wednesday 13th June: the fortified church of Prejmer, near Brasov

We were greatly intrigued with our visit to 'The Evangelically Fortified Church of Prejmer' (if you are Romanian) or Tartlau (if you are German, i.e. descended from the Saxons!) The Teutonic Knights started to build it in 1215, and it was settled properly in 1240 as a Gothic Evangelical Church, becoming by 1556 the most powerful 'peasant fortress' in Transylvania. Looking like a very old building in Stratford-upon-Avon, it also has gun emplacements, holes for dropping oil on invaders' heads, granaries, and 272 rooms for refugees from the village in case of invasion by the Turks, Mongols, Tartars, Hungarians, etc. The church (right)



stands on a green, completely encircled by a fortified wall 40 feet high and 4.5 m thick. The rooms were numbered for each family in the village to keep their valuables and food, There had been access through underground tunnels, but these were closed in 1970.

We could have spent a very long time there exploring, but we had to proceed to Brasov and say goodbye to Luc and Annick who were taking a taxi to get an earlier flight to Brussels. We much enjoyed exploring this medieval town, which had been attractively rebuilt after first being ruined by Turkish raids in 1421, and later damaged by a fire in 1689. We perused the architecture with admiration (Peter pointed out that one or two of the houses were painted with 'Habsburg gold'), and did a little retail fancying, then drove back for lunch and packing. We said goodbye very sadly to Gigi and his smiling wife, who had been most hospitable, and set off for Otopeni Airport. As we passed a field, we were delighted to see some 30 storks as a final reminder of this beautiful country. What a wonderful, colourful holiday it had been in three such differing areas.

Wildlife Lists

BIRDS

DD = Danube Delta Do = Dobrogea C = Carpathians

Mute Swan	Seen in many places in DD and Do and at Hasarlac en route to C.
Greylag Goose	Fairly common in DD and Do.
Shelduck	Modest numbers in suitable habitat in DD and Do.
Ruddy Shelduck	Four were seen, with 20 young, in a pool en route to DD.
Mallard	Common in DD and Do.
Gadwall	Numerous but only in DD.
Shoveler	In DD and Do. One pair at one place en route for DD.
Garganey	Usually isolated singles or pairs at the channel-sides of DD. Also seen in Do where several were at a small pool. A drake seen at Hasarlac en route to C.
Pochard	In DD and Do; 40 at one place en route for DD.
Red-crested Pochard	Small numbers in DD and Do.
Ferruginous Duck	Numerous in many places in DD including the Caraorman reserve. Also in Do including dozens at one small pool.
Tufted Duck	One seen in DD is probably under-recording.
Grey Partridge	Two seen by the roadside in Do.
Pheasant	One heard in a wooded plateau in the hills of Do. Not seen in DD.
Black-necked Grebe	Many pairs were waiting to re-nest alongside whiskered terns in DD and, at sites in Do, sometimes 20+ were seen.
Great-crested Grebe	In DD only, quite common on the open lakes of the delta. One at Hasarlac en route to C.
Red-necked Grebe	In DD only. Several pairs were seen with young, mainly in clear-water channels with surface vegetation such as white water-lilies.
White Pelican	Very frequent in DD and commonly seen in Do.
Dalmatian Pelican	Two on a lake en route for DD and then groups of usually less than five at other places throughout DD and Do.
Cormorant	Seen in DD and Do and less frequent than pygmy cormorant.
Pygmy Cormorant	Common in DD, where colonies were seen in thickets of willow. Dozens were seen at a few sites in Do.
Bittern	Just one or two heard, and one seen, in DD. Also one heard in coastal reeds in Do. Probably would have been towards the end of the 'booming' period.
Little Bittern	Very infrequently seen in DD but a female was seen well in channel-side vegetation on 5 th June.
Night Heron	Perhaps vied with squacco as the dominant heron species in DD. Seemed to be part of multi-occupancy with squaccos, pygmy cormorants and grey herons at nesting colonies. Not seen in Do. One seen at Hasarlac en route to C.
Squacco Heron	Very frequent in the DD, often seen hunting in shallow water at the sides of channels.
Little Egret	Fairly common in DD and Do but less so than squacco.
Great Egret	In the DD area but not numerous.
Grey Heron	Often seen in DD and Do.
Purple Heron	In DD only, 1 seen on 3 rd and 4 th June.
White Stork	Hundreds were seen by a lake en route for DD. Many were seen in fields in Do, and several nests with young were seen in DD and Do. At one nest, 40 sparrows' nests were counted; mainly Spanish but some house sparrows nests. 30 seen en route from Zarnesti to the airport.
Black Stork	Two flew over on 2 nd June, en route for DD.
Glossy Ibis	Dozens by a lake en route for DD and one of the more frequent wetland species in DD. 20 at a coastal lagoon in Do.
Spoonbill	In DD only, such as 20+ seen on 3 rd June.
White-tailed Eagle	Up to two or three per day in the marsh or forest areas of DD and two nests seen.
Lesser Spotted Eagle	Two together on one day in Do.
Spotted Eagle	One seen at Strimba Valley in C.

Short-toed Eagle	Only in Do and seen as singles in 2 or 3 places.
Booted Eagle	One light-phase bird was seen briefly on one day in Do.
Marsh Harrier	Often seen, usually as singles, over reeds in DD and over crops in Do.
Long-legged Buzzard	Singles in several places in DD and Do but 3 or 4 at one site in Do.
Common Buzzard	Seen in Do, some of which may have been the Steppe sub-species
Honey Buzzard	One at each of two separate places in Do. Also seen in C.
Levant Sparrowhawk	A few pairs or singles were seen well in a few places but only in Do.
Kestrel	Generally singles seen throughout DD and Do. 2 seen at Hasarlac en route to C. Single in C.
Red-footed Falcon	About 20 pairs around a rookery in DD and singles were seen over the delta's forest. Not seen in Do.
Hobby	In DD and Do but not frequent. One seen at Hasarlac en route to C and at Zarnesti Gorge in C.
Little Crake	Full song heard well at the Caraorman reserve on 4 th June.
Moorhen	In DD and Do but not numerous.
Coot	Common on the lakes and channels of DD and also in wet areas of Do.
Oystercatcher	Seen only in DD but not frequently.
Avocet	In DD and Do and possibly the commonest wader.
Black-winged Stilt	In DD and, in Do, dozens in shallow pools. 4 at Hasarlac en route to C.
Stone Curlew	Singles in a couple of places in steppe areas of Do.
Collared Pratincole	Fairly numerous near a coastal lagoon by the coast of Do.
Little Ringed Plover	A few in one or two places in DD (brackish mud-flats) and Do (freshwater pools).
Lapwing	Seen In DD and Do. Fairly common.
Turnstone	One at a coastal lagoon in Do.
Curlew Sandpiper	Seen in Do at one site.
Little Stint	In Do only, five at one small pool.
Wood Sandpiper	In Do only and at only one site.
Redshank	DD and Do but only a few, or singles, here and there.
Spotted Redshank	Only in Do; one at one site.
Marsh Sandpiper	In Do only, 2 in summer plumage at one site and another at a brackish pool near the coast.
Black-tailed Godwit	In DD and Do including 11 at the Caraorman reserve.
Ruff	In Do only, such as two females at one small pool.
Black-headed Gull	In DD and Do and numerous over the main channels of the delta where the passage of boats probably brings food towards the surface.
Mediterranean Gull	In DD (eg 3 on 3 rd June) and Do (3 at a site on 6 th June).
Caspian Gull	Seen commonly in DD and Do.
Little Gull	Five immature birds were at one site in Do, but not seen in DD.
Little Tern	Some within a common tern colony near the coast of Do.
Gull-billed Tern	Two at the same place as the little terns.
Common Tern	Very frequent in DD, perhaps less so in Do unless near a colony.
Caspian Tern	One seen at one site in Do.
Black Tern	In DD but only about 10 in total within three lakes. Also seen in Do.
White-winged Black Tern	About 20 flew towards a coastal lagoon in Do, and two sat on the mud near three other species of tern. In the distance there were others, sunlight glinting on their white wings. All were in summer-plumage.
Whiskered Tern	Seemingly the commonest tern in DD. Also seen in Do.
Wood Pigeon	Noted in DD only.
Collared Dove	Common in DD and Do.
Turtle Dove	Several along the roadside in a few places in Do.
Cuckoo	Seen and heard commonly in DD, as well as in Do. Heard in C.
Little Owl	One was seen at the entrance to a bee-eater burrow at one place and another was seen near a coastal lagoon in another, both in Do.
Swift	In DD and Do in small numbers.
Alpine Swift	Seen at Zarnesti Gorge in C.
Hoopoe	Fairly frequent in DD and Do but always as singles, some carrying food.
Kingfisher	Quite frequent along the channels in DD but not seen in Do.
Bee-eater	Numerous (100+ pairs?) at several colonies near DD and in Do.

Roller	Very frequently seen throughout DD and along the roadsides in Do. At least 20 on the roadside from airport to DD.
Black Woodpecker	Not seen in DD but numerous channel-side trees had been well hacked by birds in the past.
Grey-headed Woodpecker	Seen well in DD, singly in mature willows.
Great Spotted Woodpecker	In DD only, and may be no more frequent than the grey-headed woodpecker.
Syrian Woodpecker	Seen at a few places in Do, such as in road-side trees.
Middle-spotted Woodpecker	One or two seen in Do.
Wryneck	Only Eugen had a brief glimpse of one in DD.
Skylark	Seen in DD and Do and especially common in the steppe areas. 2 seen at Hasarlac en route to C.
Crested Lark	A few seen in DD and Do.
Woodlark	Only heard at one site in Do.
Short-toed Lark	Seen and heard singing well at one place in Do.
Calandra Lark	In DD and Do, especially just inside cereal crops next to roadsides in Do.
Sand Martin	Seen in DD and Do, mainly near bee-eater colonies. Also at Hasarlac en route to C.
Swallow	Common.
House Martin	Several around Bucharest airport then others in DD and Do but not especially common.
Tawny Pipit	A few seen in steppe country and in open ground near the coast.
Tree Pipit	Seen in C.
White Wagtail	Fairly common in DD and Do. Also seen in C.
Yellow Wagtail	Fairly common in DD and Do, with a high proportion of <i>M.f. feldegg</i> .
Grey Wagtail	One seen at Zarnesti Gorge in C.
Dipper	2 seen in C.
Robin	Not seen or heard in DD or Do but maybe overlooked in lowland forest. Heard in C.
Thrush Nightingale	Heard in DD only and possibly less frequent than nightingale.
Nightingale	Heard in DD and Do, but mainly in channel-side willows in DD.
Redstart	Heard (and seen occasionally) in mature willows in DD, where it may have been the second commonest, non-wetland passerine. A male seen in C.
Black Redstart	Only one seen/heard in DD and a female or juvenile in rocky hills of Do. Several young birds seen in C.
Northern Wheatear	Fairly frequently seen in steppe or rocky hills of Do but also seen in DD.
Isabelline Wheatear	Perhaps the commoner of the two steppe-habitat wheatears in some places. Two pairs with juveniles were seen at one site.
Pied Wheatear	Several seen in the rocky limestone hills in Do, including one singing and one carrying food.
Song Thrush	One or two heard in forest areas in Do and C.
Blackbird	Only one or two were seen or heard in forest or open woodland in Do.
Rock Thrush	One seen very briefly at one rocky site in Do and later heard at the same place by Laurentiu.
Barred Warbler	In Do, one singing in bushes and then song-fighting briefly on 6 th June.
Garden Warbler	Heard frequently in DD, in mature willows along with redstarts and chaffinches. Not heard in Do.
Blackcap	Perhaps less common than garden warbler in DD; also heard frequently in Do.
Lesser Whitethroat	A few were heard in DD and one in a scrubby hill in Do. Also seen in C.
Sedge Warbler	Limited numbers in DD and Do but song period would have ended by early June.
Savi's Warbler	Heard in a few places in DD and one seen and heard in reedbed near the coast of Do.

Reed Warbler	Heard in DD and Do but possibly less common than great reed warbler in the DD.
Great Reed Warbler	Frequently heard ,and sometimes seen, in DD and reedbeds in Do.
Icterine Warbler	Single birds were singing well at one or two places in DD and Do and one was seen with its nest at one forest site.
Olivaceous Warbler	One was seen and heard well at one place in DD.
Chiffchaff	Fairly frequent but only in DD.
Wood Warbler	One was still singing well in a forest in Do on 7 th June.
Goldcrest	Heard in C.
Spotted Flycatcher	A few were seen at one or two places in Do.
Red-breasted Flycatcher	One bird was heard briefly and one was seen, again briefly, carrying food in woodland of Do.
Great Tit	Fairly frequent in DD and Do.
Coal Tit	Heard in C.
Blue Tit	Noted in DD but not in Do.
Sombre Tit	One was seen well at one place in Do.
Long-tailed Tit	A few were seen in DD and C.
Bearded Reedling	A few seen on reed-edge in DD and a few more in coastal reed in Do.
Penduline Tit	Two nests were found in DD but birds at only one. One heard at Hasarlac en route to C.
Nuthatch	One seen near Bran Castle in C.
Treecreeper	15 seen near Zarnesti in C.
Great Grey Shrike	Seen in C.
Lesser Grey Shrike	Often seen in DD and Do but mainly on roadside cables or trees/bushes in Do.
Red-backed Shrike	The most frequent of the two species and seen in both DD and Do. Also seen in C.
Magpie	Common.
Jay	8 seen in the Strimba Valley, C.
Nutcracker	Seen by Geoff on the Magura walk in C.
Jackdaw	Very common in DD and Do.
Rook	Some were still around the colonies in DD. A flock of 200 was seen in hill country in Do.
Hooded Crow	In DD and Do and quite common in the former. The grey had a noticeable pink hue to it.
Starling	Common in DD and Do.
Rose-coloured Starling	7 seen on 6 th June, a few of which were in bright pink/black plumage.
Raven	A large group on the Magura walk in C.
Golden Oriole	Singles were seen in several places in DD and at other sites in Do. Some were still singing.
House Sparrow	Common and lived alongside Spanish sparrows in storks' nests.
Spanish Sparrow	Seen at several places in and around DD, as well as in Do; always near storks' nests.
Tree Sparrow	Seen, but only in and around DD. Perhaps overlooked elsewhere.
Chaffinch	Interestingly common in the channel-side willows in DD. Also seen/heard in Do.
Linnet	A small group was seen at one hillside site in Do.
Goldfinch	Only a few were seen in Do, at a wooded valley near a nunnery.
Greenfinch	Very few and only in Do, including the woods by a nunnery.
Hawfinch	Three flew over at a wooded valley in Do.
Crossbill	A pair seen near Bran Castle in C.
Reed Bunting	Singles often seen from the boat in DD. Also at wetland sites in Do.
Ortolan Bunting	Heard in several places in hills in Do. A pair was bathing in a roadside gully after heavy rain and another pair was feeding young in a scrubby part of some woodland.
Yellowhammer	Just one or two in a few places of open woodland in Do. Seen in C.
Corn Bunting	Quite frequent in DD and Do, especially on hillside bushes in Do.
TOTAL = 168	

BUTTERFLIES AND OTHER INSECTS

The Delta

Large white
Green-veined white
Eastern Bath white
Large tortoiseshell
Comma
Painted lady
Cardinal
Silver-washed fritillary
Queen-of-Spain fritillary (below left)
Marbled fritillary (dead)
Ilex hairstreak (below middle)
Large copper
Short-tailed blue (below right)
Small blue
Holly blue
Silver-studded blue

The Carpathians

Swallowtail
Clouded apollo
Green-veined white
Orange tip
Common blue
Southern white admiral
Hungarian glider
Camberwell beauty
Red admiral
Comma
Arran brown
Woodland ringlet
Wall brown
Grizzled skipper



Some other insects seen in the Carpathians

Silver-ground carpet moth *Xanthorhoe montanata* (below left)
Speckled yellow moth *Pseudopanthera macularia*
Orange moth *Angerona pruneria* (below middle)
Scorpion fly *Panorpa antiporum* (below right)



OTHER SPECIES

Seen in the Delta

European pond terrapin
Balkan wall lizard

Seen in the Carpathians

European brown bear
Roe deer
Yellow-bellied toad

