

Romania's Danube Delta & Carpathian Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Spring & early summer Departures

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Bucharest, drive Zărnești.
Day 2/3	Zărnești.
Day 4/9	Danube Delta.
Day 10	Return Bucharest and fly London.



Departs

April, May and June

Focus

Birds and mammals

Grading

Grade A. Easy day walks only

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code ROM03) or see the current Naturetrek brochure

Highlights:

- Explore the reed-fringed waterways of the Danube Delta, one of Europe's most important wetlands.
- 4 nights exploring the Danube Delta on a floating hotel
- Large numbers of nesting pelicans, herons, Pygmy Cormorant & Glossy Ibis in the Danube Delta.
- Black, White-winged and Whiskered Tern all breed.
- Evening Bear watching in the Piatra Craiuli National Park.
- Wallcreeper, Nutcracker & other upland species in the Carpathian Mountains.



From top: Floating Hotel, Brown Bears, White Pelicans.
Photos courtesy of Daniel Petrescu, Geoff Carr and Abby Grainger



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Introduction

This holiday is divided into two parts:

The Carpathian Mountains - Here we will explore the spectacular Transylvanian forests and alpine meadows in search of woodland and montane bird, plant and butterfly species and, if we are fortunate, perhaps Brown Bear.

The Danube Delta and Black Sea coast - Here we will split our time between exploring the Delta by boat and floating hotel and a thorough exploration of the adjacent Dobroudja region. Our Romanian co-leader has an unparalleled knowledge of the Delta and its birds so we are in very good hands here.

We will start by journeying from Bucharest to the Carpathian Mountains. This rugged chain stretches in an arc through Romania for around 600 miles, reaches around 2,500 metres in height and is divided into 3 main regions. The landscapes have been shaped by a variety of processes, including glacial and volcanic. River cut gorges have created some stunning scenery, while the mixed terrain and climate allow for a great diversity of wildlife. Most of our time will be spent in the Transylvania area and we will be based in the small town of Zărnești, where we stay in a



Bran Castle

comfortable guesthouse. During our time here we will explore a several valleys in search of birds, such as woodpeckers, raptors and smaller passerines. The area also has places of historical interest and we will go past Bran Castle as well as Rasnov Citadel.

Travelling from the Carpathians to the Danube Delta will take us most of a day. The source of the Danube is in south west Germany and it then snakes its way through Europe for over 1,800 miles before it reaches the Black Sea. Our focus will be on the delta, which is a maze of channels, small lakes and marshes in an area that was once a prehistoric sea bay. Boarding our floating home for the next few nights, we will get away from the hectic pace of everyday life. Smaller boats allow us to search for waders and nesting birds through the back channels, and we will also keep an eye on the skies for birds flying over, including eagles and storks. There is an opportunity to relax in the evenings and you can experience a great sense of peacefulness at the end of the day, watching the sun set over a swathe of reed beds from the deck of the boat.

We will spend our last few days based out of Tulcea as we search the Dobroudja region for a variety of species along the Black Sea Coast as well as among the mountains and plains of this area. Gulls and waders can be found along the coast, while Bee-eaters and Hoopoe are often seen just inland. More raptors can be found soaring over the hills, while Suslik, or Ground Squirrel, make forays out of their burrows in search of food.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

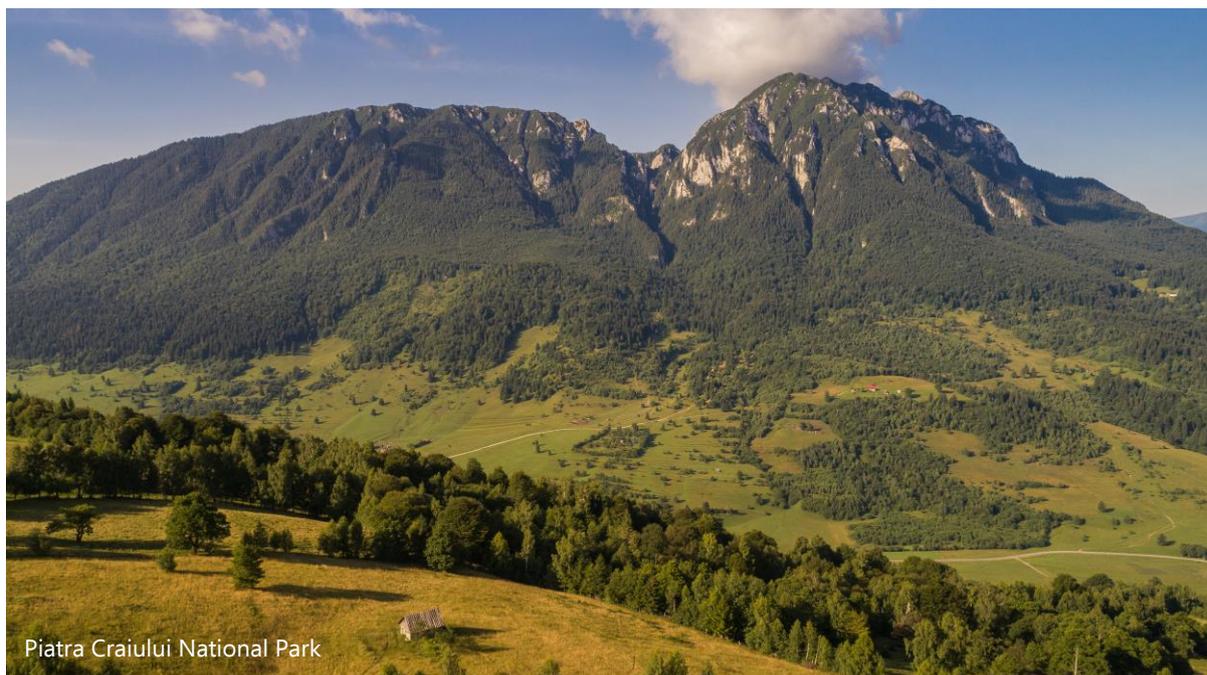
Zărnești

We depart from London on our 3 hour flight to Bucharest, the capital of Romania. Here we will meet our local guide and drive for around 4 hours out of the flat plains that surround the capital and into the cool forest-clad mountains of the Carpathians. We will base ourselves for 3 nights in Zărnești, a small Transylvanian town backed by the mountains of the Piatra Craiului National Park and where some of the locals still use horse drawn carts for transport. We are due to arrive at our comfortable guesthouse mid-evening (although please note that this can be later, depending on the flight schedules).

Days 2 – 3

Zărnești

We have the next 2 full days to explore the mountains, gorges and valleys of Transylvania. Our exact itinerary will depend on the weather conditions and advice of our local guide, but we will be focusing our efforts on the spectacular Piatra Craiului National Park (Rock-of-the-King). This dramatic park is dominated by a 25 kilometre jagged limestone ridge, widely regarded as one of Romania's most beautiful sights, which reaches a height of 2,244 metres. Brown Bears, Wolf and even Lynx still roam the forests whilst, to date, 110 species of bird and 1,100 species of higher plant have been recorded, including 2 endemics. There are many spectacular and wildlife rich areas to explore. The lower slopes are cut by a series of dramatic limestone gorges, such as the Zărnești Gorge, home to Wallcreepers, Black Redstarts, Crag Martins, Ring Ouzels and wheeling



Piatra Craiului National Park

flocks of Alpine Swifts. The surrounding forests are also the haunt of Lesser Spotted Eagle, Goshawk, Sombre Tit, Black, Grey-headed and Three-toed Woodpeckers, plus the majestic - but very elusive - Ural Owl. There is also much to keep the botanist interested including a wealth of orchids and plenty of butterflies.

We are also sure to pass Castle Bran during our time in the Carpathians, the much disputed residence of 'Vlad the Impaler' on whom the legend of Count Dracula is based.

Then, as the sun lowers, we will offer the option to visit a specially constructed hide deep in the forests to look for Brown Bears (approximately 1 hour from Zărnești). Wolves and Lynx are rarely seen, but the Brown Bears frequently descend from the hills in the evening and, whilst nothing is certain in the world of wildlife watching, we have a good chance of finding one or more of these magnificent creatures. Indeed, Romania still holds the largest population of Brown Bears on the continent and whilst they are not faring so well in other regions of Europe, in the Carpathians they are flourishing!

NB - the cost of the bear watching is not included in the tour price. It is likely to be in the region of £30 per person and payable locally (in Euros or Lei).

Day 4

Tulcea

Today we make an early start to drive to Tulcea on the edge of the Danube Delta. Although a long journey – one that will take most of the day – it is also an interesting introduction to the fertile plains, villages and towns of eastern Romania. As the road descends into the plains, the



Red-backed Shrike

spruce forests gradually give way to a more open landscape and the attendant birdlife changes from alpine to lowland species. We will start to find the first Rollers, Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes, all three of which line the roadside wires and the spectacularly coloured Bee-eaters which hawk for insects overhead. On our journey to Tulcea we will see a change in scenery and culture passing from the Carpathians, with its Hungarian and Germanic towns, into the low-lying and impoverished

region of Dobroudja. The transition is most tangible in the contrast in scenery between the wide open landscape of the Black Sea coast and the high forested mountains of Transylvania. We aim to arrive in Tulcea by early evening from where we will board our floating hotel in time for dinner.

Days 5 – 7

Danube Delta

We will spend the next 3 full days aboard the floating hotel from which we will explore the very heart of the Danube Delta. The day-to-day itinerary should be considered a guide only, as to some extent we will plan our programme as we go along, to allow for greater flexibility. The programme tends to be determined by prevailing local conditions (in particular the weather and water depth in the channels), the advice of our local Romanian guide and of course on the birds! The delta is incredibly rich in breeding birds, and the outline given below is merely a taster; no doubt we will encounter our fair share of additional surprises.

The Danube Delta comprises a vast complex of reedbeds, willow forest and wetland, bisected by an intricate network of channels. We will explore as wide a variety as possible of these habitats, both on foot and using a



Penduline Tit

combination of the floating hotel, a small motor boat and, if the water level is very low, perhaps rowing boats (rowed by our Romanian guides!). The Sulina channel that runs past Tulcea is wide and straight to facilitate passage of large freight through to the Black Sea, so we will aim to get access to the smaller, less disturbed channels as quickly as possible where birdlife is more abundant. Typical sights include numerous Glossy Ibises, Squacco Herons, egrets, Pygmy Cormorants and Cormorants which can gather in impressive numbers where the water levels are low. Large flocks of White Pelicans glide serenely overhead whilst in the shallower channels Kingfishers are ubiquitous and Common Sandpipers, Green Sandpipers and Greenshanks feed along the banks. Fringing reeds hold several species of reed warbler, plus family parties of Penduline Tits and other reedbed species; including a bumper population of Little Bitterns. Raptors will include frequent sightings of Marsh Harriers, whilst Red-footed Falcons may be seen



Marsh Harrier

in small groups hunting insects overhead. White-tailed Eagles can be quite difficult to find in the breeding season but there is always a chance of locating one of the ten or so breeding pairs. In places, the channels unexpectedly open out into wide eutrophic lakes covered in white and yellow water lilies. Here marsh terns swoop low over the water hawking insects (all three species occur, Whiskered Tern being the most abundant) and wildfowl

such as Ferruginous Duck breed. One particular large lake, Lake Furtuna, lies just to the north of Maliuc, in the heart of the delta. We shall certainly visit this site as, at this time of year, it can hold an impressive selection of birds. Migrating waterfowl and waders mingle with resident species through the first half of May, and White Pelicans often gather in huge numbers to feed and roost.

There will also be the opportunity to undertake short walks on land, where mature willow forest and cultivated areas yield further species of interest. In open areas, Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, Rollers and shrikes are very common. The woodlands support five species of woodpecker including Grey-headed and Great Spotted (most common), as well as Lesser Spotted, Black and Syrian, Golden Orioles are also abundant. Overhead, hunting Hobbys are a regular sight and around the sleepy fishing villages, thick scrub holds Common Redstarts, Spotted Flycatchers and, if we are lucky, perhaps an Eastern Olivaceous or Icterine Warbler. The lifestyle of the Delta's residents is also fascinating to see, with waterborne transport the only viable way of getting around and fishing the predominant source of income. A visit to the Danube Delta is an unforgettable experience in every respect.



European Roller

On our last evening we must sadly return along the Sulina Channel back to Tulcea where we will spend out last night on the floating hotel.

Day 8

Tulcea

After an early breakfast we will leave the floating hotel and travel by minibus westwards, never far from the banks of the Danube. Our first stop on a hillside overlooking the river and adjoining lakes with pools gives a panoramic view and it is here in the steppe country that we are likely to encounter the endearing little Suslik, a form of ground squirrel common to the area. Northern



Wryneck

Wheatear, Lesser Grey Shrike and raptors like Long-legged Buzzard, Steppe Buzzard and Short-toed Eagle are found in this habitat. Moving on to a hillside covered in sparse oak woodland there is a good chance of finding Sombre Tit, Wryneck, Levant Sparrowhawk and Hobby.

In the afternoon we will reach the Macin Mountains, a line of low hills rising to about 400 metres. This is an area of poor grassland with rocky outcrops and wooded slopes leading to cliffs and crags higher up the hillside. We will search here for the Pied Wheatear and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and perhaps even an Isabelline Wheatear, keeping a watchful eye open for Stone Curlew and the rare Saker Falcon.

We will drive back to Tulcea in the early evening and spend the last two nights of our tour in a comfortable, but simple, hotel.

Day 9

Tulcea

For our final day we will make use of the bus once more to travel to the Babadag plateau. As we head south we will stop occasionally to look for steppeland birds which may include Long-legged Buzzard, Saker Falcon and Ortolan Bunting. The Babadag Forest and the plateau on which it sits hold one of the largest concentrations of birds of prey in Romania and perhaps in the whole of Eastern Europe. Threatened species such as Eastern Imperial Eagle and Levant Sparrowhawk breed in the mixed woodlands alongside Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Black Kite, 'Northern' Sparrowhawk and Honey Buzzard, indeed from suitable vantage points it is possible to see over ten species of raptor in a single morning. This is also an extremely



botanically rich area, containing some of the most extensive lime forests in Europe alongside mixed oak woodland and forest steppe. With such a wide range of habitat types it is not surprising that the Babadag forest contains an equally wide range of plants including Ground Pine, Cornelian Cherry, Spiked Speedwell and Wild Clary. In turn these provide food for numerous butterflies such as Lesser Spotted Fritillary and Idas Blue. We will spend the morning exploring this fascinating area looking for raptors, Sombre Tit, woodpeckers and a wide variety of plants, butterflies and other insects.

In the afternoon we head further south to the Vadu district which contains an extensive area of lagoons just behind the coast linked to a now defunct industrial complex but rich in birdlife. Here waders collect on migration with often large numbers of Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers, plus



breeding Avocets and Kentish Plovers. This was also the site that the White-tailed Plover chose for its first breeding attempt in Europe in 2000. There is a large mixed colony of Collared Pratincoles, Black Terns and Little Gulls providing plenty of activity, and finally to the beach for the last of the migrant waders, terns, gulls and maybe even an Arctic Skua. We must then return to Tulcea for our last night in Romania but on

the way there is a chance of Red-footed Falcons feeding over the fields or Rose-coloured Starlings on migration.

Day 10

London

Today we must make the long journey back to Bucharest, but will try and break the journey wherever possible. Our return flight to London usually departs late afternoon, to arrive back in London mid-evening.

Tour grading & focus

Grade A - Mostly easy walks of a couple of hours or so taken a leisurely pace. There will be a couple of longer walks in the Carpathian Mountains, however, where the paths are uneven in places and undulate. All walks are taken at a slow pace. This holiday is suitable, therefore, for anyone with an 'average' level of fitness. Should you require additional information on the tour please give the Naturetrek office a call on 01962 733051.

The primary focus of this holiday will be on Romania's outstanding birdlife. Whilst your tour leader's expertise will be primarily in birds, they will be more than happy to share their knowledge on the region's mammal and butterfly life, geology, history and to a lesser extent, plants.

NB - Please note that on our June departures we will focus on eastern Romania's exciting range of resident and breeding species of bird as the northbound migration will largely be over by this time. June is an especially busy month for the breeding herons, pelicans and other species in the Danube Delta, the bears are still active in the Carpathians and there will be a greater variety of butterflies around in the lowlands than in May. For further details please call 01962 733051.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. Please note that the choice of rural hotels in Romania is extremely limited and you should not expect 5-star accommodation and luxury on this tour! Standards are improving, but the hotels generally lack character and are often limited in comfort. Food is usually plentiful, but there is not normally much variety.

For our 4-nights in the Delta we will be staying aboard a very comfortable floating hotel (see cover page). There are 10 small rooms on the lower deck of the hotel each with private facilities. Single rooms are available but limited so please notify us as soon as possible if you wish to be assigned a single. On the upper deck there is an air-conditioned dining room and bar plus an open sundeck. Power is supplied by a generator, although this is usually switched off overnight. Although a little cramped, it is clean, comfortable and of a better accommodation standard than

many Romanian hotels! It is also a wonderful way to get away from civilisation and explore the very heart of the Danube Delta.

Weather

The climate in Romania is 'Continental', and so warm sunny days can be expected (with daytime temperatures climbing as the month of May progresses) on this holiday. It will be cooler in the mountains, sometimes even cold on the mountain tops, where rain showers or even a late snow shower are always a possibility. By mid-June it will be starting to heat up in the lowlands and temperatures at this time can climb into the upper 20s°C to low 30s°C.

Regional Flights

The standard flights for this holiday are from a London airport. It is sometimes possible to fly from regional airports, although using these routes does often involve travelling out early or returning a day later in order to fit in with the group flights. Please note that flight schedules can change so please contact the Naturetrek office for further information and prices.

Your Safety & Security

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/romania prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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