

# Romania - The Wildlife of Transylvania

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 May – 4 June 2019



Brown Bear by Martin Webb



Fire Salamander plus weevil by Andy Buntten



Sand Lizard by Andy Buntten



Clouded Apollo by Martin Webb

Report compiled by Andy Buntten  
Images courtesy of Martin Webb & Andy Buntten



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Tour participants: Andy Bunten & Ionut (guides) with 14 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

This was a fantastic place to explore with wonderful limestone gorges, beautiful flower-rich meadows, bird-rich fishponds and vast swathes of natural forests. To experience the traditional agriculture and learn about the ways of the shepherds was fascinating, and to experience the horse-drawn carts, the shepherds' dogs and the hand-scything of hay brought it all to life.

There was wildlife in abundance too with fabulous birds such as the much sought after Wallcreeper, Spotted Nutcrackers, Black Woodpeckers, Red-backed Shrikes galore and skulking Little Bitterns. There were beautiful and plentiful orchids, Alpine Bells and Hungarian Snowbells and fantastic butterflies with blues, hairstreaks and fritillaries. However, it was the mammals that really enthralled with daily shows by Chamois and amazing views of European Brown Bear not only from the hide but also from our wonderful guest house.

Add to this weather which far exceeded our expectations, some stunning picnics and excellent food and you get a pretty perfect trip!

## Day 1

**Tuesday 28th May**

All of us, bar one, gathered at Heathrow Terminal 5 for our late morning flight to Bucharest. The flight was pretty much on time and thankfully also uneventful as we landed into a hot and sunny Bucharest airport. We met our driver Marius and then headed north to the hills and our home for the next week.

The drive was a straightforward one and we saw a few birds as we passed through the flat farmland and started our ascent into the more scenically interesting mountainous areas. The pick of our sightings, a Little Owl on a telegraph wire, was briefly seen by a couple of us as we went through a small mountain village and an Eastern Hedgehog was at the door of our guesthouse.

As we approached our destination the landscape got more mountainous still and we drove up a steep, rough road with ample hairpin bends to the village of Magura. Our guesthouse was magnificently sited overlooking a dramatic gorge and high forest and meadow clad mountains. Our minibus was unable to make the last few metres up to the front door of the guest house so we disembarked at the car park and walked gently up the last few steps to the rear entrance of our new home. By this time it was approaching 22.00 and quite dark but we could hear the constant chirping of Field Crickets all around us.

Although it was late our hosts had kindly prepared a delicious meal for us so we tucked into soup and polenta with meat/veg sausages and lovely donuts to follow. We were all pretty tired by now so dropped into our beds to be woken a little later by a very spectacular thunderstorm, before nodding off back to sleep until the morning.

## Day 2

**Wednesday 29th May**

As we'd had a late night only a few people rose early to see what might be around on this beautiful cloudless morning.

Fieldfares were flying to and fro in front of the guesthouse, a Black Redstart was, typically, on the rooftop and Common Redstarts, Common Cuckoos, Common Blackbirds and Song Thrushes were all in fine voice.

Not to be outdone the mammals also put on a show with Chamois showing well on the edge of the gorge opposite (one being roughly suckled by her kid) and a Red Fox trotting through the meadows just below us. A delicious and healthy breakfast later we boarded our bus to drive to Zarnesti.

Today we were off to the fishpond system and Dumbravita Lake just northwest of Brasov. We headed into Zarnesti to collect our guide Ionut and pressed on north. En route we saw Northern Raven and White Stork and heard from Ionut about the fate of the Saxons in Romania, with tens of thousands of Germans sold back to Germany. The settlement of Vulcan showed us Saxon and Germanic influences on the architecture. The frontages of the residences had huge wooden doors of adequate height to permit the entry of a hay-laden horse and cart.

As we entered the area of the fishponds we were immediately struck by the sheer wealth of birds with grebes, egrets and gulls galore. We were like children in a sweetshop, not knowing where to look first. A Red-necked Grebe was seen, next four beautiful mahogany coloured Ferruginous Ducks, a Purple Heron appeared in the reeds, amazingly well camouflaged, Whiskered Terns dipped around the lake surface and Mute Swans with cygnets fed by the distant reeds. There were spectacular Great Crested Grebes wherever we looked and smart male Common Pochard too. Not a bad start. A Marsh Warbler sang its mimic laden melodies from a willow tree nearby and smart looking Tree Sparrows flew around the bushes. Most noticeable of all though was the incessant calling of hundreds of frogs – most if not all of them in the Marsh Frog ‘complex’ with many looking like Edible Frogs.

We spent the next few hours walking around these fishponds which were so rich in all sorts of wildlife that it was difficult to know whether to look down for the plants, butterflies and dragonflies or up for the birds flying past. There were plenty of herons around: Grey Herons sentinel-like on far banks, Black-crowned Night Herons flying to and fro across the paths, and more Purple Herons flying low over the water.

Smaller birds were in abundance too with lots of singing Sedge Warblers and more wonderfully mimetic Marsh Warblers. Savi’s Warbler reeled away intermittently in the distance challenging some of us to pick it up as the song faded and rose in volume. No such problem with a very raucous Great Reed Warbler which belted out its song from a small stand of reeds. Not to be outdone, Marsh Frogs bubbled and gurgled away incessantly from the nearby ditches.

There were some lovely views of male Western Marsh Harriers and a pair of dainty Little Grebe appeared before gently submerging and disappearing off to the other side of the lake.

Common Blues, Orange Tips and Painted Ladies flicked around in the sunshine as did a more sombre coloured Grizzled Skipper. There weren’t a large number of dragonflies but Blue-tailed Damselfly was fairly common, perching inconspicuously on low grass stems.

Just before lunch we heard the mellifluous, fluty whistles of Golden Orioles while Common and Whiskered Terns swooped over the pond and a pair of Squacco Herons appeared nearby.

While our lunch was being prepared by Simona and her mother we wandered a lovely flower rich meadow – pride of place going to a stand of lovely Carthusian Pinks (*Dianthus carthusianorum*). The plants here were clearly irresistible to butterflies and we found Wall, Small Heath, Common Blue, Painted Lady, Woodland Ringlet and Heath Fritillary among others.

Our delicious lunch was consumed while we watched the plentiful wildlife around us. Three Western Marsh Harriers flew just across the pond, a Little Bittern led us a merry dance and both male and female Cuckoo, the later with its bubbling call, called around us.

Lunch completed we headed off to another, this time more eutrophic, lake festooned with pond weed and marginal vegetation near to the village of Rotbav. This was yet another excellent site with Whiskered Terns to greet us as we began our walk round. More dragonflies buzzed around us: the powder blue Broad-bodied Chaser, plus Blue-tailed and Red-eyed Damselflies. Hundreds of Black-headed Gulls swarmed around their colony and one, really attractive, male Ferruginous Duck was seen in amongst Great Crested Grebes, Mallards and Common Pochards.

Although some of us had had a quick glimpse of a Little Bittern we did want to see more and soon after arriving one bird obliged for many of us stalking its way stealthily though a crowded pond edge before lurking in tangled branches. Another bird, caught suddenly in the open, tried to brazen it out by stretching upright and pretending to be a twig but its nerve soon broke and it flew off.

We watched as a pair of Great Crested Grebes did their incubation swap just in front of us – a lovely sight. Sedge Warblers were common here and we watched them in their display flight as they sang with their energetic rattily-buzzy song, competing with the Marsh Warblers in their vigour.

We had more mammal sightings in the shape of Muskrats, one with vegetation in its mouth as it swam under a bank and some beautiful views of Common Kingfishers – one bird even remaining still enough for us all to it through the telescope - a rare occurrence.

Then it was time to leave this tern, warbler, hirundine and gull-rich lake and take ourselves off to Brasov where Ionut led us to the famous Black Church which was built by the German community of the city and is the main Gothic-style monument in the country, as well as being the largest and one of the most important Lutheran places of worship in the region. Here we saw some very interesting interpretative panels, the guild's carpets and other artefacts before having a little wander around the town and heading off back to our hotel.

Once again a lovely meal was waiting for us but even before we'd consumed one mouthful we had a quick look outside and found a Brown Bear climbing acrobatically down a very vertiginous rock face across the valley. A fairly distant but very exciting sighting and a fabulous way to end what had been a wonderful day.

## Day 3

Thursday 30th May

### Zarnesti Gorge

Today dawned beautifully again with a clear blue sky and perfect visibility. Common Cuckoos were calling, House Martins were busily building their nests under the eaves right outside our rooms and Fieldfares were

chattering their way from tree to tree below us. A Black Woodpecker was 'rain' calling very intermittently across the gorge but although we didn't see it this time one of the group did catch a brief view a little later. The Alpine Swifts which fly through the gorge opposite the guest house from time to time did their stuff and appeared for a brief visitation. A scour of the sheer rock faces opposite was rewarded by more views of the beautiful Chamois.

We were spending today principally in the Zarnesti Gorge and drove down at 08.30 so we could walk to an area where we hoped we may see Wallcreeper. It was difficult walking briskly through this beautiful and wildlife-rich site but we stiffened the sinews knowing we'd be walking back down again and with our quarry uppermost in our minds.

Once at the likely spot we waited patiently hoping at least to hear that characteristic *glissando* call. We'd only been waiting for 20 minutes or so when the bird appeared above our heads before promptly flying across the gorge and moving around the sheer cliffs there. The party moved after it and had good, if brief, views while the birds flicked around various rock outcrops. Eventually it moved back to the place where we first saw it and spent another five minutes or so quartering the rock face and giving us wonderful views of its spotted wings and scarlet shoulders. This was an absolutely fabulous bird and high on the 'wish-list' of many of our group.

Very satisfied with this we wandered further up the gorge accompanied by Orange Tip, Green-veined White and Painted Lady butterflies as well as a number of beautiful flowers including Hungarian Snowbell, Alpine Bells, Fly Honeysuckle, Alpine Clematis and the beautiful yellow Austrian Leopardsbane.

Wandering our way back down we heard Willow Tit, Eurasian Wren and Coal Tits galore and the number of butterflies increased in the glorious sunshine and hot weather.

Apart from the Wallcreeper the next 'most wanted' was Fire Salamander and, sure enough, we found two of these wonderful beasts, glistening as if they'd been newly varnished, just beside the path. Cue another couple of hundred photos.

Simona and her mother had joined us again with another magical spread of wonderful food while Willow Tits and Eurasian Wrens serenaded us from the nearby trees. A few people who had missed the Salamander made the brief walk back to re-engage with these rather otherworldly animals finding Goldcrest and European Robin as we did so.

Then it was back into the bus to drive up to the top of the plateau before walking back down again. We'd done it in this seeming odd way to ensure we were at the Wallcreeper site earlier in the morning.

The walk down the hill through sunlit meadows and woodlands was wonderful. Common Redstarts sang from treetops, orchids such as Military, Green-winged and Early Purple were found together with abundant Yellow Rattle, Alpine Lady's Mantle and Ragged Robin – the meadows were just wonderful.

All these plants supported lots of butterflies too of course and we found Little Blues everywhere, Grizzled and Dingy Skippers and Green Hairstreak as well the skipper-like moth the Mother Skipton. In a boggy area we found a brace of Yellow-bellied Toads before we descended into the woodlands with their Sanicles, Woodruff

and Yellow Archangels. Wood Warblers serenaded us as we made our way down the muddy track as did numerous Chaffinches

At the base of the gorge we waited by the cool stream for the bus to appear and saw Bullfinches and heard the distinctive song of the Red-breasted Flycatcher.

Then it was back in the bus to be driven to our guesthouse and relax before the list was compiled and another meal consumed. Once again though a highlight was to come as after dinner the bear had re-appeared on the rock slab over the valley and we spent until dusk watching it through the telescope. What a great day!

## Day 4

Friday 31st May

Despite a less than optimistic forecast the day dawned reasonably well and once again Chamois, and this time Brown Bear as well, were present on the limestone crags opposite the hotel.

A Black Woodpecker was calling as were the usual Common Blackbird, Song Thrush, Chiff-Chaff and a Lesser Whitethroat. Along the lane by the hotel there were Tree Pipits singing and both Great Spotted and Green Woodpecker showed themselves well.

After our delicious breakfast we headed off along the lovely plateau waiting a short while for two cows and two calves to be ushered into a field and watching as the calves leapt and gambolled in the weak sunshine. Then it was north through Sinca Noua and some hour or so later we arrived at our destination – the Narcissus Forest near the town of Vad. Here we'd hardly left the minibus before we saw Common Buzzard, Red-backed Shrike and a distant raptor which puzzled us for a while until it came closer and revealed itself to be a Hobby. Fortunately it then perched on a dead tree enabling excellent telescope views of this fine bird.

In the wood we found a couple of different species of Cow-wheat including the local and very attractive *Melanopyrum bihariense*, Ragged Robin and Quaking Grass plus a number of lovely Butterfly Orchids.

The wood was damp and luscious, like a rich plum pudding, and full of insects including bumbling Cockchafers and more focussed Mosquitoes. Nuthatches called from mature Oak trees and a Middle Spotted Woodpecker scolded us from the depths of the leaves.

Small ponds contained Yellow-bellied Toads and Hornets were buzzing menacingly while we strolled through more lovely woodland with the floor covered in Wood Anemone leaves. More Great Spotted Woodpeckers appeared and, dashing between trees, gave us very good views.

A Pied Flycatcher was singing and all around us we could hear the beautiful song of Eurasian Golden Orioles, a distant Eurasian Hoopoe and the equally onomatopoeic Common Cuckoo.

As we emerged from the woodland we found a young Sand Lizard, a lovely group of Narcissi, a less than lovely dead Fox cub and heard a distant Nightjar churring.

We made our way to the bus with the constant sound of Field Crickets in our ears and various butterflies moving rapidly between the lovely meadow flowers. Then it was time to drive back to Sinca Noua, via a short walk in an area of open grassland, and get to our mid-afternoon dinner

Our meal was provided by a well-known local family who do catering for many of the village's festivities. It was a wholesome meal too, held beneath a canopy of vines roofing a spacious courtyard and accompanied by copious amounts of local wine, plum and cherry brandy for those who wished to indulge. Afterwards we had a tour around the very impressive garden allotments although it was a little worrying to see a few very fat, healthy looking Colorado beetles.

It was now time to head out for the Bear hide. We drove past some massive dogs before following the ranger who was transporting bags of assorted bear bait, mainly maize and biscuits, to the prepared clearing. Carefully negotiating the insecure-looking footbridge and cautiously heaving ourselves up a muddy slope led us to the steep steps of the hide.

We arrived at around 18.00 and a Brown Bear was already in evidence. We settled quietly into our tiered seats in the hide and for the next hour and a half had a most magical time watching the comings and goings of various bears.

A couple of female bears were present initially together with a young cub that had only just recently left the safety of its mother. As a result this young cub was very wary and quite quickly climbed high up into a tree. We couldn't quite work out why until a very large male bear appeared. This 22 year old had a bad reputation as a cub killer so no wonder our small bear had exited vertically. This huge male then strutted and rolled his way around the open area in front of us like a champion Sumo wrestler intimidating his opposition.

By the end of our session we'd seen 10 different bears and observed some fascinating behaviours as the different bears moved around avoiding each other or feeding together depending on their social status.

The big bears had left for a while at around 19.30 so we took that opportunity to leave the hide and make our way back to the bus and then back to our guest house.

Back to our guest house before 10pm we reflected on a wonderful day of wildlife culminating with a superb encounter with mainland Europe's largest land carnivore.

## Day 5

Saturday 1st June

### Barsa valley to Coltii Chilieii

Today we were heading to the beginning of the Barsa Valley and to the Coltii Chilieii (a shrine in a cave). Our fears about the weather seemed to be confirmed as it had been raining heavily most of the night and at 06.00 it was still pouring. However, despite the appalling forecast, it started to clear at around 08.30 and we had a fabulous dry day of sun and high cloud. Perfect.

Another huge and magnificent breakfast was laid before us of amazing local and home-produced goods. Well-fortified, we climbed into our bus for the short trip to the Coltii Chilieii trail, passing through Zarnesti to collect Ionut.

Setting off on our walk Ionut told us more about the old two-year cycle of transhumance where large numbers of sheep (5-10,000) would be walked down to the Danube Delta area before returning to the mountains. This journey of around 4-500 kilometres was part of a system which was very common in the 18th and 19th centuries. We talked about the shepherds' dogs with short lengths of stick dangling from a spiked collar around their necks. The collar was to help protect from Wolf attacks and the piece of stick designed to strike the dog's front legs when it was running and so aimed to stop it from going too far and chasing protected wildlife in the Park before trotting back to its flock.

The trail we took more or less followed the contours of the land and we climbed gently but steadily through some magnificent flower-rich meadows. There was a real profusion of colours from Yellow Rattle, Twayblade, Flax, Gentian and Whorled Clary galore, and lots of different orchids as well including Fragrant, Butterfly, and Broad-leaved Marsh Orchids. A botanist's paradise!

There were plenty of birds as well with Tree Pipits performing particularly well using the tall conifers as song posts from which to launch themselves on their arcing display flights. We heard a number of Yellowhammers singing and first of the almost ubiquitous Red-backed Shrikes. These magnificent little birds were just about everywhere and it was delight to see so many. A Black Kite drifted past which excited Ionut as they're not a common bird here and at about the same time we saw a very smart rufous looking Roe Deer jumping its way through a distant field system.

A little later our Black Kite appeared again but this time with a lovely and very typical Honey Buzzard showing its small protruding head, long tail and pinched-in wings.

Autumn Crocus leaves were everywhere and the fields in the sunshine were starting to produce various different butterflies and other insects. There were Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail, Small Heath, Little Blue, Orange Tips and the ubiquitous Specked Yellow moths.

We paused at a clearing having heard a Black Woodpecker, and the bird appeared and flew down to the ground – presumably to feed on ants or some such. For a little while we were treated to good sightings of this wonderful bird as it uttered its flight and the 'rain' calls.

We were musing that Spotted Nutcrackers often appear here when we turned around and there two were just above our heads! Often wary birds this pair just sat there allowing multiple photographs and fantastic views.

Tree Pipits were calling everywhere as were Common Chaffinches and Chiff-chaffs as we made our way along the contour of the hillside before dropping down to meet up with the all-important lunch. We were still seeing lots of butterflies and more plant species including Globe Flowers and lovely purple Mountain Pansies. A small body of water in the track had all generations of Yellow-bellied Toads in it – adults, tadpoles and eggs.

We descended to a most gorgeous bank ablaze with the colours of wild flowers – Thyme, Rock Rose and many others. Our first Common Frog was also enjoying this beautiful area and was sitting peacefully until we ruined its rest.

It hardly needs to be said that we enjoyed another wonderful Simona and mother lunch – this time with unctuous pancakes to finish – before some of us headed up the hill to the monastery site. It was a stiffish climb with more lovely wild flowers, teeming Wood Ants nests, some more lovely butterflies including Woodland Ringlet and Duke of Burgundy and a close up view of a busy Goldcrest before we reached the cave beyond the monastery at around 14.30.

We negotiated a rather truculent dog and then set off back downhill to re-join our friends who'd been lolling in the glorious sunshine in the bank of beautiful wild flowers like so many Shakespearean characters.

We clambered aboard our bus and then made the short, if bumpy, ride back up the hill to our lovely lookout hotel.

We foregathered a little while later to do our checklist and look at a few Chamois calmly enjoying the sun across the valley. After another delicious meal we peered out again and got a brief view of a Brown Bear before retiring and dreaming of yet another day in this unbelievably wonderful countryside.

## Day 6

Sunday 2nd June

### Barsa valley

Another lovely morning dawned with around eight Chamois on the cliff opposite our lovely hotel. A Peregrine was calling and seen dashing past the base of a cliff. Lesser Whitethroats, Common Redstarts, Chiff-Chaffs and Common Cuckoos were calling and a Black Woodpecker put in an appearance just beneath us. These were blissful mornings that we were experiencing.

A health-giving organically sourced breakfast later and we were heading back down the familiar track to Zarnesti to pick up our guide Ionut.

Today we were back in the Barsa Valley but this time just a little further on beyond where we'd been the day before.

We left the bus and started the walk up the gentle incline of the valley and immediately saw two European Sparrowhawks circling in front of us.

A small Common Frog appeared in front of us too and while watching this little beast move through the vegetation we noticed the stunning blue of a beautiful Spring Gentian. This area of open grassland with bushes and trees scattered around was perfect for Tree Pipits and Red-backed Shrikes and we saw plenty of each calling, singing and perched on their respective tree tops.

We discussed the Red-backed Shrike or 'butcher bird' and its larder and decided to hunt around in the nearby Hawthorns to see if we could find any sign. Almost immediately Chris found a poor cockchafer, legs still feebly waving, impaled on a thick Hawthorn spike. How apposite, we felt, to see an impaling in the land of Vlad.

The beautiful meadows with speedwells, daisies, buttercups, orchids and much else besides kept us all entertained while a fly past of a Grey-headed Woodpecker and a Mistle Thrush was welcomed by the birders. Some very impressive Bolete fungi caught our attention. Initially we thought they were *satanicus* (Devil's Bolete) but on reflection felt they were *luridiformis* (Lurid Bolete). Whichever, they were spectacular!

We gradually made our way higher to the accompaniment of Lesser Whitethroat song, a lovely Sand Lizard and various butterflies including some nice Clouded Apollos. We reached a log which looked as if it had had some rough treatment so we wondered if perhaps a Brown Bear had torn it apart.

A dozen or so Red Crossbills flew over as we climbed higher into the woods themselves - lovely Beech and Spruce forests.

Here we tried to find Pygmy Owl and had a little success in hearing one call a few times but sadly no sightings. We did see Goldcrest, Coal and Crested Tits though and brief views of a vocal Black Woodpecker and a scurrying Red Squirrel.

We walked back down this beautiful valley with its Speedwells, Stitchworts, Plantains, Buttercups and so much besides until we found Simona and her magical mother with yet another wonderful lunch - this time featuring a much talked about Rhubarb Sponge. Hit of the day.

After lunch we made our way around various other small valleys off the main Barsa valley looking for water bodies with amphibians. We found many Yellow-bellied Toads, some singing incredibly plaintively, dragonflies, including Broad-bodied Chaser and Large Red Damselfly, and a pair of amazing Common Toads - a huge female with tiny male in clasping attendance and yards and yards of toad spawn around them.

Here there were also meadows with lots of butterflies - Clouded Yellows, Small Heaths and Blues as well as Bug Orchids and slow-flowing streams with, as well as the toads, a Great Crested and Montadon's Newt.

A few spots of rain brought us back to the bus and then to the Park Visitor Centre where Ionut showed us round the amazing interactive displays including one which, he said, kept the children enthralled. We never left this one.

The Visitor Centre was a very informative and well-laid out place which we left around 17.00 to get back to our hotel and a fantastic bean soup and pork main dish. Delicious.

There was then time then for a little more Chamois spotting as we did our list and then to bed. Once again this was another fantastic day in this beautiful country.

## Day 7

Monday 3rd June

### Sinca Noua and Stramba Valley

Today it did finally seem as though the weather Gods had caught up with us as it was raining steadily early in the morning.

A Black Woodpecker called and flew in to the area of meadow below the guest house and perched on a fence before heading back into the trees.

The rain cleared for a while as we drove down the track, with Common Redstarts appearing from time to time in the willows by the road, four Greenfinches flew in front of the bus and by the stream at the base of the track our old faithfuls of a White-throated Dipper and Grey Wagtails put in an appearance.

As always we picked up Ionut and as we drove along the valley towards Sinca Noua he told us about various aspects of Romanian life including the Roma people and the current views on Romania and the EU.

We arrived at Sinca Noua around 10.00 and clambered on board horse drawn carts to make our way north and to the Stramba Valley. The ride in the carts was extremely pleasant (notwithstanding what seemed like a flat tyre and some dodgy wheel bearings in one of them). Ambling along at a gentle pace we had an excellent view of this old village and its very traditional houses. Birds were easier to see and hear too – with singing Black Redstarts on the house tops, a Marsh Tit calling, Blackcap and Garden Warbler singing and a Black Woodpecker shooting powerfully across the road.

As we passed a gas plant full of House Martins a Eurasian Hobby whipped past through the middle of the birds before disappearing at breakneck speed the other side. We couldn't see if it had caught anything or not.

After about an hour or so of this very pleasant form of transport we turned off the road and into the valley proper before finally coming to a halt in a lovely meadow. Here we leapt out of our carts and continued walking up the valley to the accompaniment of Yellowhammer, Tree Pipit and Garden Warbler.

Alas at about 12.00 our luck with the weather, which had been amazing so far this holiday, finally broke and the rain started falling steadily and gradually intensifying.

Simona and her mother appeared with more lovely food and we took turns to dash to her car, where she'd set it up, grab some food and dash back to the bus to eat it. After lunch we nearly ventured forth again in a lull, but the rain came back and we decided it was best to return to the hotel and relax and see if we could manage a walk there.

On our way back we stopped again at Sinca Noua to photograph the very impressive White Stork's nest complete with sentinel adult and four small chicks; photographs taken we clambered back into the coach only to promptly leap back out again as the other adult arrived and started feeding the chicks.

We stopped again in Zarnesti to see the huge Stork's nest there that Ionut remembered being an impressive structure when he was a boy, before, once again, the rain beat us back.

We relaxed at the hotel, had another abortive attempt at a walk before contenting ourselves with a fantastic view of a young bear that Martin had spotted climbing around on the cliffs opposite. We watched this animal for a good couple of hours while it potted around, slept and chewed at various plants. A Black Woodpecker was calling too and then a Chamois sauntered out from the woodlands just beneath our hotel and gave us the best views we'd had of this species too. Sometimes it pays to come back early!

## Day 8

Tuesday 4th June

Our last early morning was a bit on the damp side again and our early morning walk had to be curtailed as we didn't want to be soaked on a long travelling day. However we had the bonus of our Brown Bear still on its perch on the gorge opposite and we, again, had an extended view of this animal which was still present when we left two hours later.

The usual birds were singing and calling and we hoped for another close view of the Black Woodpecker but sadly though it was very vocal it remained invisible. Cuckoos were calling, Black Redstarts singing and White Wagtail wagging as we gazed around at this gorgeous landscape with its traditional farms so fantastic at supporting the wonderful wildlife we'd been enjoying all week. House Martins swooped overhead and Red-backed Shrikes called harshly as we said our sad farewells to our hosts and headed off towards Bran, en route to the airport.

We arrived at Bran Castle early and thanks to Simona's assertiveness had a good tour around this fascinating edifice. She told us about the real, and very interesting, history of the castle while the Count Dracula and Vlad the Impaler images were there for all of us to see.

Simona's many talents included acting as a guide to the castle and she told us stories and facts about this labyrinthine building. There are very few authentic historical artefacts remaining in the castle as most have been relocated to museums. Items exist from the period of medieval conquest to the time when one of Queen Victoria's granddaughters lived here with the King of Romania.

Large numbers of Common Swifts screamed around the castle and many more visitors were doing so inside, so we quickly bought a few souvenirs, mainly home-made jams and cheese, and made our way south towards the airport.

Our excellent driver Marius steered us expertly through the Romanian countryside and we saw a few birds through the very rain-smeared windows – Kestrels, Buzzards and occasional White Stork. After a couple of hours, we made a brief stop at a service station where we found Corn Bunting, Crested Larks and some lovely stands of Larkspur.

Then it was back into the bus to arrive at the airport in good time for an uneventful check in and boarding of the aircraft. Sadly, we had a substantial delay in taking off which meant for an uncomfortable trip for Anne who had an onward flight. Fortunately, this connecting flight was delayed too and was made – so all was well.

Thanks must go to our bus driver, Marius. His skilful driving and willingness to help was greatly appreciated. The gentle knowledge and patience of our lovely local guide, Ionut, brought tremendous pleasure to all of us. Simona and her wonderful mother cannot be thanked enough for their ability to bring food of outstanding quality out to us in the wilds of Transylvania.

Obviously, our thanks go to our hosts George and Oona at the Mosorel guest house – excellent home-made food, beer and wine and what must be one of the most gorgeous locations and views in Romania.

Thanks to Denise and others for so willingly producing a list of some of the special plants we found each day, and finally many thanks to all the group who gelled so well, who helped each other so selflessly and who made the trip an absolute delight.

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Brown Bear by Martin Webb



Chamois by Martin Webb

## Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May/June							
			28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		20						
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		1						
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		12						
4	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		50						
5	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>		5						
6	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	1							
7	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2						
8	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>		1						
9	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		50						
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	1	4		2	1		8	4
11	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>		3						
12	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		12						
13	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		3						
14	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		18						
15	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		6						
16	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		3						
17	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		6						
18	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>		1						
19	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		12						
20	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>					3			
21	Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga pomarina</i>				1				
22	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					2			
23	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		6						
24	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>					1			
25	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			1	3	6	3	1	
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		4						
27	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		30						
28	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		1						
29	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		200						
30	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>		40						
31	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		4						
32	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>		15						
33	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		1						
35	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓		H		6	2	
36	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		4	H	2	H	H	1	H
38	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H	H	H			H		
39	Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>					1			
40	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1							
41	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymartus melba</i>			✓					
42	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		6		12		6	6	20
43	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		3						
44	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				H				
45	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>				1				
46	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				3	H		2	2
47	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>			1		1	2	1	

	Common name	Scientific name	May/June							
			28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
48	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				1				
49	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>						1	1	
50	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	2	1	2	1	1	2	2
51	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>				1			1	
52	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						1		
53	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>		1	1	10	15	6	4	2
54	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		5	H	H	1	2	2	
55	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>					3			
57	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓		✓				✓
59	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		6		6	8	6	4	✓
60	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		12	2	1	1	H	1	
61	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			1	1	H	4		
62	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>						1		
63	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>							H	
64	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>			1			H		
65	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				1				
66	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		2	4	4	2	2	4	2
67	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>								2
68	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		6						
69	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓		8		✓	✓	✓
70	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			H	H	1	H	H	H
72	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>		1						
73	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		6						
74	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		H						
75	Marsh Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus palustris</i>		3						
76	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>		H						
77	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		1	H	H	H	H	H	H
78	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>							2	
79	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		1		H	H			
80	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			H	H	1	1		
81	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1					
82	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				2				
83	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>			1					
84	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		6	4	2	6	6	6	8
87	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		H	H	H	1	H	H	H
88	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			H		1	4	1	
89	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			1		H		H	
90	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>				1				
91	Red-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>			H					
92	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		1					2	2
93	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		H	2	2	2	2	3	2
94	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		1		1	1		1	1
95	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		30		1	1		4	
97	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		2						
98	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	8	1	6	3	4	2

	Common name	Scientific name	May/June							
			28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
99	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1	2	4	6	2	6	4
100	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		1	H	6	12	4	H	
101	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		H	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			2		2	2		
103	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		H			H		4	
104	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					2			
105	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>						12		
106	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				2	4		2	
107	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		H						

## Mammals (MH = mole hills)

1	Eastern Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus concolor</i>	1							
2	Common Mole	<i>Talpa europaea</i>			MH	MH	MH	MH	MH	
3	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			1		1	1		
4	Muskrat	<i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>		2						
5	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	1			1				
6	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		1		1	1	1		
7	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>		1		11	1		1	1
8	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>					2	1	1	
9	Chamois	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>		6	5	3	3	8	1	

## Reptiles (D = dead)

1	Sand Lizard	<i>Lacerta agilis</i>				2		1		
2	Slow Worm	<i>Anguis fragilis</i>					D	1		

## Amphibians

1	Montadon Newt	<i>Lissotriton montandoni</i>						✓		
2	Fire Salamander	<i>Salamandra salamandra</i>			2	2		D		
3	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>						✓		
4	Yellow-bellied Toad	<i>Bombina variegata</i>			2	1	10	✓		
5	Agile Frog	<i>Rana dalmatina</i>			1					
6	Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>		✓						
7	Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>					1	1		
8	Great Crested Newt	<i>Triturus cristatus</i>						1		

## Plants of Note

1	Carpathian Pink	<i>Dianthus carthusianorum</i>		✓						
2	Comfrey	<i>Symphytum officinale</i>		✓						
3	Yellow Flag Iris	<i>Iris pseudacrus</i>		✓						
4	Bladder campion	<i>Silene vulgaris</i>		✓						
5	Marsh Spurge	<i>Euphorbia palustris</i>		✓						
6	Grassy-leaved Iris	<i>Iris graminea</i>		✓						
7	Alpine Bells	<i>Cortusa matthiola</i>			✓					
8	Hungarian Snowbell	<i>Soldanella hungarica</i>			✓					
9	Common Valerian	<i>Valerian officianialis</i>			✓					
10	Elder sp	<i>sambucus officianialis?</i>			✓					
11	Mezereon	<i>Daphne mezereum</i>			✓					
12	Fly Honeysuckle	<i>Lenisura xylostelum</i>			✓					
13	Elm-leaved Spirea	<i>Spiraea chamaedryfolia</i>			✓					

	Common name	Scientific name	May/June							
			28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
14	Red lungwort	<i>Pulmaria rubra</i>			✓					
15	Perennial honesty	<i>Lunaria rediviva</i>			✓					
16	Southern Woodruff	<i>Asperula taurina</i>			✓					
17	Alpine Clemetis	<i>Clemetis alpina</i>			✓					
18	Common Monkshood	<i>Acaridum appelis</i>			✓					
19	Military Orchid	<i>Orchis militaris</i>			✓					
20	Green-winged Orchid	<i>Orchis morio</i>			✓					
21	Early Purple Orchid	<i>Orchis mascula</i>			✓		✓			
22	Spreading Bellflower	<i>Campanula patula</i>			✓					
23	Alpine Lady's Mantle	<i>Alchimilla alpina</i>			✓					
24	Ragged Robin	<i>Lynchis flos-cuculi</i>			✓					
25	Yellow Rattle sp	<i>Rhinanthus sp</i>			✓					
26	Pheasants-eye Narcissus	<i>Narcissus poeticus</i>				✓				
27	Cow Wheat sp	<i>Melampyrum bihariense</i>				✓				
28	White False Helleborine	<i>Veratrum album</i>				✓				
29	Spike heath	<i>Bruckenthalia spiculifolia</i>				✓				
30	Rampion sp	<i>Phyteuma tetramerum</i>				✓				
31	Thyme sp	<i>Thymus cosmosus</i>					✓			
32	Fragrant Orchid	<i>Gymnadenia conopsea</i>					✓			
33	Common Twayblade	<i>Listeria ovata</i>					✓			
34	Globeflower	<i>Trollius europaeus</i>					✓			
35	Great Masterwort	<i>Astrantia major</i>					✓			
36	Mountain Pansy	<i>Viola lutea</i>					✓			
37	Whorled Clary	<i>Salvia verticillata</i>					✓			
38	Sanfoin	<i>Ornobrychis viciifolia</i>					✓			
39	Perennial Flax	<i>Linum perenne</i>					✓			
40	Spring Gentian	<i>Gentiana verna</i>						✓		
41	Purple Hellebore	<i>Helleborus purpurascens</i>						✓		
42	Seven-leaflet Bittercress	<i>Cardamine heptaphylla</i>						✓		
43	Pignut	<i>Conopodium majus</i>						✓		
44	One-flowered Wintergeen	<i>Monesus uniflora</i>						✓		
45	Yellow Broomrape	<i>Orobanche flava</i>						✓		
46	Wood Scabious	<i>Scabiosa sylvatica</i>						✓	✓	
47	Bug Orchid	<i>Orchis coriophora</i>						✓		
48	Lurid Bolete	<i>Boletus luridis</i>						✓		
49	Melancholy Thistle	<i>Cirsium helenioides</i>							✓	
50	Dog Rose	<i>Rosa canina</i>							✓	
51	Alkanet sp	<i>Anchusa barrelieri ?</i>							✓	
52	Himalayan Balsam	<i>Impatiens glandulifera</i>							✓	



Wallcreeper by Martin Webb



Hungarian Snowbell by Andy Bunten