

Romania's Danube Delta & Carpathian Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Report

16 – 25 September 2017



Piatra Craiului



Western Marsh Harrier



Bearded Tit



Spur-thighed Tortoise

Report and images compiled by Alison Steel



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Day 1

Saturday 16th September

Most of the group flew out from Heathrow to Bucharest, where we met our guide, Florin, on arrival and the rest of the group. It felt decidedly warm, going from around 8°C to 32°C. Having got all the bags and everyone safely on the bus, we departed Bucharest and set off for the mountains. Only Feral Pigeon, a few Jackdaws, some Rooks and a couple of Magpies interspersed the journey.

A short stop was a welcome chance to stretch our legs and a few indulged in a start of the holiday ice cream.

As the sun was setting, we transitioned from going over the mountains to descending into Transylvania. Leaving some of the jagged peaks behind we started to see a few more horse-drawn wagons, many piled high with hay. Florin shared a little of the history of the area as we drove through, particularly about the citadel that sits high on a hill.

The Pension Elena was a welcome site. Everyone was speedily checked in and, after a short while to refresh, was welcomed by George (GG) and Elena with a glass of 'Dracula's tears'. Dinner was very welcome after our long day, and conversation flowed freely until the long day caught up with some and we headed up to bed.

Day 2

Sunday 17th September

A good breakfast set us up for the day. After making some sandwiches for lunch, we set off for Piatra Craiului National Park. Black Redstart was our first bird of the day when one was spotted on a roof top just outside the gates of our guesthouse.

A short drive took us to the foot of the hills, where some impressive limestone cliffs rose up beyond. A beautiful warm, sunny morning meant we were hopeful of finding a few species. Just out of the car park we spotted some wagtails; a mixture of Grey and White Wagtails feeding in the fields. A couple of Whinchats were quickly found too. A little way up there was a Song Thrush calling in a worried fashion, prompting us to find the Red-backed Shrike in the bush next to it. A Common Kestrel was our first raptor, and mixed flocks of Blue Tits and Great Tits flitted through the tree tops. A Hooded Crow raised hopes of a Spotted Nutcracker, until it moved into the light. Very shortly after, however, we did have our first sighting as a bird flew overhead, eclipsing our first Common Buzzard sighting.

As we headed further up into the forest, more Spotted Nutcrackers were seen, some sitting still long enough to allow a photograph or two to be taken. Autumn Crocuses grew along sections of the grass verges. Several haystacks were under construction, making us appreciate how much work is involved in creating one.

One stop saw a large flock of Northern Ravens come into view. Mixed among these, sharp-eyed Florin spotted a female Goshawk. She was joined by a male and we could appreciate the size difference between them.

Continuing on up, both European Robin and Chaffinch were heard calling, although neither put in an appearance. Connell added Eurasian Nuthatch to the day's sightings.

Just before arriving at the monastery, a Marsh Tit called before putting in a brief appearance. There was singing coming from the church building, a nice background sound to the butterflies and bees feeding on a hugely colourful flower garden: Red Admiral, Comma, Painted Lady and Small Tortoiseshell among them. A small, brown, day-flying moth was also spotted. Another Black Redstart and Spotted Nutcracker were also seen around the clearing.

Returning the way we'd come, more Spotted Nutcrackers flew overhead. A small Snake-eyed Skink scuttled across the path. A Willow Tit was heard, as was a Great Spotted Woodpecker. Some of those towards the back of the group also saw Willow Tit and Crested Tit.

The last stretch of downhill was more open and a breeze had picked up, relieving the sun of some of its intensity. Small patches of wild flowers provided colour and interest to the scenic views. Lunch was eaten either by the bus or by the river, where more Grey and White Wagtails were seen. This was followed by a break back at the guesthouse in Zarnesti.

Feeling refreshed, we got back into the bus and set off for Bran. As it was a sunny Sunday, it was fairly busy so we headed on to the viewpoint overlooking Bran Valley. Only a couple of birds were seen, but the panorama was fantastic.

Back in the village, after a brief photographic stop, we headed for the castle. A few chose not to go inside as there were lots of steps at this building with lots of historical significance and interesting to look around, despite a couple of large tour parties.

A refreshing drink in the gardens was enjoyed by several before we made our way back to the bus. While waiting for everyone to gather, there were good views of some Northern Ravens, Common Buzzard, Fieldfares and, rather surprisingly, a Eurasian Hoopoe. We were treated to some Kurtoskalacs, a Hungarian sweet treat made with nuts and honey that is cooked with strips of dough wrapped in a spiral.

Returning to Zarnesti, Florin's sharp eyes spotted some Great Grey Shrikes. A roadside stop to look at these also resulted in pair of Eurasian Hobby, a couple more Common Buzzards, a Common Kestrel and a pair of Peregrines, much to Jez's delight.

A good day was had by all and a great dinner was much appreciated.

Day 3

Monday 18th September

An amazing thunder and lightning storm woke most people shortly after midnight, with some fantastic views to be had. Despite this, everyone arrived for breakfast and was ready to depart for 8.30am.

Driving towards Zarnesti gorge, we could see blue sky appearing behind us, but low cloud over the gorge. Taking the road slowly allowed us to scan for Grey Wagtail and Dipper. The wagtails were soon spotted, flitting their way along the streams beside the road. On getting out of the bus a Dipper was soon spotted. Not fazed by our presence, it allowed us good views as it carried on foraging. After we'd left our driver, Calin, was able get a good video of it dipping and diving.

On entering the gorge we were struck by the size of the rock faces. The initial part of the gorge was formed when a cave roof collapsed, so it must have been an enormous cave. A scan of the rock faces resulted in sightings of age least two Chamois, their striped faces showing well through the telescope.

Marsh Tits were showing well, as were a couple of Nuthatches. We could hear many other birds, including Willow Tit, Green Woodpecker and Jay. At one point the sound of a rock fall carried through the gorge. Some squabbling Jays brought our attention to a high ridge where a Sparrowhawk was circling.

In spite of our concentrated effort in over an hour of scanning rock faces, Wallcreeper proved elusive. After a quick mushroom hunt, it was time to wend our way back along the valley.

John caught a glimpse of a Black Woodpecker after its call gave away a rough location, which allowed Alison to have a momentary view of it in the telescope. Further back down the gorge, a Great Spotted Woodpecker was more obliging and allowed a fairly close look as it worked its way around the bases of some trees by the path. Some Marsh Tits also were seen very well, with a couple only a few feet away. We had to tear ourselves away and return to the bus in order to get back to the guesthouse in time for lunch.

A short siesta for some followed a lovely meal before we set off to Stramba Valley. Birding from the bus produced a couple of Common Buzzards, some Jays, a Green Woodpecker and some more Spotted Nutcrackers. We also had a great sighting of a Red Fox snoozing in the sun, although our arrival disturbed it and it quickly ran off.

Getting off to walk, three Yellowhammers were added to the day's species. The side of the road had lots of flowering plants attracting numerous butterflies and a Roe Deer grazed on a field further up the hillside. Wandering a little further, a male Red Backed Shrike was showing well in a bush, allowing us to see clearly his mask and red back.

In order to meet the ranger on time it was, all too soon, time to get back into the bus and drive further up the valley. A couple of stops were made for closer views of Spotted Nutcracker feeding on acorns, another Red Fox and a Grey Heron perched atop a tree.

After collecting the ranger we continued on, with a brief pause when a Ural Owl was spotted perched on a logging truck trailer. It quickly flew off into the forest, displaying a fairly dark back. Arriving near the hide we had to stick together and walk quietly. At least two European Brown Bears could be seen in the forest as we made our way to the hide. On reaching the hide we could see that there were three bears already there, feeding. Quickly settling in, the ranger let us know via Florin that the two smaller ones were 18 month old brothers. Over the next one-and-a-half hours we watched as a numbers of different bears came and went. One was a mother with seven month old cub. She was quite aggressive at times, snarling and chasing away some of the other bears. The mother of the two older cubs also arrived later in the evening. As well as the bears, there were a number of Red Foxes that came in to eat, and several smaller birds including Chaffinch, Robin and Grey Wagtail. As the light started to fade, we had to make our way carefully back to the bus. On the way back to the ranger station a few people were fortunate enough to see the Ural Owl again, this time perched high in a tree, however most people managed to see the Roe Deer that crossed the track ahead of us.

Making our way out of the valley, the leaders had a brief sighting of a Nightjar on the road. Despite stopping to look, it flew off before anyone else had a chance to see it, but a bear total of 11 meant that everyone was very happy.

Day 4

Tuesday 19th September

Today we had to leave Zarnesti and journey to Tulcea in order to board our flotel (floating hotel). After packing the bus and making sure that everyone had left their room keys, we headed back towards Bucharest. A heavy rain shower reduced visibility for a while, but we did learn a little about the gypsy and local communities. A large guard dog that Jez and John saw whilst passing was particularly despondent at being caught in the rain.

The rain cleared as we cleared the higher pass and the day brightened the further out the forest we got. Stands of Sea Buckthorn berries and Cornelian cherries were for sale along the roadside providing patches of colour.

A petrol station stop had two Kestrels patrolling nearby, but not many other birds of note.

Turning south-east, past Bucharest, took us to Lake Rodneau where the diversity of bird life meant that we delayed our departure in order to see as much as possible. Within moments of arriving, views of Marsh Harrier, two young White-tailed Eagles, a Mute Swan flock, a number of Little Grebes and hundreds of Coots were seen. A slow wander round the lakeside produced varying ducks, including a Mallard, Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Pintail and Gadwall, along with Black-necked Grebe, some Wood Sandpipers, a Spoonbill and seven Greater Flamingoes. A Eurasian Hobby gave some stunning close fly-bys; at one point it even had a go at a Great Egret. The White-tailed Eagles rested in a field for a while. As they took off again they caused a large mixed flock to take to the air, wheeling around. The Flamingoes gave us some stunning flight views, their size particularly evident as they flew amongst the ducks.

Moving south there was a stop for ice creams before we got to Lake Hazarlac. On getting out of the bus, one of the first birds seen was a Squacco Heron. Great and Little Egrets also fed amongst the reeds, as did Wood Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Teal, Common Pochard and Grey Wagtail. A Kingfisher sped through in a streak of blue. Marsh frogs, stunningly green in colour, sat amongst the weedy shallows. Marsh Harrier, Black-headed Gull, Caspian Gull, Sparrowhawk and Osprey were visible over the lake, while some Pygmy Cormorants had tucked themselves in next to the reeds. It would have been lovely to stay longer, but we still had a way to go to Tulcea and time was getting on.

Birding from the bus did produce a number of firsts for the trip, although it was to be hoped not lasts, which included Black Stork, Turtle Dove and Red-footed Falcon.

Tulcea was bigger than many had expected, with an industrial town vibe. Driving through, a mix of old and new buildings could be seen, and many boats along the river. Our crew kindly brought our bags on board and we were welcomed by Elena. There was a chance to find rooms and refresh before a very tasty dinner. The checklist allowed us all to reflect on the fantastic sightings for the day, but did produce some good-natured bantering on what was allowed to be counted.

Day 5

Wednesday 20th September

It was a cooler, overcast morning as we left Tulcea in the smaller boat. Caspian and Black-headed Gulls were immediately obvious in the main channel of the Tulcea branch, accompanied by a few Whiskered Terns. Passing the Tulcea naval base and a number of large cargo ships, we turned into the smaller channel, Mile 36. Fishing is a very popular activity in this area with many camps spread out along the banks.

It wasn't long before we picked up our first Kingfisher, perched obligingly on a dead branch. Shortly after a bird was spotted in the undergrowth which turned out to be a juvenile Night Heron. Many birds could be heard in the trees growing next to the channel, including Long-tailed Tits, Great Tits, Blue Tits and Tree Sparrows. Flycatchers were heard calling so we stopped to see if these could be seen. As we scanned the vegetation, our boat captain, Dan, drew our attention to two Black Woodpeckers very low down on a tree. They stayed for a minute or two before disappearing out of sight. A few bends later a huge silhouette could be seen up in a dead tree: a White-tailed Eagle. It wasn't bothered as our boat stopped below it and we could easily see the pale head and white tail feathers. A little further on, two younger eagles flew overhead and then beyond the trees and out of sight, their huge wingspan evident even at some distance. The next new sighting was a juvenile Little Bittern. It was seen eating a frog, however it was quite shy and didn't stay visible for long.

As we headed back towards the Sulina branch we were fortunate enough to see four White-tailed Eagles circling above. They stayed in and out of view as we reconnected with our flotel. A lovely lunch was followed by a short siesta, while we were being towed along. Both White and Dalmatian Pelicans put in appearances. There was time to enjoy the sunshine as we moored for the night in the Old Danube channel, where some admired the amazingly camouflaged frogs that were sitting and swimming among the lily pads.

We then headed back out into the channels. Taking Crisan channel, with binoculars at the ready, we came across large flocks of Barn Swallows flicking acrobatically through the air and across the reeds and water. A stop at a small inlet to watch a Grey Heron, which, as it took off, sent frogs scattering in all directions, gave Ken time to spot a Little Crake creeping cautiously around the bottom of some reeds.

Marsh Harrier and Hobby periodically drifted into sight, some close enough to really appreciate their colouring. Another lake stop produced large quantities of Greylag Geese, a Pygmy Cormorant, a glimpse of a Purple Heron, a calling Spotted Sandpiper, Caspian Tern, Common Snipe and Ferruginous Duck, amongst others. Heading back the wind picked up a little so it felt distinctly cooler. Northern Lapwing and Common Greenshank fed along the banks of Crisan channel as we motored towards the village. A Wild Boar was also spotted rooting around on the shore.

Another tasty dinner then an early night followed our busy day. It's tiring work watching birds from a boat deck!

Day 6

Thursday 21st September

It was another cool start to the morning, although the omelette with faces brought smiles to our faces. A few of the hornets that had been buzzing around the boat last night were still around, just starting to warm up. As we made our way along the Crisan channel again, Jane gave a shout of "Fox!" This was very quickly amended to Golden Jackal, a great beginning to the morning's sightings. A little further on there was a variety of falcons

flying and perched. It was good to see Common Kestrel, Red-footed Falcons and Hobby together to appreciate the differences between them. The kestrel wasn't happy with the falcons and every time they perched, it chased them off. Common Greenshank, Common Snipe, Northern Lapwing and Wood Sandpiper foraged along the edges of the water. The yellow fringe flowers were often useful to indicate a bird's location. The occasional Caspian Tern flew over, mixed amongst the usual gulls. Bearded Reedling (previously called Tit) could be heard calling across the river. The male showed really well in the sedges. A female also made an appearance on the other side of the river before she joined the male and they both flew off. A stop near Iacob Lake again showed that the Greylag Geese were still there and, again, we scared a Purple Heron. A Red-breasted Flycatcher was calling nearby, however only brief glimpses were had. Lots of frogs were spotted in the meantime. Some red finned Perch could be seen in the water below. Eventually some had brief views of the flycatcher.

We carried on further to the bird sanctuary that had been a fish farm at one point. It was hotter now so a little glare was coming off the water. Safely off the boat, a Red-backed Shrike was found in some nearby scrubby bushes. Marsh Harrier and Grey Heron periodically appeared above the reeds. Snatches of Savi's Warbler were seen between reed stems. In the shallow water there were Spotted Redshank, Northern Lapwing and Black-tailed Godwit feeding. A variety of butterflies and dragonflies flitted around the vegetation. Tree Frogs could be heard calling along the vegetation lining the water's edge. Two Penduline Tits flew over and dived out of sight in the thick reeds.

Back on the boat it was possible to see huge numbers of frogs on the lily pads. In short succession, both Grass Snake and Dice Snake were spotted swimming through the water. The return journey allowed some closer views of Hobby, Marsh Harrier and Red-footed Falcon. A Red-breasted Flycatcher was seen better and we added a Spotted Flycatcher to the trip list. After a very productive morning, lunch was much appreciated, although we were a little late back.

As we ate, the tug pulled the flotel further upstream, along the Old Danube channel. A number of people had a siesta, however a number of Black Storks were seen over the bank, making Catherine and Angela particularly happy. A few people also saw a young Pallid Harrier near the mooring point for tonight. Once tied up and secure, we set off again in the small boat up the channel. Just around the bend there was an Osprey in a tree. Watching it take off, circle around then plunge into the shallows to grab a fish, regaining the air before being chased by a Marsh Harrier was amazing! Some of the afternoon's other highlights included lots of Hooded Crows perched high on dead trees, a number of Hobby kept reappearing between the trees, flashes of brilliant blue signalled a passing Kingfisher, a huge unmistakable silhouette of a White-tailed Eagle that flew off as we drew closer, more Marsh Harriers drifting low across the reed tops, two Little Crakes that did not seem bothered by our presence as they continued to feed on the top of the floating vegetation, and some Dalmatian Pelicans on the water, taking off with relative ease to land a bit further on.

Returning to the flotel in time for pre-dinner drinks gave an opportunity for birding for the top deck. Another Pallid Harrier, a male this time, was spotted; the silvery plumage standing out well from the reedbeds, even at quite some distance.

The mooring was in just the right spot to watch the beautiful sunset, fractionally marred by the fact that the best sighting of a Reed Bunting today was of a male that had become waterlogged. It was frantically trying to swim out of the channel, but was tiring quickly. Despite its best efforts, and those of the crew, it didn't make it.

Once the sun had set we retired to the dining room. We enjoyed another fantastic dinner, and some more spectacular napkin art (Pelicans tonight) was much admired. The frog chorus around the boat is incredible. There is so little light pollution that the stars could be seen in greater number than are normally visible. The water alongside the boat was mill pond still, allowing a reflection of The Plough, or Ursula Major, to be seen, and a distant thunder storm over the Black Sea caused the horizon the light up from time to time as the lightning flashed low across the sky. Overall, a good choice of location for our last night in the delta!

Day 7

Friday 22nd September

Some braved the early morning on the top deck and were rewarded with White-tailed Eagle, Osprey and Marsh Harrier. Having been well fed at breakfast, including our eggs, scrambled this time, with a smiley face, it was time to face the chilly morning. A cool breeze was blowing making it feel autumnal.

A Purple Heron showed well near the flotel mooring, and then some Garganey flew in to feed. Leaving the flotel to start its journey back to Tulcea, we set out in the small boat to explore more of the narrower channels. We had some good views of Hobby as it glided back and forth across the water, and a brief view of a Grey-headed Woodpecker as it flew off. Further on, we eventually had a sighting of a Water Rail with a frog in its mouth. A short while later a lake opened out off the side of the channel where there were Great White Pelican, Mute Swans, Pochard, huge flocks of Ferruginous Ducks and Coot, as well as Great Crested Grebe and gulls swimming on the surface, occasionally rising up to wheel around in a large mixed flock.

Winding our way back through the channels, it was fairly quiet for a little while. Marsh Harrier and Osprey could intermittently be seen over the reeds. Dan kindly offered to share his home-made wine which, along with the coffee, helped to warm everyone up. The sighting of five Honey Buzzards soaring ahead also helped to revive us. Back on the Old Danube we found Caspian Tern and Black-tailed Godwit mixed in with some of the gull flocks. Various Marsh Harriers drifted along the banks, searching for their next meal. Around one corner we came across Grey-headed Woodpecker and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker on nearly adjacent trees.

Back on the narrower channels, there were Whiskered Terns fishing. A large Long-tailed Tit flock was lovely to watch, but caused some disappointment when they were wrongly named as Penduline Tits. By now we were nearly back at the flotel when the back end of a mammal was seen disappearing into the undergrowth. Initially thought to be a pig, a closer look when it reappeared revealed it to be a Raccoon Dog. There were a few brief, but clear, sightings of it as it worked its way along the shore. Stopping to look at this elusive mammal allowed some Penduline Tits to be located, first by call and then some lovely close views as one male climbed a reed stem. This alleviated the earlier disappointment. Arriving back at the flotel in time for lunch, we ate as the tow boat hitched up and started the tow back towards town.

The deck area was still quite cool, despite the sun, so only a hardy few braved it. This proved worth the effort with good views of numerous raptors, including male Red-footed Falcon, more Hobby and Marsh Harrier, White-tailed Eagle, Short-toed Snake Eagle and Booted Eagle. In addition there were Greylag Geese, Spotted Redshanks, White Pelican, egrets, Grey Heron and many ducks.

The changing vegetation, from high reeds and sedges with small trees and bushes to the taller, denser trees showed that we were getting back towards the developed areas. A quick swap round of the tug position indicated

that we were close to re-joining the main channel. Heading back up to Tulcea was fairly smooth. A very large catfish was seen jumping from the water, impressing even the local crew. Mooring was done quickly and efficiently, just in time for dinner to be served.

There was a bit of a cold going around so an early night was appreciated by all.

Day 8

Saturday 23rd September

Our last morning on the flotel. We were packed and everyone ready to go in a timely fashion. Calin was waiting with the bus and we headed south out of Tulcea. The first stop was at Daninz Dadaped, a hill near Babadag that has steppe habitat and is known for raptors. The day was just starting to warm when we arrived. Northern Wheatear and Tawny Pipit were immediately evident. A Common Kestrel was also quickly located. Huge number of grasshopper species leapt every time you put your foot down. The made Catherine very happy and she spent much of the time here crawling through the grass to see how many species she could locate.

Our first larger raptor of the morning was a Long-legged Buzzard that flew along the front of the hill, showing off its yellowy-orange tail, before it landed on a rock on the side of the ridge allowing for some good views. A juvenile Pallid Harrier, displaying the characteristic ochre underparts and pale collar, quartered over the hillside, occasionally alighting on a rock to consume a small prey morsel before taking to the air again. It stayed around for quite some time, allowing for prolonged looks. A Short-toed Snake Eagle made use of one of the nearby pylons to scan the surrounding landscape. Some good telescope views were had in the time it remained, until it decided to fly off to a distant field in search of a meal. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk sped past low and fast causing the wheatear, pipits and wagtails to scatter. Ray managed to locate a Red Fox that was very well camouflaged against the rock, so much so that, even knowing where it was and looking directly at it, it took a lot of persistence to help everyone see it. A pair of Levant Sparrowhawks was found within a group of soaring birds as they appeared over the ridge line. Gradually they drifted close enough to make out their paler undersides and dark wings tips compared to the Eurasian Sparrowhawk. Slowly making out way back to the bus, we were all amazed at the quantity and colours of the grasshoppers and crickets. A final appearance of the Pallid Harrier during morning coffee rounded our time here off nicely.

Back in the bus a number of birds were spotted as we drove including a pair of Turtle Doves, a Booted Eagle and some mixed gull flocks. A brief stop at a gas station turned up a Little Owl on the nearby farm buildings.

We arrived at Vadu in time for lunch. Perhaps not the most picturesque spot for a picnic, with the abandoned sand mining factory in the background, but we did have some good views of waders and wildfowl in the pools. Ruff, Dunlin, Common Ringed Plover and Wood Sandpiper probed to mud at the edge of the closer pool. Wandering round to the next pool a large mixed duck flock swam among the Mute Swans, made up of Gadwall, Garganey, Teal, Shoveler, Common Pochard and Ferruginous Duck. A few Little Gulls were also there. In the grassy areas to the side, some Crested Larks were hopping around. At times some of the males really showed off their fantastic crests. Behind them some Corn Buntings perched at the top of a low bush. Beside the old factory there were lots of wires that provided a perfect vantage point for the European Bee-eaters to wait on. Getting a bit closer allowed us to see their brilliant colours, their chestnut heads glinting in the sun as they swivelled their heads in search of insects. One would swoop away and return a few moments later with a dragonfly or similar in its bill which it would sit and swallow. A very dark cloud behind created a backdrop that showed up their colours

really well when lit up in the sun's rays. As the rest of us watched these colourful birds, Connell managed to locate a Souslik (or European Ground Squirrel) in the grass. It was very nervous and disappeared back down its burrow before anyone else managed to see it.

A stroll along the road produced some Red-backed Shrikes and a very close view of a Bee-eater. On reaching the bus we drove a little further to the Black Sea coast where a small pool contained some Little Grebes. The shoreline had a large quantity of resting gulls and some Sanderling running in front of the lapping waves. A few people wandering along the shore, stopping to look at the shells. A little way offshore Great Cormorants perched on a net strung between posts. Caspian Gull, Black-headed Gull, Mediterranean Gull and Sandwich Tern flew past. While scanning the gulls, Shirley noticed one particularly dark-headed one which turned out to be a Pallas's Gull, proving that it is worth taking time to look more closely at large groups of birds. An inquisitive dog and horse with a foal paid us a visit, looking for some attention.

The start of a heavy rain shower sent us back to the bus. The wet weather didn't affect the birds and we had a lovely view of a male Pallid Harrier and it swooped low over the landscape. A quick stop in the village for ice creams had Florin hearing a Red-breasted Flycatcher (again!). The return journey had a large number of Marsh Harriers being seen, almost one every few hundred metres. A gas station comfort stop turned into a longer stop than expected when the arrival of over a hundred Red-footed Falcons materialised in the air above our bus. We were able to watch them dip and dive as they chased insects for several minutes before they vanished from sight as fast as they had appeared. Two great, unexpected wildlife encounters from the same place in one day!

Returning to Tulcea, we made a brief stop at the pharmacy to get some cold medication before continuing on to the Ibis Guesthouse. A warm welcome awaited and we were quickly settled into our rooms. More good food this evening and the presentation, particularly of the dessert in the shape of a swan, continued on from the flotel. This was followed by completing the checklist - much anticipated today as a number of new species for the trip were added.

Day 9

Sunday 24th September

We're heading west out of Tulcea this morning. From the road it was possible to see across the river to Ukraine. A number of raptors were spotted as we drove along, including a Lesser-spotted Eagle that was near a convenient pull in so most were able to see the distinctive wing curvature.

We stopped in a village for a short walk to search for Syrian Woodpecker. Around the back streets it was very interesting to get a glimpse of semi-rural life. One garden had a car, a horse, a satellite dish and a hand-cranked well. It wasn't long before a woodpecker was seen and it turned out that there were two in the area, a times perching in exposed places which allowed us to see the difference in face markings to a Great Spotted Woodpecker. Seeming to mock us, some Red-breasted Flycatchers called at several points along the street, but only teasing glimpses were had.

At Celic Dere monastery lots of locals were starting to arrive for morning services. Just out of the bus, more views were had of Syrian Woodpecker. Several flew amongst the walnut trees. As we started along the valley another Red-breasted Flycatcher called. This time it came into full view and finally most were able to get fantastic views of a juvenile bird. Right next to it was a Spotted Flycatcher so some comparisons were possible.

Strolling along, many woodpecker calls could be heard as the birds darted and chased through the fruit and nut trees. Entering an open area we could see a very bucolic scene as sheep and goats were herded up ahead and mixed broadleaf woodland grew on the slopes above the more open area of fruiting trees. It was warm and sunny too so felt extremely idyllic. The beautiful harmonised singing from the monastery was a very pleasant sound backdrop to our time in the area.

We started to hear a few more birds calling: Nuthatch and tits, including Sombre Tit that had been much talked of during the trip. Two very obligingly perched out in the open in the sun meaning that a good look at them was possible. Several raptor species circled high above and a large number of Hawfinches flew over in small groups. Emma saw a Eurasian Treecreeper which Alison B managed to keep track of until a small number of the group could also find it as it made its way up the branches. Feeling pleased with our sightings so far, a break was had for morning coffee.

Going further west, we reached the Macin Mountains where we found more steppe habitat. Around 30 million years ago they were several thousand metres high, but now the largest peak is 467 metres. They primarily consist of blue-grey granite. We arrived in time for our picnic lunch, however bird watching continued, especially when dark shapes flew high overhead. A number of these were Lesser-spotted Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Honey Buzzard and Sparrowhawk. Taking a wander to some trees, there were grasshoppers and crickets springing away with every step, a rattling whirl of wings as they went. Woodlark was found around the bases of the trees and one perched up high which let us see the white head markings. More raptors included a Steppe Buzzard, similar to Common Buzzard but a little smaller, and a Black Kite.

Walking into the start of the woods we could hear skinks and lizards scuttling through the dry leaves. Bright red Cardinal Beetles brought specks of colour to the forest floor. So that he could hear better, Florin left the path for a sunny spot. A few minutes later there was a shout of "Tortoise". He'd found what he'd been listening for, a lovely male Spur-thighed Tortoise, about 35 centimetres long. To start with he hid in his shell, then slowly peered out at us. Deciding that we weren't a threat, he crawled away reasonably rapidly and was soon out of sight among the dead leaves. A few who had remained behind found more Sand Lizards, flowers, butterflies and a Praying Mantis.

Having pulled the thorns from our shoes, we headed back to Macin for ice cream. As it was Sunday it took a little effort to find an open shop. The town has Italian influence and was settled by those working the quarries. Another couple of brief glimpses of European Roller were had on the drive back to Tulcea. There was some time to relax before dinner this evening, which was very tasty as always, especially the special (boozy) cake for dessert.

Day 10

Monday 25th September

It was time to say 'good-bye' to Tulcea this morning. Once the bus was packing we headed north again towards Bucharest. A short stop at Lake Hazarlac for a leg stretch and some birding didn't produce any new species, however there were hundreds of Starlings murmuring in broad daylight. At times they would disappear into the reeds or nearby bushes then re-emerge, a swirling ball of noise and feathers.

Our journey to the airport took us through central Bucharest, where we said farewell to Adrienne and Roy. It was surprisingly busy and very mixed with old and new buildings interspersed. Arriving at the airport in reasonable time, we then said goodbye to John and Jane. The flight was fairly smooth and we arrived safely back in the UK a few hours later.

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White-tailed Eagle



Black Storks

Species Lists:

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

	Common name	Scientific name	September									
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					100+	✓	✓			
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				2						
4	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				2				✓		
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
6	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>				✓				✓		
7	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				1						
8	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>				2+	✓		✓	✓		
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	✓			✓		
10	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				✓		✓	✓	✓		
11	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>				20+	✓	✓	✓	✓		
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>								✓		
13	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>					1	✓		✓		
14	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				✓				✓		
15	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				1		4	✓	✓		
16	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>				✓						
17	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>				7						
18	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>				✓	✓	5	10		1	
19	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				1						
20	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>					2					
21	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>					3		1			
22	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>				3	4	✓				
23	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
24	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>					1	✓	5	✓		
25	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				2	✓	✓	✓			✓
26	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
27	Great White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>					✓	✓	✓			
28	Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>					✓	✓	✓			
29	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>				5	✓	✓	✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	September									
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
30	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
31	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>				1		1	3+			
32	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>							5		2	
33	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>							1	1		
34	Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga pomarina</i>									5+	
35	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>							1	1		
36	Levant Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter brevipes</i>								2	✓	
37	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓	1		✓		1	✓	
38	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		3								
39	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			2	✓	✓	✓	✓	lots	✓	✓
40	Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>						2+		2		
41	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>									1	
42	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				2	4+	✓	✓			
43	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>								3	✓	
44	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	✓	✓	✓		1	✓	✓	✓	
	Steppe Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i>									1	
45	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>						1	1			
46	Little Crane	<i>Porzana parva</i>					1	5				
47	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				1	✓	✓	✓	✓		
48	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				1000+			✓			
49	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				✓	✓	✓	3			
50	White-tailed Lapwing	<i>Vanellus leucurus</i>								✓		
51	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>								✓		
52	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
53	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>						1	2			
54	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>								5+		
55	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>					1	✓	✓			
56	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>					1	✓		✓		
57	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>				✓		✓		✓		
58	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					1					
59	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>								15+		
60	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>								✓		

	Common name	Scientific name	September										
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
61	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>									✓		
62	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
63	Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>									✓		
64	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaeus melanocephalus</i>									✓		
65	Pallas's Gull	<i>Ichthyaeus ichthyaeus</i>									1		
66	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>					✓	✓	✓				
68	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>									✓		
69	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>					✓		✓	✓			
70	Rock Dove/ Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
71	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
72	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>				1					2	1	
73	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>			1								
75	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>									1		
76	European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>			TL								
77	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>					1					1	
78	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				1	✓	✓	✓				
79	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>									10+		
80	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1					1				
81	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>										2+	
82	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>					1	H	1				
83	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>										6+	
84	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		H	✓	1	2	✓	✓				
85	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>			✓		3						
86	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			✓							H	
87	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>					1	1	2			1	
88	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	4		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
89	Red-footed Falcon	<i>Falco vespertinus</i>				✓		✓	1	100+			
90	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		3		2+	✓	✓	✓	✓			
91	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		3									
92	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>		3									

	Common name	Scientific name	September										
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
93	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>		2	1				✓		✓		
94	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓						✓	✓	
95	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>		20	✓								
97	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
98	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓
99	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓					2	2	
101	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓	✓								
102	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		2									
103	Sombre Tit	<i>Poecile lugubris</i>											3+
104	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		1	✓								H
105	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>		H	H								
106	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓
107	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓
108	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>							2	2			
109	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>							2	H			
110	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>											4+
111	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>									8+		
112	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>											✓
113	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
114	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓			✓			✓	✓	
115	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		6	H			H	H	10+			
116	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			1						✓		
117	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		H	H			H	✓	H			✓
118	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>				1			✓				
119	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>									1		
120	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>							1	H			
121	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓			✓					
122	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>							1				
123	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		1	H								

	Common name	Scientific name	September									
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
124	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			✓							
125	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		2	✓							✓
126	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>										1
127	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100s
128	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>										1
129	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		5	✓							
130	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		1	✓		1					✓
131	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>						1		1	1	
132	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		H	✓		✓					
133	Red-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>					H	✓	H			1
134	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		3	1	1						
135	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		2								1
136	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>						1		✓		
137	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>										E
138	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			1							
139	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
140	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
141	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓	✓		✓			✓	H	
142	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
143	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>									3	
144	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		H								
145	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		4	✓		✓	✓				✓
146	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>										✓
147	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		H								
148	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓		✓	✓					
149	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>						✓				✓
150	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>								✓		
151	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓	3							
152	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				✓		✓	✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	September									
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25

Mammals

1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			2							
2	European Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>			11							
3	Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>						1				
4	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			1							
5	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			6+					1		
6	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>									1	
7	Chamois	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>			3							
8	Souslik	<i>Spermophilus citellus</i>								1		
9	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>					1					
10	Raccoon Dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>								1		

Amphibians

1	Marsh/Pond/Edible Frog	<i>Pelophylax sp</i>				3+	✓	lots	✓	✓		
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Reptiles

1	Dice Snake	<i>Natrix tessellata</i>						1				
2	Grass Snake	<i>Natrix natrix persa</i>						2				
3	Spur-thighed Tortoise	<i>Testudo graeca</i>									1	
4	Snake-eyed Skink	<i>Ablepharus kitaibelii</i>		1							✓	
5	Sand Lizard	<i>Laceta agilis</i>							1		✓	