

Romania's Danube Delta & Carpathian Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 – 13 May 2019



European Bee-eater



Monkey Orchid



Nodding Sage



Squacco Heron

Report compiled by Andy Bunten
Images courtesy of Stuart Ball



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Summary

“Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.”

And I think that our recent trip fully confirmed this observation by Ratty. We had a splendid time in the dramatic uplands of Piatra Craiului and an amazing experience on the ‘Floatel’ on the Danube Delta.

Highlights abounded – the wonderful woodland in Babadag with an array of stunning orchids and two exhibitionist Ortolan Buntings; Spotted Nutcrackers perched patiently atop a nearby conifer; ten European Brown Bears gambolling a mere few feet in front of us; the beautiful blue of displaying European Rollers tumbling around a Bee-eater rich quarry; the ethereal colour of sunlight shining through the Bee-eaters’ wings; a Lesser Spotted Eagle flying low past us in the verdant Stramba valley; the unexpected, and very smart, summer plumaged Pallas’s Gulls; the first sight of hundreds of White Pelicans gliding majestically over us and the gorgeous tranquillity of drifting, engine off, through the narrow Danube waterways with kingfishers dashing ahead of us, singing Common Redstarts and lurking herons and egrets around every corner. Bliss.

Altogether we saw some amazing wildlife including over 170 bird species, Brown Bears, Golden Jackals, an energetically swimming Muskrat, Tree Frogs, Fire Salamander and the excitingly venomous Megarian Banded Centipede.

Through all this though was the way the whole group mixed and got on from the very start creating a magnificent atmosphere which transforms a mere trip into a very special holiday.

Day 1

Saturday 4th May

London Heathrow/Manchester – Bucharest – Transylvania

We arrived at Heathrow or Manchester Airport to catch our flights to Bucharest. The group from Manchester arrived first and then waited patiently for the slightly delayed flight from Heathrow.

This landed around one hour late at Bucharest and after collecting our luggage we met our local guide Cristian who quickly took us down to our brand-new minibus and its driver Cristi. As the flight landed at 8.00pm we weren’t going to get to our guest house until late, so we stopped at a restaurant close to the airport where the presence of a party meant that we were entertained as well as being very well fed on soup, chicken and delicious ice-cream.

We arrived at our hotel around about 1.00 am and quickly retired to our rooms to dream of the splendours to come the following day in this magnificent area of beautiful mountain forests.

Day 2

Sunday 5th May

Piatra Craiului National Park (Coltul Chiliilor) – Stramba Valley – Bear Hide

We had a delicious and filling breakfast, with fresh omelettes for those who wished, before creating our own sandwiches for lunch and then heading off a short distance to the Piatra Craiului National Park. It was a cool but dry morning and the snow-capped peaks of the mountains made a gorgeous picture. At the hotel there were White Storks in nests, Black Redstarts and Tree Sparrows.

Today we were walking up the track to the monastery of Coltul Chiliilor, a distance of around three kilometres, and it being a Sunday, we were already being joined by locals out for a weekend outing.

As we made our way up the gentle slope of the hill we were accompanied by the trill of Lesser Whitethroats, soaring Common Buzzards and Ravens and the rather unusual sight for UK based birdwatchers of Fieldfares perched on tops of trees and in full breeding mode, while our botanists were finding Pyramidal Bugle, lovely creamy-white Wood Anemones and lots of Cowslips with clumps of paler, larger Oxlips amongst them.

We found a tree that looked like it had been attacked by men with axes so great was the damage - a sign that a Black Woodpecker had been very active searching for wood-boring grubs. A little further on as we strolled past more Oxlips, some lovely, startlingly blue, Gentians and pale cream Vanilla Orchids we heard, and then saw, a Spotted Nutcracker flying along and land on top of a conifer tree. So often wary birds that quickly fly off, this individual very obligingly stayed put long enough for us all to have excellent views through the telescope.

Further up the track we found a huge and impressive Brown Bear footprint among more delicate Mountain Pansies, Yellow Anemones, Herb Paris and Lungwort.

We lunched at the Monastery site where we saw a sprightly and beautifully marked Velvet Ant busying its way along a track. They have a painful sting so we observed from a respectful distance.

After lunch we made our way back down the track and quickly heard, and then had wonderful views of, Crested Tits – one of which perched close to us showing off its crest to perfection. A little further down the track we came across a lovely swooping, twisting group of some 50 Common House Martins busily collecting insects from around the trees and bushes and as we approached our bus a distant Black Woodpecker uttered its distinctive flight and then 'rain' calls.

After a cup of coffee in a café opposite the National Park headquarters, we made our way towards the Stramba Valley passing through the town of Sinca Noua with its White Stork nests perched high on the telegraph poles. In the valley we heard a Eurasian Golden Oriole doing its squawking, almost cat like, calls before slipping back into the more mellifluous song we're all familiar with, and also calling away were a Eurasian Wryneck, which we didn't manage to see, and a 'spotted' woodpecker – either Syrian or Great Spotted- which we caught a glimpse of but not enough to be sure which it was. Probably Great Spotted.

We were able to be much more confident about a lovely Lesser Spotted Eagle which glided past us at eye level before landing on the ground and remaining there long enough to give us good telescope views.

Our next venue was the amazing European Brown Bear site along the valley. We arrived at the entrance to meet the local guides and then carefully negotiated the insecure-looking footbridge and cautiously heaved ourselves up a muddy slope that led us to the steep steps of the hide at around 17.00 or so, crept in as quietly as we could and then settled down in hope. Silent anticipation filled the confined space of the hide. Last minute adjustments to cameras were completed with flash and focussing beams switched off.

Our first sighting was a skulking Raven which lurked for a while and then glided down to help itself to some of the food laid out for the bears by the people working here.

Then the first bears emerged warily from the forest, lumbering down the slope and into the clearing. For nearly two hours we were captivated by their comings and goings, a cub climbed very cutely up a tree stump, another bear indulged in a bit of back scratching and mothers and cubs were coming very close to our hide to feed.

A Red Fox appeared and hid himself warily on the outskirts of the open area. A Eurasian Jay flew in too, seeking some unconsidered trifles.

By the end of the session we had seen 10 different individual bears – adults and cubs, males and females. It was around 19.00 when we cautiously left the hide and made our way back to the bus. Even now the wildlife in this lovely valley was evident – we heard another Black Woodpecker calling and then Cristi's sharp eyes spotted a lovely Lesser Grey Shrike perched on a dead tree next to the bus.

An hour or so later we were back to our guest house for a splendid meal and chance to reflect on a wonderful day of wildlife culminating with a superb encounter with mainland Europe's largest land carnivore.

Day 3

Monday 6th May

Piatra Craiului National Park (Zarnesti Gorge) – Bear Sanctuary

After another filling breakfast we were off again to the Piatra Craiului Park, though this time for a walk up the Zarnesti Gorge. The weather was much nicer than we'd expected with blue sky, sun and white clouds -perfect for our gentle uphill walk along the broad gravel track.

White-throated Dipper on the stream was seen by some through bus windows and Grey Wagtails were flitting up and down the stream. Mistle Thrushes and European Robins were singing when Cristi spotted an excellent Fire Salamander -a good 5 inches long and spectacular in its black and yellow skin.

We heard the distinctive 'chair-chair' of a Willow Tit and found it in a nearby tree – it flew across the stream but remained in full view showing itself very nicely particularly its very well marked pale wing panels.

It was time for a few raptors with Common Kestrels calling from a cliff top fastness, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk circling high over the gorge and the strident call of a Peregrine Falcon coming from somewhere along the valley. A few moments later we saw the bird itself apparently getting annoyed with a Northern Raven that was 'cronking' away as it crossed the valley.

The valley was looking beautiful and the sun brought out a few butterflies including Brimstone, Green-veined White and many Orange-tips while we searched, fruitlessly sadly, for the Wallcreeper that inhabits this area. We strained our ears to listen for the 'glissando' call but without luck – although we did hear Eurasian Wrens, many Coal and some Crested Tits and a laughing Green Woodpecker.

We returned to the base of the gorge for our picnic and then drove up to the top of the plateau at Pestora where we breathed in the beautiful soft, clean air and marvelled at the myriad shades of green stretching out in front of us – dark firs, emerald grass and ethereal newly emerged birch.

A Black Redstart sang from the ridge of a nearby house and we engaged in cheery chat -mainly one way -with an elderly gentleman who had tight hold of a couple of very large bottles of beer. It didn't seem as though these would be the first of his day!

In the fields a worker with a large wooden rake was flattening out the mole hills to make the subsequent hay cut easier and while we watched him a couple of Spotted Nutcrackers flew overhead and at the same time a Black Woodpecker called briefly from the wooded valley below us.

We returned to our bus and drove back down the twisty road to Bran where we spent a short time having a coffee and checking out the local produce stalls.

Then it was back to the hotel with time to properly freshen up and do the lists from the previous days before another delicious meal washed down with local beers and very acceptable red wine

Day 4

Tuesday 7th May

Transylvania to Tulcea (birding en route at Lake Hasarlac)

Sadly, it was now time for us to leave this marvellous area of mountains, woods, eagles and bears, and so we consumed our last substantial breakfast, loaded our minibus with skill and precision, and headed off towards the Danube Delta. We drove through heavy rain which turned to heavy snow as we ascended into the mountains before returning to rain as we dropped into the agricultural areas of Ploiesti and Slobozia.

Our first coffee stop produced a Whinchat and a Red-backed Shrike and our lunch stop beside a lake near Amaru was very productive with Glossy Ibises feeding close to us with a small group of Ruff. Lots of Whiskered Terns, Barn Swallows and Sand Martins fed furiously over the open water and reedbeds. Great Reed Warblers sang from the reeds and a Little Bittern was seen flying from one side of the reeds to the other. The rain intensified and we retreated back to the coach as Purple Herons flew over and a pair of Black-winged Stilts appeared on a nearby ridge.

Then it was off east again until we stopped at a petrol station near Slobozia for a comfort stop and were treated to a male Levant Sparrowhawk flying overhead.

We continued on our way finding regular numbers of White Storks and a single Roller until we arrived at another lake Chiolol Hasarlac where we found a Ruddy Shelduck, our first Pygmy Cormorants, Great Crested Grebes,

Great Egret, Western Marsh Harrier, European Cuckoo and, once again, large numbers of low flying, feeding hirundines.

It was then time for the final leg of our journey and we arrived at our floating hotel at around 17.45 to be greeted with a very warm welcome and an equally welcome cherry brandy. We then had an hour or so to relax before meeting to do our list, plan the day ahead and have the first of our very filling and delicious meals.

Day 5

Wednesday 8th May

Danube Delta (Mile 36) – Sulina Brach – Litcovr and Ceamurlia Canals

We woke to a cool, cloudy morning with the early sounds of the river, the city and the motorized boats at Tulcea's port. Early risers were treated to fly pasts of Whiskered and Common Terns and Black-headed and Caspian Gulls, as well as a speeding Hobby and the usual Western Jackdaws and Hooded Crows. After a delicious breakfast on board, we left our floating hotel behind and started our first day on the Danube, exploring the river delta on our expedition boat.

We made our way along the Canal Mile 36 and quickly heard, and then saw, Grey-headed Woodpecker as well as a number of Spotted Flycatchers perched low among the willow tree roots. Common Kingfishers were appearing regularly now and a glimpse of black and white low on a mud bank was resolved into a beautiful Collared Flycatcher. We back-tracked a bit and all had excellent views of this wonderful bird.

Common Redstarts were proving very abundant and calling from just about every other tree and being joined in song occasionally by both Common Nightingale and Thrush Nightingale.

A huge White-tailed Eagle appeared over the trees, closely followed by the almost inevitable Hooded Crow harrying away.

Huge numbers of Pygmy Cormorants were flying over the nearby pools and a large flock of White Pelicans in perfect formation also hove into view almost seeming as if they were suspended in mid-air.

Singing Eurasian Blackcaps and, for comparison, Garden Warbler joined the constant calls of Common Redstarts and Chiff-chaffs and Whiskered Terns were building in numbers. The cold wind made the morning coffee very welcome and we cupped our hands around the hot fluid as we gazed into a lake where huge numbers of Whiskered Terns bounced and weaved around, when Trevor's sharp eyes spotted a different bird amongst them – White-winged Tern. A lovely bird to see.

We had good views of a hulking Great Reed Warbler perched high in the Phragmites and bellowing out its ratchet-like song and, while listening to that, a Dalmatian Pelican flew overhead giving us good views of the difference between this species and the much more numerous White Pelicans. At another pool we found Red-necked Grebes looking very smart and with Great Crested Grebes nearby for useful comparison.

A Penduline Tit called from a small Willow tree and we had excellent views of this smart masked bird as it perched amongst the reeds. We then headed across Lake Furtuna where we found a rather unexpected Pallas's Gull resplendent with its fine black hood and brightly coloured beak. A few moment later we noticed an adult

White-tailed Eagle among the Black-headed Gull colony and were able to glide our boat very close to this huge, and hugely impressive, raptor.

On our way back to the floating hotel we saw increasing numbers of Glossy Ibis and Squacco Herons as well as a Eurasian Hoopoe and another Dalmatian Pelican. Then it was lunch and a chance to birdwatch in luxury as we sailed smoothly along the Sulina Branch of the Danube until around 16.00 when we re-boarded the smaller boat for another trip out through the channels and small lakes.

Our afternoon brought Red-footed Falcon, various different waders, including some very smart summer plumaged Spotted Redshanks, more White-tailed Eagles, Western Marsh Harriers and the occasional Eurasian Hobby. Another Pallas's Gull appeared then a couple of pairs of smart Garganey and some lovely Eurasian Spoonbills with their astonishing spatulate bill.

Bearded Reedlings, which we'd been hearing from time to time, now appeared and bounced across the water in front of us into the reeds 'pinging' as they went.

Then it was back to the mother ship to relax, do our list, select another delicious wine from the impressive on-board array and tuck into a marvellous meal. We discussed our plans for the next day as well as contenders for bird-of-the-day (Pallas's Gull, White-winged Tern, Collared Flycatcher and Dalmatian Pelican) and went to bed early in anticipation of another wonderful day's birding.

Day 6

Thursday 9th May

Caraorman Bird Sanctuary – Old Danube- Channels north of Sulina Branch

An early morning group met around 06.45 on a beautiful morning with sun and white cloud. Here we had a fantastic half an hour or so with singing Eurasian Reed Warblers, Great Reed Warblers, Common Cuckoos, reeling Savi's Warblers, multiple Cuckoos, Kingfishers, Purple Herons, Blackcaps, Garden Warblers, Eurasian Penduline Tits, Pallas's Gull, Night Herons, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and a couple of shy Golden Jackals which appeared briefly and disappeared as people rushed up to see them.

Then it was breakfast and we headed off on the smaller boat in lovely sunshine. Grey-headed Woodpecker called and we had a silhouette view as it perched on a dead tree top.

It was wonderful drifting down the narrow channels in the warm sun with Lesser Whitethroats, Common Redstarts, Common Kingfishers and Eurasian Golden Orioles all abundant. We sailed into Lac Jacob where there were Common Swifts, calling Eurasian Penduline Tits and more Savi's Warblers - still seen but not heard.

Down the channels there were small groups of waders – lovely breeding plumaged Spotted Redshanks like rich plum puddings, elegant Common Greenshanks and Wood Sandpipers with their richly mottled backs.

We travelled to the amazing Caroarman site where derelict buildings were the sad order of the day but where, also, there were pools and scrubby areas perfect for birds. Among the derelict buildings Eurasian Hoopoes, Northern Wheatears, Collared Doves and Eurasian Tree Sparrows fed and bred, while on the nearby pools there were multiple delights. Wood Sandpipers, Little and Temminck's Stints, Black-tailed Godwits, flocks of Ruff, Common Terns and hulking great Caspian Terns were easily found. Around the edges of these pools Lesser

Whitethroats sang and European Bee-eaters called and flew colourfully past us, their golden wings glinting in the sunshine.

There was a Sand Lizard too and then, not to be outdone, the amphibians joined in as a Tree Frog appeared, during the period we were watching a Little Owl in the derelict buildings, and proceeded to hop onto Andy's trousers. He/she was rescued and put into a more suitable habitat where his cousins, the Marsh and Edible Frogs, were watching our shenanigans.

It had been a wonderful morning and we headed back to our 'flotel' for lunch during which we saw a distant White-tailed Eagle being mobbed by an apparently miniscule Western Marsh Harrier.

At around 15.30 we were back onto our small boat and heading up the Old Danube channel. We saw our usual friends of Common Kingfishers, Common Redstarts and Blue Tits as well as numerous Common Cuckoos. Our keen-eyed boatman spotted a Great Reed Warbler and we had fantastic views of this great, hulking warbler. We continued on our way seeing lots of familiar friends before a ripple in the water betrayed the presence of a Muskrat swimming towards us and we watched as it unconcernedly swung to the left and dived. Only bubbles were left.

We then entered a lake where we had excellent views of Dalmatian Pelicans, more fantastic Pallas's Gulls and a whole load of marsh terns. We saw lots of our familiar Whiskered Terns but then also Black Terns and eventually White-winged Terns too – a wonderful grouping of all the marsh terns. We saw a bit of behaviour as well as the Pallas's Gull stole some fish from the Pelican which reacted somewhat but then the Pallas's Gull was in turn set upon by a Caspian Gull. In the end the bit of food seemed to sink below the water.

A wonderful afternoon was brought to a conclusion by a Eurasian Hobby dashing past and a great group of Black-crowned Night Herons emerging one after another from the bushes of the channels we meandered through as we made our way back to our flotel and another wonderful evening meal.

Day 7

Friday 10th May

Eracle – Stipoc – Razaboinita – Sontea Canal (mile 36 to Tulcea)

Today was to be our last full one on the wonderful Danube Delta and it was a cool, cloudy but dry morning when a few of the group met early to look over the wonderful reedbeds and wetland systems.

Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, Purple, Black-crowned Night, Squacco and Grey Herons, Great and Pygmy Cormorants, Common and Whiskered Terns, singing Reed and Great Reed Warbler were all seen - an excellent half-hour's birding!

After breakfast we headed off on our smaller boat along a canal. There were Common Cuckoos just about everywhere and we heard the bubbling call of a female before noticing the rufous morph of a female bird in a nearby tree.

At an opening into one of the numerous lakes we saw a handful of Black Terns wheeling and dipping amongst the Whiskered Terns as well as more lovely Ferruginous Ducks, and Great Crested Grebes.

We'd been hearing Savi's Warblers regularly over the past couple of days but here, at last, we managed to find one perched fairly high up in the reeds and staying still long enough for the group to see it clearly – bill open and reeling away.

Further down the channel Eurasian Penduline Tits were calling away and a pair of Eurasian Golden Orioles flew down the line of fringing Poplars towards us.

Various herons were two-a-penny now with Purple, Grey, Squacco and Black-crowned Night all flying out of just about every bush we sailed past.

We stopped for a few minutes in blissful peace and quiet among the Water Soldier, Water Mint and Yellow Flag just listening to the silence punctuated by ever bolder Marsh Frogs. The same frogs being attracted to a red bottle top jerked up and down from a fishing line by our boatman – why it drew them so we weren't really sure.

We passed through more lovely canals with Wood Sandpipers flying along in front of us, with singing Sedge and Garden Warblers all around, before we found a tree with two Eurasian Hobbys perched quietly in the top branches. A beautiful sight.

We approached the 'flotel' and had two Dalmatian Pelicans soaring overhead and a whole host of Great White Pelicans with their accompanying Great Cormorants before we sailed into Lake Baclanestii Mari where we stopped at a Red-footed Falcon colony and observed both male and female falcons perched high in the trees and tending to their nests.

A lovely way to finish the morning and it was then back to the mother ship for yet another fulfilling lunch and the gentle and lovely tow back to Tulcea through the canals of the Danube via such sights as a White-tailed Eagles nest with three birds in occupation, Black Woodpecker and a Spotted Flycatcher busily going about his business in the low roots of the canal side trees.

Day 8

Saturday 11th May

Babadag, Sinoe and Vadu

With great reluctance we had to leave our wonderful floating hotel, although we were looking forward to another exciting day and some new habitats and animals.

Our first stop was in the Babadag Forest which, we learned, was a tautological title as Babadag meant forest of the fathers. The fathers would, we felt, have been very pleased with our brief visit to their location. We delighted in orchids, and other plants, at every turn. Early Purple, magnificent Lady, Butterfly and Monkey Orchids more or less abounded and Solomon's Seal, Flax, Milkwort, Iris and wild Peony brought a riot of colour to this lovely peaceful location. Bloody-nosed beetles trotted down the path in front of us and Ortolan Buntings vied for our attention, singing lustily from the top of the low trees and bushes.

With its dappling sunshine and natural surprises at every turn it was an enchanting place and real privilege for us all to have been able to visit.

We continued our way further south passing through Baia at mid-morning and seeing numbers of Crested Lark as well as a lovely pale tailed Long-legged Buzzard.

At Sinoe we headed towards the coast where we found a pair of Red-backed Shrikes posing to the right-hand side of our minibus before beautiful European Bee-eaters appeared to the right- and left- hand sides as well as right in the road ahead of us. These astonishingly beautiful birds arranged themselves like so many starlets around us - eager for their beauty to be captured.

We emerged from our minibus to try to find the Paddyfield Warblers we knew to be at this site and, after a bit of time, we were able to locate a few of these reed-dwelling birds and set up the telescope on them as they sang from the top of the Phragmites stems. While we were doing so a Eurasian Hobby whipped past, a Northern Wheatear bobbed and dipped on a nearby bank and the European Bee-eaters serenaded us with their lovely 'prooping' calls. Almost Nirvana were it not for the mosquitoes with their foot-long proboscises!

Our lunch, prepared by Cristi, was at a shady shrine with an active colony of Spanish Sparrows, the males of which were certainly full of the joys of spring.

Then it was off to the final stop of our day at Vadu. Initially, with its concrete remains, this seemed a slightly unsalubrious destination but the birds here were fabulous.

At the first pool we had about 20 European Bee-eaters overhead, a number of Common Shelduck, Ruff, half-a dozen Red-footed Falcons and about ten Pied Avocets. A little further down the road, and before we emerged from our bus, we were mere feet away from a number of scuttling, feeding Souseliks.

At the wetland area here we saw beautifully summer plumaged Curlew Sandpipers, another six Ruff, two chocolate-dark Spotted Redshank and a few russet coloured Little Stints. These waders were gorgeous and everywhere we looked we saw more – Wood Sandpipers appeared, Greenshank too and a handful of Glossy Ibis landed nearby. Savi's Warblers were singing and a Eurasian Bittern started its low booming calls as Collared Pratincoles glided around in front of us. Little Egrets were present too including a really strange blue morph, a melanistic form looking for all the world like a Little Blue Heron or Western Reef Egret!

A group of seven Spoonbills were standing around in a field with their remarkable spatulate bills showing well while near them Glossy Ibises busily probed the soft grassland. Beyond these a veritable flock of Collared Pratincoles were sitting in the low grass, occasionally making short swooping flights low over the ground before settling back down again.

As we approached a more substantial waterbody we had a both White-winged and Black Tern fly over us and had excellent views of a Lesser Grey Shrike which was circling round us from perch to perch as it sought insects and small reptiles.

The small lake itself had various terns on it but also a few Little Gulls, one of which was dressed in fine summer plumage.

As we made our way back to the minibus a Bittern, possibly the bird we'd been hearing booming previously, flew across some reeds in front of us and, on landing, remained in position for a little while enabling most of us to get good views – some even through the telescope.

Not an easy bird to see and an excellent end to a lovely day in some fantastic, bird-rich habitat.

We didn't really wish to leave but we had a couple of hours drive back to our hotel so reluctantly clambered into our bus and set off home where we knew another lovely meal would await us.

Day 9

Sunday 12th May

Celic Dere – Muntii Mancinulu

The day dawned very mistily but we had a suspicion, well-founded, that the sun would soon burn this off to produce a hot and sunny day.

Our first port of call was the area around the monastery of Celic Dere. As soon as we arrived we found European Goldfinches and Greenfinches in the trees around the car park including a European Goldfinch's nest somewhat precariously sited at the tip of a thin branch.

We walked through a lovely field, dotted with trees and with woodlands either side of us to the sound of Field Crickets, Eurasian Golden Orioles and distant purring European Turtle Doves. A distant pair of European Honey Buzzards soared over woodlands and a Hawfinch perched on the top of a nearer tree as we strolled through this idyllic area.

A Eurasian Nuthatch zipped in front of us and called from the depths of a large tree challenging us to find it, which eventually we were able to do.

As we entered the woodland proper there were Spotted Flycatchers around and also the distinctive wheezy calls of an Icterine Warbler which we spent a lot of time tracking down as it moved among the pale green sunlight leaves which so perfectly camouflaged it.

Birdsong was everywhere in this lovely steep sided, predominantly Hornbeam woodland and we heard the delicious trilling of a Wood Warbler, the thin call of a Eurasian Treecreeper contrasting with the much flutier tones of Blackcaps. We eventually found the bird we'd been searching for – Red-breasted Flycatcher. This was a female bird and probably only recently arrived and it moved around the trees around us giving everyone good views.

We emerged from the woodland and walked across a more open shrubby area with the chanting from the monastery growing louder. Red-backed Shrikes were perched up on low shrubs, Great Tits picked through the branches for caterpillars and Blackbirds hunted away in the shade.

We were ushered to our bus by a lovely Scarce Swallowtail, used the basic local amenities and then headed off. We were heading to Macin and the National Park near there but stopped at a large quarry en route to see if the European Bee-eaters might be present. They certainly were! The quarry was alive with these gorgeous birds gliding and calling and settling outside their nest holes. In the sun they shone like jewels as the light caught different parts of their impossibly colourful plumage. Starlings were present too but we were hoping for European Roller which, in the time-honoured fashion, appeared just as we were about to leave. As beautifully coloured as the Bee-eaters two of these birds arrived at the quarry edge and inspected the Bee-eaters nest holes. One very obligingly stayed perched on the quarry edge so we could set up the telescope and get excellent views of a stunning bird.

We continued our journey, rolling down a track in the Muntii Macinulu NP, looking for Black-headed Buntings which we duly found singing from the telegraph wires running down the line of a thin hedgerow.

Then it was time for matters more corporal as we settled down for the delicious picnic that had been prepared by our hotel. Wildlife watching never stops of course and during our lunch we found a Roe Deer hiding in a distant field with only its head visible, an exhibitionist Tawny Pipit conveniently landing regularly in a nearby bush and a European Stonechat perched on a distant fence line.

After lunch, and before heading off on a short walk into the park proper, we scoured some distant old buildings around which various hirundines were circling, hoping for a Red-rumped Swallow. Eventually our diligence was rewarded as a fine bird flew towards and then across us.

On our walk we were treated to the sight of a leaping Cristi as he catapulted in the air to avoid a very large and impressive centipede - Megarian Banded Centipede. We were told of the power of this beast's venom though later research seemed to indicate that while one wouldn't want to go out of one's way to be bitten by one it was perhaps not quite as deadly as portrayed.

The park was busy with people picnicking on this sunny Sunday so many of the birds we were looking for would probably have retreated higher up into the crags. This appeared to be the case as Stuart's sharp eyes picked up a Pied Wheatear a long way away on a distant ridge. We searched for it for some time, occasionally seeing it in its display flight high over the impressive rocks and again perched on a grey boulder. A Common Rock Thrush, our other 'quarry' species, then suddenly appeared again perched distantly on a craggy ridge before it flipped away never to be seen again.

In the nearer area of trees we could hear Nightingale and Blackcap and both Syrian and Great Spotted Woodpecker gave us brief views while a Red Fox was seen trotting away behind some rocks.

Our way back to the bus was accompanied by various Skippers, Brimstones and Fritillaries as well as more views of European Roller, Long-legged Buzzard and a nice Balkan Wall Lizard with a newly grown tail.

We drove a little further south before re-entering the park again to an area of wide Steppe grassland. Almost immediately we saw a number of Isabelline Wheatears, distinctive with their long-legged appearance and upright stance. More Red-backed Shrikes were dotted around on the low bushes and a young harrier lead us a merry identification dance before we finally settled on an immature Montagu's.

We started our way back home though decided this lovely day needed to be celebrated with a quick ice-cream stop. More delights were to await us at the hotel where, after our customary excellent meal the cooks brought out a special cake and sparkling wine. This was a lovely touch from great staff in a wonderful hotel – a fitting way to conclude our last night on Romanian soil.

Day 10

Monday 13th May

Tulcea – Bucharest airport

Time for us to go! After a relaxed start, another lovely breakfast, a sit in the flower-filled gardens of our very smart guest house and some unpressured packing, we boarded our bus for the journey from Tulcea to Bucharest. The usual birds appeared in the countryside that unfolded before us plus pale morph Booted Eagle which drifted regally past our bus.

We passed through a rookery near a lake where a few of us were able to see a few Red-footed Falcons amongst the noisy, lively rookery.

A little further on we carried out an intricate bus manoeuvre to turn into the road to Garlicui and after a couple of miles stopped for a break at a most fantastic European Bee-eater colony. Birds were flashing around everywhere at the edge of the old Danube flood plain. There were European Bee-eaters, European Rollers, hirundines and starlings, a singing Eurasian Skylark and a flock of beautiful Red-footed Falcons dancing up and down over the fields hunting for insects.

Walking a little way through a herb-rich grassland we surveyed the broad former floodplain now with groups of cattle being tended by various cowmen – including an extremely recumbent one. In the distance we picked out a few Ruddy Shelducks – a welcome opportunity to see this bird again, this time in strong sunshine – as well as busily feeding Sauslik.

The rest of our journey was uneventful with old favourites like Eurasian Hoopoes, Red-backed Shrikes and Great Egrets appearing as we passed suitable habitats.

We made good time motoring along the main roads to the airport marvelling at some of the driving and following, for some time, an ambulance that appeared to be trying to create its own custom!

We arrived at the airport in very good time. The group divided at the airport and farewells were said between the 'Manchester' and 'Heathrow' teams – we'd all thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. The Heathrow check-in and other such matters had a few minor delays but basically went smoothly and we arrived on time, collected our luggage and headed off homewards.

Warm thanks are due to our local guide Cristi, whose gentle humour and caring manner was greatly appreciated by all; to our first driver Cristi who impressed us all with his skill; to all the staff at the hotel in Vulcan, on the wonderful floating hotel and our final guest house in Tulcea. Everyone was helpfulness personified.

And, of course, the group; you were a delight to be with and you gelled together from the first second – thanks are due to you for the excellent, friendly atmosphere you created which made the holiday a joy for everyone.

La revedere Rumania....Multumesc! (Goodbye Romania...Many thanks!)

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	May									
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				20	✓	✓	✓			
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>				12	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
3	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				2		6		12		
4	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>				2						5
5	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>				4						
6	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				4	12	8	2	2		
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		2		6	✓	✓	✓	✓	3	
8	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				6	2	8	4	2		
9	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>					20	12	10			
10	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				6	6	✓	✓	4	6	✓
11	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				2						
12	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>					5	4	4			
13	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				12	✓	✓	✓			
14	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		6	2	30	2	20	6	12	12	15
15	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				10	50	✓	20	10		
16	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					10	3		10		
17	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>						H		1		
18	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>				1						
19	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>					2	25	✓			
20	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>				1	40	✓	✓	6		
21	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		2		3	✓	✓	✓	2	1	
22	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>				8	12	15	✓	1		
23	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				3	3	4	6			1
24	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
25	Great White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>					100+	✓	40		100	✓
26	Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>					3	4	6	2		
27	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>				12	100+	✓	✓			
28	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				1	30	✓	✓	1		
29	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>									4	

	Common name	Scientific name	May											
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13		
30	Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga pomarina</i>		1										
31	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>												1
32	Levant Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter brevipes</i>				1								
33	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1									1
34	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				1	15	✓	6	8	2	2		
35	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>									1			
36	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>					6	2	5	1				
37	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>								1	2			
38	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		4	4	1	1	1		1	2			
39	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					6	4	2					
40	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
41	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				2		12		6				
42	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avocetta</i>						10		12				
43	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				6	20	20	2	20				
44	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						2						
45	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>					4							
46	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>						3		8				
47	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>						1						
48	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>					5	4		4				
49	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>								12				
50	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						2	1	1				
51	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>					4	12	20	6				
52	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					2	1						
53	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>						1		3				
54	Temminck's Stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>						2						
55	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>								30				
56	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>								15				
57	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>						1						
58	Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>				2				2				
59	Pallas's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus</i>					2	3	2					
60	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>												
61	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May									
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
62	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>					1					
63	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>						20				
64	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
65	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>				12	✓	✓	✓	✓		
66	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>					1	12		4		
67	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>						12	6	4		
68	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>				3				1	H	
71	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		8	4	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		H	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	H	H	H
73	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>						2				
74	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>			✓							
75	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓		✓	20	20	10	✓		
76	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>				1				1	6	8
77	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>					8	10	2			
78	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>				TL	6	12		20	40	40
79	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>					2	3		4	2	2
80	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>		H								
81	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>						TLs				
82	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>									1	
83	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1			3	2	H		1	
84	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>		H	H				1			
85	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			H							
86	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>					3	2	H			
87	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1	4	12	4	6	6	4	4	2
88	Red-footed Falcon	<i>Falco vespertinus</i>					3	2	8	6		8
89	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>					2	3	4	2		
90	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1							
91	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>				1				3	6	2
92	Lesser Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius minor</i>		1						1		
93	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		H	1		H	H	2	H	6	

	Common name	Scientific name	May											
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13		
94	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		4	2									
95	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓		6	4	2	✓	✓	✓	
96	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>		3	2									
97	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	2	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
98	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			60+	✓					✓	✓	✓	
99	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
100	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4	4	10								
101	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓	✓	H								
102	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		2	1									
103	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			1									
104	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>			1									
105	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓				1	6	10				
106	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	6	1		6	6	10		✓		
107	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>						1	H	H				
108	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>						6		2	2			
109	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>												4
110	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>									2	4		
111	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
112	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		8	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
113	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
114	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>										1		
115	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		H						H				
116	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓			H	H	H	1	H		
117	Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>										H		
118	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>				4	2	6	6	H				H
119	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>							H					
120	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>					H	H	1	2				
121	Icterine Warbler	<i>Hippolais icterina</i>										2		
122	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>					H	H	1	H				
123	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	H		H	H	H	1	1			
124	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>					H	H	H	H	H			
125	Barred Warbler	<i>Sylvia nisoria</i>												

	Common name	Scientific name	May										
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
126	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>		✓	H	H			3	2	H	H	
127	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	H								
128	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			H								
129	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>										1	
130	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>										2	
131	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
132	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	6	6	1	1	2	2		
133	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		4	6								
134	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		4	H								
135	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		4	H								
136	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>					6		1		2		
137	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		H	H								
138	Thrush Nightingale	<i>Luscinia luscinia</i>					H						
139	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>					H		H	H	H	H	
140	Collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>					1						
141	Red-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>										1	
142	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		4	3	H						1	
143	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>					✓	1	1	H			
144	Common Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>										1	
145	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>				1					2		
146	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>										1	
147	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>						4		6			
148	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>										10	1
149	Pied Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>										1	
150	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			2								
151	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
152	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>									✓	✓	
153	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		6	4	6	4	6	12	✓	✓	✓	
154	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		1									
155	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>				TL							
156	Blue-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava</i>									✓		
157	Black-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava feldegg</i>									✓		

	Common name	Scientific name	May										
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
158	Grey-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava thunbergi</i>									✓		
159	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			4								
160	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		6	4	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
161	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>									1	1	
162	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		H	1								
163	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	6	✓	✓		
164	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>										2	
165	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		H								4	
166	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>						4				6	
167	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>									6	10	H
168	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		2									
169	Ortolan Bunting	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>									4	H	
170	Black-headed Bunting	<i>Emberiza melanocephala</i>										2	
171	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>						2	2	2	2		

Mammals:

1	Northern White-breasted Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus roumanicus</i>									1		
2	European Mole	<i>Talpa caucasica</i>			hills								
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		1							Dead	1	
4	European Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos arctos</i>		10									
5	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		2		2						1	
6	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>			1								
7	European Souslik	<i>Spermophilus citellus</i>									✓		✓
8	Muskrat	<i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>							1				
9	Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>							2				

Amphibians & Reptiles:

1	Fire-bellied Toad	<i>Bombina bombina</i>									H		
2	European Tree Frog	<i>Hyla orientalis</i>							1		H		
3	Edible Frog	<i>Rana kl. esculenta</i>							✓				
4	Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibundus</i>							✓	✓			
5	Sand Lizard	<i>Lacerta agilis</i>							2				

	Common name	Scientific name	May										
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
6	Balkann Green Lizard	<i>Lacerta trilineata</i>									1		
7	Balkan Wall Lizard	<i>Podachis tauricus</i>										1	
8	Grass Snake	<i>Natrix natrix persa</i>							1				1
9	Aesculapian Snake	<i>Zamenis longissimus</i>									Dead		
10	Fire Salamander	<i>Salamandra salamandra</i>			1								
11	Copper skink	<i>Oligosoma aeneum</i>									1		

Butterflies:

1	Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podalirius</i>											✓
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>										✓	
3	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>											✓
4	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>				✓							
5	Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>			✓	✓							✓
6	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>								sp			sp
7	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>				✓				✓			✓
8	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>				✓				✓			
9	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>								✓			
10	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>								✓		✓	✓
11	Knapweed Fritillary	<i>Melitaea pheobe</i>											✓
12	Lesser Spotted Fritillary	<i>Melitaea trivia</i>											✓
13	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>								✓			

Other Invertebrates:

1	Field Cricket	<i>Gryllus campestris</i>												H
2	Bee Fly	<i>Bombylius</i> sp.			✓	✓								
3	Chafer	<i>Cetonia cuprea</i>										✓		
4	Bloody-nosed Beetle	<i>Timarcha tenebricosa</i>										✓	✓	
5	Whirligig Beetle	<i>Gyrinus natator</i>										✓		
6	Velvet Ant	<i>Mutilla europaea</i>			✓									
7	Megarian banded centipede	<i>Scolopendra cingulata</i>												✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May										
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	

Molluscs:

1	Roman Snail	<i>Helix pomatia</i>			✓	✓							
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Dalmatian Pelican



European Brown Bear



Pallas's Gull