

Holiday Highlights

Romania

3 - 12 September 2022

Guides: Sally Nowell and Istvan Bartol

Guests: Janet and Tony Cummins, Shenagh Gilliard, Alison Cawley and John Scotford, Lyn and Dave Maslin

Day 1: We all meet at 09:30 in terminal 3 at Heathrow airport. With all the reports of long delays at the airport we are prepared for anything. But we go straight to the check in desk, straight through customs, (well most of us do except those with nuts, bolts, steel rods and plates in their hip, knees and shoulders) and then are able to relax in the departure lounge with coffee and croissant, newspapers and the various books we have brought with us. We sit in the lounge waiting for our gate to be called, it is called early and we make our way there and are promptly boarded. Once on board one of the crew offers Sally a seat in Club class, she politely refuses preferring to stay with the group. Not long into the flight the same crew member comes along and offers all our group a free drink! Champagne, gin and tonic, bacardi and coke are all ordered and enjoyed as a very unexpected treat!

Our flight is less than three hours and between reading and chatting it soon passes and we arrive at Otopeni airport close to Bucharest. We pass through customs without delay, though with so many pockets in our bags and coats passports aren't always easy to locate.

After collecting our bags we exit arrivals and Istvan, our local guide, is waving our Speyside Wildlife logo in the air waiting to collect us and our bags and whisk us to our nearby hotel for the night. Our transport for the week is waiting in the car park with the very familiar Speyside Wildlife logo on the side. Our hotel is less than five minutes away and our softly lit rooms are comfortable and smartly decorated. We enjoy a first meal together in the pleasant hotel restaurant, before retiring for the evening.

Day 2: We are treated to an excellent spread at our 07:30 breakfast, make our sandwiches up from the vast array of ingredients and check out of the hotel.

We make our way north away from Bucharest towards the Carpathian Mountains, along a motorway filled with unfamiliar billboard signs and across a large agricultural area that sadly look rather dried out, it doesn't look like the dry summer has left the farmers with a very good crop. As we drive, Istvan talks to us about local farming and the challenges of invasive species experienced by Romania.

We soon start to see some of our first birds, our first raptor flies right in front of us, a Common Buzzard. Common birds such as Jackdaws, Wood Pigeons and Collared Doves line our route. Marsh Harriers cruise above the maize fields and eventually we start to see the mountains ahead. It's a rather cloudy, misty and damp morning, a good travel day though as it's not too hot. A brief comfort stop and we see Ravens overhead and then we feel the road start to climb through pretty villages, past interesting churches and a field full of Hooded Crows feeding. Woodland stretches ahead and from side to side unbroken as far as the eye can see. The woodland is a mix of trees, a lot of beech, larch and oak. We see our first castle perched up high on a hill above an attractive town and weave our way up and down hairpin bends to an open meadow area, where we stop. Istvan is hoping we will see Black Woodpecker here.

As we get out of the van we hear a yaffling Green Woodpecker who obligingly perches high in a large spruce tree, it's a great start. We then hear some smaller birds, Chiffchaff contact calling, Robin, Great Tit and Crested Tit. We then spot Tree Pipit and Meadow Pipit and a stunning and confiding young Red-backed Shrike. Istvan works hard to try and get us a view of Crested Tit but to no avail. A brief glimpse of a Treecreeper and a group of Mistle Thrush, who are elusive at first, but then perch high giving us all good views. We decide to have lunch in this stunning area and continue to bird. This is a high mountain meadow, grassland and scrub with mature trees around the edge. As we start to organise lunch we are thrilled to have a group of eight White Storks circling overhead and then quickly they disappear. Several buzzards are studied closely, in case they are Honey Buzzards but no they are Common Buzzards, but they are joined by a couple of Sparrowhawks.

After lunch we move on to a similar area of open meadow, still in search of Black Woodpecker. We see our first Black Redstart and White wagtails here, feeding amongst the cattle. We hear Green Woodpecker and Sally manages to spot a very distant Black Woodpecker silhouetted on the skyline, sadly this turns out to be our only view of Black Woodpecker on the trip.

Our route takes us back across some expansive high agricultural areas, this time looking a bit healthier than those on the lower plains. We spot a low flying raptor which at first we think is a Marsh Harrier from its behaviour, but Istvan gets excited he thinks it's a Lesser Spotted Eagle and manages to quickly swing the van into a parking space and we all jump out and get some great views of our first eagle of the trip and Dave and Lyn's first ever Lesser Spotted Eagle. It's a real thrill to watch this bird with its unusual flight of drooping wings soar around so close. Above it we spot a Hobby with prey, in amongst a large flock of House Martins. On the ground is a young Marsh Harrier with an outstandingly bright golden crown. Alison and John are particularly taken with its stunning and bright plumage, a male Marsh Harrier floats by and another young bird further away. A fabulous raptor viewing that gets us all excited and thrills us to pick up quite a coup just at the roadside.

We drive on to Bran and the beautiful castle, famous for its associations with Dracula. It's difficult to find a stopping place to take a photo but eventually Istvan finds a suitable spot that gives us Grey Wagtail too.

Our next area is one where Istvan has seen Red-footed Falcon. Here there are hundreds of corvids in the fields, we scan the wires searching for the falcons, get excited over numerous raptors that all turn out to be Common Buzzards except one that turns out to be another magnificent Lesser Spotted Eagle. We turn back and make our way further into the mountains and up towards our hotel. Enroute we stop at a quarry, here we are hoping for a bit more activity than we manage. A Marsh Tit is calling by the van, Sally is trying to turn a rock into an Eagle Owl, we see a Raven being relentlessly pursued by a Stock Dove and Alison manages to pick up some distant movement which turns out to be two more Black Redstarts. Just as we decide to move on Istvan finds us a Blackcap and then we continue up the gravel track to Magura and our delightful hotel.

Here we are greeted warmly by Herman, but decide to delay our check in and instead go for a walk in the hope of finding Nutcracker, a bird Tony really wants to see. The views here are stunning as we walk along the road between meadows and orchards, with the constant sound of cow bells in the background. We find our first Great Spotted Woodpecker and astonishingly Istvan finds us a group of Chamois on a distant cliff, difficult to spot even through the telescope until you get your eye in!

After we have stretched our legs we return to the hotel for check in, a freshen up and dinner.

Day 3: We start our day with a delicious and varied breakfast, followed by a short drive to the beginning of a spectacular gorge. Janet decides to have a restful morning, but the rest of us are ready for a walk. A gentle track takes us up a tree-lined slope and finally into the beginning of a steep sided gorge. As we go we check out the woodland birds around us, mostly mixed flocks of very elusive tits, Coal, Crested, Great and Willow. In a clearing around an elderberry bush, thick with berries a Blackbird and Blackcap feed. Nutcracker is a target we are really focused on today, we occasionally hear them calling but they too are elusive flying high over our heads from one side of the steep gorge to the other. We meet a Naturetrek group who has spotted Chamois on the hillside, the same slope we saw them from yesterday but today we are a little closer and so get a better view.

We hang back from the other group to give us all some space, but they are a bit slow so we overtake and eventually continue on up the track, until we come to a mountain hut. We decide to spend a bit of time here looking for Nutcracker, we can hear them calling above. Shenagh spots a "grey bird" flying onto the distant cliffs and wonders what it is. Sally scopes the area Shenagh saw the bird disappear into, it's a stunning Peregrine plucking some prey, we watch the Peregrine for a while and eventually, whilst Tony is watching it, it flies off and

we think the prey item is just the bird we are trying to spot a Nutcracker!! Not quite the view we were wanting!

We continue up the track enjoying some of the plant life Sedums, Campanula, Cirsium and Carpathian Bellflower. We reach our turning point, an area where Wallcreeper has bred this year. But though we scan the cliffs for a while we see nothing and make our return journey, much easier and quicker this time as its downhill! The scenery is spectacular and we are finally treated to some good views of Nutcracker as we descend. Nearer the bottom we have some good mixed tit flocks with most of us seeing Crested and Long-tailed Tit. We return to the hotel for a cooked lunch before heading back out, this time we are going Bear watching! It's nice to have Janet back with us after her restful morning.

We journey through pretty villages past fields of maize and horse drawn carts and big open grazing areas surrounded by mixed woodland and scrub. We turn off the tarmacked road and make an immediate stop along a track beside a cattle field. Istvan finds us Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Fieldfare in a thicket, Sally spots a Lesser Spotted Eagle over the hillside and we hear another calling below.

Further along a tree-lined lane, strewn with fallen apples we have a close Red-backed shrike and enjoy some butterflies over the fields, Brimstone and Clouded Yellows flutter past. We try for Grey-headed Woodpecker but to no avail so we head on past fields full of autumn crocus, otherwise known as, according to Alison, 'Naked Ladies'. We are making our way to our meeting point before we go up to the bear hide.

At our meeting point we are surrounded by apple trees, Chiffchaffs and tit species feed hungrily on the insects in the trees, a single Spotted Flycatcher shows briefly. We are eventually joined by a few others who are going to the bear hide, including Herman from the hotel. We follow in convoy through the forest up a winding and at times muddy track. Eventually we come to a stop and get out of our vehicles. We are told to make our way quickly and quietly to the hide, we can already see a couple of bears in the area so do as we are told and move as one along the narrow path and into the hide.

We take our seats and are amazed to see immediately in front of us eight Brown bears sniffing out the food that has just been put out for them. We can see that a sack of apples has been dumped and other treats hidden in logs. As the bears feed and interact we are spell bound for two hours of watching. One by one the larger bears wander off. A small family group of a mother and two large cubs attract our attention as they all settle down together for a rest. Another youngster seems unwelcome and is chased off by a larger bear. It returns when the family group is more active but isn't welcome and remains very wary. A large dark bear comes in, the ranger tells us he's called 'Big eyes' and is eight years old, a handsome and slim animal compared to some of the other more chunky individuals with thicker coats. All the bears except 'Big eyes' depart and now it is time for us to leave.

We make our way back to the van in the dark and Istvan drives us back to the hotel, over an hours drive, but we chat together most of the way reflecting on our day and our evening and discuss wide ranging and interesting topics. We arrive back at the hotel for a snack tea before heading to bed after a full day.

Day 4: We start the day driving down the gravel track to the town below, but our journey is delayed due to a car accident. We take a detour and find ourselves journeying past maize fields, attractive small villages and towns and finally to our lake side destination at Dumbravita.

We get out of the van and immediately start scanning across the lake, where we can see a lot of birds. Mainly duck species and Grey Heron, Common Crane and Great Egret stand out at first, but we can see a mix of waders and gradually start picking out the different species one by one to try and make sure everyone sees everything. The different characteristics of the wader species at this time of year are very tricky but with some effort, particularly by Tony, the differences become clearer. We watch from three different positions along the lake side, the latter along a dam wall. On the wall are a group of Cormorants we have seen fishing in unison earlier. We also see a small group of Black Storks at the far end just resting. We keep getting the scope on different birds but the Spotted Redshank is definitely a favourite, such a handsome bird.

Most of us manage to see a pretty impressive array of fabulous waders and some great close views too. We rack up 16 different wader species in the space of one and a half hours, Common, Green, Wood, Curlew and Marsh Sandpiper, Ruff, Little Stint, Eurasian Curlew, Spotted Redshank, Common Greenshank, Sanderling, Dunlin, Little Ringed Plover, Common Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit and Turnstone.

Shenagh finds an interesting Soldier fly larva in the mud. Sally spots what at first she thinks is a Sparrowhawk, perched on one of the metal walkways, but as Istvan looks we think its a Goshawk and sure enough as it takes off its clear its quite a big bird but it disappears before we have another look. Shortly after a young cuckoo races out of the reeds below us and perches up again on the metal walkway giving us a fine view of a well marked juvenile.

We leave the lakeside after Alison manages to get a photo of the horse and cart she has been wanting to photograph, though the cart driver is wanting payment in cigarettes for stopping and posing.

We next head in search of woodpecker, Istvan thinks he has heard Syrian Woodpecker, he has such sharp hearing! As we walk we see high perched Spotted Flycatchers and eventually track down a Middle Spotted Woodpecker high in a spectacular stand of large oak trees. Between the oaks and the road stretches a large swathe of mixed planting including a lot of berry bushes. Amongst the berries there is a lot of activity, a number of Tree Sparrows but more excitingly lots of warblers. Amongst them are Garden Warbler, Blackcap,

Common and Lesser Whitethroat and of course Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler. We bird this scrub area hungrily but it is time to head to our next destination.

Lunchtime is calling but Istvan has a lunch spot in mind 30 minutes away. We arrive in very different habitat, vast open grassland plains where we sit and eat our lunch expectantly. We spot a Red-backed Shrike on the bushes below us, Tony sees a Marsh Harrier floating behind us and then we see a Great Grey Shrike up on the hillside opposite us. The bird perches well and moves into better and better positions for us all to see. We spot some distant raptors, some are falcons, we wonder if they are Red-footed Falcons that so far are evading us. We head across the grassy plain and stop, we have a group of high soaring birds, Istvan watches and we all think these may be the falcons we had hoped to see. We think they are perching in trees further along the road, but as we drive up we see that the birds are Kestrels. As we watch we are approached by a farmer in some interesting boots and outfit. He is carrying a bucket of mushrooms and speaks surprisingly good, which he is very keen to practice and says he has learnt from watching English speaking films. Once engaged, Alison and Shenagh find it difficult to extract themselves from his conversation, but manage to do so by taking an exceptional interest in the Wheatears and Whinchats perched on the fence surrounding a chicken farm below us.

We head on to a parking area and copse of oak trees, as we get out of the van Tony spots a Hoopoe in the woodland, a few see it before it heads away and though we catch further fleeting glimpses of it we don't get good views. We walk into the wood and it's very quiet but beautiful, only a Blue Tit moves high in the tree canopy above us and we hear a distant nuthatch.

We return to the van and continue on the road a short distance, where we come across more Spotted Flycatchers and Red-backed Shrikes and a large flock of feeding Chaffinches amongst the trees filled with tiny apples. We find a Yellow-bellied toad and Sally finds a large Green Bush Cricket, both spectacular critters for the list of the day. We need to head back to the hotel having driven a large circle. So back we go for a pleasant evening meal.

Day 5: An early start today as we have a long journey from the mountains down to the Black Sea Coast. Just after leaving our hotel we have our first Honey Buzzard flying high over the track, but sadly it was on a mission and didn't stop for us all to get a decent view.

We retrace our steps back south towards Bucharest and then head east toward the Black Sea coast. We stop briefly to stock up on nibbles, particularly chocolate that seems to have become a daily staple! Our route takes us through winding mountain roads and then through vast areas of intensively farmed plains, with huge swathes of sunflowers and maize. We hit the motorway around Bucharest and the traffic slows almost to a standstill and rather alarmingly the traffic going in the opposite direction, (the one we will be going in three days time to get to the airport) is at a standstill and for several miles the traffic is motionless. Sally

and Istvan are both thinking we need to find an alternative route on the return journey.

We drive past huge warehouses between large lorries and unfortunately behind one full of pigs filling the van with a rather pungent aroma! But we are soon on the move and leave the Bucharest traffic behind. After several closed toilet facilities we finally leave the motorway for a comfort stop, we take a 'B' road and perhaps because of this see our first and impressive number of Bee-eaters. A chocolate and loo break and we are on our way again. We have a lunch stop at an immaculate service area that we have all to ourselves, with tables and benches and clean loos to accommodate us all. After crossing the Danube we finally see the Black Sea in the distance.

Our first stop in this vast open Steppe area is a quarry amidst open grassland. On the grassland we have our first good view Souslik, a rather engaging small rodent, not unlike a Prairie Dog that provides good food for raptors. We can hardly contain ourselves with the numbers of raptors in the air near and far. Tony spots a large raptor beyond a group of huge pylons, Shenagh has one a little further away, John sees something over by some fencing and Lyn has something off in the other direction, where do we start?? We tried to look at each bird in turn.

We see Long-legged Buzzard, distant Short-toed Eagle, a Sparrowhawk that could have been Levant but we did not get a conclusive look to confirm it, several distant Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzard, Kestrels galore. Then Shenagh says she's seen a large brown bird land on a pylon, Sally finds it in the scope and it's a large falcon, a Saker Falcon. The falcon takes off and we follow it and watch as it goes into battle with two Long-legged Buzzards. We watch as they challenge each other then finally lose sight of the Saker behind a hillock.

Whilst we are watching the raptors, seven species in all, we aren't paying attention to some of the smaller birds, two delightful Crested larks suddenly announce their presence with a fluty call and perch well for us all to see. But it is time to move on.

Down some rough roads and Istvan suddenly shouts that the bird that has just flown across in front of us is a Lesser Grey Shrike, we stop the van but immediately see falcons which look like Red feet, we all get out of the van but the falcons seem to dissolve into thin air and are nowhere to be seen. Istvan is determined though and continues scanning the horizon, but he does find the shrike deep in the maize field hunting along with a Red-backed Shrike spotted by Shenagh.

We head towards a wetland area and enroute we stop to see a dead Golden Jackal by the road side hoping we might see a live one later in our travels. Fortunately our spirits are lifted by the sight and sound of a huge flock of European Bee-eaters and several Rollers on telegraph wires, quite a thrilling sight

and reward after a long day of travel. Beyond the Bee-eaters we see a Purple Heron but we need to move on again, places to go birds to see!

At a small fresh water lake a little further on we have fly pasts of Caspian tern, Gull-billed tern and Tony has a Black tern. We are surrounded by Bee-eaters and watch several as they take advantage of a lorry which was a mobile beehive. The bees are being picked off by several Bee-eaters flying around. Greenshank, Common Redshank and Common Sandpiper join us at the pool and Alison spots a Red-breasted Flycatcher down in the undergrowth, but sitting up cooperatively for a photo and full ID on John's app. We leave the pool seeing Squacco heron and Wood Sandpiper on the way out.

We are late for our hotel so put the blinkers on, so we don't see more and delay our return further. Sadly we spot something else on the way home in the area we thought we had seen the Red-footed Falcons. This time we can confirm they were indeed what we were after and we all manage to get some great views of them flying over the ploughed fields beside us, including a stunning male feeding on the wing. Our day is complete so to the hotel we head.

Our hotel for the next two nights is a very different affair to Herman's up in the mountains. This is a large modern hotel seemingly in the middle of nowhere. It has a large and inviting swimming pool which sadly we do not have time to use. Our rooms are large and airy and the dining area comfortable. We enjoy a pleasant meal followed by a much loved desert of pancakes with cherry compote and cream.

It is as we are eating dinner tonight that news reaches us of the Queens death, a moment of sadness for us all, we pause to reflect and will not forget where we were when the sad news reached us.

Day 6: After breakfast we go out in search of Sombre Tit, this is another bird that Tony has on his list of ones he'd really like to see. A short drive from the hotel and we arrive in a sunny forest glade, we are surrounded by oak trees, dragonflies and butterflies, all very beautiful in the warm morning sun. Istvan spots Camberwell Beauty butterfly and we also find some huge fritillary's that we later identify as Silver-washed Fritillary but then decide they are in fact 'Cardinals'. We try and find the Sombre Tit but the woodland is pretty quiet except for a Spotted Flycatcher and the constant activity of the butterflies, small moths and dragonflies. Whilst Istvan perseveres searching for the Sombre Tit we were all well and truly distracted by the insect life, which includes a very spectacular bright green European Mantis. Lots of photos are taken and plans are made to do some id when we have time to relax on board our floating hotel.

We leave this spot and drive across mixed arable land dotted with large grazing pastures, herds of sheep and goats with their attendant shepherds, with an occasional horse drawn cart passing by, one collecting children from school, captured by Alison for her holiday photo collection. Along the way we see

European Bee-eaters and Rollers on the wires and stop to scan fields for larks and wheatears. We find Isabelline Wheatear in a ploughed field, a stunningly elegant bird and as we watch Bee-eaters swarm by and show off their eye-catching plumage of green, blue, yellow and chestnut as they hawk over the ploughed furrows. Tony and Istvan think they have Short-toed Lark but the birds are elusive and we don't all get on to them. Dave spots a Long-legged Buzzard perched on the telegraph poles just along the road.

We continue on, now keen to try and find other Wheatear species for the trip. We finally make our lunch and coffee stop at Chia gorge. A beautiful spot to stand or sit and watch for birds. At first all is quiet but once again butterflies steal the show, a hundred or more butterflies and moths cover the thistles nearby, mainly Cardinals and a huge number of exquisite Painted Ladies. Janet takes a stroll up the side of the gorge and spots a different mix of blue butterflies amongst the herbs and flowers on the steep slopes, Tony finds a Wall butterfly up there later. As we eat our lunch one or two raptors float in, at first Kestrels, then Common Buzzards and then a Long-legged Buzzard and then a Booted Eagle comes in flies right over us giving us a spectacular view, staring down at us as it flies over, Dave is totally enthralled!! The eagle is mobbed by two Levant Sparrowhawks but of course it just brushes them off un-phased. As we stand a Saker Falcon comes in, then what looks like another large Falcon appears from on high but its not a falcon though its diving with wings held back, it's a ring tail Montague's Harrier, it drops from a great height but then glides back and fore along the ridge for all to see. An incredible raptor fest we enjoy for 30 minutes or more, but its time to move on to our next stop.

Away we go, past more herds of sheep, small and rustic farms and simple villages. We see Hoopoe enroute but are heading this time to a monastery. We stop in the shade, it's getting very warm but we are here to see Red-breasted Flycatcher and we soon are watching a number of them feeding below the canopy of fruit trees. Istvan, who is considerably younger than the rest of us, suggests we crouch or sit on a bank, we aren't sure we can get down and if we do will we get up!!! We all manage to see the flycatchers and a pair of Common Redstart, a very busy area with all the birds feeding. A woodpecker calls, a Syrian Woodpecker for us this time, it calls and then lands on a nearby tree.

We drive away a short distance to an area where we think we might see Levant Sparrowhawk, Istvan plays a tape and we almost instantly get a response, a bird replies and flies across to our right. Across from where we are standing a large falcon comes powering through, it's a Saker falcon and its being mobbed by the Levant Sparrowhawks, they look tiny against the chunky Saker. Away in the distance the wind turbines are whirling and we have a large raptor appear, this time its a Short-toed Eagle, then we have two Short-toed Eagles, one lands on the ground but then they both disappear, we have had quite a number of great raptors today!

Our final stop of the day is towards the coast, after travelling down some rough roads that look like farm tracks that are leading nowhere, we eventually arrive at a huge lake covered in waterfowl, waders and gulls. Its very windy so not easy birding but the Ruddy Shelduck are a real treat in their rich toffee coloured plumage with butterscotch heads. We see a large flock of Avocet and huge mix of gulls. But we soon move on from here as the birds are very distant and the weather conditions are making it difficult for us all to enjoy them.

We move to an area where Collared Pratincole have been seen. Just as we arrive we have one very near the van, Lynn is desperate to get a photo of this gorgeous bird, a delightful young and very confident bird, as we look across the field we can see several very well camouflaged birds hunkering down amongst the clods of earth. We enjoy the Pratincoles flying back and forth flashing their chestnut underwing and white bellies as they go. Such beautiful birds, they are a real delight. Whilst watching the Pratincoles Alison is thrilled to get our best view yet of a stunning female Red-footed Falcon as it whizzes through showing its dark blue grey back and a rich orange underbelly, what a stunner!!!!

For the next part of the afternoon Istvan tells us "This is going to be AWFUL", we all laugh but then know what he means!!! The road surface is really rough, he's not wrong that it's a bit uncomfortable, but we continue along the road past large lake areas. On one stop we see a mixed group of water birds including White Pelican, on we go practically in the reed bed, pausing only briefly for Sally to get out and give everyone a taste of Samphire, which is growing by the track edge. Our final stop is for a group of gulls in a dry river bed. But not just any gulls, some of these are Pallas' Gull and that is exactly what we are here for!! A group of mixed gulls are dominated by these magnificent and massive birds but with them are Gull-billed Terns and Caspian Gull and Tern. A final treat for the day and we head back to the hotel through clouds of Yellow Wagtails and the occasional Reed Warbler that shows itself at the road edge.

Day 7: We promptly pack the van and then have breakfast before making our way north towards Tulcea. Our first stop is beside some telegraph wires that hold several European Roller and Bee-eaters, the two birds sitting side by side are stunning. We hope to get some photos but the Rollers just keep moving further along the wires away from us.

We move on to a huge inland lake, stopping on a natural raised area looking out over hundreds of birds, the first we pick out is Red-crested Pochard but as we all scan across the birds we find a wide variety of different species. Tony spots a Spoonbill, Istvan calls our first handsome Ferruginous Duck along with Pochard and Pintail. We are hoping for Greater Flamingo here and finally spot a single bird out in the lagoon which gracefully takes off, does a circuit and then lands back where it started.

We move on to a fortress perched high on a hill. Enroute we drive through avenues of poplar reminiscent of France. At the fortress the wind is quite gusty,

though we note that by Outer Hebrides standards it's just a gentle breeze! But we do not linger here long but behind the hill we find a bit of shelter. Here we have lovely views of Hobby and a magnificent flock of pelicans high over the fields of wind turbines. The flock move as one, effortlessly whirling, turning and gliding out of view with what looks like the minimum of effort.

We move on to our final destination before joining our boat. Here we are in beautiful woodland of Oriental Hornbeam, we walk through a grassy landscape under the shade of these beautiful native trees in search of Sombre Tit. This bird is proving particularly challenging, Istvan is playing a tape which it responds to by flying quickly past us and then hiding amongst the dense foliage of the hornbeams, a few of us manage to see it and Istvan works hard but its to no avail the bird just isn't playing ball. We do however add Icterine warbler to our list and that is showing well and a bird we all struggle to identify but eventually agree on it being a Lesser Whitethroat. We reluctantly leave this beautiful and serene place, another favourite of the trip and make our way to Tulcea to join our floating hotel.

We park and our luggage is unloaded and then spirited away by the boat crew. We are greeted on board by our lovely team and a glass of schnapps. We are settled into our rooms briefly and then we are off into the Danube delta.

Daniel, a lively, large and competent Romanian is owner of the boat and our guide for this part of the trip. He speaks seven languages, grew up on the Delta about which he has a vast knowledge and experience. We all relax as our boat drifts through water channels lined with tall poplars and willows. Sally spots a Golden Jackal up ahead on the bank sitting at the river side, it stands and we watch this beautiful animal through our binoculars just before it disappears into the undergrowth. Not long later John and Shenagh see another mammal which they describe and Daniel confirms that it must be a European Mink.

As we float along Sally thinks she has a crake in the reeds, the boat comes to a halt, it is in fact a young moorhen deep in the reeds but Lynn thinks Sally said 'crane', she wonders what it was doing deep in the reeds on a river bank!. Alison spots a Night Heron and is so excited her words come out as gobbledygook but miraculously we all knew what she meant and see the bird! As we drift we see Common Kingfisher, Great and Little egret, Night, Squacco and Grey Heron. Overhead we have the company of a Hobby and we are all amazed by Daniel's ability to call in Grey-headed Woodpecker. We have four birds in the tall trees beside the river, our first of the trip and quite a sight. We continue and see White-tailed Eagles, Green Sandpiper and Greenshank along the river and a Great Reed Warbler fly past.

Eventually we arrive back at our floating hotel and our tug boat takes us a further 10 kilometres up river before coming to a stop. We are all ready for dinner in our comfortable dining room and at our beautifully decorated table. We dine and then Daniel introduces us to the Danube Delta areas telling us about some of the

conservation challenges and efforts. We retire listening to the village on the bank playing traditional music. Floating hotels were once a common sight on the Danube but we are told that ours is one of only four remaining. Our hotel boat hosts just our group and is pulled by a Tug boat, during the day we leave the hotel and go out in a smaller boat with seating and a canopy should it rain or to provide shade from the sun. We have a very adequate and welcome toilet on board. After our day out we meet the hotel at the same or a different location on the delta.

Day 8: After breakfast we leave our floating hotel, but not before spotting the local pair of White-Tailed Eagles perched not far away. We then pass the huge five star hotel on the banks of the Danube. A strange contrast to the natural area we are in but the biggest Lebanese restaurant in Romania is apparently to be found within the complex. Hot tubs and fancy apartments leaning over the river banks do not persuade us that we would rather be there than on our lovely cosy and welcoming floating hotel. Our boatman weaves through the river channels, passing fishing men and women who have somehow made their way into the depths of the river maze to try their hand at catching something. European Kingfishers flash across in front of the boat and Hobbies and Marsh harriers drift by overhead.

It isn't long before we hear the tinkling of Bearded Tit in the reeds. We stop and soon there are several of these gorgeous, at home rather elusive birds, feeding along the base of the reeds and then perching high on the reeds around us.

The Bearded Tits are joined by a Reed Warbler as they feed and a Water Rail is calling deep in the reeds. A whole mix of adult and juvenile Bearded Tits are now visible, so we sit and enjoy them for a while before floating away again. We follow the reed lined channels, occasionally turning into small or much larger lagoons. As we do so, we see Whiskered Terns wheeling overhead and huge rafts of wildfowl. These prove difficult to see at such distance and using the scope is tricky on a moving boat however hard the boatman tries to hold it steady. Daniel and Istvan identify Ferruginous Duck in large numbers and we begin to get our eye in with these rich chestnut coloured birds and their strongly marked wings in flight.

We are wowed by huge flocks of White Pelicans coming in to land low over the lagoons, sadly landing just out of sight. After five hours of drifting along the channels birding we return to our floating hotel for lunch. We have stuffed vine leaves and delicious soup, followed by a good chunk of cake to restore us. A brief siesta or birding from the sundeck and we are then off again birding for the afternoon. This time we are focused on trying to pick up woodpeckers we haven't yet seen. It is a rather breezy afternoon and the woodpeckers remain elusive. Eventually two of us catch sight of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, but as most of us miss it we continue our search. We do manage good views of Grey-headed Woodpecker but it's the magnificent Black Woodpecker we really want to catch up with, our view earlier in the trip a good half mile away!

We drift into a huge expanse of open water. Again we have Hobbies flying overhead, Black-necked and Great Crested Grebe, Ferruginous Ducks, Wigeon and huge colonies of cormorants. We experience a bit of a problem with the boat but we are happy to continue birding whilst Daniel, Istvan and the boatman resolve the issue with a temporary solution and before too long the engine is fixed and we can relax and are back on our way. As we go the boat churns up the bottom of the lake and the Black-headed Gulls and Whiskered Terns have obviously learnt that this happens and follow the boat picking up the worms that come to the surface. Along the channel we pass a stunning group of resting Caspian and Black-headed Gulls on a sand bank. Caspian Terns have joined them and look amazing with their bright red bills glowing in the late afternoon sun.

Not far along the channel Daniel spots a European Bittern. But one of our guests is in the loo!!!! It disappears just before they emerge from our very welcome onboard toilet, but did they miss the bittern? No, it reappears and we all get an amazing view of this bird which can be just so difficult to see. We are able to watch it for 20 minutes or so as it weaves its way in between the reeds at the edge of the water. We eventually leave it in peace and move on to our next huge lagoon.

Again vast rafts of duck but Sally is scanning the reed edges and spots a Little Crake, at first Daniel thinks it's a Moorhen again but Sally is insistent and persistent, she knows its not a Moorhen and eventually Daniel has to agree that it is indeed a Little Crake and the boat slowly approaches. We are all able to watch this skulking character for quite some time, similar to the Bittern, it weaves in and out of the reeds feeding, but we still are able to see it pretty well and it turns out to be one of the favourite birds of the trip. As we are watching the crake Daniel spots a couple of European Otters frolicking in the shallows amongst the water lilies. As we watch them we see what must be hundreds of frogs leaping out of the water as the otters dive under the floating vegetation.

We leave the open water and as we return to our floating hotel we pass Grey-headed Woodpeckers, huge sedate Dalmatian Pelicans drifting along and then as we sail towards the setting sun a group of White Pelicans sit with Pygmy and Common Cormorant just beside our mooring for the evening.

We arrive in time to freshen up and have an evening drink watching the setting sun. After dinner we go outside to try and catch a glimpse of the Harvest Moon before retiring for the evening.

Day 9: Our morning starts off perfectly, the sky is clearing to reveal a clear blue sky, outside the hotel the air is warm and the view across the reeds is immense from the top deck. Several of us gather and Istvan is already there trying to attract Lesser Spotted Woodpecker to the dead tree beside the hotel. A Grey-headed Woodpecker arrives but this is not quite what we were after but the views are spectacular, we all drink them in. We then scan out across the water in front of us and there are four White Pelicans preening obsessively to keep their feathers

in tip top condition. Occasionally another pelican flies in giving us yet another 'wow' moment. Its hard to describe why or how these rather ungainly birds look so thrilling in flight, their huge wings and effortless gliding is just mesmerizing in its elegance, when the pelicans come drifting in to the water they are truly magnificent. After we've admired the pelicans Istvan is still trying to tempt the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker into the tree and eventually one arrives. Everyone is delighted with this 'pocket sized' woodpecker who stays around giving us some fabulous views for several minutes and turns out to be another favourite bird of the trip.

Just as we go down for breakfast Istvan shouts 'Glossy Ibis', we see just enough of a bird flying over to be able to tick it on the list but for Janet, whose favourite bird is Glossy Ibis, not the best view she would have hoped for.

After breakfast we cruise out into the open water and get very near the pelicans. Also around the area are Garganey, Wood Sandpiper and Squacco Herons. Suddenly a White-tailed Eagle appears and comes right towards us and in front of us it dives, grabs a fish and off it goes, what luck to witness that! We need to move on but not long after we set off we find a group of Penduline Tits who obligingly, along with a Reed Bunting, sit on top of the reeds for us all to admire and enjoy (another bird of the trip). Shortly we continue on our floating journey through channels that seem to get narrower and narrower to the point we need to dodge out of the way of the reeds, sometimes we aren't sure we'll get through but with our expert boatman we do and as we do we enter open lakes covered in swans, ducks, grebes, gulls and terns, along the banks we are surrounded by the calls of Bearded Tit tinkling around us, get occasional fly pasts and see them sitting in the reeds or feeding at the bases, we also bump into more otters along the river channels. On the floating vegetation of Water Chestnuts we see loads of beautiful green Edible Frogs jumping as our boat makes its way.

We return to the floating hotel and have lunch before our final few hours on the Delta. Our pace is much slower now. We all sit up on deck relaxing whilst Rowana brings us chilled water, gin and tonic or beer and watch the world go by, a real 'mindfulness' moment of the trip. We drift along and from the sundeck can look out over the huge expanse of reeds around us.

Marsh harriers floating by, White-tailed Eagles perched up on dead trees, Hobbies and Bee-eaters aerial feeding, Black Storks and groups of pelicans making use of the thermals. Along the banks we spot a Little Bittern, it holds very still hoping it can't be seen but we were too quick and all manage to get decent views of this cryptic bird. We are continuing to look and listen for Black Woodpecker, eventually Daniel admits defeat. We enjoy watching a group of European Bee-eaters diving into the water in front of us, they seem to be using it to bath and preen, all perching up on the trees lining the ever widening channels to spruce themselves and their stunning plumage up. Finally we arrive back at Tulcea as the sun is setting. This evening we will be preparing for an early start tomorrow and completing the bird list and sharing our holiday highlights.

A holiday highlight for us all this evening is Tony's suggestion that Lyn is his magic moment, a slight break down in communication but a lot of hilarity on our final evening together before we make our journey home.

Day 10: An early start but as throughout the holiday, everyone is prompt and ready to go after Rowana has served us an early breakfast. Istvan has loaded the van in no time and we are away five minutes earlier than planned. Our journey takes us west through villages and some stunning open steppe countryside. Istvan and Sally are keen to avoid the motorway route we had come east on, to avoid any potential delays when we have a plane to catch. The route is much more interesting than the motorway, passing farms and villages with interesting churches. Although the journey is slower it is also shorter and so we arrive at the airport in good time to get lunch and relax that we are here in plenty of time.

We are aboard our flight in no time and on our way back to Heathrow. Sally is taking an onward flight so misses saying goodbye to everyone as a visit to the loo was priority after the flight so we managed to get separated, but one way or another we say our goodbyes, hoping we might all meet again before too long.

FAVOURITE SPECIES

Shenagh - Bittern

Alison - Penduline Tit

Tony - Little Crake

Dave - Lesser Spotted Eagle

Lynn - Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

John - Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

Istvan - Levant Sparrowhawk

Janet - Glossy Ibis

Sally - White Pelican

FAVOURITE PLACE

Alison - Zarnesti Gorge

John - Hermani Villa and the Danube Delta

Tony - Vadu area

Janet - the wood by the monastery

Shenagh - Babadag Forest

Lyn - the Delta, so relaxing, a magical experience

Dave - the Delta, "the whole package, the wine, the desserts!"

Istvan - Lake Tulzla

Sally - Cheia Gorge

MAGIC MOMENT

Tony - my first sight of the bears "it was mind blowing".

Janet - sailing into the sunset towards our floating hotel with the pelicans perched beside us.

Lyn - the Booted Eagle in the Cheia Gorge, so many different raptors.

John - this morning watching the pelicans and White-tailed Eagle fishing.

Sally - the same as John, just soaking up watching the pelicans in the early morning light and everything else that was going on around us.

Alison - seeing the full moon this morning with the pelicans flying across it.

Dave - watching the Booted Eagle in the Cheia Gorge, it felt like it was engaging with us as it circled overhead looking down at us.

Shenagh - being at the back of the boat watching the gulls and terns feeding on the worms churned up by the boat.

Istvan - it was all good, but particularly enjoyed being on the Delta.

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Ruddy Shelduck
Mallard
Gadwall
Pintail
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Garganey
Pochard
Red-crested Pochard
Ferruginous Duck
Tufted Duck
Pheasant
Black-necked Grebe
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
White Pelican
Dalmatian Pelican
Great Cormorant
Pygmy Cormorant
Great Bittern
Little Bittern
Night Heron
Squacco Heron
Little Egret
White Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Glossy Ibis
Spoonbill
Greater Flamingo
White-tailed Eagle
Osprey
Lesser Spotted Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
Booted Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Montague's Harrier
Long-legged Buzzard
Common Buzzard
Honey Buzzard

Sparrowhawk
Goshawk
Levant Sparrowhawk
Common Kestrel
Red-footed Falcon
Hobby
Peregrine
Saker Falcon
Little Crake
Moorhen
Coot
Common Crane
Avocet
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Sanderling
Turnstone
Dunlin
Curlew Sandpiper
Little Stint
Wood Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Spotted Redshank
Greenshank
Marsh Sandpiper
Black-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Common Snipe
Ruff
Black-headed Gull
Mediterranean Gull
Caspian Gull
Great Black-headed Gull (Pallas's)
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Little Gull
Little Tern
Sandwich Tern
Gull-billed Tern
Common Tern
Caspian Tern
Whiskered Tern
Feral Pigeon

Stock Dove	Red-breasted Flycatcher
Wood Pigeon	Pied Flycatcher
Collared Dove	Great Tit
Cuckoo	Coal Tit
Hoopoe	Blue Tit
Kingfisher	Crested Tit
Bee-eater	Marsh Tit
Roller	Willow Tit
Black Woodpecker	Sombre Tit
Green Woodpecker	Long-tailed Tit
Grey-headed Woodpecker	Bearded Tit
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Penduline Tit
Syrian Woodpecker	Nuthatch
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Treecreeper
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Great Grey Shrike
Wryneck	Lesser Grey Shrike
Skylark	Red-backed Shrike
Crested Lark	Magpie
Sand Martin	Jay
Barn Swallow	Nutcracker
House Martin	Jackdaw
Tree Pipit	Rook
White Wagtail	Hooded Crow
Yellow Wagtail	Raven
Grey Wagtail	Starling
Dunnock	Golden Oriole
Robin	House Sparrow
Common Redstart	Tree Sparrow
Black Redstart	Chaffinch
Northern Wheatear	Goldfinch
Isabelline Wheatear	Reed Bunting
Whinchat	
Mistle Thrush	
Fieldfare	
Blackbird	
Garden Warbler	
Blackcap	
Common Whitethroat	
Lesser Whitethroat	
Reed Warbler	
Great Reed Warbler	
Icterine Warbler	
Willow Warbler	
Chiffchaff	
Goldcrest	
Winter Wren	
Spotted Flycatcher	

MAMMALS

Chamois
European Brown Bear
Roe Deer
Souslik
Golden Jackal
Mink
European Otter

BUTTERFLIES

Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary
Clouded Yellow
Brimstone
Speckled Wood
Common Blue
Cardinal
Bath White
Camberwell Beauty
Painted Lady
Red Admiral
Small Heath
Wall Brown

OTHER CRITTERS

Yellow Bellied Toad
Great Green Bush-cricket
Slow Worm
Dice Snake
Golden Jackal
Praying Mantis
Cone-headed Grasshopper
Edible Frog
Southern Darter
Western Willow Emerald
Hummingbird Hawk Moth
Southern Hawker