

ECOTOURS – WORLDWIDE TRAVEL TOUR TO HUNGARY-ROMANIA

Kiskunság-Hortobágy-Transylvania-Danube Delta

22August – 4September 2018



Leaders: Gabor Orban & Andrea Katona



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GRAND TOUR of HUNGARY & ROMANIA Kiskunság-Hortobágy-Transylvania-Danube Delta PHOTO TRIP REPORT – 22August-4September 2018



Several strikingly different birding areas in Central and Eastern Europe made this journey a GRAND TOUR! The combination of such interesting areas as **Kiskunság and Hortobágy National Park in Hungary** and **Transylvania in Romania** is the most rewarding. Add to this a few days in the **Danube Delta** and on the **Black Sea Coast** and you have a truly great adventure!

David and Martha were looking for something really exciting and original combination of nature and culture, basically concentrating on birds, mammals and also photography, so we warmly invited them to participate in this tour! Actually we asked them how they would like to spend the time, what should be the main focus and we tailor made the tour according to their answers. During the trip we encountered several different habitats thus the bird list contained amazingly varied species including **Saker Falcon, Red-footed Falcon, White-tailed Eagle, Imperial Eagle, Common Crane, Ferruginous Duck, Pygmy Cormorant, Eurasian Roller, European Bee-eater, Nutcracker, most species of European woodpeckers plus White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Glossy Ibis** and many more. Most interesting mammals included Sousliks in Hungary, Brown Bears from professional hides in Transylvania and Golden Jackals really upclose from blinds as well. Beside wildlife we encountered many different ethnic cultures, medieval monasteries, Hungarian churches & castles, everyday village life, craftsmen and nomadic shepherds as well.

Fact File

- 4 days in Hungary
- 10 days in Romania
- starting in Budapest and finishing in Bucharest
- visiting Kiskunság NP and Hortobágy NP in Hungary
- crossing Transylvania, Carpathian Mts., Danube Delta, Black Sea coast and Dobrogea
- using 6 accommodations

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Highlights

- exploring Kiskunság and Hortobágy National Parks in Hungary, steppe habitats, oxbow lakes
- visit to the Turda Gorge in Transylvania
- 3 days in the Eastern Carpathians, including bearwatching as an optional extra
- stay 1 night close to the Dracula Castle at Bran
- 2 full days in the Danube Delta
- 1 day in Histria and Vadu, one of the best birding areas in Europe
- visit to the famous Babadag Forest
- birding in the Macin Hills and Cheia Gorge

Accommodation

2 nights at our Kondor EcoLodge, Kiskunság National Park, Hungary
 1 night close or at Hortobágy National Park, Hungary
 2 nights in Torockó, Transylvania, close to Turda Gorge
 3 nights in the Eastern Carpathians
 1 night at Zarnesti/Magura area close to Bran Castle
 3 nights at the Danube Delta area
 1 night at Mamaia or similar at the Black Sea coast area

Tour Started: 11am morning Wed, 22ndAug, 2018 at Budapest Airport
 Tour Ended: 10am morning Tue, 4thSept, 2018 at Otopeni, Bucharest



Our price included:

- all travel as noted in the itinerary;
- all accommodation based on shared rooms (most rooms are twin bedded), at most locations there are single rooms as well for extra charge
(Please ask for a single room at the time of booking!);
- 3 meals per day, generally breakfast at the accommodation, packed lunch, dinner (consists of at least two courses);
- services of the leader(s) and trip materials

Not included:

- flights to Budapest and from Bucharest;
- optional programmes to places of interest and entrance fees involved, such as visit of Bear Hide or entrance fees of cultural sights;
- airport and other departure taxes, tips;
- drinks; food beyond generally 3 meals/day as in the itineraries;
- excess baggage charges;
- telephone calls and any other personal expenses
- compulsory personal insurance

If you have questions about inclusion of any cost item, please ask us.

Activity level

Generally easy to moderate walks;
 Some longer drives expected

Optional programmes: bearwatching in the Carpathians and visit of Bran Castle

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Daily description with photos made during the tour

Days 1 & 2 - 22Aug & 23Aug

We waited for Martha and David at the Budapest Airport in the morning. It was quite easy to recognize each other since we met before in Philadelphia at the American Birding Expo, but just to be sure Andi had an Ecotours Kondor sign with her.

Our Kondor EcoLodge is less than 60 miles from the airport in the heart of the Kiskunsag National Park if we go on the quick way. But instead we would cross some of the attractive parts of the protected area on small rural roads, so within less than an hour we could start to see great species.

But before serious birding we stopped as well at a lovely, typical Hungarian village with a mediaeval church which is usually closed, but we were lucky this time to be able to visit inside as well. We could see some of the original frescoes, the Hungarian and the Transylvanian Hungarian flag, so Gabor and Andi explained why Transylvania is considered as the heart of Hungary despite the fact that during the last 100 years it belongs to Romania.



One of the typical habitats of Kiskunsag is the flat, perfect plain of the "puszta" which has several different types ranging from dry grassland to marshy meadows. Kiskunsag grassland is the typical habitat for population of **Great Bustard**. This is also a home to **Stone Curlew, Tawny Pipit, Lesser Grey Shrike, Wheatear**, and a set table for foraging **Imperial Eagle, Red-footed** and **Saker Falcon**. If we want to see **Collared Pratincoles** we should go where puszta meets arable land.

If we should choose the flag species of this area we would go for **Eurasian Roller** and **Great Bustard**. The best Hungarian populations for both are at Kiskunsag. To see the Great Bustard we have to drive to vast plains of north Kiskunsag while Roller core breeding area can be found right where our hotel is.





The lodge grounds itself can yield some of the birds that could become easily the highlight of our day in the field. **Bee-eaters** abound in the National park and lot of them breed nearby as well as **Rollers** and **Red-footed Falcons**. Other birds that can postpone our morning departures from the lodge are **Golden Oriole** and **Hoopoe**. **Common** and **Black Redstart** both breeding in the garden, **Spotted Flycatcher** as well. Mammals are also noteworthy – **Eastern Hedgehog**, **Red Squirrel**, **European Souslik** are common and there are some other species which are usually more difficult to be located.



Red-footed Falcons are also numerous and they add to the color range of local birds. Indeed, the most colorful species seem to abound here. During our stay we will check the most important natural alkaline lakes which generally have very high salt concentration. They are rather flat and rich in nutrients and thus very suitable for birds to stop by. Different species can be found at gravel pits and alongside the canals connecting Tisza and Danube rivers with drier areas. **Marsh** and **Montagu´s Harriers** hover over the fields and sometimes a **Short-toed Eagle** turns up.





A panic in the flocks of **Ferruginous Duck, Shoveler, Garganey** and **Red-crested Pochard** announces a presence of **White-tailed Eagle** or **Saker Falcon**. **Whiskered Terns** should be common while **Black** and **White-winged Black Terns** have a presence just during favorable wet years only. Alongside **Black-headed** and **Yellow-legged Gulls** there are a few colonies of **Mediterranean Gulls** as well.

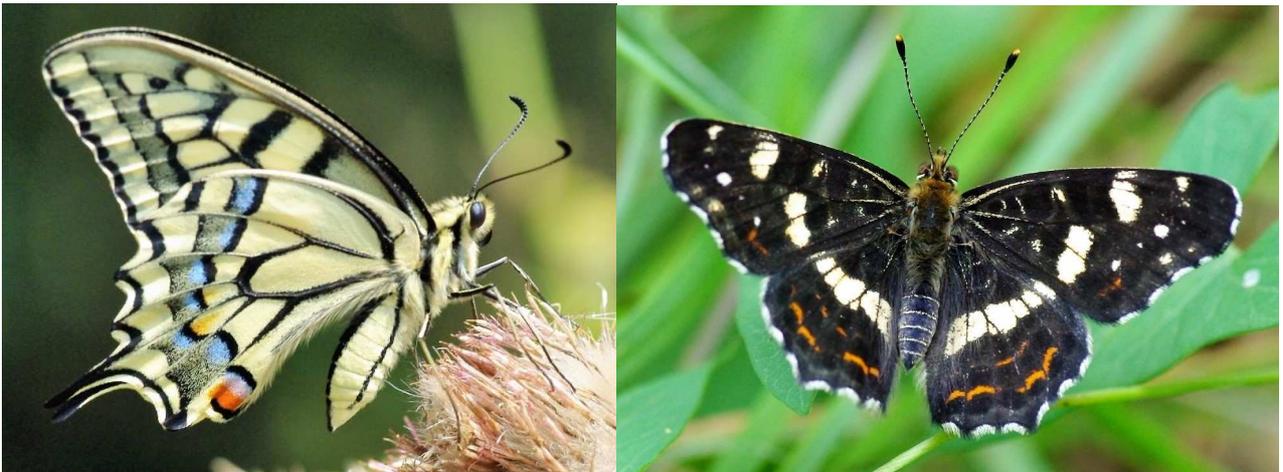


We visited one of the seasonal farms on the puszta and observed thousand years old traditional livestock such as Great Grey Hungarian Cattle and birds like **Tawny Pipit, Crested Lark, Little Owl** or **Lesser Grey Shrike**.



The garden and surrounding of the Kondor Ecolodge is excellent for macro photography, especially dragonflies, butterflies, spiders and several interesting insect species.

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Day3 24Aug2018

After our last morning at the Kiskunság we start to travel to East. Within an hour we stop at a great floodplain forest which offers excellent birding. First we check out the old trees and look for different **Woodpeckers** which can include **Lesser, Middle and Great-spotted**, but also **Black** or even **Gray-headed**. **Hawfinch** is quite common and we have a good chance for several other forest species, including tits, treecreepers and flycatchers as well.



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Later we visited a large open oxbow lake of River Tisza which offers a good observation of many **herons, egrets** and **waterfowl**. Floodplains and these type of lakes are really perfect birding spots. Depending on the water level birds include **Ferruginous Duck, Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Pygmy Cormorant, Black-necked Grebe, Squacco** and **Purple Heron** or **Spoonbill**. Reedbeds are teeming with **Penduline Tit, Bearded Reedling, Great Reed, Savi's** and very rarely you can find **Moustached Warbler** as well. It is usually more common to hear than to see **Bittern, Corncrake, Spotted Crake** and **Little Crake**, but we might be able to catch a glimpse of some of these.



During the afternoon we travel further East towards the famous Hortobágy National Park. At Hortobágy we try to catch up with any of those species which we perhaps missed at Kiskunság.

On the way we cross other large open areas, so it worth to scan the sky, because we might spot some good raptor species such as **Saker Falcon, Imperial Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard** or very rarely a migrating **Pallid Harrier**.



Day4 25Aug2018

This morning we spend again at other areas of Hortobagy, checking some steppe like grasslands locally called Puszta, traditional extensive farms and perhaps some fishponds and then we travel towards the Romanian border. This will be a long travel through some hills, later start to descend into the Transylvanian Basin after crossing the Bucin Pass. Our final destination will be close to a secluded village which is actually a World Heritage site, partly because of the several beautiful mediaeval traditional houses, the local folklore and also the attractive limestone hills around.



We should have time to look for some locally common species such as **Wood Lark**, **Yellowhammer**, **Red-backed Shrike** and perhaps **Rock Bunting**.



We also visited the spectacular Turda Gorge which is not just a famous gorge in Transylvania, but actually one of the largest ones in whole Romania. Here we looked for **Golden Eagle** which earlier during the year usually breeds successfully on one of the cliffs. This place is also a breeding area for **Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush** but it starts to migrate South early, so we could not find it. On the other hand **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** and **Peregrine Falcon** is quite common. We also looked for **Alpine Swifts** and **Eurasian Crag Martins** in the air, plus **Red-rumped Swallows**. Checking the cliffs gave another chance for **Rock Bunting** as well.





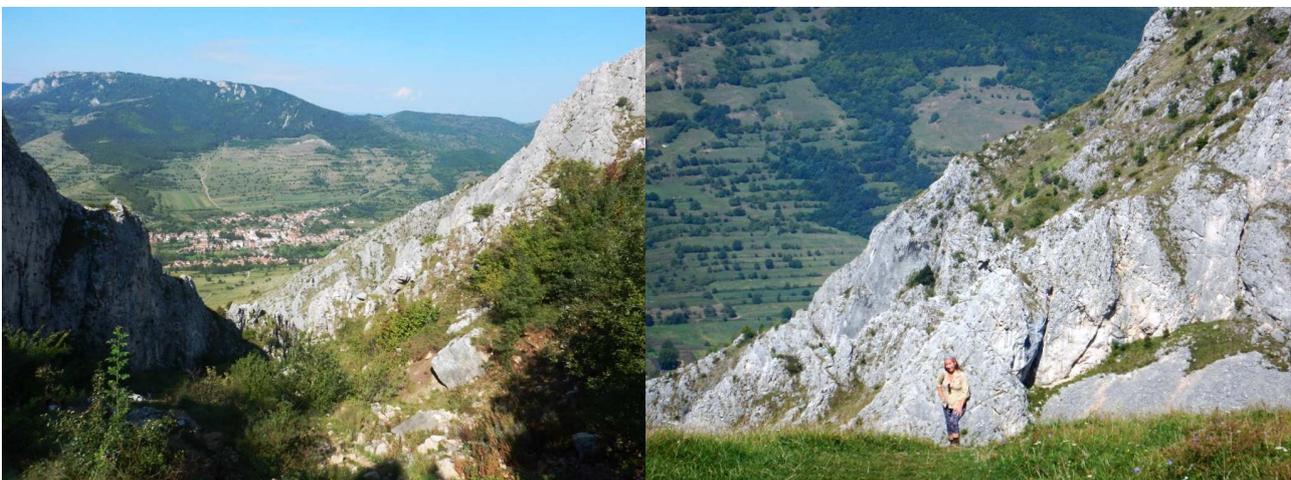
We had beautiful limestone hills around us, perfect location for outside wedding parties as well.



Day5 26Aug2018



We had our hotel near the World Heritage village of Torockó / Rimetea from where we hiked up on the slopes of the Székelykő or Secler Rock.



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Day6 27Aug2018

After a morning birding close to our hotel we left this limestone area and traveled East towards the towering Eastern Carpathian mountains. Basically we crossed most of the Transylvanian Basin. During the several hours long journey we stopped both for birding alongside the road and for taking some photos of landscape or cultural highlights such as amazingly decorated wooden carved gates made by the local Hungarian speaking Szekely or Secler people or mediaeval fortresses or churches. Some of the city parks are surprisingly good for birding as well so it was easy to find **European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, European Blackbird or European Robin. Eurasian Collared Dove** and some of the **Woodpecker** species inhabit these areas as well.



Meggyes or Medias - Trumpeter's Tower - Saint Margret Evangelical Church

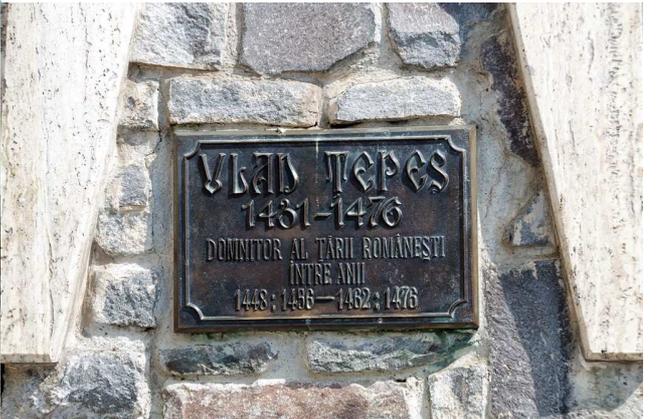


Segesvár - Sighisoara - Clock Tower

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Segesvár - Sighisoara



Segesvár - Sighisoara - Vlad Dracul and Vlad Tepes



Segesvár - Sighisoara - Vlad Dracul House - Birthplace of Vlad Tepes



Sighisoara - Church of the Dominican Monastery; Sighisoara - Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral

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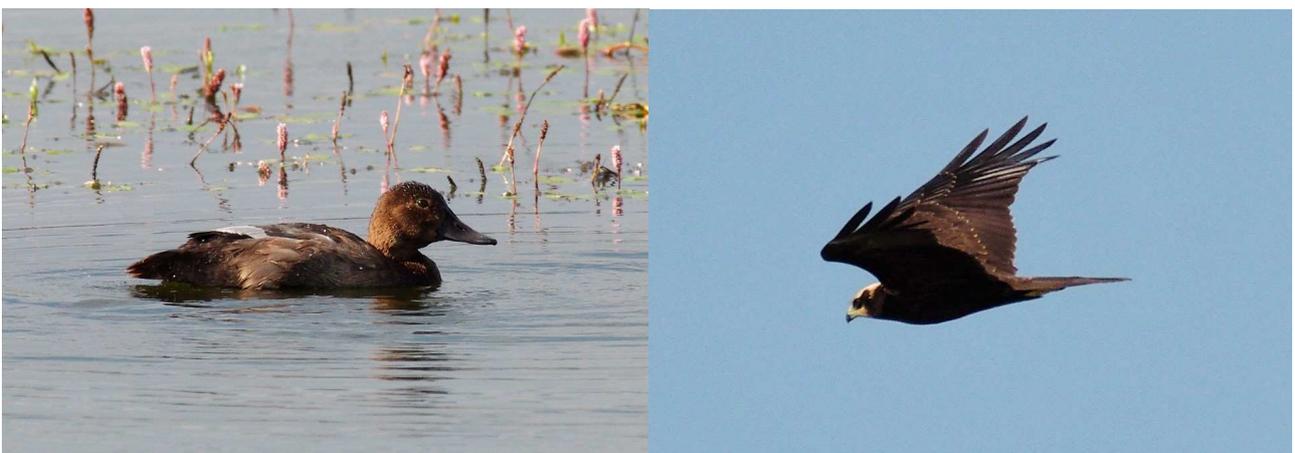
After the cultural stops we also visited the Homoródszentpál Fishponds for some birding.



We found a few butterfly species and several ducks, grebes and a few raptor around.



Great Crested Grebe and its young



Ferruginous Duck and Marsh Harrier

Finally we reached the Hargita region and our small guesthouse/pansion which was our base for the next 3 nights.

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Day7 28Aug2018

After the previous day's long journey today we spent most of the time relatively close to our accommodation, mainly trying to reach good forests of the Hargitha Mountain.

At lower elevation with some search we found some typical species which included here **Coal** and **Crested Tit**, **Firecrest**, **Siskin**, some **Red Crossbill**, **Wood Warbler** and on the adjacent meadows also **Woodlark** and **Black Redstart**. We also looked for **Gray-headed** and **White-backed Woodpecker** in a deciduous forest.



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At higher elevation at spruce and pine forests we called **Eurasian Pygmy Owl** which usually alerts the nearby songbirds as well such as **Coal and Willow Tits** or **Common Treecreeper**. Typical, but not easy woodpecker of the old conifer forests is **Three-toed Woodpecker**. It is very hard even during early Spring when there is much higher chance to find Hazel Grouse or Capercaillie, but with extreme luck we might get a view of at least one of them.

At more open areas closer to the peak we hope to enjoy the sight of species which generally inhabit subalpine slopes. Walking around a bit should produce **Water Pipit**, **Ring Ouzel**, plus **Mistle Thrush** and **Fieldfare** common as well. We listened for **Nutcracker** as well.





White Stork



Brown Hawker



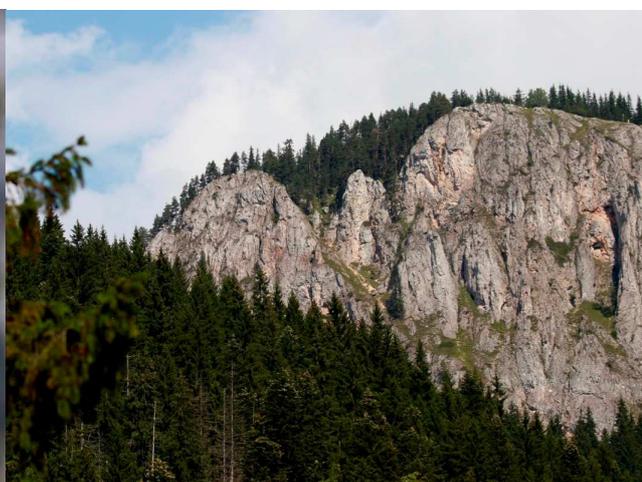
Days8 29Aug2018

This day we made an excursion first through the Northern Hargita driving to higher elevation, crossing a mountain town of Gheorgheni and passing a strange mountain lake with broken stumps sticking out of it. According to the story the lake was created by a landslide, but killed

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a sepherd with all his herd as well. Rarely we can spot **Chamois** on the walls here above the lake.

Later on we started to descend into an incredible valley which is called **Békás/Bicaz Gorge**. It is even bigger and deeper than Torda Gorge what we visited before. The huge limestone cliffs are really towering above the surrounding area. There are a couple of incredible twist and turns and hairpins as we go, so not much possibilities to stop but we found a place where we can admire not just the scenery, but try to find a giant butterfly-like **Wallcreeper**. It is usually easy to add **Gray Wagtail** and **White-throated Dipper** to the list here as well alongside the small river.



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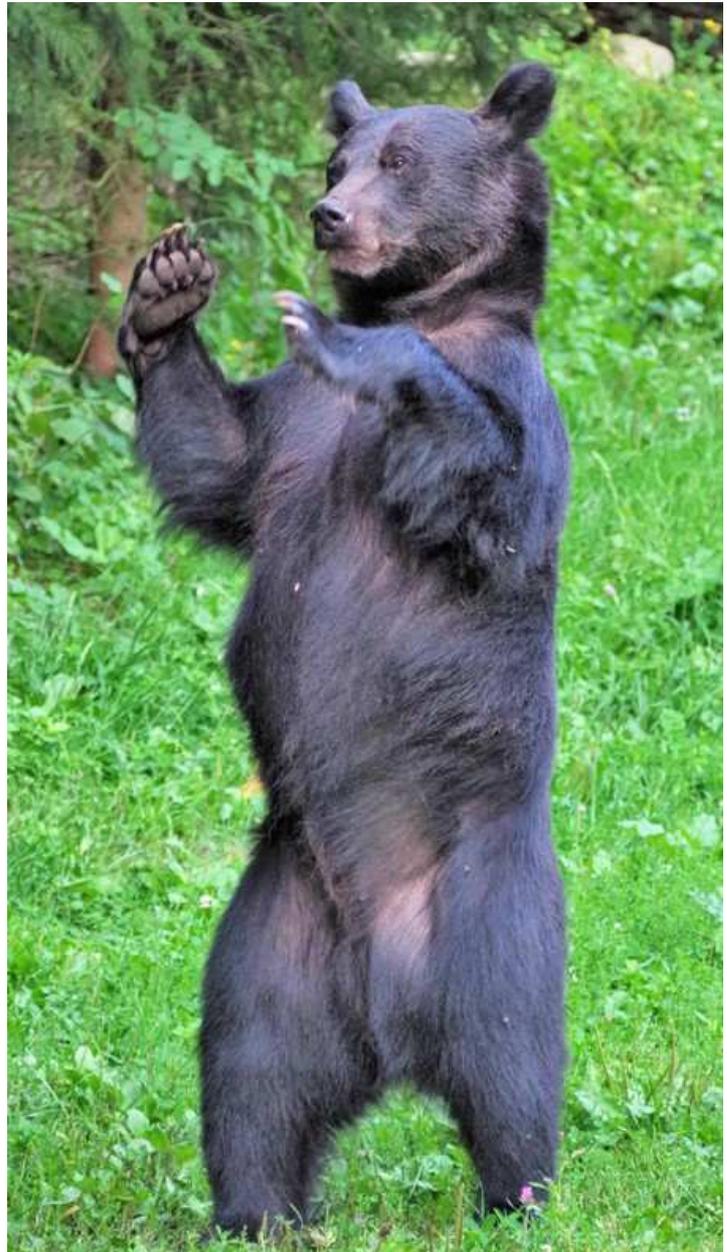


On our travel back we stopped at other foresty areas as well to look for woodpeckers and other woodland species.



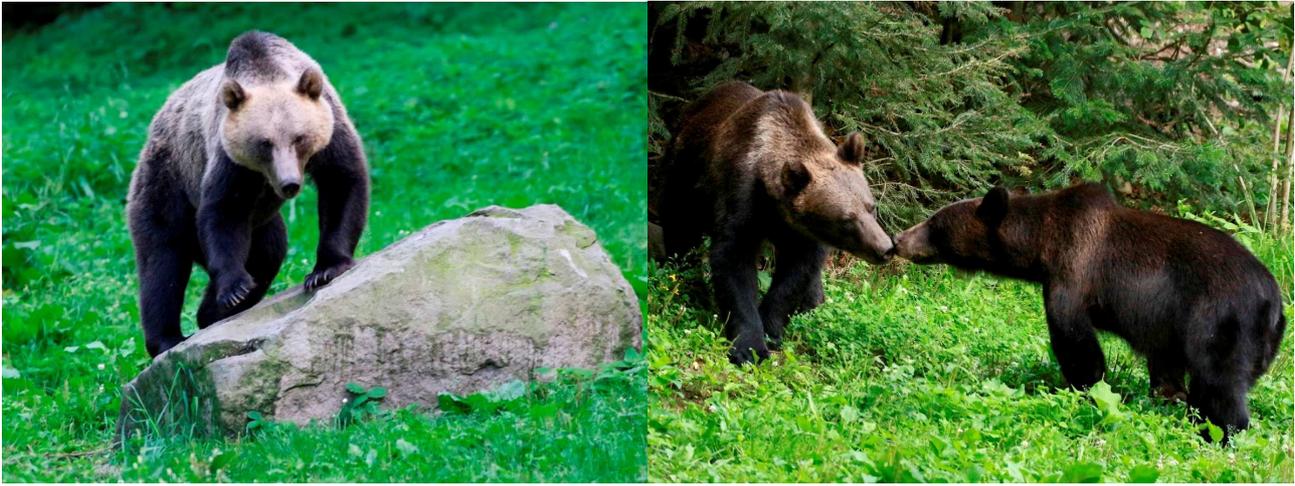


One of the evenings we offered an optional extra evening outing to spend some time in a professional bear watching hide. We knew that there a very good chance to see **Brown Bear** upclose from a safe and comfortable place, but what we experienced was really something unique even during our decades of experience: we had all different ages and sexes of Brown Bears with various colors, including several cubs as well. Before dusk we had a total of 11 bears during few hours.





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Day9 30Aug2018

Today we travelled alongside the Eastern Carpathian Mountains from North to South, crossing partly the second largest city, Brasov which is referred as the entrance or exit gate of Transylvania. We broke the journey a few times to look for **Lesser-Spotted Eagle** and other **raptors**. Shortly after we arrived to the Easternmost edge of the Southern Carpathian mountains where we visited the famous **Bran Dracula Castle**. We stayed nearby at the foot of the mountain.





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Days10-12 31Aug - 1Sept – 2Sept 2018

Today we had a long journey first down from the hills and then to East through a huge lowland area towards Tulcea, capital of the **Danube Delta**.

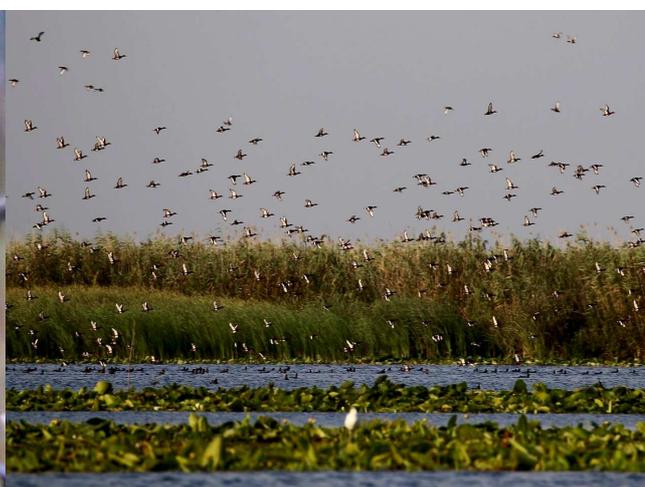
The Danube Delta is a huge area, several thousand square kilometers, protected as a **Biosphere Reserve** which we will be able to discover just partly however we will have 3 nights and more than 2 full days in this area.



During the days we saw large numbers of **Dalmatian & White Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants**, different herons and egrets. **White-tailed Eagles** were in good numbers, but we had no luck with finding a **Steppe Eagle** as well. Ducks included **Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested and Common Pochards, Gadwall and Garganey**. The most common grebe was **Great Crested**, but there were other species as well such as **Little-, Eared or Black-necked** but no **Red-necked Grebes**. Numerous **Greylag Geese** were around as well.

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The reedbeds were home of thousands of songbirds, including **Great Reed** and **Reed Warblers**, **Savi's Warbler**, **Penduline Tit** and **Bearded Reedling**. There were many more species to look for, it would be too long to list all!



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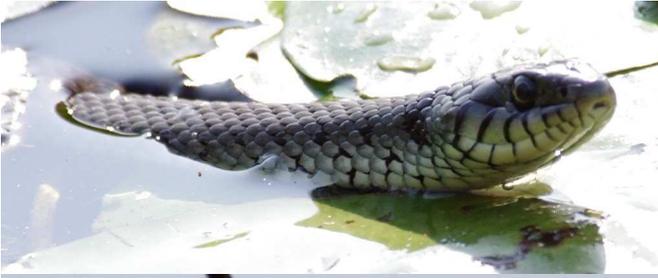
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Immature Black-crowned Night-Heron

Little Crake with huge feet



Hard to be a mouse in the crossroad of owl eyes!



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Day13 - 3Sept 2018

We spent the last full day with discovering various habitats both alongside the **Black Sea coast** and further inland which is a surprisingly dry area.

The small **Macin Hills** is a place to look for **Pallid Harrier**, **Long-legged Buzzard** and **Isabelline Wheatear**. We have not visited the **Cheia Gorge** to search for **Pied Wheatear** and some more raptors.

On the coast we visited Histria and Vadu for another chance to see **White and Dalmatian Pelicans**, **Pygmy Cormorant** and perhaps even **Ruddy Shelduck** and **Paddyfield Warbler** in the reeds.

We stopped birding and raptor spotting whilst travelling to **Babadag Forest**, home to **Booted Eagle & Levant Sparrowhawk**. **Sombre Tit** also a local speciality however we did not see it.



Avocet

Black-winged Stilt



Little Ringed Plover

Ruff

Wood Sandpiper

Day14 4Sept 2018

After breakfast we said goodbye to the Black Sea coast and headed for Otopeni Airport North of Bucharest where Martha and David waited for their flight back home and Andi and Gabor started a 2 days long journey home through the hills.