

Birding Abroad – Romania – Danube Delta and Dobruja

26 August to 2 September 2025

Romania's Dobruja region boasts some of Europe's finest birdwatching. It is here that the River Danube, after flowing east for over 1775 miles finally reaches the Black Sea, splintering into a myriad of channels to form the world-famous delta. As well as being a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, the delta is Europe's premier wetland, unsurpassed in size, biodiversity and avifauna. The wider Dobruja region extends south across the eastern flank of the country and has steppe, woodland and craggy hills as well as miles of coastal lagoons, contributing to the wide bird diversity. Our tour was timed to coincide with the start of the autumn migration when a variety of waders, raptors and passerines from further north pass through the area, joining the vast assemblages of breeding birds already present.

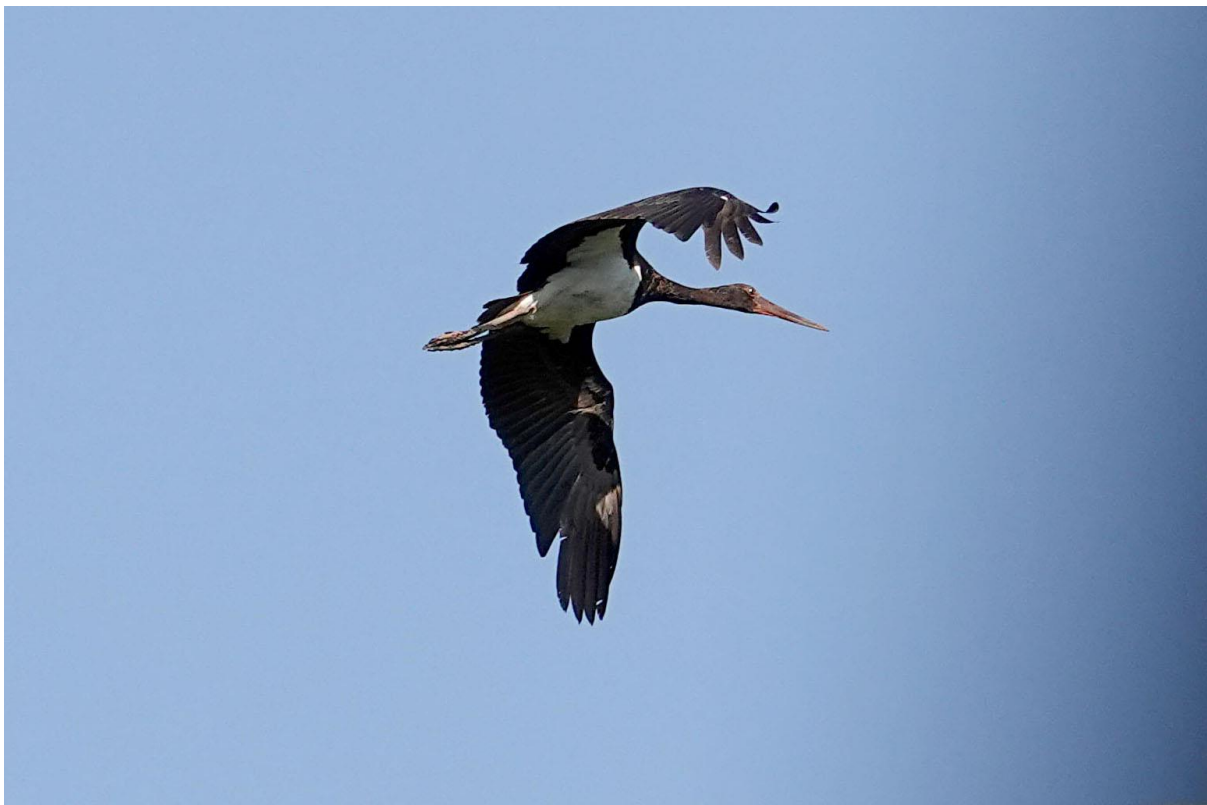
Our group comprised Lynn and Trevor Andrew, Paul Bibby, Anne Clarke, John Dibbs, Liz & Keith Reynolds and Theresa & Tony Walker. Lance and Nick were the Birding Abroad leaders, and we were accompanied by an experienced local guide. The following report provides a summary of the main highlights of our tour.



Tuesday 26 August: Group members arrived at Bucharest airport late afternoon after flights from London and Leeds. Once united with our guide Zoltan, we loaded the tour bus and set off eastwards. The evening was lovely and warm and with a glowing red sunset behind us, we were soon making good progress on the motorway. Darkness fell around 8.00pm and we arrived at our first night's accommodation near Cernavoda a couple of

hours later. The location was convenient for a one-night stop over – the late afternoon flight arrivals meaning it would have been very late to continue on to the Black Sea coast on our first evening. We duly retired for the night to be fresh and ready for the next day.

Wednesday 27 August: Our hotel had been carefully selected because it over-looked a large lake. Breakfast at 8.00am was followed (even preceded for a keen few), by a short birding session from the terrace. Here we were treated to an excellent sample of species that we were to see in some abundance throughout the tour. The lakeshore had a nice mix of herons, which included Grey and Purple Heron, Great White Egret, Squacco Heron and one Little Bittern. Three Eurasian Golden Orioles fluttered in the treetops and two Black Storks soared overhead in the perfectly blue sky.



An onward journey of one hour took us to the Black Sea coast, where we arrived at 10.25am. Along the way we noted several European Rollers and Red-backed Shrikes at the roadside; species which are thankfully still numerous in the region, whilst a flock of at least 500 White Storks circled overhead.

The salt-lake at Lake Techirghiol, south of Constanta, was already full of local tourist bathers taking the waters and health enhancing properties of the mud in the shallows. From the promenade we scanned for birds and enjoyed nice views of up to 110 Little Gulls, 70 Mediterranean Gulls and an adult Caspian Gull, the latter being another species which was to be frequently met with during the week. An old jetty had small areas of bather-free mud around its base where several Black-winged Stilts and Wood Sandpipers fed, accompanied there by single Temminck's Stint and a Little Ringed Plover.

Our next stop was a little way to the north at the brackish lagoon of Navodari, where the margins and muddy islands were ideal for waders including no less than 30 Wood Sandpipers, 20 Common Snipe, 20 Ruff, eight each of Common Greenshank and Grey Plover, three each of Temminck's and Little Stints (affording excellent and instructive comparisons), and a solitary Common Redshank. As ever at migration time, birds come and go, and three Black Terns and an Osprey dropped by during our session there. Three Crested Lark flew around, their calls carrying on the breeze - always a nice species to see and hear to herald the start of a tour in continental Europe.

Lunch was taken at a beachfront restaurant along the coast, which provided a pleasant fish meal and welcome rest in the shade from the rather hot early afternoon sun. Outside thin lines of windbreak hedges were ideal for passerine migrants and patiently checking the area yielded four Red-breasted Flycatchers as well as Willow Warbler, Whinchat and Lesser Whitethroat. A couple of Red-rumped Swallows circled over, a species which used to be very uncommon in Romania but is steadily increasing in numbers.



A first-winter Red-breasted Flycatcher prior to its migration to the Indian subcontinent

Our final session of the day was at Vadu, the approach road proving good for Lesser Grey Shrikes with a minimum of eight being seen on wires and hedge tops. Driving towards the vast Lake Sinoe, the lake edges had retreated due to summer evaporation and a thick belt of dry phragmites prevented us getting close to the shore. Seeking slightly higher vantage we scanned over the distant lake, awestruck at the sheer volume of birds which included single figure counts of Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans. Bordering pastures held two

hunting Montagu's Harriers and six feeding Eurasian Curlew as well as 15 Gull-billed Terns which hawked for insects to feed their free-flying young which were still begging for food. A brief walk into a small woodland produced Middle Spotted and Syrian Woodpeckers as well as six roosting Red-footed Falcons, including adults and juveniles. A couple of Eurasian Hobby were in the same area, and an adult White-tailed Sea-eagle glided over. Two Common Hoopoe were the first of the trip, with more colourful exotics represented by day counts of 18 European Roller and 20 European Bee-eaters. A European Hare was our only sighting of the 'Lepus' genus during the tour.



European Roller – declining in the north and west of Europe, but thankfully still doing well in Dobruja

More Eurasian Golden Orioles sat in the treetops as we set off towards our hotel on the outskirts of Vadu. Here set away from the local village amongst farmland, birds flying to their roosts included yet more Red-footed Falcons and many 'flava' wagtails. We enjoyed a lovely home cooked meal and a welcome beer, the night accompanied by the howling of a Golden Jackal in neighbouring fields.

Thursday 28 August: Breakfast was at 7.30am and we were away an hour later to Histria, our first port of call, a few miles north up the coast. We stopped several times en-route to scan roadside lakes and fields, including for a spectacular flock of 400 Ruddy Shelduck. The shimmering pink of 400 Greater Flamingos was an instant draw at lake Nuntasi, where further scanning produced four Dalmatian Pelicans, hundreds of Northern Shoveler and Mallard and several thousand Collared Sand Martins skimming over the water, an eye-catching sight indeed. Whilst watching four Montagu's Harriers quartering the marshes, high pitched calls revealed a party of 25 Collared Pratincoles

which swooped passed and amongst them we managed to pick out a Black-winged Pratincole, its features showing perfectly in excellent light and at close quarters. This species is a scarce visitor to coastal Dobruja during migration periods.

Nearby we walked around a system of fishpond where we enjoyed nice views of species typical of this habitat; 15 Black-crowned Night-herons, eight Pygmy Cormorants, two fly-by Whiskered Terns and an overhead Osprey. Surrounding hedges proved attractive to passerines with two European Turtle-doves being a welcome sight, in addition to the 15 or so Red-backed Shrikes counted and 10 Corn Buntings. Two Green Sandpipers found shallows in which to feed, whilst a drier area proved suitable for two Eurasian Thick-knees and several Common Hoopoes. A small group of Red-footed Falcons were perched in the taller trees around the pond complex, and a Common Cuckoo, our only sighting of the tour, flew between bushes as we left.

We moved on to the archaeological site at Histria, where the surrounding trees held a couple of Icterine Warblers, always a welcome sight and six Lesser Whitethroats. A Short-toed Snake-eagle and a Booted Eagle soared overhead and both Eurasian Hobby and more Red-footed Falcons dashed around the treetops, including the juvenile below which sat nicely in the open.



By now it was quite hot (28 C.) and so lunch, and a pleasant shady break were taken in a nearby village restaurant. Resuming at 2.40pm, we walked around the Sitorman quarry. Here we checked any boulders for wheatears, and with care gradually picked out several Northern, two Pied and a single Isabelline. The dry steppe habitat was ideal for Tawny Pipit too with five being found in the grassier spots. A European Ground-Squirrel (Souslik) was spotted near its burrow, a mammal now listed as endangered by the IUCN in its Red List of Threatened Species. The familiar sound of a singing Common Quail drifted over from agricultural fields adjacent to the quarry, rather late in the season for song we thought. Soaring overhead a Long-legged Buzzard got us looking skywards, which proved a useful tactic for some of the group when minutes later a Saker Falcon whipped through the air and away. Would we see another for those that missed it? Over the road we checked out another area of slightly damper and greener grass, where large flocks of Common Starlings were feeding (but not the hoped for Rosy Starling) and found several more Common Hoopoes and at least 12 Northern Wheatears.

Each stop today had produced Red-backed Shrikes, the species almost becoming a background bird and the day count reached an admirable 123, a figure that no one could only dream about in Western Europe these days.



A female Red-backed Shrike rests as it prepares to migrate to southern Africa

Temperatures had been in the high 20s all afternoon, so it was thirsty work and at 6.00pm we returned to our hotel where once again at sunset, Red-footed Falcons and flava wagtails were dropping in to their roost. After a wonderful day in the field, a welcome drink or two awaited together with a fine evening meal.

Friday 29 August: After breakfast at 7.30am we bade farewell to our hosts, some of the group buying tasty homemade fruit preserves as a souvenir. Our first session today was on the outskirts of Vadu in an area of reedbeds. Our quest was to find Paddyfield Warbler, but try as we might, the birds could not be tempted to show. Several Common Reed-warblers did appear and compensation was on hand with really great views of three Moustached Warblers. Also here were a few Bearded Reedlings which 'pinged' and popped out for us all to see. The sharp calls of secretive Savi's Warblers were heard but again the birds stayed hidden amongst the dense reeds. Flying over were two small groups of Eurasian Spoonbills, 60 Purple Herons and two Great White Egrets. A Booted Eagle circled as we left at 10.40am to begin our journey north to Tulcea, gateway town to the Danube Delta. En-route our guide paused the minibus to check-out a large falcon perched on a pylon, which proved to be a fine adult Saker Falcon, which gave great views this time for all the group.



Once in Tulcea we headed to the quay to board our boat, a powerful launch which would take us along the sparkling river Danube before branching off onto one of the many side channels taking us deep into the delta marshlands. Our boat was narrow enough to pass through the ever-tapering waterways, the only way to reach our hotel which blended

nicely into the surrounding environment. Along the way we noted groups of Great White Pelicans and four Black Storks passed overhead. European Bee-eaters seemed to be everywhere. The hotel garden was really an extension of the surrounding habitat, with rotting older timber interspersed with willows and other trees. Here we noted a pair of Grey-headed Woodpeckers.

The afternoon was spent on a pleasant boat trip. Returning to the water a variety of heron species were on show, with Great and Pygmy Cormorants lining the treetops and several Eurasian Hobby hawkling the canals. Somewhat of a surprise was the excellent mix of woodpeckers amongst the 'crack willows' dotted along the banks. First a pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and then two Black Woodpeckers showed nicely, the smallest and the largest of European woodpeckers within a short distance. We passed along some wider channels and even across some open lakes, where Caspian Terns were feeding and group of Caspian Gulls were 'loafing'. Several Glossy Ibis flew over as did two large flocks of Purple Herons in 'V formation', the day total for this species ending on a fantastic 185.

As evening drew closer, we headed back towards the hotel. Drawing alongside an area of reed fringed riverbank, we watched a Little Crake feeding in the open alongside three Western Water Rails, another memorable sight. In the last snatches of daylight, Paul spotted a superb Golden Jackal on the bankside (shown in the photo below), bringing the day to a fine conclusion. As if to celebrate a memorable day in the delta, soup and a traditional carp main meal was enjoyed by all before we retired to bed.



Saturday 30 August: Breakfast was again at 7.30am. Sitting on the veranda enabled us to study close birds in the vicinity. Two juvenile Little Bitterns favoured the margins of a large pond, with woodpeckers coming into a tall bare tree including Black, Grey-headed and Greater Spotted. A couple of Thrush Nightingales called from the shadows whilst Garden Warbler and Blackcaps fed in the berry bushes. Early morning risers watched four Eurasian Penduline-tits just down the lane. A loose group of five Levant Sparrowhawks flew over, star birds, but unfortunately disappearing before all could see them.



Decaying timber in the delta's riparian woods were ideal for woodpeckers, here a young Grey-headed

We set off in the boat once more to explore the many miles of channels in the northern sector of the delta. Gliding smoothly and quietly along, we could slow down or stop whenever there were birds of interest at the bank side. A flickering movement in the trees soon proved to be a male Collard Flycatcher and the strong 'whoet' call was another elusive Thrush Nightingale. Yet another juvenile Little Bittern sat amongst the reeds just metres from our boat as we emerged into a much larger open area of shallow water. Here Whiskered Terns were abundant, and ten Squacco Herons were treading the surface lily pads and extensive mats of water chestnut. Staying close to the reed edges were groups of Ferruginous Ducks, approximately 200 in all, with ten Garganey and 18 Northern Pintail flying over.

Today's stars of the show were undoubtedly the Great White Pelicans. Our day count estimated 3000 being seen, some fishing and some circling around us as we plied the channels. One larger lake area produced a huge cooperative feeding flock, several hundred strong. We watched in awe as the birds slapped wings ushering fish towards

each other, new birds joining as others moved on, each contributing to a dazzling display. A few we noted still had the bright orange facial skin remaining from the breeding period.



Dalmatian Pelicans were present in several locations too this morning, though far fewer in number than their cousins, a total of 18 being counted for the day. Reed fringes held another co-operative Little Crake and yet more Little Bitterns, whilst a couple of hundred Whiskered Terns were skimming the surface, with adults in varying degrees of summer plumage and plenty of juveniles for us to study too. Grebes were also in evidence with many Great Crested and Little and also a few Black-necked. At the bankside we spotted European Pond Terrapin, Dice Snake and Eastern Grass Snake, nice additions to our reptile list, with over 30 Edible Frogs being notable amphibians. Eventually after absorbing the wonderful, serene ambience of this part of the delta we returned to our hotel, weaving through a myriad of channels, some cloaked in willows offering welcome shade, others with more open banks where many European Bee-eaters and European Rollers sat out. We all appreciated why this is such a special place.

After a light lunch, with Lesser Spotted and Syrian Woodpecker from the veranda, it was time for a longer journey through the delta towards the Black Sea passing the historic port of Sulina, whose skyline hosted a cathedral and numerous styles of architecture reflecting the town's European, Russian and Ottoman rule through the years. The ruins of an old Ottoman lighthouse survive to this day, though it is some way back from the

present seashore as the delta has expanded over the centuries. However modern navigational aids still allowing shipping to move to and fro between the Black Sea and the port of Tulcea some 70 km inland.



The vast freshwater lakes of the delta are a great place to study marsh terns and during our outward and return journey today we had several opportunities to pause and scan and managed to pick out five White-winged Terns and several Black Terns amongst the hundreds Whiskered Terns.

Heading further out into brackish and ultimately saltwater bays, Zoltan told us that the nearby shoreline away to the north was actually in Ukraine. Sand bar islands at the mouth of the delta provide isolated breeding areas for many species and sitting here in the surrounding shallow waters we found Pallas's Gulls, 'king of gulls', both adults and juveniles. These monster birds were accompanied by tens of Caspian Gulls and a single Little Gull, with 200 Sandwich Terns, 100 Common Terns and three nice juvenile Black Terns. Waders using the sand spits were 25 Black-tailed Godwits and six Eurasian Oystercatchers. Just being here in such a remote and beautiful spot where few birders get to come was quite a unique and wonderful experience. It was soon time to set off back, pausing to re-fuel our boat in Sulina. As the afternoon turned into early evening the sky was again a lovely orange and we passed several smaller villages, returning friendly waves from the locals, these small rural populations surviving mainly by fishing.

We returned at 7.50pm, and whilst it had been a long afternoon, everyone agreed that it had been a very special experience, one to savour with lasting memories of a fabulous place.



Sunday 31 August: We had a pre-breakfast stroll around the hotel, the weather starting a little misty before it soon brightened up. Three Red-breasted Flycatchers were detected as they sallied beneath tall willows. The regular woodpeckers (Black, Syrian, Greater Spotted, Grey-headed and Lesser Spotted) all put in appearances and several young Eurasian Hobby called almost continuously, begging for food from the nearby adults.

After breakfast we said our goodbyes and thanked our hosts before loading the boat. A Eurasian Penduline-tit made a timely appearance before we set off back to Tulcea, slowly to begin with so we could enjoy a final couple of hours of the delta's magic. Another Golden Jackal gave great views as it stalked the bankside and a large Grass Snake scurried away to bask undisturbed. The journey provided a chance to consolidate on the delta birds, with yet more Black Storks, Ferruginous Ducks and White-tailed Sea-eagles seen. One lake held at least 90 Squacco Herons, no doubt enjoying some of the hundreds of Edible Frogs present.

As we reached the main navigable shipping arm of the Danube, we accelerated to 45 km/hour speeding along the busy lanes and were soon back in Tulcea where we thanked our skilled boatman who had steered us so successfully over the last three days. Our stay

in the delta had been very exciting, magical even, a truly wonderful and unmissable experience. The lovely meal at lunch was finished with a tasty papanasi (a traditional doughnut with fruit confit and cream) just to keep up our calory count!

Reunited with our minibus and on terra firma, we set out westwards into the Macin Hills, where just over one hour later we checked into our next hotel set in the agricultural fields and vineyards of the region. The view was rather splendid with some rocky crags nearby soon yielding what was to become a regular Long-legged Buzzard. A flock of 500 White Storks soared over nearby hills, probably looking for a roosting site after a long day on the wing. Once refreshed we set off for a late afternoon walk amongst remnant steppe grassland where Tony and Theresa found our only Woodchat Shrike of the trip, a juvenile, showing its key distinguishing features from several Red-backed Shrikes close by.



A juvenile Woodchat Shrike showing the light-centred scapulars and more variegated wing pattern

The short grass was ideal for Tawny Pipits and a small group of six were located alongside three Isabelline Wheatears. A few Whinchats and Corn Buntings and a distant Peregrine were seen whilst two Spur-thighed Tortoise were also spotted. A species of Cone-headed Grasshopper (most likely the Mediterranean Slant-faced Grasshopper) and European Mantis (which some refer to as Praying Mantis) added to the insect interest. As we drove back to our hotel a group of four Eurasian Golden Orioles flew past.

We were back for 6.45pm and later enjoyed a traditional meal of duck in the hotel restaurant. The waiter was extremely helpful, a genial and rather comical chap who had filled our table with carafes of local wines and the local schnapps, all on the house! A good night's sleep certainly followed for most.

Monday 1 September: Breakfast was again at 7.30am, with pork chops (in place of bacon) and eggs as well as some excellent home-made local jams. After half an hour drive we approached some gently undulating hills with oak woodlands and clearings, where we set up to check for any visible migration. The early morning cloud began to clear, and we were rewarded with two Lesser Spotted Eagles slowly gliding south, our first sighting of this species on the tour. The eagles were joined by a pulse of European Honey-buzzards, some passing close overhead, involving some 12 birds in total.



A pair of European Honey-buzzards, always a memorable sight

A splendid adult female Montagu's Harrier drifted over our heads, having most likely roosted nearby. Other raptors included a Short-toed Snake-eagle, three Booted Eagles, another three Lesser Spotted Eagles and two Western Marsh-harriers. European Bee-eaters were on the move too, their calls filling the air, with 300 being the mornings total. Tree Pipits buzzed south, at least 20 being logged, the flyway also drawing in a single European Turtle-dove, a stunning adult male Eurasian Golden Oriole, 40 Northern House Martins and 15 Common Swifts. Common Chaffinches and two Hawfinches flew over, most likely local birds. Our guide directed us along woodland edges and bushy glades where he soon located a pair of Sombre Tit, with another single nearby, a speciality of this

part of Europe. Here too we found at least three each of Red-breasted and Spotted Flycatchers, Eurasian Nuthatch, Common Whitethroat and Common Redstart. A Middle Spotted Woodpecker was watched, but it soon retreated back into the oak woodland.

Butterflies had thus far on the tour been fairly thinly spread, with Common Blue, Clouded Yellow, Small White, Painted Lady, Red Admiral and Meadow Brown being noted intermittently, but today we enjoyed at least ten Silver-washed Fritillaries and a single Cardinal as well as numerous Eastern Bath Whites.

We returned to our hotel for lunch and a short rest before driving to a craggy hillside a few miles away, where there was a deep pool created by the flooding of an old quarry. Here the water attracted birds to drink at its margins including a flock of Eurasian Linnets and with patience we managed to locate three Ortolan Buntings and a Pied Wheatear.



The heat of the day drew several Ortolan Buntings in for a drink at the lakeside

Fields here and nearer our hotel provided the final birding session of the day, an eclectic mix of species being seen, the list being impressive, albeit we had perhaps by now become accustomed to seeing a countryside so rich in bird life. In just an hour or so we encountered many Red-backed Shrikes, Lesser Grey Shrike, groups of European Bee-eaters, several European Rollers, a fine male Montagu's Harrier, an adult White-tailed Sea-eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Booted Eagle and Short-toed Snake-eagle. A European Ground Squirrel ran quickly away and down its burrow. As we drew into the hotel grounds a group of 12 Red-rumped Swallows were circling overhead, their soft calls echoing around our balconies as we headed to our rooms.

The sunset and warmth of a lovely evening looking over the vast plain was a nice memory to take home; it might be some time before we feel that warmth again.

Tuesday 2 September: This was our last day of the tour, and some enjoyed a pre-breakfast stroll which produced a stunning flock of 70 European Turtle-doves, quite a number these days! After breakfast and thanking our hosts, we loaded the minibus and set off, initially north to cross the Danube via a new suspension bridge at Braila, one of Europe's longest, completed in 2023 and reminding us of the Humber bridge back home. This took us onto the Baragan Plain, an extensive area of agricultural land with patches of remnant steppe stretching to the Carpathians. Our guide knew of a large lake with sections of muddy margins where passage waders might be feeding. We decided to give it a go and walked down to the shoreline. Here we scanned the water's edge picking out 120 Ruff, 70 Pied Avocets, 60 Northern Lapwings, four Wood Sandpipers, plus singles of both Little Ringed and Common Ringed Plovers. A few Northern Shoveler, Common Teal and a couple of Garganey comprised the wildfowl interest and several Black-necked Grebes including juveniles were out in the middle. One last try in a near corner of the lake produced a couple of Spotted Redshank and then the star bird of the morning, a juvenile Broad-billed Sandpiper. The bird, which had briefly shown its head only, finally came out into the open to give us great views. It appeared quite defensive, calling and even giving a quick burst of song as one of several nearby Curlew Sandpipers tried to encroach on its patch of mud! A grand finale indeed!



It was by now time to travel back to Bucharest, stopping for a restaurant lunch en-route where we duly thanked Zoltan and driver Imra for all their hard work and friendly, knowledgeable support. Early evening flights returned us to Heathrow and Leeds.

It had been a superb birding holiday amongst convivial company of the group, good fun with very nice food and accommodation. It was clear to Lance and Nick, who last visited Dobruja almost 20 years ago, that facilities for tourists and the infrastructure in general had been greatly modernised, but the birdlife remained truly special as ever.



Thanks go to Tony, Theresa, Keith, Liz, Trevor and Zoltan for allowing use of their photographs in this report.

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