

THE DANUBE DELTA – EUROPE’S PREMIER WETLAND

Wednesday 8 to Friday 17 September 2027

TOUR OVERVIEW: Designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1990, the Danube Delta is without doubt Europe’s premier wetland regardless of what criteria is used: size, biodiversity or avifauna. Waterbirds are found in numbers not seen anywhere else in Europe, including unrivalled numbers of breeding birds such as 2,500 pairs of the Great White Pelican, as well as similar totals for Pygmy Cormorant, Black-crowned Night-heron, Squacco Heron and Glossy Ibis plus an astonishing 20,000 pairs of Whiskered Terns. Overall, 320 species of birds have been recorded, more than 175 of these as breeding species. During the migration period up to a quarter of a million individual birds can be present on any one day, including globally threatened species like the Dalmatian Pelican.

As the Danube River heads across the flat plains of the Dobruja, Europe’s longest river splits into three wide channels, separating more than 5,800 square kilometres of the delta’s reed swamp, lake, scrub, tree-lined canal, woodland and sand dune. With no roads, the only way to explore this wilderness is by boat, leaving ‘civilisation’ behind, when a very different world unfolds; a realm of tranquil beauty, gentle pace and one where nature reigns supreme. Our visit is timed in the early autumn when vast breeding assemblages are still present and feeding vigorously and when the first northern migrants are beginning to head back south.



TOUR DESCRIPTION: A leisurely ten-day break designed to explore the major habitats and birds found in the Danube Delta and wider Dobruja region. From Bucharest we head to the Black Sea coast for a four-night stay near Constanta from where we can radiate out to visit a host of fabulous birding sites. Shallow lagoons near Vadu can be teeming with migrating waders and other waterbirds, whilst reed-fringed lakes near the famous archaeological site at Histria hold secretive Little Crakes and Paddyfield

Warblers. Lesser Grey Shrike and Red-backed Shrikes will be amongst the many migrants that pause in the marshes and scrub of the Black Sea lagoons near Sinoe.

Over the following days we explore the Danube Delta itself, with three nights land-based accommodation in a small delta village, which also allows us to enjoy some birding locally on foot. During these days we investigate the reedbeds and lakes by sitting back in a private boat, drifting by the many lagoons and tree-lined channels of the delta in a very leisurely style.



By spending three nights within the beating heart of this ornithological paradise, we will really get to understand and experience its remoteness and true significance for wildlife. Ferruginous Duck breed here in numbers whilst it is perhaps the best site in Europe to look for Pallas's Gull and migrant Broad-billed Sandpiper in the early autumn.



Small parties of Broad-billed Sandpipers pause to refuel on their southbound migration

Leaving the delta, we head towards Macin for our final two nights where crags and quarries hold Pied Wheatears and nearby remnant steppe dotted with castles and Roman ruins are home to Isabelline Wheatears. A multitude of raptors will be heading south, perhaps including groups of European Honey-buzzard and Red-footed Falcon, with Pallid Harrier and Long-legged Buzzard amongst the rarer possibilities.

Our local ground agent, with whom we have collaborated for over two decades, provide first class guiding and interpretive skills. They will accompany us throughout this visit, providing a unique local knowledge of the birds and wildlife and a very personal insight into conservation and the harmonic co-existence of people and nature in the Danube Delta. Quality accommodation has been chosen to ensure we will be comfortable throughout, with the best birding sites on our doorstep. Outside the delta, transport will be by comfortable bus, driven by our ground agent hosts, and within the delta, we use a small stable boat that allows close approach to wildlife.

BIRD LIST: Highlights include Ruddy Shelduck, Ferruginous Duck, Garganey, Black-necked Grebe, Alpine Swift, Western Water Rail, Little Crake, Black Stork, White Stork, Common Little Bittern, Great Bittern, Black-crowned Night-heron, Squacco Heron, Great White Egret, Eurasian Spoonbill, Dalmatian Pelican, Great White Pelican, Pygmy Cormorant, Pied Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, Little Stint, Ruff, Spotted Redshank, Collared Pratincole, Pallas's Gull, Caspian Gull, Caspian Tern, Whiskered Tern, White-winged Tern, Little Owl, Osprey, European Honey-buzzard, Short-toed Snake-eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle, White-tailed Sea-eagle, Northern Goshawk, Montagu's Harrier, Pallid Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard, Saker Falcon, Red-footed Falcon, Common Hoopoe, European Bee-eater, a host of woodpeckers including Black, Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted, Great Spotted, Syrian and Grey-headed, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Lesser Grey Shrike, Red-backed Shrike, Crested Lark, Calandra Lark, Tawny Pipit, Sombre Tit, Marsh Tit, Eurasian Penduline-tit, Paddyfield Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Pied Wheatear, Isabelline Wheatear, Hawfinch.



A Squacco Heron waits patiently for its prey

PHOTOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITIES: With so many bird species around, good results should be expected. Expertise is not required as bridge cameras and digi-scoping can secure many a fond memory. The tour will provide a great chance to photograph the waterbirds from our own boat.

EASE AND PACE: Breakfast will be taken at about 7.00am most mornings and dinner at about 7.30pm. Basic fitness is all that is required. Walking will be at a relaxed pace. By adding two extra nights as compared with our 2025 visit, so making this a 10-day tour, we can spend more time enjoying and photographing the birds without the need to rush around to fit everything in.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD: Full board hotel accommodation is provided with four nights near Constanta, three nights within the delta near the village of Mila 23, and two nights near Macin. All the hotels are of good quality, and all rooms feature en-suite facilities.



A Pygmy Cormorant drying its wings

WEATHER: The Danube Delta experiences warm dry summers, conditions which often extend well in autumn. It is normally a little cooler first thing in the morning, particularly if the wind comes from the north, but in general pleasant sunny days should be expected. Rain is unlikely at this time of year.

PRICE: The price of this extended 10-day tour becomes £2995 per person sharing a twin room. This includes all transport in Romania using a comfortable midi-bus with local driver, accommodation in good quality hotels, breakfast, lunch and dinner, the services of Birding Abroad leaders plus an expert local bird guide throughout, mineral water and entrance fees to all parks visited. A single supplement of £325 will apply.

Not included are international flights (we expect to use local airports), any drinks not provided with meals, and any personal items such as laundry. Travel insurance is compulsory. To ensure a place on this exciting tour please complete and return a booking form together with a £300 deposit.

FLIGHTS: Mid-morning flights to Bucharest are available from regional airports including Manchester and Leeds Bradford as well as London connections with British Airways. We intend to monitor flights over the coming months and choose the most convenient schedule once they are announced.

GROUP SIZE: The tour will proceed with 5 clients and 1 leader, up to a maximum of 9 clients.

DAY TO DAY ITINERARY

Day 1: Wednesday 8 September 2027

Our flights from the north and south of the UK are scheduled to arrive at Bucharest airport mid to late afternoon where we rendezvous as a group. After meeting our guide and local driver, we head east on a three-hour drive to the Black Sea coast and our rural accommodation which lies close to the most important wetlands sites. First of four nights near Constanta.



A 'serpentine' Purple Heron stalks the shallows

Days 2, 3 & 4: Thursday, Friday and Saturday, 9 to 11 September 2027

We have three full days to explore the southern part of coastal Dobruja, which hosts varied habitats including lakes, lagoons, woodland and even remnant semi-steppe.

It's only a very short drive to the productive Vadu pools, well-known for attracting a variety of scarce waders. Here shallow water often attracts Collared Pratincole, Red-necked Phalarope and Broad-billed Sandpiper amongst commoner species such as Spotted Redshank, Temminck's Stint and Kentish Plover. Wildfowl include Ruddy Shelduck, Common Pochard and Garganey, which can rise in vast flocks when 'spooked' by the looming shape of a White-tailed Sea-eagle or a passing Western Marsh-harrier. Rough grassland attracts Common Hoopoe and migrating Tawny Pipits, as well as Gull-billed Terns which hawk for insects overhead. Western Yellow Wagtails, often in their hundreds, will be busy

building their energy stores for onward journeys. Close-by open oak woodlands host both Grey-headed and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, and in the late afternoon, bare treetops become the resting place for family groups of Red-footed falcons enjoying the warmth of the sun's final rays.



A juvenile Red-footed Falcon. The barred uppertail is diagnostic compared to Eurasian Hobby

Adjacent reedbeds hold abundant Great Reed-warblers and Bearded Reedling as well as the scarce Moustached Warbler. Even more notable are breeding Paddyfield Warblers, the area being recognised as one of the best sites in Europe for this rare species.



Paddyfield Warbler – soon to depart on its long migration to the Indian subcontinent

Just to the north, an excursion to Histria allows access to a famous archaeological site where scattered trees around the museum offer refuge and food for passerine migrants such as Red-breasted Flycatcher and Icterine Warbler. Surrounding lakes hold impressive collections of waterbirds, where Garganey are frequently abundant and Great White Pelicans feed vigorously on remaining open water.

Sinoe lake is a classic site for waders, terns and pratincoles with a high chance of locating the beautiful Pallas's Gull, a superb adult being shown below. This large 'black-headed' gull is a very rare breeding species with almost mythical status in Western Europe. Here and later in the delta we have good chances to find them.



The Pallas's Gull is a marvellous sight in full summer plumage

On one day we visit the Sitorman rock quarry, a reliable breeding site for Pied and Isabelline Wheatear. Both these essentially Asian species are on the extreme western edge of their range and are little known in Europe. Pied prefer steeper rocky slopes whilst Isabelline joins Northern Wheatears feeding in the grassy fields.

Day 5: Sunday 12 September 2027

Leaving the lagoons behind, we move a short distance to the northern part of Dobruja. The gentle wooded hills of the ancient Babadag Forest host a good range of bird specialities. Resident woodpeckers include all of Black, Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted, Syrian and Grey-headed, whilst other noteworthy breeding birds include Sombre Tit as well as the beautiful Eurasian Golden Oriole.

After lunch in Tulcea, we board our comfortable private boat and follow the Sulina Arm of the Danube into the delta itself. By slowly cruising a variety of lakes and channels we will soon discover what a very special place this is. Peaceful, unhurried, calm and relaxed will best describe our days, as we watch passing herons and cormorants, Common Kingfishers taking advantage of any small fry scattered by the boat and perhaps a European Bee-eater or Eurasian Hobby snatching dragonflies as they feed on their southward migrations.

Once moored up, we spend the first of three nights on *terra firma* at a hotel near Mila 23, a village right in the heart of the delta. It is from here that we head out to explore the best birding locations. Three nights within the Danube Delta based in Mila 23.



Days 6 & 7: Monday 13 & Tuesday 14 September 2027

We have two full days gently cruising the serene waterways, where each bend reveals a new, picturesque branch of this vast wetland labyrinth. Scattered along the riverbanks are small, remote villages where life replicates the slow natural rhythm of the delta. Fishing sustains many families, while pockets of higher ground support modest cattle and cereal farms. Eco-tourism now plays an increasingly positive role in these communities, offering seasonal opportunities in guiding, boating and hospitality.

Riverine willow, poplar and alder groves line the banks, forming good staging refuges for European Turtle-dove, Red-backed Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher and Willow Warbler. With an extra day in the delta this year, we have increased chances to encounter scarcer species preparing to migrate south such as Collared Flycatcher, Thrush Nightingale and perhaps an elusive Barred Warbler. The riparian habitat interspersed with older and dead timber supports a surprising number of woodpecker species, with Black, Grey-headed, Syrian and Lesser Spotted all to be expected.

During our boat excursions we transition from freshwater to brackish waters and eventually to the inshore waters of the Black Sea itself, the differing salinity of each zone creating different wetland habitats producing a fantastic mix of birds.

At this time of year, the local breeding birds congregate in the best feeding sites, their numbers swelled not only by juveniles but also by hordes of migrants. This creates an unforgettable scene particularly when it involves concentrations of large birds such as Great White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Eurasian Spoonbills or a plethora of herons and wading birds. The Dalmatian Pelicans usually fish alone

or in small groups, but the Great White Pelicans gather in large cooperative flocks, corralling schools of fish which they scoop up into their large bill pouches. The skill and experience of our boatman will enable us to approach these birds to a close but sensible range, revealing this amazing sight and sound.



Great White Pelicans feeding on mass. Their pouches can hold four kilograms of fish!

Sandwich and Common Terns in their hundreds will be looking for fish, dwarfed by the massive Caspian Terns alongside. Ferruginous Ducks are relatively common in the delta, whilst picturesque shallow corners close to the reed edges, often adorned with yellow waterlily, are ideal places to catch a glimpse of a juvenile Little Crake or witness a 'frozen' Common Little Bittern. We'll be surrounded by Whiskered Terns on the open lakes, the adults and their free-flying young banking buoyantly from side to side and dipping down to the water surface to take insects or small fish. With careful observation we should be able to pick out the other two species of 'marsh terns' - Black Tern and White-winged Tern. More extensive reedbeds hold Great Bitterns which occasionally fly past as well as family parties of Eurasian Penduline-tit and Bearded Reedling.

On one excursion we will pass the historic port of Sulina, whose styles of architecture reflect the town's European, Russian and Ottoman rule through the years. Passing an old lighthouse, we venture into a small bay of the Black Sea itself where a huge sand bar hosts resting waterbirds including many Caspian and some Pallas's Gulls. We will pause and admire the panorama of this remote and beautiful location which few birders get to visit, a definite highlight of the tour.

Bankside reptiles include European Pond Terrapin and Dice Snake, with Edible Frog being the common amphibian. There are also mammals to be watchful for: Eurasian Otter, European Mink and Golden Jackal (shown overleaf) all live in the delta. We enjoyed wonderful views of the latter on our last visit.



Day 8: Wednesday 15 September 2027

Following a last look around the grounds of our hotel, almost a mini nature reserve itself, we say farewell to our hosts before taking our boat back to Tulcea in time for a restaurant lunch. If time allows a short excursion to Enisala would be well worthwhile. Grasslands host Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit and Lesser Grey Shrikes, whilst Lesser Spotted Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard will be on the look-out for European Souseliks. Flocks of Mediterranean Gulls often follow tractors as they turn over the soil. Red-footed Falcons chase any insects disturbed, whilst European Rollers and European Bee-eaters, as shown below, join in the feast.



Moving on it is just a short drive westwards to the Macin National Park, home to the oldest and most arid hills in north Dobruja, where we spend the last two nights of the tour.

Day 9: Thursday 16 September 2027

Parts of the Macin Ridge are forested holding similar birds to those further east including the Sombre Tit, and it is here that we make a special effort to locate this target species. The areas greatest value to bird watchers lies in the stoney dry slopes and crags at its western extremity. This is a great area for breeding wheatears, and we can expect more chances for Isabelline, Pied and Northern Wheatears as well as other dry country specialists such as Woodchat Shrike.



Rocky outcrops and quarries are home to the Pied Wheatear – here a young male

This area can be amazing for raptors too. Short-toed Snake-eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Levant Sparrowhawk, European Honey-buzzards and Montagu's Harrier all pass through on their way south, so we will keep a watchful eye for any birds passing overhead.

As the late afternoon settles over the bird-filled Dobruja countryside, we'll return to our hotel for a final dinner surrounded by the peaceful ambience of this wonderful rural setting. Night near Macin.

Day 10: Friday 17 September 2027

After breakfast we return to Bucharest in time for our afternoon flights back to the UK.

Thanks to Janos Olah, Thomas Willoughby and Tony Walker for use of their excellent photographs.

For a booking form, please see the booking page on www.birdingabroad.com

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