

Romania

21–30 April 2006

Participants:

Ben and Karenina Bennett

Stephen Graham

Bill and Barbara Smith

Tony Spraggins

Leader: Tudor Blaj



Dalmatian Pelican

A personal account by Karenina Bennett

Day 1: The group of six of us, Steve, Tony, Bill, Barbara, Ben (my husband) and I, were met at the airport at Bucharest by tour leader Tudor Blaj, and our driver, Costi. We seemed to leave Bucharest together with much of its population – it was Easter in the Orthodox Church calendar (falling a week after ours) and so many people were leaving the city for the weekend break. On the way to Sinaia we saw a Common Buzzard and a Common Kestrel, but nothing else of particular note. Travelling into Transylvania the scenery and the buildings became more and more beautiful. Sinaia looked and felt much as I had expected of Transylvania – beautiful, at times brooding; aristocratic buildings in want of repair but carrying it off with grace and elegance. The hotel was built around a courtyard, being an old summer palace, rather rambly and atmospheric and with views up into the mountains. Resident in the hotel grounds was a Black Redstart (possibly with a family) who competed regularly with a Eurasian Blackbird for the best singing perches, and a family of White Wagtails. Breakfast and dinner, traditional Romanian food, were taken in the hotel, whilst throughout most of the holiday our lunch was a picnic. The weather was in the main quite warm and sunny throughout the trip, apart from one morning and the afternoon of day 2 when some showers (not very long lasting) developed. Tudor proved to be an excellent all-round naturalist, keeping in the mini bus a box containing a large range of field guides and reference books. He was very knowledgeable on historical matters, clearly also capable of leading an historical trip in Romania. His knowledge generally of worldwide issues and history, together with a very relaxed and good-humoured manner, made it easy to fall into conversation with him.

Day 2: We began the day, bright and sunny, with an early morning walk. Amongst the trees were red squirrels. The other highlight of the walk was a mixed flock of Goldcrest and Firecrest. For the morning trip we visited Dumbrăvita Ponds. There were many terns, gulls, waders and waterfowl on the ponds, including some black-necked grebe, and a black stork put in a spectacular appearance. This was first time we heard a great bittern booming. Frogs in the ponds raised a chorus that rose and fell continuously, and which we were to hear throughout most of the trip. We lunched in fine weather but with a thunderstorm circling the hills all around us. We visited Râsnoavei Gorge in the afternoon looking for Wallcreeper, which we did not find, but we did find a little dipper who very obligingly posed for photographs. A late evening visit to Brasov to try and see bears,

probably not getting back to the hotel until gone 1 am, was ruled out, as many bears had been relocated far away from the town following an attack by a rabid bear on some people, and it was felt unlikely that we would see anything. I found this extremely disappointing, but had I visited Brasov I would not have got up in time for the following morning's trip, which would have proved to be even more disappointing. Tudor and Costi instead offered to take us out at midnight to see the candlelit Easter procession that would take place through the streets, but we all decided to opt for an early night.

Day 3: Still looking for Wallcreeper, we went to Zărnesti Gorge the following morning. A light misty rain turned into a shower, and while Tudor valiantly scoured the cliff-face with his binoculars the group (consisting of at least two very keen and experienced birders) gradually drifted away to huddle under the overhanging roof of a nearby hut. And then Tudor found two Wallcreepers, at which point all concerns for binoculars, cameras etc., vanished as we rushed over to join him. The Wallcreepers were quite difficult to find, despite being relatively low on the cliff, as they appeared to prefer the darker areas of rock, but we all had a good and lengthy view of them. A lunchtime stop at Mina, a walk through an orchard, four Lesser Spotted Eagles that appeared together, and a rather friendly yellowhammer. Along the road we saw a shepherd with traditional Romanian sheepdogs, stocky animals that we would not recognise in England as sheepdogs at all. I took a photograph through the windscreen of the mini bus, Tudor advising me not to get out – these sheepdogs are considered to be the most dangerous animals in the mountains, kept to ward off wolves and bears. A late afternoon drive up a winding mountain road through woodland brought us to spectacular views of the mountains from Queen's Clearing, which changed constantly with the clouds. Wild crocuses turned the hills a soft lilacy-blue. A Ring Ouzel showed very well, as did a group of Water Pipits. In the evening we went to a local restaurant for a meal, with venison and wild boar on the menu. It was a delicious meal, accompanied by a violin and a very accomplished Cymbeline player – a wonderful evening.

Day 4: A 06.00 start as we left Transylvania for the Danube Delta, and a picnic breakfast at Rodeanu Pond. Further along the road Tony said he thought he had seen a Long-eared Owl in the trees. We pulled over, and saw three, one of them very clearly. As we travelled towards the delta, we soon began to see more and more donkey or horse drawn carts, and horses, donkeys and cattle tethered at grass verges to graze. We stopped by Murighiol Lake for lunch where we saw our first Black-winged Stilts. We were boarding the minibus as a birdcall alerted Tudor to two Eurasian Thick-knees flying over, and we all piled out again to have a look at the one that had landed in view. Due to the thick-knees' last minute appearance we were running later than scheduled for the ferry at Mahmudia, in spite of which we were still at the dock first. When the ferry did arrive we found we had much of the upper deck to ourselves, and it was far less crowded than we had anticipated. (If you are considering this trip, the ferry does have toilet facilities and a bar.) As had been reported in the news before we left for Romania, the delta was flooded, and clumps of trees stood far away from the rest of the forest of which they were part. A string of pylons, normally on land, waded off into the distance. Great and Pygmy Cormorants, Grey, Squacco, and Purple Herons, Black-crowned Night-herons, Great and Little Egrets were seen, a Dalmatian Pelican and a White-tailed Sea-eagle flew overhead. Although there would normally have been waders closer to the ferry, the floodwater meant that it was far too deep for them, but there was still plenty to see. We arrived later in the afternoon in St George Village to stay at a family-run hotel, where Mother-in-Law produced some wonderful home-cooked meals – nearly all fish, which is local produce – and some delectable desserts, which translated, mean “little corners”.

Day 5: Early the next morning we set out in a small boat to explore the Turcosc Channel. We had close views of European Hobbies, a Peregrine Falcon, Western Marsh-harrier, herons, egrets, Ferruginous Ducks, and then out into more exposed water to see a few White and many Dalmatian Pelicans. We stopped at a beach for a walk along the edge of the Black Sea and then returned to St George, an enchanting, magical morning. We had lunch at our hotel, and spent the afternoon walking around the outskirts of St George. There were tree frogs in the grasses; Tudor found a grass snake; and there were many waders in the pools. In the late afternoon cows which had been turned out loose to graze in the morning made their own way back into the village and stood mooing outside their respective homes, or possibly where their calves were kept.

Day 6: Another walk towards St George Forest, lunch at the hotel, and then a walk in the opposite direction towards the Black Sea, which we could not reach due to flooding. But throughout the day we had seen stilts, 100+ Ruff, Spotted Redshank, Marsh and Wood Sandpipers, Eurasian Hoopoe, Sand Martins (very clearly in view sitting on a telegraph wire), Eastern Olivaceous and Icterine Warblers, Ortolan Bunting, many, many more commonly seen (or already seen) birds, and a couple of European Hares. As we walked back to St George in the late afternoon we could hear a Great Bittern booming continuously.

Day 7: An early start to catch the 07.00 ferry back to Mahmudia. The Great Bittern was still booming, and could be heard clearly in the village. From the ferry Steve spotted three Eurasian Spoonbills and some Glossy Ibises in the distance. Once again, there were various herons, egrets, cormorants and waterfowl. I assume that two White Wagtails had nested on the ferry, as they escorted us for the journey, flying off, but always returning. On arriving at Mahmudia we drove to Celicdere Monastery for lunch. As we arrived we saw a group of Hawfinches very clearly amongst the trees, and we would continue to see them flying around while we were there. From there we drove through Dobrogea Gorge where there were many Souseliks, frequently sitting up like miniature Meercats. We saw also Eurasian Hoopoe, Common Kestrel and three species of wheatear – Northern, Black-eared and Pied. We arrived at our next hotel in Mamaia-Sat, a resort on the Black Sea. A walk down to the beach elicited some disappointment from Tudor, as scrub had been removed to make way for a resort beach.

Day 8: We began the day with an early morning trip to Navodari Ponds, a Paddyfield Warbler performing for us for a considerable length of time, but very difficult to see clearly through the reeds. After breakfast we drove to Vadu. We were now regularly seeing Black-headed and Blue-headed Wagtails and Crested Larks. In a partially sunken tank of water there was a terrapin and a grass snake, both of which disappeared under water at our appearance. Tudor suddenly thrust his arm into the tank and produced a grass snake, but a smaller one than the one we had originally seen swimming around. There was no way for the remaining snake to get out of the tank of its own accord, and we were not very happy at leaving it to get too cold and die. Finally we put a small branch into the tank, weighted down with large pebbles so it touched the bottom, and with the other end weighted down outside the tank. Hopefully the snake made use of our efforts. We had lunch at what seemed to be a rather isolated café at Histria, where Eurasian Swallows were nesting in the café, and were making regular trips in and out through the doorway. After lunch we wandered around outside and then someone noticed a Red-breasted Flycatcher in a tree followed by a Collared Flycatcher and then a Little Owl. It really wasn't a very big tree, but it was excellent for birdwatching. We considered whether Tudor might have conducted the entire trip at that tree! Leaving the café, Costi noticed a snake in the road. (We had discovered earlier in the day Costi's fear of snakes when Ben handed him a strip of inner tube, and poor Costi hurried away and shut himself in his mini bus.) We stopped, and Tudor identified it as a dice snake, which leaves a rather unpleasant smell on your skin, and which had an effect on me a little later down the road, when we had to pull over, and poor Tudor washed his hands repeatedly! But Costi had managed to overcome his fear and touch the snake.

Day 9: Leaving Mamaia-Sat, we visited Arrik Adamclisi, (a Byzantine ruin), Bănesa and had lunch at Guru Dobrogea, where we looked for Eurasian Eagle-owls unsuccessfully, but we did see a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and a skink. We made stops along the road throughout the day to see Short-toed Eagles, one diving very low over the fields before us, European Bee-eaters, Alpine Swifts and Long-legged Buzzards. We arrived close to the Bulgarian border to catch a ferry to Silistra, to stay in a former communist hotel – which actually felt rather luxurious. We waited a little while for the ferry – if I understood correctly I think we had to wait until enough people turned up intending to travel – but this gave us a tremendous opportunity to watch the courtship of two White Storks on a couple of chimneys. Because of our proximity to the Bulgarian border we had to be careful with our use of cameras, and not point them towards the border, but Tudor confirmed with the border guards that we could use our cameras there. It was on the crossing that the extent of the flooding became quite apparent, with buildings under water up to the eaves. On leaving the ferry we stopped to look at the Canaraua Fetei Calarasi Fishponds. Tudor pointed out two Muskrats swimming across the lakes and a Little Bittern in the reeds. Once again, there were many gulls, terns, herons, egrets and waterfowl.

Day 10: An early-morning walk with only Steve, Tudor, Ben and me. We could hear a Black Woodpecker, but the one, which finally showed itself, very clearly indeed was a Grey-headed Woodpecker. We left our hotel and went back to the fishponds. Several Little Bittern showed. Then we began to make our way back to the airport at Bucharest, doing some birdwatching on the way, and stopping at Căldărușani Monist, where we could hear, but not see, a Common Nightingale in the woods. Horse drawn gypsy carts were on the roads as we headed for the airport. The weather looked as if it was closing in, and the birds sensed it and had become rather elusive. So we returned to London with 167 different species seen – including the following species not previously mentioned: Red-necked Grebe, Northern Pintail, Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns, Imperial and Booted Eagles, Montagu's Harrier, Northern Goshawk, Black Kite, Red-footed Falcon, Collared and Black-winged Pratincoles, Little Gull, Great Grey and Red-backed Shrikes, Calandra Lark, Syrian, Middle Spotted and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Common Kingfisher, European Roller, Common and Lesser Whitethroats and Blackcap, and a short list of others heard, roe deer, various toads, frogs, snakes, butterflies and alpine flowers (this is by no means an exhaustive list). Wherever we went, apart from the day when we arrived and the day we departed, we tended to see many raptors as we drove along, for which it was always worth stopping to check out what they were. The scenery was quite spectacular. A truly memorable trip, and a desire to go back, perhaps at a different time of year.