

ROMANIA

Birds & Brown Bears

Thu 16th – Mon 20th April 2015



Clockwise from top left: Two photos of Brown Bears – a mother and two cubs, and a handsome young male • A Dipper on the river at Bicaz Gorge • A female Three-toed Woodpecker drumming on a stump • A handsome male Ring Ouzel – part of a remarkable flock of 70+ • A young Goshawk in front of the Bear hides chasing Stock Doves © Zoli Baczó, Limosa Holidays

**report compiled by tour leader:
Zoltán Baczó**

Trip Report

Leader: Zoltán Baczó

with Jim Bennett & Caroline Blundell, Tim & Lorna Page, Andrew Rann and Anne Thomas

This tour, one of Limosa's newest offerings to Romania, goes in search of birds and Brown Bears in the beautiful Carpathian Mountains in early spring. Few such tours visit this unspoiled corner of Europe and the main focus of our short break here was to observe Brown Bears recently emerged from winter hibernation as well as to discover the varied local birdlife and find some spring migrants, too.

We enjoyed a wonderful few days of birding here, where despite the unseasonably cold weather our group encountered no fewer than 113 bird species and eight Brown Bears, the latter seen well from a purpose-built bear-watching hide. Those with a camera were able to take many nice photos of the bears' behaviour. Our daily routine was birding until early afternoon with a picnic lunch in the field; we then we went back to the hotel to pick up some extra clothes and left again to visit the Brown Bear hides, where we stayed until dusk. While we waited for the bears to appear, something would always happen in the feeding area: on one occasion a young Goshawk arrived to hunt Stock Doves and Woodpigeons!

Every spring is different in the Carpathians and this year was unusual in that the mountains were still covered in snow above 1400m following fresh falls earlier in April. Although this meant we could not visit the higher elevation habitats, we still managed to find most of the upper elevation target species - and were especially pleased to see all 10 of the European woodpecker species within this short birding break. Quite an achievement! Tour highlights included our visit to the 'woodpecker forest', where we encountered six different species of woodpecker, and a truly memorable mother bear with two young cubs in front of the hide.

Day 1 - Thursday 16th April

We met up in the arrivals hall at Bucharest Airport this afternoon and set off northeast, crossing the Carpathian Mountains to reach the Transylvanian basin, where it seems almost every village has a White Stork nest.

Evening arrival for dinner at our family-run hotel, where Magor and her mother Csilla served us a very tasty local food - washed down with blueberry brandy!

Day 2 - Friday 17th April

A short walk around our hotel before breakfast was very productive. The highlight was a fine adult Common Redstart singing from the neighbouring garden and posing for us in the open. Our first Black Redstart, Blue Tit, Goldcrest, Firecrest, Jay and Raven added to the fun.

After a delicious breakfast, we started the morning in a coniferous woodland just 30-minutes drive from our accommodation. Along the way we saw Great Grey Shrike, Fieldfare, Mistle Thrush and Common Buzzard, as well as the forest dwellers such as Firecrest, Goldcrest, Crested Tit, Coal Tit, Willow Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker. We decided to travel a bit higher in hope of finding Three-toed Woodpecker, but our attempt had to be abandoned due to the thick snow in the forest. Indeed, the only memorable species here was a nice Water Pipit on a snowy meadow.

We left the snowy uplands and drove down into the Ghiurghiu basin, where the spring was much further ahead than the mountains. We found a superb Lesser Spotted Eagle sitting on the ground; it appeared to gathering nest material. Surprisingly, it stayed long enough to be seen in the 'scope too! Just before lunch we arrived at the Bicaz Gorge area to search for another superb bird on breeding territory: the beautiful Wallcreeper.

We enjoyed a nice lunch, then headed back to the Wallcreeper spot, where we saw two birds well. Other species in the area included Kestrel, Alpine Swift, Dipper, Grey Wagtail and Raven before it was time to head back to the hotel and plan the afternoon Bear Hide programme. We focused on the closest valley to our lodgings, and visited two hides in two different places - and a total of five Brown Bears were seen. It was good to see so many smiling faces over dinner!

Day 3 - Saturday 18th April

Today the weather was rather 'British', with overcast skies and light rain. We had the usual nice cooked breakfast then decided to visit a city park - more like an arboretum - to see out the rainy morning. Almost immediately, we spotted a pair of Syrian Woodpeckers, these followed by Fieldfare, Mistle Thrush, handsome Collared and Pied Flycatchers, Wood Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Black Redstart and Long-tailed Tit. A great start to the day - and when the rain stopped we headed to an ancient oak woodland, about an hour from town.

The forest here was much greener and there was not so much bird activity at first. Slowly, the show started with our first Middle Spotted Woodpecker; we soon found another, then a third, before finally realizing there were at least four birds. A Great Spotted Woodpecker came close, too. A Green Woodpecker gave a call and, responding to an imitation whistle, a Grey-headed Woodpecker came into view first followed by the Green Woodpecker - both showing well in the open. We enjoyed this activity for a while - it was just wonderful. A male Collared Flycatcher broke the woodpecker watch briefly, but suddenly we heard the unmistakable flight call of a Black Woodpecker ... and the bird flew in our direction and landed in a huge Oak tree. Wow, what a morning!

We decided to warm up in the vehicle with our picnic lunch and coffee before trying again for White-backed Woodpecker. Within a couple of minutes, a male responded to a call from the beech woodland and hove into view. Seven species of woodpecker in a morning was not bad! We headed back to the hotel and paid a second visit to the bear hides. Only one bear today but no matter - the woodpeckers had already stolen the show!

Day 4 - Sunday 19th April

Pre-breakfast birding centred around the hotel, enjoying more Redstarts and Black Redstarts, Firecrests and Jays. Today's weather was cold and windy, so we went returned earlier than we'd originally intended, for a welcome hot coffee and herbal tea.

Our first stop after breakfast was in mature coniferous woodland not far from the hotel. Amongst the first birds we spotted were two Nutcrackers and a Crested Tit. Deeper into the forest, drumming was heard and we were soon enjoying a Three-toed Woodpecker drumming from the top of a dead tree snag. We watched it well for a long time; it frequently changed position and we realised that it lacked the yellow forehead of a male. So we had to ask, do females use drumming as well? [Ed: Yes. Male and female Three-toed Woodpeckers are known to drum]. It was a great find and our woodpecker list had now grown to eight species. In this nice woodland we also saw more Crested, Coal and Willow Tits, Treecreeper and Bullfinch.

After lunch, our second stop was at the Sanpaul fishponds, hoping to find some wetland birds and migrants. Out on the small lakes we picked up our first Ferruginous Ducks, then on the dried, muddy margins Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Dunlin and Little Ringed Plover. Two Lesser Spotted Eagles were feeding on an area of meadow together with seven White Storks.

In the evening, the bear hides produced four Brown Bears, including a mother with two cubs. An excellent daylight sighting!

Day 5 - Tuesday 20th April

Sadly, our last day of the tour. But our British Airways flight back to London was late in the afternoon so we had time to make several birding stops before we arriving back at the capital, Bucharest, at 3pm. Today the weather was cold again so we skipped the pre-breakfast birding and simply started the post-

breakfast day earlier. First stop was Odorhei Park, hoping to find Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and the first Wrynecks of the season. As luck would have it, the first bird we found was a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker feeding on a thin branch very close to us - right in the car park area. We walked deeper into the park and finally came across two Wrynecks feeding on the ground. We were thrilled to have seen all ten possible woodpeckers during the trip!

Our next stop was at the Sanpaul fishponds, but the weather was so windy we decided to spend only a short period of time here. In a sheltered area, however, we found Pygmy Cormorant, Garganey, Ferruginous Duck and Mediterranean Gull. A male Citrine Wagtail flew over our heads, but Bittern, Bearded Tit and Water Rail were destined to be 'heard only' species.

Our picnic lunch was planned to be while we crossed the Carpathian Mountains. We stopped in a sheltered and wonderful place with great views over the Bucegi Natural Park. From this wonderful spot we could see the snowy peaks dusted with a light snowfall. Suddenly, a large flock of thrushes arrived and landed on the nearby trees - and we realized they were *all* Ring Ouzels! We counted more than 70 birds in the trees and nearby wet meadow. What a wonderful way to end our trip!

I hope that you all enjoyed the tour - certainly luck seemed to be with us as we found some fabulous birds and of course bears. It was a pleasure to see you all having such fun together.

Zoltan Baczo

ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED

(Total 113 species recorded by the group)

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Two were seen on a lake close to Bucharest

(Common) Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

At least three were seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 19th.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Good numbers at Sanpaul fishponds

(Northern) Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

30 seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 19th

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

15 plus nine seen at Sanpaul fishpond area on 19th and 20th of April

(Common) Teal *Anas crecca*

Several seen at Sanpaul fishpond area

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Four were seen at Sanpaul fishpond area

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

Six were seen on 19th; then two were seen on 20th of April at Sanpaul fishponds

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Two at Sanpaul fishponds en route on 20th

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

30+ seen at Sanpaul fishponds

(European) White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

A common bird in Transylvania, seen every day of the tour.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

One was seen at Odorhei City Park by the river; a common breeding bird at Sanpaul fishponds

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

One was seen at Sanpaul fishponds

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*

A maximum of six birds at Sanpaul fishponds

(Great) Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

One was seen over a roadside lake just outside Bucharest; two were seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 19th

(Common) Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

15+ seen during the week

(Eurasian) Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Two seen during the week

(Northern) Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

One young female was seen in front of the Bear hide at 18th

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Four at Sanpaul fishponds on 19th; two in the same area on 20th

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Common breeding bird of the area

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Clanga pomarina*

One was seen at Ghiurghiu basin on 17th, then two more were seen at Sanpaul fishponds hunting on the ground with White Storks

(European) Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

One was heard at Sanpaul fishponds on 20th

(Common) Coot *Fulica atra*

Common at Sanpaul fishponds area

(Northern) Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Three roadside birds were seen on 17th

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

Eight were seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 19th; then four birds in a same area on 20th

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

One was seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 20th

(Common) Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

One was seen at Sanpaul fishponds area on both days we visited

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

One was seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 20th

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

About 12 were seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 19th, then four seen on 20th

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Found only at Sanpaul fishponds area on 19th and 20th when we counted 22-40 birds

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

One 2cy was seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 19th

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Common in wetlands, seen at Rotbav roadside ponds than in Sanpaul fishponds

Mediterranean Gull *Ichthyophaga melanocephalus*

2 adult was seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 20th

Feral Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Common

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Observed every afternoon in front of the Bear hide. Small groups came to feed on corn seeds left for the Bears

Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*

Observed every afternoon in front of the Bear hide.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Widespread and common.

(Common) Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Two were seen plus several more heard during the tour

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

Three were seen during the tour

Alpine Swift *Apus apus*

Two were seen at Bicaz Gorge on 17th

(Common) Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

One was seen in flight by the Tarnava Mare river from the Odorhei city park on 17th

(Common) Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Two birds were seen well during the tour

(Eurasian) Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*

Two were seen at Odorhei City Park on 20th

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*

One female was seen very well at Odorhei City Park on 20th

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*

Five seen nearby Sighisoara woodland on 18th

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*

A pair was seen at Odorhei City Park on 18th

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Two were seen nearby Sighisoara

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos*

One male was seen nearby Sighisoara woodland

Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus*

One female was seen at Suseni woodland on 19th

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Two were seen near Sighisoara woodland on 18th

Grey-faced Woodpecker *Picus canus*

Two were seen near Sighisoara woodland on 18th

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*

A male was seen well nearby Sighisoara woodland on 18th

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*

Two was seen close to Suseni woodland on 17th

(Eurasian) Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Common

(Common) Magpie *Pica pica*

Very common

(Eurasian) Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Widespread and common.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Widespread and common.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

Common

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

Fairly common

Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*

Two were seen well at Suseni woodland on 19th

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*

Two were seen at Odorhei City Park on 18th

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus*

One was seen well plus several heard at Suseni woodland on 19th

(Eurasian) Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Fairly common

Great Tit *Parus major*

Fairly common

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Four were seen on 18th

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*

Only heard due to the strong winds on day 20th at Sanpaul fishponds area

(Barn) Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Common and widespread

House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Common

Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis*

Common

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*

Heard only at Sanpaul fishponds area on both days when we were here

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

One was seen and several heard at Sanpaul fishponds area

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*

One was seen plus several heard at Odorhei City Park on 18th and on 20th of April

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Common

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

Two were seen at Odorhei City Park on 18th

(Northern) Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Six were seen plus several heard at Suseni woodland

(Eurasian) Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Common

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*

A couple at Bicaz Gorge on 17th were one of the highlights of the tour.

(Eurasian) Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

Two were seen well at Suseni woodland

(European) Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Widespread and common.

(Eurasian) Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Common

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Common

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Common

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

Common

Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus*

70+ were seen at Predeal on 20th. A quite fantastic sighting!

(European) Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Common

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Fairly common

(Common) Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

A male was seen next to our Hotel garden

(European) Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

Two were seen during the tour

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Seen in different places during the tour

Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*

Seen in different places during the tour, some still on the way to the breeding places

Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*

A male and female were seen at Odorhei City Park on migration at 18th, then a male on 20th.

Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis*

A couple were seen at Odorhei City Park on 18th and 20th; then a male near Sighisoara woodland.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Widespread and common.

(Eurasian) Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

10 were seen at Sanpaul village

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

Most of the Yellow Wagtails were seen at Sanpaul fishponds area. We were able to identify several subspecies like Black-headed *feldegg*, Grey-headed *thunbergi*, Blue-headed *flava* and different variations like '*superciliaris*' with their black heads and white supercilium.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Good numbers here and there

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Four were seen at Bicaz Gorge on 17th

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*

A male was seen in flight at Sanpaul fishponds area on 20th – they are regular here in spring.

Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*

One was seen pretty well on 17th

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*

Four were seen during the tour

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

One was seen in a snowy meadow when we visited the Bucin Pass on 17th

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Several heard

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Common

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common

Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Six were seen during the tour

(European) Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

A total of 11 birds seen during the tour

(European) Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

A few here and there

Serin *Serinus serinus*

One was seen at Odorhei City Park on 18th

Bullfinch *Pyrrhulla pyrrhulla*

One was seen at Suseni woodland

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

Five were seen at Odorhei City Park on 18th

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

Several seen during the tour

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Two were seen at Sanpaul fishpond area

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*

One was seen in the very first day along the Homorod Valley

MAMMALS**Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*****Brown Bear *Ursus arctos arctos***

Sightings were made each afternoon we visited the bear watching hides. No doubt about the highlight - the mother and two cubs seen on 19th

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris***Wood Mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus*****European Hare *Lepus europaeus***