

Romania

Birds & Brown Bears

Fri 21st – Tue 25th Apr 2017



Bears, bears and more bears from our 2017 visit, along with Wallcreeper, melanistic Ural Owl and Ring Ouzel © Zoltán Baczó and tour participant Donald Martin

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

Romania | Danube Delta & Black Sea

Transylvania is a fantastic place for birding and probably the best place in Europe to see Brown Bears! Our second short break was a great success again as we enjoyed a good selection of bird species, more precisely 115 and no less than 21 different Brown Bears! Highlights of the tour included eight species of woodpeckers, Ural Owl, Wallcreeper, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Northern Goshawk, Ring Ouzel, nest building Hawfinches and, of course, the Brown Bears. This tour was created to enjoy Transylvania's wonderful forests and wildlife. During our trip, spring suddenly turned to winter right on the first day and this made it much more difficult to find higher elevation species. On April 21st, heavy snowfall hit the Carpathians and crossing the Prahova Pass suddenly became a real challenge (especially for those who had already changed to summer tyres!). Luckily the snow on the road was quickly cleared by the authorities and in the afternoon it became much easier to get around.

Day 1 – Friday, April 21st

At Bucharest Airport we all met in the arrivals hall late in the afternoon. Today we only had time for a little birding on the road to the accommodation. From Bucharest we travelled east, crossed the snowy Carpathian Mountains then reached the so-called Transylvania basin. Today, 40cm of snow fell in the higher parts of Transylvania! On the road we had seen several hunting Kestrels, a Little Egret over a small pond, Common Buzzard, a Sparrowhawk and lots of Rooks and Jackdaws. We arrived at the accommodation at 21.45 local time and, after a tasty evening dinner, we headed to bed. The sky cleared and temperatures below freezing were expected in the morning.

Day 2 – Saturday, April 22nd

During the pre breakfast walk we quickly realized the temperature had dropped during the night, and it was -4C in the morning. We felt this change in our naked hands and the need for hot drinks was clear. Bird activity was good; the first bird we spotted was a nice male Collared Flycatcher hunting from a fence wire, then Chiffchaff, Fieldfare, Mistle Thrushes, Song Thrushes and Redwings feeding on the nearby garden but also a Whinchat, Jays and a nice male Black Redstart. After the breakfast we drove to an ancient oak forest reserve to find as many woodpecker species as possible. We just called this place the "woodpecker forest". On the way to the forest, a Black Stork was found in a field, lots of White Storks were on nests in almost every village we passed and we also found an adult female Montagu's Harrier. As soon as we arrived at the woodland, the first woodpecker we heard was a male Green Woodpecker, then deeper in the forest we found the first Middle Spotted Woodpecker, then a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, several Great Spotted Woodpeckers, a Black Woodpecker flew overhead then perched on a branch where everybody could see it well through the scope. The show was not over yet because quite soon we heard than saw a Grey-headed Woodpecker, too! We had seen six species of woodpeckers so far, but still one important candidate was missing, the White-backed Woodpecker. We walked back to the van and kept looking, but only found a melanistic Ural Owl. Wow, what a nice bird! We walked closer and had a brilliant view of it while it sat on a branch high in the canopy.

We had our picnic lunch by this superb woodland and just before we left we spotted a Hoopoe too! It was time to leave and drive back to our accommodation and prepare for the afternoon bearwatching session. We spent three hours in the hide and enjoyed 11 Bears; a mother with two older cubs, five younger but already independent cubs (their mother caring for them until the cubs reach their second year), and an adult female and two bigger male bears. Wow, what a view and all in the daylight! Those who brought a camera on this trip could take many great images!

Day 3 – Sunday, April 23rd

Today's pre-breakfast walk was shorter due to rain, but even so we found a small group of white-headed Long-tailed Tits, Lesser Whitethroat, Whinchat, two Meadow Pipits and heard two Cuckoos in the distance. We had a nice breakfast but unfortunately the rain would not stop. The nearby city park proved to be a nice place for birding even in the rain, because as we parked the car, the first bird we found was a male Syrian Woodpecker! We took a short walk around the park trails and saw several Wood Warblers, Collared Flycatcher, Fieldfare, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and a nice male Common Redstart. Finally the rain stopped and we could continue our way to Sanpaul wetland area. On the way we found a male Montagu's Harrier hunting over the meadow, then a Lesser Spotted Eagle on the other side of the road. Nice!

The village by the wetland holds the highest number of White Stork nests in the region, which means at least 50 occupied nests in the village this year. We also found the first Red-footed Falcon of the season over the village.

This wetland site had an amazingly rich bird fauna in a relatively small area. In the first ponds we could see Ferruginous Ducks, Garganey, loads of Barn Swallows hunting over the water surface and lots resting on the reeds, too. Due to the cold weather, swallows were congregating in big number over the wetland. On a dry pond with some mud, we found six Black-winged Stilts, Ruffs, Green Sandpiper and Wood Sandpiper. We took a short walk on a bank between two larger lakes where we saw a nice male Bearded Reedling. Probably there were more in the reeds but this cute male came closer to us and we all had a brilliant look. Little Gull, Common Tern and one more Montagu's Harrier were seen today, too.

Lunch was taken in a roadside restaurant than it was back to the accommodation and soon we were all heading to a different bear hide. This time we saw seven bears in front of the hide - and two more from the car! An adult Northern Goshawk came to chase Stock Doves without any luck and two Red Foxes visited the feeding station.

Day 4 – Monday, April 24th

Today we had a nice clear but cold start again. There were fewer birds than previously, but even so we located a singing male Common Redstart, Linnets, Greenfinches, Fieldfares and several Lesser Whitethroats. This morning's plan was to visit a limestone gorge for Wallcreeper. On the way to the gorge we stopped in a conifer wood in hopes of finding a Three-toed Woodpecker and other higher elevation species, but the woodland was quite, with fresh bear footprints visible in the snow and a single Red Squirrel in a tree overhead. We continued our drive to the gorge where, within 15 minutes, we found a male Wallcreeper guarding its territory quite low on the cliff side. Probably due to the cold wind it was less active and we could admire and follow it for quite some time. Wow, cracking bird and what a view! In the gorge we saw Grey Wagtails and a pair of feeding Dippers too.

In the afternoon we went again to the bear hide we had visited on Saturday. We saw a total of five bears this time and we recognized four individuals from our earlier visit, but a bigger male was new today so the total count was 21 individual bears in three days! Well done! I have to mention that the hunting of Brown Bears and other large mammals like Wolf and Lynx was banned in 2016 and the result is clear as more and more bears are visible in front of the hides.

Day 5 – Tuesday, April 25th

We skipped the early morning birding today in order to gain some more birding time on the way back to the airport. After a nice breakfast we left the accommodation at 7.45 AM. The weather was clear and sunny and had started to warm up again. Our first stop was at the nearby city park where in the warmer temperature the bird activity was amazing. Common Redstart and Serin, Fieldfares sang from a treetop, and a pair of Wrynecks was active, too. The latter species was the main reason for coming back here again because the Wrynecks brought our woodpecker list up to eight species seen on the tour! A couple of nest-building Hawfinches was a super bonus for most of us, while a Wood Warbler was a lifer for Owen!

On the way to the Sanpaul wetland site we stopped again to look for Lesser Spotted Eagle. In the fishpond area we found a Marsh Sandpiper, two Common Sandpipers, Yellow Wagtails, Corn Bunting and a Little Owl. Lunch was taken at over 1300m above sea level along the Prahova pass, where we could admire the snowy peaks of the Transylvanian Alps. On the snowless parts of the alpine meadows, thrushes were feeding on worms, among them Song Thrushes, Blackbirds, Mistle Thrushes and eight Ring Ouzels. Time was pressing and we continued on to the airport, from there heading home with some amazing memories of a great trip.

ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED

(Total 115 species recorded by the group)

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Two were seen at Sanpaul wetland on 23rd

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Good numbers at Sanpaul fishponds and also around the accommodation

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Eight were seen at Sanpaul wetland on 23rd

Wigeon *Anas penelope*

Six were seen at Sanpaul wetland on 23rd

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Seven at Sanpaul wetland on 23rd

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

A total of 19 seen at Sanpaul fishpond area on 23rd and 25th

Common Teal *Anas crecca*

Six seen at Sanpaul fishpond area on 23rd

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

A total of 28 were seen at Sanpaul fishpond area on 23rd and 25th

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

At Sanpaul wetland, a total of 22 birds were seen well on 23rd and 25th

Hazel Grouse *Tetrastes bonasia*

A male was seen from the car after we left the bear hide on 23rd

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Only heard at Sanpaul wetland area on 23rd

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

10+ seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 23rd

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*

One was seen in the middle of a wet meadow on 22nd

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

A common bird in Transylvania. Seen every day of the tour

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

Only heard at Sanpaul wetland area on 23rd

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

A breeding colony of 18 pairs was discovered at Sanpaul wetland area where they nest on top of the reeds.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Two were seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 23rd

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

One was seen from the car on the way to Zeta from Bucharest Airport

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*

One was seen along the Homorod valley on 23rd then three more on the way to Bucharest on 25th

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

One was seen on the first day between Bucharest and Zetea

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

An adult was seen in front of the bear hide, chasing Stock Doves on 23rd

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Several seen during the week

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*

An adult female was seen over the village of Sanpaul on 23rd then an adult male over the road on 25th

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Two were seen during the tour

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Eight seen in three days during the tour but most numerous at Sanpaul wetland area

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*

One adult female and two adult males were seen, all on migration

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Common breeding bird of the area

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

One was heard at Sanpaul fishponds on 23rd

Common Coot *Fulica atra*

Common at Sanpaul fishponds area

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Two roadside birds were seen on 25th

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

One was seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 25th

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*

One was seen at Sanpaul wetland area on 25th

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Two were seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 23rd

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

One was seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 23rd

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Two were seen at Sanpaul wetland area on 25th

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Found only at Sanpaul fishponds area on 23rd and 25th, when we counted a total of 14 birds

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Seven were seen at Sanpaul on 23rd and 25th

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinans*

Ten were seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 23rd

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

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

Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*

An adult was seen at Sanpaul fishponds on 23rd

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

One was seen at Sanpaul wetland on 23rd

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

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Observed every afternoon in front of the bear hide.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Widespread and common.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Two were heard every morning around the accommodation

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

One was seen at Sanpaul village on 25th

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*

One dark, melanistic bird was seen at the 'woodpecker forest'

Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Two birds were seen well during the tour

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*

Two were seen at Odorhei City Park on 25th

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*

One male was seen at the 'woodpecker forest', then another male was at Odorhei City Park on 23rd

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*

Three were seen at the 'woodpecker forest' on day 2.

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*

A male was seen at Odorhei City Park on 23rd

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Four were seen at the 'woodpecker forest' on day 2

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

One calling male was seen well at the 'woodpecker forest' on day 2.

Grey-faced Woodpecker *Picus canus*

One male was seen well at the 'woodpecker forest' on day 2.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*

A male was seen really well at the 'woodpecker forest' on day 2.

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*

Two were seen during the tour

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Common and seen well from the Bear hide

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*

Very common

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Widespread and common.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Widespread and common.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

Common

Common Raven *Corvus corax*

Common in Transylvania but not as numerous as Rook or Hooded Crow

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

Fairly common

Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*

Two were heard at Suseni woodland on day 4.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*

Three were seen at Odorhei City Park

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus*

One was seen well from the bear hide on day 4.

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Fairly common

Great Tit *Parus major*

Fairly common

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*Two were seen on the early morning walk on 23rd**Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus***

A total of four seen at Sanpaul wetland, but one male came very close and everybody had a great view of it.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

100+ seen at Sanpaul wetland area. Due to the cold, many swallows were feeding over the lake's surface.

House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Common

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Several seen during the week

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*Heard only at Sanpaul fishponds area on both 23rd and 25th**Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus***

One was seen and several heard at Sanpaul fishponds area

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*One was heard at Sanpaul wetland on 23rd**Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix***Three were seen at Odorhei City Park on 23rd and on 25th**Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita***

Common

European Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Four were seen during the tour

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

A total of seven seen during the week.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*One was seen at Suseni woodland on 24th**Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea***

Common

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*One of the highlights of the tour, we saw a couple at Bicaz Gorge area on 24th**Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris***One was seen at the 'woodpecker forest' on 22nd**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

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*Two were seen during the pre breakfast walk on 22nd**Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus***

Eight were seen at Predeal on the way back to Bucharest.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Common

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Fairly common

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*A male seen during the pre breakfast walk on 24th, then another male was at Odorhei City Park on 23rd**European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola***

One was seen during the tour

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*A male was seen on two occasions during pre breakfast walks on 22nd and 23rd**Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis***

A nice male was seen during the first pre breakfast walk in front of the Hotel, than another at the 'woodpecker

forest' on 22nd

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Widespread and common.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

Only three were seen at Sanpaul wetland area, of the forms `superciliaris` and *flava*

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Good numbers here and there

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Three were seen at Bicaz Gorge on 24th

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*

A feeding pair was seen at Bicaz Gorge on 24th

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Two were seen on the pre breakfast walk on 23rd

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Eight were seen during the tour

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

A total of 5 birds seen during the tour

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

A few here and there

European Serin *Serinus serinus*

One was seen at Odorhei City Park on 25th

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus*

One was seen on 23rd

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

Best view at the Odorhei City park, where we found a nest building couple

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

Several seen during the tour

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Two were seen at Sanpaul wetland area on 23rd

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*

Two were seen in the last day at the Sanpaul wetland area

MAMMALS

Western Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

Brown Bear *Ursus arctos arctos*

A total of 21 different individual were seen in three afternoons! Indeed a highlight of the tour!

Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*