

Romania: 27-31 May 2019

This report details a five-day trip to the Dobrogea region of Romania – namely Constanța and Tulcea counties – chiefly along the Black Sea coast. The trip was enjoyable, with 145 species logged during a classic European birding break.

Romania sits in a lesser position, in terms of ecotourism and its status as a birding destination, when compared to other Eastern European nations, not least its neighbour to the south, Bulgaria. Two reasons that may be behind that are, firstly, the lack of Western Palearctic specialties. There are of course some superb species in Romania, but none that can't be seen similarly or even better elsewhere.

Secondly, access to the absolute jewel in the crown – the Danube Delta – is restricted to organised boat trips. This puts off the independent birder (myself included) – unless you want to join an organised group, or pay a hefty amount for a private tour, it's impossible, as you can't go out on your own. Given this was a trip with my only partly-birding partner, it wasn't something we invested in, and I'm sure most people visiting would take the plunge (and rightly so – by all accounts it's out of this world).

However, despite not visiting the delta proper, I was thoroughly impressed with the birding and had an excellent time. As alluded to earlier, birding infrastructure is nigh-on non-existent, but it's not hard to find a real wealth of birdlife. The variety of species I saw reflected the dynamism of the habitats: vast reedbeds, saltmarsh, beaches, steppe, arable farmland, mountain, mature woodland, wood pasture etc ... it had it all. The abundance of species compared with Western Europe, including esteemed places like Andalusia and Provence, is notable too.

Being the end of May, passage was pretty much done and some breeders were already sitting. A trip in early to mid-May would doubtless yield an even greater list. Also, it was clear there had been little recent rain with little standing water and some pools even drying up during the course of our stay.

In a similar vein to some of my previous reports, I will concentrate chiefly on birding sites. Feel free to contact me at edward.stubbs41@gmail.com if you have any question. Photography opportunities are excellent and I've posted several on my blog (godalmingareabirds.blogspot.com).

Transport, accommodation and weather

We hired a car with Thrifty and collected it from Bucharest Henri Coandă International Airport. Despite landing at a heinous time, the staff were friendly and helpful. The journey east to the Black Sea was straightforward, with a cheap toll near Constanța. Roads in rural Romania were mixed at best. Some were fine, others absolutely wretched, including some larger ones.

Our accommodation played a big part in the enjoyment of the week. We situated ourselves in the fishing town of Jurilovca, situated centrally to the better birding areas. We found the Lake House on booking.com – for £40 between us a night, we had an entire house with kitchen, WiFi, bathroom etc.

However, best of all was the simply magical view from our extended patio and garden. The lagoons and reedbeds picture below held some 72 species during the week, including daily sightings of both pelican species, Whiskered Terns, Great Reed Warblers, Collared Pratincoles, Little Bittern and Ferruginous Duck (that selection is just the tip of the iceberg though!). Indeed, most of the best

wetland birding came from the patio, where nesting Tree Sparrows and White Wagtails provided much entertainment. I can't recommend the house enough.

The weather was pleasant all week, in the mid-20s and sunny.

Literature

There's little to go on. Gosney (1994!) is out of date and I didn't even use it. Gorman's *Birding in Eastern Europe* (2006) is OK for general information but lacks detail. So, it was down to Cloudbirders reports: five were most useful – Boswell (2017), Crouch (2014), Richardson (2017), Vebruggen (2015) and Vermeulen (2009). eBird data is lacking in Romania.

Sites

Histria

Considered one of the best sites on the Black Sea, unfortunately Histria was desperately dry and the only remaining pools were distant and tricky to view. Doubtless this is a far better site a few weeks earlier in the season. We did have a flock of Red-footed Falcons here. The bridge between Lacul Nuntași and Lacul Histria at 44.535201, 28.727588 is well-known for showy Paddyfield Warblers but, while easy here, we found them far more cooperative at other sites.

Jurilovca/Capul Dolosman

The reedbeds and lagoons at Jurilovca, as well as the headland at Capul Dolosman, were excellent. While we had the benefit of a panoramic view of the water from our house, they are easy to access by car/foot – take Strada Portului south towards the fishing port and take the track east at 44.754561, 28.875959. From here, you can take tracks/pathed banks south and/or east within the lagoons and reedbeds. Plenty of species can be seen here: Whiskered Tern, Collared Pratincole, both pelican species, Ferruginous Duck, Purple Heron, Night-heron and Great Reed Warbler were daily fixtures, with Little Bittern and Spotted Crake (at night) also logged.

To the east of Jurilovca, Capul Dolosman offers an easy drive through scrub and farmland, with the lagoons and reeds also viewable. Many of the above species were recorded, along with Booted Eagle and Lesser Grey Shrike. Simply follow the road east from 44.760198, 28.884212 to the headland (which is probably good for migrants in suitable conditions).

Sinoe Lagoon area

Sinoe Lagoon is huge and not really viewable – it's smaller, sheltered lagoons to the west that are most productive here; indeed, the drive from Sinoe to the pools was one of the most bird-filled of the trip. It's a tricky spot to find but Boswell and Vebruggen both offer good directions. An annotated version follows:

From Sinoe, take the track east at 44.626792, 28.743839 and prepare for potholes! The stretch of farmland, all viewable from the car, between here and the peak of the hill at 44.627357, 28.802966 is excellent with Black-headed Buntings, Stone-curlews, Calandra Larks, Collared Pratincoles, Isabelline Wheatears and Marsh Warblers all seen well.

The track slopes down and bends through a Bee-eater colony, before driving through reedbeds either side of the road. Here we had superb views of up to eight Paddyfield Warblers – specifically around 44.620764, 28.806987 was very productive. A little further on you can scan the pools and lagoons for the first time. In early May 2017 Boswell had hundreds of passage waders; I had none!

Keep on east and, at the junction, make sure you take the furthest south track at 44.619432, 28.811667. Then turn right at the fork at 44.617944, 28.810780, before driving northwest then southwest through the reed cutting area. You can then take your car as far as you fancy adjacent to the pools and lagoon (morning is best, with the sun behind you).

As mentioned, we missed out on waders but, away from breeding colonies in the Danube Delta, this has to be the easiest site in spring/summer/autumn for Pallas's Gull in Romania (and thus one of the easiest sites in the EU). Previous reports had success here in the large gull roost and it was the same for us – three birds, a first-summer and two-second summers. They were distant and heat haze didn't help, along with the fact we approached on foot. However, if you aren't visiting the delta, this is the place to see this species. Also here was a Caspian Tern, many Caspian Gulls and Great White Pelicans.

Lacul Saraturii/Lacul Plopul/Lacul Murighiol

These large lagoons are closer to the delta and naturally have more birds. Lacul Plopul was completely dry during our visit but is said to be good. Lacul Murighiol was best viewed from the rack west of Murighiol town at 45.049222, 29.152864, along which there are various pull-ins. It was a bit disappointing though, with few herons/egrets and no Pygmy Cormorants.

Lacul Sărăturii however was heaving with birds, chiefly nesting Caspian Gulls and Common Terns, but also breeding Black-winged Stilts, Black-necked Grebes and Avocets. The bird tower was locked during our visit, but it was easy to view from the south shore (park on the road and walk north). The two smaller laculs to the east of the 222D (Lacul Sărat and an unnamed other one by the road) held a few ducks, including Red-crested Pochard and Ferruginous Duck, along with Stone-curlew on the slopes above.

Măcin mountains

A fine spot, and while we dipped Levant Sparrowhawk plenty of other species made the visit worthwhile. On the 22D towards Măcin, take a right onto a track at 45.235140, 28.158018. Continue until one of a few crossroads, this one at 45.245968, 28.183803. Take a right until you reach 45.242865, 28.186291, then head up the track until approximately 45.244301, 28.191678 where you can park.

This whole area is excellent and it's fairly obvious where to explore. By taking the path north (adjacent to the stream) and climbing up you move through semi-riparian woodland, then scrub and finally rocky outcrops. We had a singing Rock Thrush, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, plenty of Ortolan Buntings, Hawfinch, Syrian Woodpecker, Thrush Nightingale and Honey and Long-legged Buzzards. The site is known for Levant Sparrowhawk, but we had none.

Fântâna Mare

The mature woodland here was productive despite a brief stop. Turn south on the 223A at 44.900037, 28.505661 on the road to Fântâna Mare. There are several pull-ins and tracks; we had several Icterine and Wood Warblers and the only Wryneck of the trip, while others have seen Middle and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers here.

Enisala area

This was disappointing, with the main marsh/reedbed hard to view. Your best bet is seemingly to park at 44.884541, 28.819457 to the west of Enisala Safari Village and scope the mud.

Slava Rusa

The road between Babadag and Slava Rusă is cited as a productive one and, while we didn't see much of note, it's worth going through if heading to Măcin due to the abundance of birds.

Cogealac-Grădina road (Bunting Byway)

In an attempt to shortcut to Cheia we drove this aggressively potholed road between two villages, and it inadvertently turned out to be one of the most enjoyable half-hours of birding all trip!

Without getting out the car, a 2.3 mile drive starting at the bridge southwest of Cogealac (roughly 44.553708, 28.541817, with a Little Owl perched on the top to boot), featured no fewer than 3 Ortolan, 16 Black-headed and 36 Corn Buntings (all singing). The farmland wasn't unlike any other but the abundance of roadside perches meant great views could be obtained.

We also had both Icterine and Marsh Warbler, Tawny Pipit, four lark species (including six Calandra), many Bee-eaters and Rollers and 18 Red-backed Shrikes. In summary, well worth driving along early morning.

Cheia gorge

This well-known Pied Wheatear site is a good spot for a couple of hours of birding. For the wheatears, on approach to the gorge from Cheia park at 44.507632, 28.430710 by the river. The obvious gorge just to the west had three birds, with plenty of Rollers nearby too. Alternatively one can park at 44.499311, 28.423664 and walk north, with this southern area of the site having Booted Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard overhead, Tawny Pipit and – in the woods – Turtle Doves, Golden Orioles and Syrian Woodpeckers.