

ROMANIA 26-31 DECEMBER 2015

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INTRODUCTION

Having wanted to see flocks of wintering Red-breasted Geese for a few years I had anticipated visiting Bulgaria until a Naturetrek newsletter advertising a Christmas trip to Romania encouraged me to investigate an alternative option. Gerard Gorman's excellent **Birding in Eastern Europe** indicated that seeing the geese in late December should be possible and looking at an Ornitholidays' trip report from December 2008 on www.cloudbirders.com indicated the same. The report can be found at <http://www.ornitholidays.co.uk/tourreports/Romania%20Dec%202008.pdf>.

The cost of the trip would have come out at less than £500 much cheaper than the £1395 that Naturetrek were charging although I picked up an additional cost to replace a damaged tyre.

The trip was very easy to do with good accommodation and food throughout and easy travel although some back roads are badly pot-holed and I will certainly go back at other times of the year as the area looks fantastic.

I saw all the species I wanted to see including three groups of Red-breasted Goose. Greater White-fronted Geese were common but the mild temperatures, 14C when I first arrived had probably resulted in lower numbers than normal. The winter had been very mild although temperatures suddenly dropped on 30th December and it was -7C when I left Constanta on the morning of the 31st.

FLIGHTS

I flew from London to Bucharest on Boxing Day for £105. It would have been £60 higher with checked luggage but the hand luggage allowances on BA were more than adequate.

CAR HIRE

I hired a car through Holiday Autos www.holidayautos.co.uk with Hertz at a rate of £75 although there was an additional charge of 38 euros plus 24% tax for the late night pick up and a set of winter tyres which are mandatory in winter in Romania. The car was an Opel Corsa but could have been in better condition it had over 104,000 kms on the clock.

ACCOMMODATION

Hotels were pre-booked on www.bookings.com. Staff at all three hotels spoke English and those at the Hotel Nevada in Constanta were particularly useful.

- Bucharest – Avis Boutique Hotel Bucharesti. 40 euros for one night. An easy 15 minute drive from the airport which was useful giving the late night arrival
- Tulcea – Motel Corsar. 20 euros per night. Just west of Tulcea on the road to Braila. There is a large lake directly opposite the motel. I did not eat in the motel restaurant although there is an excellent restaurant, again with English speaking staff about a kilometre back towards Tulcea.
- Constanta – Hotel Nevada. 36 euros per night. Again conveniently positioned near the major routes through Constanta with an excellent restaurant on site.

SITES

Details of all the sites visited can be found in Gerard Gorman's **Birding in Eastern Europe** which I used alongside the Michelin Romania Motoring and tourist map, plus copies of a few more detailed maps from googlemaps. In hindsight I should have printed off more detailed googlemaps showing more of the driveable tracks etc. The ground was fairly dry so driving tracks was not too much of a problem although even in the car the geese were largely unapproachable. The following notes supplement the details in Gerard's book.

Note: in some cases the names in Gerard's book are spelt differently to the names on the Michelin map, on googlemaps or on the road signs and they seem to vary between maps as well.

- **Lake Hasarlac** (page 209) – I drove past this lake on route to Tulcea on the first day only stopping for a couple of minutes but still saw Pygmy Cormorant and Dalmatian Pelican.
- **Razelm Lagoon** (page 207) – I covered the hinterland of the lagoon several times and found the best approach to be to take the 222C east from Tulcea to Murighiol and then drive south towards Plopul. The turn in Murighiol is not obvious driving from Tulcea but is on the right c.100 metres after the sharp right turn in Murighiol. The lake between Murgihiol and Plopul held large numbers of geese. In addition the fields behind the lake at Plopul itself held massive flocks of distant geese. The lake itself is a known drinking site for geese including Red-breasted but disturbance from hunters stopped them from doing so during my visit. However the lake did produce a single Dalmatian Pelicana and White-tailed Eagle. A few kilometres further on just before Sarinasuf was good for a wide variety of waterbirds including Dalmatian Pelican and 17 White-tailed Eagles. Further south-west, particularly around the village of Iazurile there were large numbers of Greater White-fronted Geese. The waterfront at Sarichioi held small numbers of Pygmy Cormorant.
- **Babadag** (page 207) – The marshes below the village of Enisala held several Pygmy Cormorants and a Grey-headed Woodpecker was roosting over the road south towards Jurilovca.
- **Lake Ceamurlia** (page 208) – The fields between Lunca and Ceamurlia de Jos held groups of c.10 and 100+ Red-breasted Goose, mixed in with large flocks of Greater White-fronted Goose along with Rough-legged Buzzard. Further east between Visina and Lunca 17 Cranes were found in fields near the Lunca Holiday Resort, and further west there were 13 Ruddy Shelducks between Ceamurlia de Jos and Baia. A White-tailed Eagle was seen near Lunca.
- **Sinole Lagoon** (page 210) – I couldn't find any reasonable driveable tracks down to the lagoon so only visited this area fleetingly.
- **Istria** (page 211) – The area down to Histria ruins is not as exciting in winter as Gerard describes in summer but Lake Istria held a flock of 20 Dalmatian Pelicans while Lake Nuntasi held Black-necked Grebe and a number of commoner ducks. The road towards Nuntasi village held Rough-legged Buzzard. The best area however was the fields between Lake Nuntasi and the village of Sacale to the south. These held big flocks of geese including at least 250 Red-breasted Geese plus c.135 Whooper Swans. There were a number of driveable tracks but the geese were extremely jumpy so a cautious approach is essential for good views. Note the flocks were most visible when driving north from Sacale. They could easily have been missed driving south from Istria.
- **Cheia** (page 211) – I visited this area as a break from wetland birding but it was bitterly cold and I returned to the car after 10 minutes. As Gerard says it's quiet in winter with Green Sandpiper

and Buzzard the only birds seen but it looks like an excellent site for other times of year. Driving west into Gradina from Cogealac on route to Cheia produced a flock of at least 60 Calandra Larks.

- **Lake Tasaul** (page 212) – I spent time at dusk looking for flights of geese along the west shore just south-west of Sibioara and also looking around the fields between here and the airport to the west without success. I also visited the north-west of the lake near the village of Piatra. In hindsight I don't think I was actually in the village of Piatra but at a smaller village nearby but Pygmy Cormorants were common along with a number of commoner birds but again this is probably a site best visited at other times of the year.

ITINERARY

- 26th** Late arrival Bucharest and drove to nearby Avis Hotel arriving at 0045 on 27th.
- 27th** Morning drove east towards Constanta before driving north towards Slobozia and then NE to Tulcea with a fleeting stop at Lake Hasarlac. Afternoon birding east of Tulcea along 222C particularly between Murighiol and Plopul and Plopul and Sarinasuf.
- 28th** Drove south towards Babadag and birded sites around Razelm Lagoon and Laguna Sinoie and Histria, concentrating particularly on areas between Baia and Ceamurlia de Jos and Lunca and Ceamurlia de Jos.
- 29th** Morning east from Tulcea concentrating on areas between Murighiol and Sarinasuf. Continued south after geese flocks near Plopul were disturbed by hunters. Spent time exploring Agrihiol area and then the area between Lunca and Ceamurlia de Jos before finishing the day at Histria before driving to Constanta for night.
- 30th** Morning around Lake Tasaul and in area between Sacele and Histria before driving inland to explore the almost bird-less Cheia Gorge. Returned to west side of Lake Tasaul included marshes in NW corner near Piatra. Returned to Constanta picking up a bad puncture in Constanta on route to the hotel
- 31st** Replaced punctured tyre in Constanta and had slow drive back to Bucharest for afternoon flight back to London.

BIRDS OF INTEREST

Black-necked Grebe	Five Histria
Pygmy Cormorant	One Lake Hasarlac, seven Sarichioi, eight Enisala and c.20 in NW corner of Lake Tasaul.
Dalmatian Pelican	One Lake Hasarlac, four Sarinasuf, one Plopul and 20 Histria.
Ruddy Shelduck	13 Ceamurlia de Jos
Red-breasted Goose	28 th – 10+ between Lunca and Ceamurlia de Jos, 29 th – 100+ between Lunca and Ceamurlia de Jos, 30 th – 250+ between Histria and Sacele. All with big flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese. Other large distant flocks of White-fronts may well have held more Red-breasted Geese.
Whooper Swan	c.30 near Agrihiol and c.135 between Histria and Sacale. Other distant flocks in fields may also have been Whoopers but Mute Swan was the only species seen on the lakes and lagoons often in high numbers.
White-tailed Eagle	17 Sarinasuf and singles Plopul and Lunca.
Rough-legged Buzzard	Singles east of Jurilovca, between Lunca and Ceamurlia de Jos and Nuntasi and a probable south of Mihai Bravu.
Long-legged Buzzard	Singles Cucurova, Catoloi, Agighiol and Cogealac.

Hen Harrier	Male Cucurova and a total of two males and six females at sites around the Danube Delta lagoons.
Crane	17 between Lunca and Visina.
Great Black-headed Gull	10+ Sarinasuf
Grey-headed Woodpecker	One roosting over the road SE of Enisala.
Calandra Lark	60+ Gradina

OTHER BIRDS

Cormorant	White-fronted Goose	Collared Dove
Great Egret	Buzzard	Little Owl
Little Egret	Marsh Harrier	Great-spotted Woodpecker
Grey Heron	Sparrowhawk	Skylark
Mallard	Kestrel	Blue Tit
Gadwall	Coot	Great Tit
Teal	Lapwing	Starling
Wigeon	Curlew	Magpie
Shoveler	Dunlin	Jay
Pintail	Green Sandpiper	Rook
Pochard	Mediterranean Gull	Hooded Crow
Tufted Duck	Black-headed Gull	Jackdaw
Goldeneye	Common Gull	Chaffinch
Shelduck	Yellow-legged Gull	Goldfinch
Mute Swan	Caspian Gull	Reed Bunting
Greylag Goose		

MAMMALS

Brown Hare	One Histria
Red Fox	One Saligny
Golden Jackal	One freshly dead a few metres from the road c.5 kms south of Mihai Viteuza,
Western Polecat	One dead on A2 on outskirts of Bucharest.