

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 catching 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 is one of Limosa's newest offerings to Romania and is designed in order to explore the Carpathian Mountains for Birds and Brown Bears in early spring. Very few such tours are available exploring this unspoilt part of Europe and the main focus of this short break is to see and study Brown Bears just after the winter hibernation and to explore the local birdlife and find some migrants too.

We had a wonderful four days of birding here and, despite the cold weather the group encountered 113 bird species (three heard only) plus eight Brown Bears seen pretty well from a special hide, all in a daytime light! Those who had a better camera could take many nice pictures of the Bears' behaviour too. Our daily routine was birding until early afternoon with lunch in the field; then we went back to the accommodation for some extra clothes and left again to visit the Brown Bear hides, where we stayed until dusk. While we waited for the Bears, always something would happen in the feeding area: for example, a nice young Goshawk came to hunt Stock Doves and Wood Pigeons.

Every spring is a bit different here in the Carpathian Mountains and this year was a bit unusual in that even during the tour snow was forecast. Above 1400 metres the Carpathian Mountains were still snow covered due to the fresh falls from earlier in April. Because of this situation we could not visit the higher elevation habitats, but even so we managed to find most of the high-altitude targets. We were especially proud to find all 10 of the European woodpecker species within this short time of birding. The highlights of the tour was the 'Woodpecker Forest' where we saw six species of woodpeckers in a very nice oak woodland; then the second most memorable moment was a mother Bear with two young cubs in front of the hide.

Day 1 - Thursday 16th April

At Bucharest Airport we all met in the arrivals hall late in the afternoon, so we only had time birding on the road to the accommodation. From Bucharest we travelled northeast, crossed the Carpathian Mountains then reached the basin called Transylvania, where almost every village had a White Stork nest.

Around 9 o'clock we reached our hotel, had a nice dinner then went to sleep. We must mention that the accommodation we used is a family-run hotel and Magor and her mother Csilla did a very nice job and all the time served us a very tasty local food and 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. Black Redstart, Blue Tit, Goldcrest, Firecrest, Jay and Raven were seen too.

After a very nice breakfast we started the morning in a coniferous woodland just 30 minutes' drive from our accommodation. On the way we saw Great Grey Shrike, Fieldfares, Common Buzzard, Mistle Thrush, while in the forest birds like Firecrest, Goldcrest, Crested Tit, Coal Tit, Willow Tit and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. We decided to travel a bit higher in hope of finding Three-toed Woodpecker, but our attempt was unsuccessful 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 area in time and drove down to the Ghiurghiu basin where the spring was much further ahead than the mountains: we found a superb Lesser Spotted Eagle sitting on the ground and probably gathering nest material. Surprisingly it stayed long enough to be seen with 'scope too. Just before lunch we arrived the Bicaz Gorge area to find another superb bird in the breeding territory - Wallcreeper.

We had a nice lunch first than back to the Wallcreeper spot where we saw two birds well. Other species in the area were Alpine Swift, Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Raven and Kestrel. It was time to start driving back to the hotel and plan the afternoon Bear Hide program. We had focussed on the closest valley to our lodgings, where we had two hides in two different places. We visited both places and in the end five Bears were seen. It was good to see the smiling faces during the dinner!

Day 3 - Saturday 18th April

Today the weather was quite 'British', with overcast skies and light rain. We had the usual nice cooked breakfast then decided to visit the closest city park - more like a nice arboretum - in the rainy morning. When we arrived, almost immediately a pair of Syrian Woodpeckers were spotted and followed by Fieldfares, Mistle Thrush, Collared Flycatcher, Pied Flycatcher, Spotted Flycatcher, Wood Warbler, Black Redstart, Lesser Whitethroat and Long-tailed Tit. We all agreed it had been a nice start of the day; "unfortunately" (!) the rain had stopped and we could continue the program visiting a very nice ancient oak woodland area, just an hour from the city park.

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

We decided to warm up in the vehicle and take our picnic lunch and have a coffee. After a while it was time to leave this wonderful place, but before we left tried for a White-backed Woodpecker one more time. We had a chance to see this rare species here too and within a couple of minutes a male responded to a call from the beech woodland and came into view. Seven species of woodpecker in a morning was not too bad, so we headed back to the accomodation and tried the Bear hides too. In the end we saw only one Bear but this day remained as one of the best days of the trip.

Day 4 - Sunday 19th April

Pre-breakfast birding centred round the accomodation with the usual Common and Black Redstarts, Firecrests and Jays. Today was cold and windy so we went back earlier for a hot coffee and herbal tea.

Our first stop after breakfast was in a mature coniferous woodland not so far from the accommodation. Amongst the first birds we spotted were two Nutcrackers and a Crested Tit. Deeper in the forest, drumming was heard and soon we found then watched a Three-toed Woodpecker drumming from the top of a dead tree snag. We watched it well for a long time while it often changed position and realised that it had no yellow on the forehead. Looking like a female we had to ask do females use drumming as well? [Ed: Yes. Male and female Three-toed Woodpeckers are known to drum]. Anyway, it was a nice find and our woodpecker list had now grown to eight species. In this nice mature woodland we saw more Crested Tits, Willow Tits, Coal Tits, Treecreeper and Bullfinches.

Our second stop was after lunch at the Sanpaul fishponds, hoping to find some wetland birds and migrants. Right out in the small lakes we found our first Ferruginous Ducks, then on the dried, muddy lakes Ruffs, Wood Sandpiper, Dunlin and Little Ringed Plovers. Two Lesser Spotted Eagles were feeding on an area of meadow together with seven White Storks. At the evening Bear Hides we saw four Bears, amongst them a mother with two cubs! In the end everybody had seen this maternal scene during the daytime. Excellent!

Day 5 - Tuesday 20th April

Sadly, our last day of the tour. Luckily the BA flight back to London was late in the afternoon so we had time to visit several birding places before we reached Bucharest at 15.00. Today the weather was

cold again so we skipped the pre-breakfast birding and simply started the post-breakfast day earlier. First stop was at Odorhei park hoping to find Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and the first Wrynecks of the season. Right in the car park area and the first bird we found was a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker feeding on a thin branch very close to us. What a surprise, not bad at least, so we went deeper to the park and finally found two Wrynecks feeding on the ground. We were pleased to have seen all 10 European Woodpeckers during the tour!

Next stop was at Sanpaul fishpond area but the weather was so windy we could only spend a short period of time here. In a sheltered area we found Pygmy Cormorants, Garganey, Ferruginous Duck and Mediterranean Gull. A male Citrine Wagtail flew over our heads; Great Bittern, Bearded Tit and Water Rail were destined to be 'heard only' species. The picnic lunch stop was planned to be while we crossed the Carpathian Mountains. We stopped in a sheltered and wonderful place with great visibility of the Bucegi Natural Park. From this wonderful site we could see the snowy peaks in 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 on the trees and on a nearby wet meadow.

From this point we drove straight to Bucharest Airport. I hope that you all enjoyed the tour: certainly luck seemed to be with us as we found some fabulous birds and bears. It was a pleasure to see you all getting on so well and 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 *Ichthyaetos 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

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 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*

One of the highlights of the tour. We saw a couple at Bicz Gorge area on 17th

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

Serín *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 hides. No doubt the highlight was the mother and two cubs seen on 19th

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