

TRANSYLVANIA EXTENSION 2014
with SAKERTOURS
24-28 May 2014



One of the bigger Brown Bears encountered on this trip (Simay Gábor)

Leader: Simay Gábor

This was the very first time when our Danube Delta – Dobrudja tour had an extension to Transylvania. After an eight days trip to the Delta area we travelled from Bucharest to the Southern Carpathians and we spent three and a half day (plus one day travelling) among the beautiful mountains of Transylvania.

Definitely the main aim of this trip was not to see the biggest possible number of species but rather to add to the long list made in the Delta at least a few mountain specialties and to see Carpathian Brown Bears. Still we managed to see 104 species of birds during this short tour which raised the total number for the whole trip to 205 species (173 seen in the Delta).

We managed to fulfil both of our aims as we did see some of the Carpathian specialties and also we had two amazing encounters in two different evenings with four Brown Bears. All of the bears were seen exceptionally well from a close range from hides designed for the Sakertour guests.

Weather-wise we could have mixed feelings as though most of the time we had nice and sunny but not too hot weather, at least in two days heavy rains made bird watching impossible for a few hours.

Saturday, 24th of May

After the very successful trip to Dobrudja and the Danube Delta we drove with those who decided to join us to the Transylvania extension trip to Sinaia which is at the heart of the Southern Carpathian Mountains near the big town of Brasov. From Sinaia we took a small road winding up to a hotel, located at the elevation of 1400 m above sea level. At this level we found nice spruce forests and just a few hundred meters below beautiful beach woods which made bird habitats even more diverse.

First we checked in our hotel and right after it started to rain quite heavily. It had made us to stay in the hotel and had a cup of tea and a little talk before the sun came out again. Though it was late in the afternoon we still had some time to visit the surrounding spruce forest. Here we had good views of many Common Crossbills in different plumages (juvenile, red males and also females). Crested, Willow and Coal Tits were relatively common around and also a couple of Firecrests were seen well. So activity was very good here, however, as we drove further down to the elevation of beech trees, we found very silent forest with only a few freshly fledged Nuthatches.

It was already quite late, so we drove back to our hotel and we walked a bit upward to the edge of the spruce forest where we found the *alpestris* race of the Ring Ouzel. A male was continuously singing from the top of a tree, giving us superb walkaway views. It was a nice finish of the day and we walked back to our hotel to have our supper and have a good rest before the next day which seemed to be a long and action packed one...

Sunday, 25th of May

Early in the morning, before breakfast, we drove down short distances and stopped here and there and took short walks beside good forests. We saw most of the species recorded here on the previous day, a Black Woodpecker, Lesser Whitethroat and two Honey Buzzards. Further down we had great views of a singing male Collared Flycatcher. This was the place where we heard some Song Thrushes mobbing something inside the forest. We checked the place and we flushed an Ural Owl. We followed it and it led us to the whole family with fledged and well flying juveniles (four of them) which were sitting around us on the high beech trees. Wonderful start of the day!

We went back to the hotel, where we had some breakfast and we walked up to a nearby cable car station. The cable car took us above tree level. On the grassy slopes of the Bucsecs Mountains it was coldish and a bit windy and even some snow patches were here and there on the northern slopes. Water Pipits were common even around the station and we saw several singing and display flying. We took a short walk from here and not very far we found a few Shore Larks on the grass. One of them was very confident so we had really great and close views of it. The very distinct *balcanica* race is a scarce breeder mostly in the remote areas of the Southern-Carpathians.

It was time to walk back to the cable car station as big clouds were gathering down in the valley. Around our hotel we had lunch in a nearby restaurant and then we started our four hours drive to Zetelaka where we spent the following three nights.

Big showers followed us till we left the high mountainous region but the weather became sunny and actually warm when we reached the wide valleys of Transylvania. Here we had a few Lesser Spotted Eagles. This species has probably its biggest stronghold here, in the lower mountain regions of the Carpathians.



Shore Lark race *balcanica* (Simay Gábor)

We also saw a couple of Red-backed and a Great Grey Shrike and a quick stop provided very close up views of a few singing Marsh Warblers. We also had another quick stop at Homoródszentpál and we had a short glimpse at the nearby small fishponds. We saw here a Whinchat and beside some common water bird we had some Whiskered and many Black Terns.



A smaller Brown Bear (Simay Gábor)

At this point we really had to hurry as – though we were close to our hotel – we did want to try on our first evening to see one of the prime targets of the trip, and of course evening is far the best part of the day to see Brown Bears.

We checked in to our hotel and our local friend, who maintains and manages our local bear hides, picked us up and we drove directly to the location. From the car we had to walk a bit uphill, and then we reached our comfortable wooden hide. At the beginning only a couple of birds were around, among them two nice Stock Doves. However suddenly a middle sized – probably five years old bear – came out from the forest and spent plenty of time in front of us, before a much bigger female bear arrived. It was a magnificent sighting just from about 30 meters away. Just before dark we returned to our hotel and though we were a bit tired after this long day we were also glad as we did see some nice bird species and for some of us Brown Bear was one of the target species of the trip.

Monday, 26th of May

In the morning it was sunny and it was actually quite warm. After breakfast we drove towards the Békás Gorge where we hoped to see Wallcreeper. Around our hotel we saw some Common Redstart and a Green Woodpecker, and from the van we managed to spot an Ural Owl which disappeared quite soon in the dark forest. Our first longer stop was a spruce forest by the road where we tried to find Three-toed Woodpecker which is notoriously hard to find this time of the year. Especially this year which had an unusually warm spring and thus woodpeckers had laid their eggs much earlier than expected. This resulted in a much earlier fledging date – so woodpecker-wise the forest was absolutely silent, despite we found many traces of them on trunks of the conifers. Otherwise the forest hosted most of the commoner forest birds and we had some Bullfinches and Hawfinches here also and a nice Lesser Spotted Eagle and Eurasian Hobby as well.



Wallcreeper (Simay Gábor)

After about an hour driving we reached the magnificent and huge rock walls of the gorge. One might think that it is impossible to find such a small bird on a cliff like this. Fortunately Wallcreepers have their favourite locations here and sometimes they do come down to the bottom of the valley. When we parked the car, soon a bird was seen flying away close to the cliff. Though it disappeared very quickly, some of us managed to identify it as a Wallcreeper. Of course we were not satisfied with this kind of view so some of us settled down to the best view point while others were walking around and we hoped we will have another chance. Around the fast flowing stream Grey Wagtails and Black Redstarts were common, and also a Dipper was seen well. In the air beside Common Swifts lone or smaller groups of Alpine Swifts appeared regularly. Patient however prized us eventually as the Wallcreeper was eventually found coming down from the cliff. After we collected the whole group every one had close and long views of this beauty as it was feeding along the small holes on the cliff's surface.

It was already time to have lunch in a nearby restaurant. Nearby we found some tracks of Three-toed Woodpecker but this time it was raining so heavily that it was impossible to do any serious search around. As we were driving away fortunately we left behind the clouds. We stopped in a wide valley where we saw many Common Cuckoos as they were drying their wings on electric wires, a Woodlark and a nice Garden Warbler. After a while we recognised the typical song of the Common Rosefinch from the distance. We could not find our way towards the bird but not far from here we found another male which perched up to the top of a nearby tree so we had great views of it.



Lesser Spotted Eagle (Simay Gábor)

In the afternoon we wanted to visit another small river where Thrush Nightingales breed. We heard one readily around our first stop however it proved to be too shy and stayed in the middle of a dense bushy area. Definitely it was a bit too late in the spring as just a bit earlier

they are much easier to see. At another spot we heard a few singing again but they behaved exactly the same way as the previous bird. However here, with some persistence we managed to have a few glimpse of the bird flying among the bushes. A nice surprise was a flock of Rose-colored Startling gathering and feeding on the cicadas on the nearby willow trees. At least a hundred birds were moving around which were seen very well.

Though it was almost dark when we arrived to a town park, we had still enough light to find many Collared Flycatchers here. When it was completely dark we heard a Scops Owl from an old tree, but it stayed inside its hole. A bit later though it was singing from outside clearly and soon we found it sitting in a small tree. With our spot light we had great views of it as it perched for us for one or two minutes. A distant Corncrake was heard also, before we went back to our nearby hotel.

Tuesday, 27th of May

Today we wanted to do once again some bird watching in the higher mountains in the spruce forest level where we hoped to find some more species typical to this type of woods. So we chose the Hargita Mountains to start the day which was about an hour drive up on a small winding road. On a small track we walked well into the forest. Firecrests, Willow and Crested Tits, Common Crossbills and a Ring Ouzel among others were seen well and in general bird activity was good around. Suddenly we heard a big bird's fast wing beats which were immediately recognised, that it must belong to a Capercaillie. Few of us even had a glimpse of a female bird. We walked further and we were lucky enough to see most probably the same bird about a hundred meters away. It took fly from a high perch but it was flying relatively slowly across the road just in front of us. We were very much satisfied with this view as outside the lekking period it is a very though one to see.

We walked a bit further which proved to be a good decision. At one point from we wanted to turn back we had a little rest and we were listening if we can pick up some more interesting song or call. And we did as we recognised the soft whistles of a Eurasian Pygmy Owl. It was not very far and eventually we could find it hiding in a dense conifer. However, later it perched to the top of a spruce tree where we had wonderful views of it.



Eurasian Pygmy Owl mobbed by a Chiffchaff (Simay Gábor)

While we were approaching our van we noted the very odd calls of a group of Nutcrackers. We walked into the forest and some of us found a whole family of them. When the whole group managed to relocate the site, only one bird was still there. It was a first year bird, which was very tame and provided us walkaway views. This bird is a common one in the surrounding woods, however in the breeding season it is very shy and usually silent.



Juvenile Nutcracker (Simay Gábor)

We had lunch back in our hotel. Some of us saw a few Alpine Swifts high in the air – an unusual sight away from their breeding site. In the afternoon we wanted to try once more the forest for Three-toed Woodpecker. During our way we had some heavy rain, but our birding spot was dry. Raptors were active and we had three Honey Buzzards, a Lesser Spotted Eagle and a Eurasian Hobby here. However, woodpecker-wise the forest was just as silent as it was the day before. We heard a distant Pygmy Owl here as well and we saw some of the more widespread forest birds, but woodpeckers eluded us this time.

The whole group was keen on to return to the bear hide for the last evening with the hope we would manage to see an even bigger one. Already when we entered the hide a middle sized bear was in front of us. A Red Fox later joined it and it was interesting to see this two species side by side, none of them bothered by the other at all. They were neglecting each other; however the bear didn't neglect something else. Suddenly it became aware of something, sharply looking around and suddenly it started to run, just exactly when, from the other direction a huge dark Brown Bear arrived running towards the small one. For the big one it was enough to see the small one away from the food resource so it settled down in front of us for a while. As dark was approaching the bear walked away and as nothing were moving around we walked back to our car as well. It was fantastic to see these creatures and study their behaviour and even see some action, so we agreed it was well worth to return.



A big bear seen on our last evening (Simay Gábor)

Tuesday, 28th of May

Unfortunately today we had no chance for bird watching as we had to start our drive to the airport very early. At the airport we said goodbye to each other.

Thanks to all who participated in the first extension tour to Transylvania. We had some really special moments and some great views of birds and other wildlife surrounded by a beautiful landscape.



Bucsecs Mountains (Simay Gábor)

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus*: One female was seen on the 27th in the forest of the Hargita mountains. First only some of us had a quick view of it but soon the whole group had nice – though short - flight view of it.

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*: Recorded only on one day.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: It was recorded only on one day.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*: It was seen on the 25th at the fish ponds.

Great White Egret *Egretta alba*: A couple of them were seen on the 25th at the fish ponds.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: Small numbers were seen on the 25th at the fish ponds.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*: In the valleys we saw plenty of nests in villages and also the adults around.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*: We recorded it only on the 25th.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: Two birds were seen on two different dates.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*: Quite common during the extension tour.

European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*: All together we saw five individuals during these four days.

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*: Not rare at all in the Carpathians and we had good views of them several times during the trip.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: A few were seen during the trip.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*: We saw lone individuals three times.

Corncrake *Crex crex* (H): We heard one bird calling in the dark from the center of a town, what was a bit unusual record.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*: A few birds were seen at the fish ponds on the 25th.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*: We recorded them only around the fish ponds on the 25th.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*: Only two birds were seen at the fish ponds on the 25th.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*: A flock of 20 birds were seen feeding above the water at the fish ponds on the 25th.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*: A common resident throughout the tour.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*: A few birds were seen but they were seen well only around the bear hide.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*: Fairly common.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: Very common in the villages.

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*: We recorded it only on one day.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*: It was recorded every day but surprisingly lot were seen after a rain when they perched out to dry themselves.

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*: We had fantastic views on our first morning of a family with well flying young. Next day another bird was seen shortly.

European Scops Owl *Otus scops*: We had very good views of one in the lights of our spot light just from a few meters.

Eurasian Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium passerinum*: One was heard on the first night from the hotel by some of us during the night. One was seen extremely well on the 27th and another one was heard on the same afternoon.

Common Swift *Apus apus*: Several flocks were seen at different locations.

Alpine Swift *Apus melba*: A localised breeding species around. They were seen well on two occasions in small numbers.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*: One bird was seen above the small river while we were searching for Thrush Nightingales.

European Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*: We saw one or two around our hotel.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*: One was seen around our first hotel.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*: Woodpeckers were silent generally during this trip and thus we saw only a few of this otherwise common species.

Wood Lark *Lullula arborea*: One was seen sitting on a wire on the 26th.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*: A few were heard or seen on the first two days of the trip.

Shore Lark *Eremophila alpestris*: Very good views of the localised race *baclanica* at high elevation on the 25th.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: A common bird throughout the trip.

Common House Martin *Delichon urbica*: We recorded every day in villages and twons.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*: We heard a few singing in the Hargita Mountains.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*: A common breeder on the high alpine meadows, especially around rocky outcrops. Many birds were seen singing and display flying on the 26th.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*: Only a few birds were seen of the nominate race on the 25th.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*: Very common along small streams and rivers.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*: Common though not really numerous.

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*: We saw one bird at Békás Gorge while searching for the Willcreeper.

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: It was recorded twice on two dates.

Duncock *Prunella modularis*: One bird was seen on our first morning.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*: Most of them were only heard but a few were also seen in the forests.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*: This time it was surprisingly hard to see. Though we heard several singing, only one bird was seen shortly in the dense bush cover.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*: A common bird in villages and around cliffs.

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*: A couple of nice males were seen during the trip. They were regularly seen around our hotel.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*: Only one bird was seen on the 25th.

Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*: It was seen in small numbers on all dates.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*: Especially common at higher elevations so most of them were seen on our first two days.

Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus*: We had fantastic views of one male singing on our first evening and two more were seen on other dates.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*: A common bird in the woods and gardens.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*: In some area it was a very common bird but totally missing from other places. Recorded on two days.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*: A common forest bird.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*: Surprisingly only one bird was seen.

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*: We had very good views of singing birds on two days around weedy, wet habitats.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* (**H**): It was only heard singing at the fish ponds on the 25th.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*: A few birds were heard singing or seen in different types of habitats on three days.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*: It was only seen on the 25th.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*: Common in woody and bushy habitats.

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*: One was seen well at the Common Rosefinch site.

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*: Very common in coniferous forests.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* (**H**): It was heard singing on two days.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*: One of the commonest bird in coniferous forests.

Firecrest *Regulus ignicapillus*: We had several good views of this little beauty.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*: We recorded it only on the 27th.

Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis*: We saw a beautiful male in the morning of the 25th. In the evening of the 26th several males were seen in a town park.

Marsh Tit *Parus palustris*: A few birds were seen on two days.

Willow Tit *Parus montanus*: Quite common in tit flocks and it was seen well on three different days.

Crested Tit *Parus cristatus*: We had very good views of them several times and it was recorded on four dates.

Coal Tit *Parus ater*: Probably the most common bird in coniferous forsts.

Great Tit *Parus major*: Very common in most type of forests.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*: It was quite common in the forests and we recorded them every day.

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*: We had to wait about an hour in the beautiful Békás Gorge till we had really great view of a breeding plumaged bird at eye level, while it was feeding just about ten meters away.

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* (H): It was only heard on one day.

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*: A few were seen and much more were heard.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*: Quite common in open habitats and we recorded them on all deays.

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*: We saw two birds on the 25th and 26th, respectively.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*: A few flocks were seen on three dates.

Common Magpie *Pica pica*: Quite common in open habitats.

Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*: A noisy family group was seen in the Hargita, though most of us saw only one bird as the rest of the goup moved away quite quickly.

Western Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*: Couple of them were seen, especially around villages. Here, we can find birds with a much prominent white collar, as these birds belong to the distinct *sommerringii* race.

Hooded Crow *Corvus corone*: Common.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*: Many were seen or heard above forests every day.

Common Starling *S turnus vulgaris*: Common.

Rose-colored Starling *Pastor roseus*: A nice flock of above a 100 bird were seen while feeding on insects on willow trees beside a small river. It is a scarce bird around which can be only found here in some years in late May.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: It was common in or around human settlements.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: Quite common but missing from some of the mountainous habitats, therefore it was recorded only on two days.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*: A very common bird in most wooded habitats.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*: A common bird but we come across it only on two days.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*: Small flocks were seen on two days.

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus*: Small flocks were heard or seen on two days.

Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*: Quite common and we saw them high up in the mountains and also around villages.

Common Rosefich *Carpodacus erythrinus*: First a male was heard singing and just a bit later another fine male was seen very well. It is a scarce breeding bird in the Carpathian-basin and only a few regular breeding sites are known.

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*: We had very good views of several flocks in coniferous forests. Obviously it was a good year for them.

Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*: Many nice males were seen in the forets.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: Only a handful of birds were seen.

European Serin *Serinus serinus*: Despite it is a common species in villages, we met them only once, when a small flock was feeding on a freshly mowed meadow.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*: We saw them only on the 26th.

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*: Not so common then in the lowlands of the Carpathian-basin, but we still recorded them on two dates. .

MAMMALS

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*: One was seen from the bear hide on our last evening.

Brown Bear *Ursus arctos*: We had fantastic views of four individuals on two evenings.

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*: A few were seen in beech forests in two dates.