

Adult Pallas's Gull in the Danube Delta (Leonardo Garrigues)

DANUBE DELTA & DOBRUDJA IN SPRING

with **SAKERTOURS**19th - 25th May, 2024

Leader: Márton Molnár

The Danube Delta is known to be the largest expanse of reed beds on Earth, holding a unique avifauna and offering fantastic birdwatching and photo opportunities. The Dobrudja area is also a popular Spring destination for birdwatchers as it holds quite some local specialties and nice steppe-like habitats. As well as offering beautiful landscape, the Macin Mountains are also home to many good birds. The combination of these three areas during a birding trip in May offers a fantastic experience for any birdwatchers in the world. This year we were lucky to have nice weather all week, so birding was comfortable and enjoyable. Besides birding we also enjoyed the local food and hospitality of local people. Finally, we managed to see 182 bird species during the tour, including some local rarities which we found.

Highlight of this year's tour included all the specialties of the Delta area including Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, Squacco Heron, four Grebe species, Ferruginous Duck, Pygmy Cormorant, breeding plumage Pallas's Gull, White-tailed Eagle, Red-footed Falcon, Black and Grey-headed Woodpeckers, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Marsh Warbler, Penduline Tit, Bearded Reedlings and the all-time favourite Eurasian Golden Orioles and we luckily had fantastic views of Black Stork and Osprey as well. However, birding in the Dobrudja area was also fantastic. We were amazed by the mass of waterfowl, especially as we saw the local specialities like Broad-billed Sandpiper, Kentish Plover, Collared Pratincole and others. We also managed to see the obligatory passerine species of the area like Pied Wheatear, Paddyfield Warbler, or Black-headed Bunting. Finally, we had a fantastic time in the Macin Mountains too, where we put Common Rock Thrush, Levant Sparrowhawk, and Woodchat Shrike to the list.

19th May (Sunday)

After picking up all the guests on the bus, we left the airport area near Bucharest-Otopeni heading east towards the Black Sea coast. We had a short stop for a sandwich lunch then we arrived to Lake Techirgiol where we spent the whole afternoon. As we were approaching the lake, we spotted our first Grey Partridges just beside the road. They quickly disappeared in the vegetation, but everybody saw them well. Soon we arrived to the lakeshore where we had a big surprise. In the first flock of waders, we spotted a Pectoral Sandpiper which was a real bonus bird on the tour as it is a rarity in whole Romania. After that we enjoyed the fantastic numbers of Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints. Besides we had excellent views of Greater Flamingos and we saw our first Broad-billed Sandpiper, Dalmatian Pelican, Long-legged Buzzard and Black-headed Bunting. In one of the corn fields along the lake we were lucky to see two Quails fighting to each other, it was a great experience for everyone as this species is usually only heard. Big flocks of Mediterranean and Little Gulls on the lake also made us happy. All in all, birding was great, even though it was limited to a half day. In the evening we arrived to our first accommodation in Vadu, where we enjoyed a fantastic dinner.



Greater Flamingos in the Dobrudja area (Leonardo Garrigues)





A vagrant Pectoral Sandpiper and Black-headed Bunting (Leonardo Garrigues)

20th May (Monday)

We started the day with a prebreakfast birding near the village of Vadu. We visited some nice reed beds where the birds were really active during the early hours. We successfully saw our main target bird, the Paddyfield Warbler. We had excellent views of a singing male on the top of the reed vegetation. Besides we observed several Great Bitterns, Savi's Warblers, Bearded Reedlings, Water Rails and other reed birds. In a small patch of bushes, we spotted some warblers so we spent a few minutes with them. Beside Willow Warbler, Garden Warbler and several Blackcaps we enjoyed a beautiful Barred warbler too. On the way back to the bus we observed a single Rosy Starling passing by. Later this turned out to be the only Rosy Starling during our trip, as 2024 was a really bad season for this species in Romania and Eastern Europe.

After our well-deserved breakfast we travelled to a huge rock quarry. Here we had fantastic views of all the local specialities. Pied Wheatears and Ortolan Buntings were singing actively, a pair of Isabelline Wheatear was feeding chicks just a few meters away from us, and we also had two Red-rumped Swallows passing by very close. After these fantastic observations we left he quarry and visited a nice grassland where we had close-up views of Eurasian Stone Curlew and Calandra Lark too.

After lunch in a nice restaurant, we spent some time on raptor watching. From a hilltop in the sunny weather, we enjoyed the active movement of Long-legged Buzzards, we also managed to see an immature Montague's Harrier and a beautiful pale morph Booted Eagle hunting for Susliks. We ended the day on the beach of Vadu where we enjoyed close-up views of two Arctic Skuas in breeding plumage, and saw five Slender billed gulls, Sandwich Terns, Caspian Terns. On the way back to the hotel we spotted two Golden Jackals standing amongst the reed vegetation just next to the road, and it was a perfect ending of the day.





Calandra Lark and Eurasian Stone-curlew (Leonardo Garrigues)

21st May (Tuesday)

Today we had a short prebreakfast birding again just near the hotel. A singing Barred Warbler and four Ruddy Shelducks flying by were the most exciting moments. After breakfast we went to Histria to visit a fantastic wetland. The area was not disappointing at all! The highlight was a small flock of Pallas's Gulls, including both immature and adult birds. Besides two Broad-billed Sandpipers, a large flock of roosting Pelicans (both Great White and Dalmatian), a Kentish Plover, a Caspian Tern, White-winged and Whiskered Terns, dozens of Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints were also present. It was difficult to leave this fantastic habitat but finally we headed to the huge rock quarry again to search for raptors during the warm hours. This time we saw only Long-legged Buzzards and a distant White-tailed Eagle, but we had good views of the local Wheatears again.

Then we went back to Vadu where we checked a nice wetland. We have got excellent views of Collared Pratincoles drinking just a few meters away from our bus. All the participants were able to make good photos of this unique species. On the way back we quickly stopped because we saw a snake in front of the bus. When we got off the bus the snake was well hidden but we heard a drumming from the nearby trees. Soon we spotted a nice Syrian Woodpecker which was very cooperative so we could watch it for a long time.

As it worked yesterday, we ended up at the beach again. Today it was a bit different, we saw the Arctic Skuas again, but we also saw some new birds like Little Tern and Kentish Plover. After our last dinner in this hotel, we prepared for tomorrow's travel to the Delta.



Collared Pratincoles (Leonardo Garrigues)

22nd May (Wednesday)

In the morning we headed north after breakfast. On the way towards Tulcea we made two stops near the Babadag region. At first, we visited an open forest habitat with beautiful old Oak trees. Soon after we parked

the bus we spotted a singing Woodlark, two Lesser Spotted Eagles, two Booted Eagles and a European Turtle Dove showing very well. We were just turning back from our leisurely walk when we suddenly noticed that the local breeding Starlings were very nervous. Soon we realised that they were alarming a beautiful male Levant Sparrowhawk sitting on the tree. Unfortunately, the bird flew off within a few seconds so we were able to watch it only for a short time. Yet this was not the best highlight in this area. A few minutes later when we were still on our way back to the bus, we heard a strange Tit-like call from the bushes. We moved a little closer, and by then we were sure we could hear Sombre Tits. It was hardworking, but in the end, everyone managed to see the birds. It was a pair with recently fledged juveniles.

Our second stop was in a nice oak forest where we walked in small a valley. After only 50 meters of walking, we heard a singing male Red-breasted Flycatcher. We successfully managed to see it very close up, it was a great moment for everyone. Later on, during the walk we picked up a singing Wood Warbler, an Icterine Warbler, another Red-breasted Flycatcher, several Hawfinches and a nice Middle Spotted Woodpecker too. As soon as we returned to the bus, we just spotted 3 beautiful Honey Buzzards above the parking site. It was a perfect ending of this short stop.

In the afternoon we arrived to the port of Tulcea where we moved to our boat. Soon afterwards we found ourselves in the middle of the amazing Danube Delta. We were in a boat, bobbing on the water, exploring the narrow canals and unique habitats. Our boater Romy was professional as always, he really knew how to turn the boat to have the best light conditions to photograph a bird even if it was in an inaccessible bush. During the afternoon we managed to see some of our targets like Collared Flycatcher, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, and all the local woodpeckers including Black, Grey-headed and Lesser Spotted. At the end of the day, we occupied our hotel which had beautiful surroundings.



Sombre Tit is a tough one to get (Leonardo Garrigues)





Tawny Pipit and Collared Flycatcher (Leonardo Garrigues)

23rd May (Thursday)

A prebreakfast walk around the hotel resulted in seeing singing Marsh Warbler and a bonus singing River Warbler. After breakfast we started our morning programme in the Delta on boat. At first, we checked a beautiful male Penduline Tit building a new nest. It was not shy at all; we were watching him only from a few meters distance while it was precisely knitting the plant fibres together. A little bit later along a narrow canal surrounded by old willow trees we saw Grey-headed and Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers showing very well. Then we reached a huge open water surface where we were able to watch the special fishing technique of a huge flock of Great White Pelicans. Some Dalamtian Pelicans were also present around them so we could have excellent views of both species. We enjoyed watching them for a long time until we continued. But there is always something new in the Delta, a few minutes later a beautiful adult Pallas's Gull in full breeding plumage passed by our boat and amazed us. Besides we also enjoyed watching Red-necked Grebe family, Penduline Tits, Golden Orioles, and many other birds.



Dalmatian Pelican – the less numerous pelican species of the Delta (Leonardo Garrigues)

After lunch at the hotel, we allowed ourselves a little rest, until the temperature and light conditions became optimal in the afternoon. Then we started an afternoon boat trip which was fantastic again. We visited a huge mixed breeding colony of waterfowl, where we had fantastic opportunity to photograph Black Terns, Whiskered Terns, Common Terns, Black-necked Grebes and many other species. Two fly-by White-winged Black Terns in beautiful summer plumage also delighted us. On the way back to the hotel we heard a Little Bittern calling, and we managed to have good views of an Osprey, a Black Stork and a Thrush Nightingale too. A short stop at a random grassland patch produced some beautiful Large Coppers too – just to mention butterflies. When we arrived back to the hotel, we felt ourselves very satisfied as we saw all the main target birds in the Danube Delta and we have got wonderful experiences.



Black-necked Grebe, White-tailed Eagle and Marsh Warbler all seen in the Delta (Leonardo Garrigues)

24th May (Friday)

Today we aimed to reach the Macin Mountains. The morning was spent travelling both on boat and bus. Around lunchtime we reached our final destination. Our first stop was at a bushy area where we checked an active nesting site of Long-eared Owls. One chick was still in the nest, another one was already clinging on a branch, and an adult stood guard next to them. It was a perfect start in this new region as we had excellent views of the owls. After lunch in a local restaurant, we climbed up to a smaller hill to search for Levant Sparrowhawk. We had to wait for some time before hearing a female calling and finally seeing a distant male. Then we visited a quarry to find Common Rock Thrush, but instead we found something else. Two strange black and white wheatears turned up on the top of the rocks. One was showing characteristics of a Pied x Eastern Black-eared hybrid, while the other turned out to be a pure Eastern Black-eared Wheatear which was a big surprise in this region! Before dinner we ended the day on a pasture where we found a nice Woodchat Shrike.



Adult Long-eared Owl and Woodchat Shrike around the Macin Mountains (Leonardo Garrigues)

25th May (Saturday)

On the last day we had only a few hours in the morning to watch birds. At first, we visited another quarry to search for Common Rock thrush. It resulted Pied Wheatears, Isabelline Wheatears and a singing Common Whitethroat which was new for the trip list, but no Common Rock Thrush. We made a short visit to a close-by fishpond where we were we accidentally bumped into another Levant Sparrowhawk flying very close to us. This was the best observation of this species during the trip. We had only a very short time until leaving so we decided to revisit yesterday's quarry to give a last chance to the Common Rock Thrush. Our persistence has paid off as we spotted a distant female on the top of the rocks. This was the last species we added to our list. It was a perfect end of the tour. After that we started back to Bucharest where we arrived in time everyone reaching the planes safely.



Levant Sparrowhawk and Pied Wheatear (Leonardo Garrigues

BIRDS – list of bird species recorded on the 2022 tour

C = Commonly seen, more than 10 individuals

'Numbers' = Actual number seen on the tour

H = Heard only

LO = Leader only

NL = Non-leader

1	Greylag Goose	Anser anser	C
2	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	C
3	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna	C
4	Ruddy Shelduck	Tadorna ferruginea	C
5	Garganey	Spatula querquedula	C
6	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata	C
7	Gadwall	Mareca strepera	C
8	Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope	1
9	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	C
10	Red-crested Pochard	Netta rufina	2
11	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	C
12	Ferruginous Duck	Aythya nyroca	C



Ferruginous Duck (Leonardo Garrigues

13	Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula	1
14	Grey Partridge	Perdix perdix	6
15	Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix	2
16	Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus	С
17	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	С
18	Red-necked Grebe	Podiceps grisegena	6
19	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus	С
20	Black-necked Grebe	Podiceps nigricollis	С
21	Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus	30
22	Black Stork	Ciconia nigra	2
23	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	С
24	Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus	С
25	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia	5
26	Eurasian Bittern	Botaurus stellaris	Н
27	Little Bittern	Ixobrychus minutus	Н
28	Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax	С
29	Squacco Heron	Ardeola ralloides	С
30	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	С
31	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea	С
32	Great Egret	Ardea alba	С
33	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	С
34	Great White Pelican	Pelecanus onocrotalus	С
35	Dalmatian Pelican	Pelecanus crispus	С
36	Pygmy Cormorant	Microcarbo pygmeus	С



Pygmy Cormorant (Leonardo Garrigues

37	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	C
38	Osprey	Pandion haliaetus	1
39	European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus	4
40	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus	2
41	Lesser Spotted Eagle	Clanga pomarina	2
42	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	3
43	Levant Sparrowhawk	Accipiter brevipes	3
44	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	1
45	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	C
46	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus	3
47	White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla	C
48	Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus	C
49	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	C
50	Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus	1
51	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	C
52	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	C
53	Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus	2
54	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	C
55	Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta	C
56	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	C
57	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula	C
58	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius	2
59	Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus	3



Pygmy Cormorant (Leonardo Garrigues

60	Ruff	Calidris pugnax	С
61	Broad-billed Sandpiper	Calidris falcinellus	3
62	Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea	С
63	Pectoral Sandpiper	Calidris melanotos	1
64	Dunlin	Calidris alpina	2
65	Little Stint	Calidris minuta	С
66	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	1
67	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	C
68	Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola	С
69	Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus	1
70	Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia	C
71	Collared Pratincole	Glareola pratincola	С
72	Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei	5
73	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	С
74	Little Gull	Hydrocoloeus minutus	С
75	Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus	С
76	Pallas's Gull	Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus	8
77	Caspian Gull	Larus cachinnans	С
78	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	С
79	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus	3
80	Arctic Skua	Stercorarius parasiticus	2
81	Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia	3
82	Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis	4
83	Little Tern	Sternula albifrons	2
84	Common Tern	Sterna hirundo	C
85	Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybrida	С
86	White-winged Tern	Chlidonias leucopterus	3
87	Black Tern	Chlidonias niger	С
88	Feral Pigeon	Columba livia f. domestica	С
89	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	С
90	European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur	С
91	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	С
92	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus	С
93	Little Owl	Athene noctua	2
94	Long-eared Owl	Asio otus	3
95	Common Swift	Apus apus	С
96	European Roller	Coracias garrulus	C
97	Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis	C
98	European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster	C
99	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	С
100	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocoptes medius	2
101	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor	6
102	Syrian Woodpecker	Dendrocopos syriacus	3
103	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	С
104	Black Woodpecker	Dryocopus martius	2
105	European Green Woodpecker	Picus viridis	С
106	Grey-headed Woodpecker	Picus canus	4
107	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	С

108	Red-footed Falcon	Falco vespertinus	C
109	Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo	C
110	Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio	C
111	Lesser Grey Shrike	Lanius minor	С
112	Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator	3
113	Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus	C
114	Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius	C
115	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	C
116	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	C
117	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	С
118	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	C
119	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	1
120	Sombre Tit	Poecile lugubris	4
121	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	C
122	Great Tit	Parus major	C
123	Eurasian Penduline Tit	Remiz pendulinus	C
124	Bearded Reedling	Panurus biarmicus	C
125	Woodlark	Lullula arborea	3
126	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	C
127	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	C
128	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla	C
129	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra	C
130	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia	C
131	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	С
132	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	С
133	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica	6
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Eurasian Hobby (Leonardo Garrigues

134	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus	С
135	Wood Warbler	Phylloscopus sibilatrix	2
136	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	C
137	Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	C
138	Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus	С
139	Paddyfield Warbler	Acrocephalus agricola	2
140	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus	С
141	Marsh Warbler	Acrocephalus palustris	1
142	Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	Iduna pallida	С
143	Icterine Warbler	Hippolais icterina	3
144	Savi's Warbler	Locustella luscinioides	С
145	River Warbler	Locustella fluviatilis	1
146	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	С
147	Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin	C
148	Barred Warbler	Sylvia nisoria	3
149	Lesser Whitethroat	Sylvia curruca	C
150	Common Whitethroat	Sylvia communis	1
151	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea	1
152	Rosy Starling	Pastor roseus	1
153	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	C
154	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	С
155	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata	С
156	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	С
157	Thrush Nightingale	Luscinia luscinia	С
158	Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos	3
159	Collared Flycatcher	Ficedula albicollis	3
160	Red-breasted Flycatcher	Ficedula parva	2
161	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	1
162	Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus	С
163	Common Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis	1
164	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	С
165	Isabelline Wheatear	Oenanthe isabellina	С





Isabelline Wheatear and Black Woodpecker (Leonardo Garrigues

166	Pied Wheatear	Oenanthe pleschanka	4
167	Eastern Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe melanoleuca	1
168	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	C
169	Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis	C
170	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus	C
171	Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava	C
172	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	C
173	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris	C
174	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	C
175	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes	C
176	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	C
177	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	C
178	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	C
179	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra	C
180	Ortolan Bunting	Emberiza hortulana	4
181	Black-headed Bunting	Emberiza melanocephala	4
182	Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus	C



Black-headed Yellow Wagtail (Leonardo Garrigues)



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