

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Romania
Dobrogea and the Danube Delta
31st May - 7th June 2008

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Participants

Norman Sheppard

Helen Jackson

Pat Ashworth

Angela Turner

Pauline Skillings

Dobrogea, the Delta plus Carpathians extension to 11th June

Malcolm and Helen Crowder

Helen Young

Bill Hudson and Jacqueline Banks

Mary Wardle

David and Steph Bennett

Leaders from the Ibis team: Eugen Petrescu (Dobrogea and Danube Delta); Mihai Petrescu (Dobrogea); Bogdan (Bebe) Moldovan (Carpathians).

Honeyguide leader from the UK: Ivan Nethercoat

Dobrogea and Danube Delta report by Ivan Nethercoat. List of plants from Mihai Petrescu collated by Mary Wardle. Carpathians section by Helen Crowder.

Photographs of Dobrogea and the Delta (excepting on page 8) taken by Ivan Nethercoat during the trip. Cover – white pelicans. Page 3 – rose-coloured starling. Page 4 – Lake Saraturi. Page 5 – bee-eater. Page 6 – larkspur and poppies. Page 7 – squacco heron. Page 8 – spoonbill (by Helen Crowder). Page 9 – Dalmatian pelican. Page 10 – roller. Page 11 – squacco heron.

This holiday, as for every Honeyguide holiday, also puts something into conservation in our host country by way of a contribution to the wildlife that we enjoyed. But, unusually, there are two thank-you letters at the end of this report.

The usual conservation contribution this year of £30 per person was given to the young ornithologists' group in Tulcea, *Falco cherrug* (the saker falcon), run by Eugen for SOR. This was supplemented by gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust leading to a donation of €675. Roger Jordan and friends in the Wildlife Outreach Network based in Essex kindly donated £200 (€265) through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust to the Eco Pontica Foundation conservation organisation based in Tulcea. www.eco-pontica.ro

This brings the total given to conservation in Romania since 1999 to £4239, the bulk of which has gone to the Romanian Ornithological Society (SOR).

The total for conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 was at £53,635 by June 2008.

Romania: Dobrogea and the Danube Delta

31st May – 7th June 2008

Day 1, 31st May – Heathrow to Bucharest to Tulcea

The now infamous terminal 5 was our meeting point for the journey to one of the most famous wildlife destinations in the world. Despite our concerns, based on recent problems, it has to be said that everything 'worked' with no hassle at all, reasonable baggage allowance and sensible carry-on rules. All was fine and we set off on a relatively roomy BA flight to Bucharest.

While England was a pleasant temperature, Bucharest was decidedly warm with 25 degrees of heat to greet us as we left the plane. Alex from Ibis was there to greet us and in no time at all the city was being left behind as we drove along in a small air conditioned coach that manoeuvred its way along main highways and pot-holed roads with ease and relative comfort.

A striking feature of the flight is the introduction to the Romanian countryside that it affords as one comes in to land: a land dominated by strip farming on a vast scale with no hedges and deep woodlands. Once on the ground, however, the profusion of wild flowers alongside these fields and in 'set-aside' type areas was obvious. Fleeting glimpses of lesser grey shrike, rollers and storks gave a feel of things to come and as we pulled in for a rest stop a flock of bee-eaters added to the sense of expectation.

Tantalising glimpses of wetlands, the Danube, red-footed falcons and hills and vineyards were had on the second half of the journey but eventually we arrived at Tulcea and a very welcome hotel, with delightful staff, a welcome shot of local liquor and a meal ready. Here too we said goodbye to Alex and welcomed Eugen, our guide for the rest of our stay and the key person behind the conservation of the delta.

Day 2, 1st June – Bestepe Hills, Lake Saraturi, Plopol and the fortress at Enisala

A very warm bright and sunny morning gave way by breakfast to slight overcast skies that stayed most of the day, but it remained warm. This morning we were joined by our second guide, Mihai, a fantastically knowledgeable botanist who was to be with us while we were 'on land' in Dobrogea.



A slight detour from our scheduled itinerary took us into a quarry at Tulcea. Eugen had not mentioned why as he wanted it to be a surprise. A golden oriole flew past and settled in good view in a tree for a while, which started the day well. As we progressed further up the track to the quarry, Eugen explained that we were looking for rose-coloured starlings that nest in colonies in gaps in the rocks. These birds can take over a site one year and not return in future years or even abandon the whole colony overnight if food becomes scarce.

As it happened our only view was of a couple of small flocks overhead but Levant sparrowhawk, roller and bee-eater all provided distant but pleasurable distractions. We had only been going half an hour.

Undeterred, Eugen persuaded our driver to take the bus 'off road' up a track to get to the other side of the quarry. A bee-eater colony and more

rollers along with lesser grey shrike slowed our ascent, but eventually we got as far as we could and disembarked. We walked to the edge of the quarry where we looked down on a noisy wildlife spectacle in the form of literally hundreds of fantastically pink and black rose-coloured starlings, all chattering away in small groups or coming and going from their cliff face nesting holes. Long-legged buzzard and ortolan bunting added to the background making this a spectacular start to the trip with a real feeling of being somewhere different.

So, back to the itinerary and by now it was nearing lunchtime, but time for a roadside stop to admire a bee-eater colony en route, where we finally got both bee-eater and roller in good telescope views for everyone.

The Bestepe hills were our lunch stop. It's a delightful place affording views back into the delta in the distance while just below us another bee-eater colony was full of activity. A white stork was nesting by the river, another roller landed below us and a magnificent male marsh harrier gave us a fantastically close fly-by as it came up the hill beside us.



Lake Saraturi was one of those sites that looked fairly quiet from the road but once telescopes were trained onto the water it soon gave up its secrets. A large colony of common terns had taken up residence on the islands with avocet and black-winged stilt as neighbours. Black-headed and Mediterranean gulls nested on a second island and in between were two nests of black-necked grebes. Pelicans flew overhead and a red-footed falcon made a feeble attempt at harassing the waders before giving up and going back to insects.

Moving on to view the far end of the lake really made the trip, however, as there among a flock of yellow-legged gulls were two magnificent great black-headed gulls (or Pallas's gull, as Collins now calls it). These are not regular birds here (no other Honeyguide trip has seen them) so we were rather lucky. These are huge gulls, a point emphasised when one briefly took to the air, flying in the 'slow motion' way that large vultures do.

Our final stop was at the fortress at Enisala. With a fine view over low hills, forest and of course the delta this was a great site. A quick view of a bird flying across the reedbed turned out to be a bittern but it was a one-person sighting as it soon dropped down into the reeds again. More obliging were the many wheatears. Nearly all were of our regular northern wheatear, despite their best attempts to look otherwise. David had a lucky view of pied wheatear and as we were leaving an Isabelline also showed itself well, perching on the superb thistles. Back to the hotel for another excellent meal and welcome wine.

Day 3, 2nd June – 'Eugen's hill', Somova hills, Celic Dere Monastery and Macin Mountains

Another bright and clear morning and after another very good breakfast we hit the road for 09.00. First stop was not far from Tulcea and as it had no name we just called it 'Eugen's hill'. And what a hill! Looking across a fantastic wetland alongside the Danube, this was the bit just before the official delta. In the distance was Ukraine but before that was a vast area of reed and open water, full of birds. Like a giant avian service station, birds were coming and going wherever we looked. Close in, whiskered terns were taking insects off the surface of the water while cormorants took fish below and appeared in very large numbers. Overhead pelicans flew by, eventually forming a large flock that descended to the water below us, causing the cormorants to take to the air in a flurry of commotion. Eugen explained how pelicans and cormorants often feed together each helping the other catch fish due to their different feeding techniques. The cormorants dive and get fish low down while the pelicans feed from the surface, each pushing the fish into the others' feeding area.



In front of us small cliffs and gullies provided nesting sites for bee-eater and roller, all adding to the noise and colour. A short-toed eagle hovered overhead and a hobby came in very close. Helen's sharp eyes also spotted our first night heron on the edge of the reeds some way below while Eugen's distance view spotted a white-tailed eagle, but a long way away and missed by most.

The next stop was similarly un-named but was a small valley well known for barred warbler. This tricky warbler proved typically elusive, responding to a recording of its call and giving fleeting views only. Concentration was not helped by four large raptors – at least two white-tailed eagles, a long-legged buzzard and possibly a lesser spotted eagle.

Somova hills is an area of thinly scattered oak trees with a grass and flower understorey and grazed by cattle – not unlike the *dehesa* in

Spain. There were two 'targets' for this area: middle spotted woodpecker and sombre tit. Yet again Eugen's unparalleled knowledge of the area – and an iPod – brought both into view relatively easily with everyone seeing the woodpecker well through the telescope and sombre tit flitting in trees a few feet away. Here too was a place of stories as Mihai pointed out plants but also told us their 'story'. From muscari to mistletoes he had a tale to tell and thoroughly enhanced the walk, and indeed every stop we made.

A short drive took us to Celic Dere Monastery. This is actually a 'village of nuns' and our lunch stop was just outside the village in an area of trees on the edge of woodland. This place is also a popular place with local people at the weekend and we met a nun clearing up after various local parties.

Today, though, we were the only visitors leaving only our footprints but will retain memories of Eugen calling up a very obliging wryneck that sat in full sun in the over the path, twisting its neck and posing for the telescopes. This is not an easy bird to show people and this was an exceptional view. Icterine warblers were also intrigued by the sound of a new bird in their territory and came to see what was going on, but as we were by now in among the trees the views were more difficult and on this occasion it was us who needed a flexible neck to make the most of them.

On then to the Macin Mountains, some of the oldest mountains in Europe, rising up from the vast plains now devoted to grazing and strip farming. Quarrying is a feature in places and it was to a small, abandoned kaolin quarry that we headed with the promise of pied wheatear.

Red-backed shrikes greeted us along with a carpet of plants for Mihai and the botanists to get their teeth into including crown vetch and large verbascums, Alas no pied wheatear but excellent views of rock thrush, resplendent in the afternoon light. The tracks we drove along took us through the breeding area of Isabelline wheatears. Eugen explained the relationship they have with birds of prey as they nest in the abandoned burrows of sousliks. The burrows become abandoned mainly due to the owner being eaten by a long-legged buzzard or a saker.

This year seems to have been very successful for the wheatears as we saw a huge number of birds, numbers increasing as we headed parallel to the mountains in search of stone-curlew just outside the 'Italian' village of Grece. Again we were unlucky with no birds showing but the atmosphere and the light was fantastic.

Another good meal, wine and conversation at the hotel and then to bed.

Day 4, 3rd June - Denis Tepe, Babadag Forest, Vadu and Histria

A calmer morning served to make the sun appear even warmer today. First stop was a large hill called Denis Tepe. Rising out of the farmland, this was an oasis for birds of rocks and bare ground – wheatears, tawny pipit and short-toed lark greeted our arrival, while overhead a long-legged buzzard drifted by. The track up to the hill allowed for the aesthetic sensibilities of the group as we passed a field of wheat sprayed with the intense red of poppies and deep blue of larkspur.



As we approached the hill it became clear that half way up was a large band of one particular plant. The delightful woolly foxgloves we had admired singly at Bestepe and other sites were here in their thousands – a sight that was new even to Mihai.

Two short-toed eagles drifted past as we left the bus and after flying together for a while they then performed some talon grappling as birds of prey often do. While watching these through the telescope a very large brown falcon flew across the field of view – a saker – but it unfortunately proved impossible to follow or show other people as it soon got lost as it went out of view behind the bus

Denis Tepe is another site of Eugen's where he has found pied wheatear – but only on the top! So, ever resourceful, he set off to with iPod in hand and left us half way so he could pinpoint the bird for telescope views. Sure enough they performed on cue so, while stood in a sea of *digitalis*, above us pied wheatears were hawking insects and landing in trees: behaviour that seems to be different to most wheatears. At one point they looked like white-headed house martins as they glided past. A very pleasant distraction for the group as they waited was a souslik who performed the 'meerkat' impression of standing on hind legs.

Babadag forest is a protected area and home to many rare plants and the extremely venomous, and very common, horned viper. It is fair to say then that our walk here was undertaken with slightly more care than one might in the New Forest.

It was good to stretch the legs and in the glorious sunshine. The flowers showed well but the butterflies and dragonflies were extremely flighty and none settled long enough for proper ID. Large fritillaries, 'Emperor' type dragonflies, limodor and lady orchids as well as a number of Red Data plant species kept Mihai and the botanists very happy. An extremely large cricket was found chewing its way through a plant stem while a spur-thighed tortoise trundled along the track. Birds were a little scarce with chiffchaff and Bonelli's warblers making a less than musical soundtrack. But it didn't matter, as the place was what was important.

A few miles further on was the village of Vadu, set back from Black Sea coast and home to a failed attempt at extracting rare metals from the sand. The abandoned factory stands empty and in decay but the remaining pools and roads are a great site for coastal birds. Lunch was taken in a small café where, in return for buying a few drinks, Eugen and our driver were again able to set up their excellent lunch buffet.

The pools at Vadu gave us good views of white-winged black tern, bearded tit, cuckoo, and the star bird for the day was a wonderful bluethroat in full song.

On the return we called in at Histria, an area famed in ancient times as a major port and home of the 'Golden Fleece' (sheep fleece being used to filter the gold).

The reedy pools were quite dry but there was enough water to keep a few black-tailed godwits, spoonbills and egrets happy. Here too was a special bird and once again Eugen's knowledge paid off as he led us back to some small reeds; with iPod perched in the grass we stood back to watch curious paddyfield warblers come to examine the 'newcomer' to their patch. An exceptionally rare visitor to the UK, this bird is on the edge of its range here but three birds came and gave us excellent views.

And so, back to the hotel for our last meal and packing before heading into the delta. This was where we also had to say farewell to Mihai who had been a great asset and helped bring the area alive with his knowledge of history, geography and of course the plants.

Day 5, 4th June – The Danube Delta

09.00 and a walk through Tulcea to the moorings beside the Tulcea arm of the Danube. Here we boarded a large boat, crossed the deck and descended into a far smaller one. For the next five hours we cruised the tributaries and channels of the Danube before heading up to our 'house boat'.

The channels took us through forest areas with mature willows, to drier farmland or reed-lined banks. Every so often we entered large still lakes littered with whiskered terns on a permanent mission to keep their nests above water. Eugen's iPod came into good use again when a black woodpecker flew over the boat. On playing the call he immediately flew back to see what was going on, repeatedly crossing the channel and eventually landing in a dead tree for all to see exceptionally well.

Pelicans and cormorants were constantly in the air and pygmy cormorants were alongside the canals with



squacco and night herons, all too numerous to count. While slowly traversing a lake with whiskered terns, cormorants and pelicans, a pair of white-tailed eagles cruised slowly past, our second sighting of what was to be a regular accompaniment to our tours.

The houseboat was moored at Eugen's village on an island in one of the main channels of the delta. This boat was extremely well laid out, especially in the dining area, designed to allow the best views for birding. The food was also exceptionally good and the service from Cerasella outstanding. As the boat was getting ready we took a short walk in the village. Numerous numbered nestboxes were in the trees, put there by children from the school who monitor what is in them, in one case a redstart. The original village was on the other side of the

river. This site was originally a government research station whose purpose was to find ways to exploit the delta – how to drain areas, how to use the reed, to plant non-native trees to see if they could be commercially viable etc. Fortunately the work was not very successful and it was abandoned. The villagers took over when a large flood destroyed most of their original site.

Olivaceous warblers were lured out of the willows with Eugen's sound system and a purple heron stood in the open in a pool on the edge of the village. Lesser spotted and Syrian woodpecker also played with us, offering fleeting glimpses only. Back to the houseboat and we were taken on a leisurely tow to our mooring for the

evening followed by another very good meal with wine.

Day 6, 5th June – Exploring the delta

Being in the delta allowed for some pre-breakfast birding and so four hardy souls set forth into the sands of Caraorman. On this island of sand stands a relic of Ceausescu's determination to exploit the delta. At this point there is a line of sand dunes stretching north into Ukraine, the former sand bar at the Black Sea coast. As the delta moved forward, the sand dunes remained and the abandoned buildings here were set up to exploit this resource. Fortunately it failed to get going and now stands in ruins. What has been left behind is a series of pools among the dunes that hold shallow water and are excellent for birds, particularly on migration when the old coastal route still seems to be used.



This morning the pools and dunes were home to over a hundred black-tailed godwits, most in summer plumage, black-winged stilt, avocet, redshank, curlew sandpiper and a flock of 30+ collared pratincoles that breed on the sand bars.

After an excellent breakfast, we once again took to the small 'runabout' to explore the canals. Spoonbills and glossy ibis and many night herons were the main feature but also another view of white-tailed eagle, this time an immature bird.

An old fish pond proved worthwhile as we disembarked via a gangplank onto the banks. A little bittern seemed surprised to see us and did his best to 'hide' in the top of a willow as bitterns do. With neck extended he pretended to 'be a tree' for a while but then finally gave up and flew off as the telescope queue formed. Black-necked grebes are here with at least three occupied nests alongside a few whiskered terns. The background sounds were of Savi's warbler, bittern and lesser whitethroat as well as the usual squawking and

grumblings of terns and herons.

Our journey was cut short a little by a dredger making its way towards us so we turned back and had a return trip to the houseboat which took us on a leisurely tour to our lunch spot. Here, once again, we ate exceptionally well with home cooked soup, Romanian 'dolmades' and fresh crème caramel, all cooked on board. After lunch there was a huge 'spiral' of pelicans coming down into a lake just visible from the highest deck. Taking to the runabout, this was our next destination.

As we entered the lake, terns followed us across open water as the pelicans were already taking to the air, huge groups left in turn, all searching for thermals upon which they can drift in search of feeding cormorants to feast alongside.

More and more birds took to the air with over 750 counted by Malcolm in one group. As we rounded a small island of reeds the remaining birds were still on the water and took off right in front of us giving terrific views against the blue sky and white clouds. Six or more great white egrets also left the reeds as we approached.

After that stunning scene we left the lake and headed back to the canals. Eugen has exceptional hearing and soon picked up the plaintive call of penduline tit above the noise of the engine. With it turned off and drifting quietly,

we all heard the birds calling from nearby willows. Time to set foot on land again and soon we were all watching a very smart pair of birds, along with a marsh warbler, although this was ignored by most in favour of the much more spectacular tit.

Grey-headed woodpeckers were calling as we left but refused to be lured into view, despite Eugen's own impersonation and then iPod, so we left them for another canal he knew well, this time lined with dense willow and water lilies with a mirror calm surface. After much searching, the woodpeckers finally got curious and flew over the boat a few times but did not play ball as well as their larger relatives had done.



A calm and beautifully sunny evening settled in as we docked with our 'mothership' and set forth for our new mooring for the evening. This took us down the old Danube, still a major route but in this area it still has its natural riverbanks, unlike some places along its course. Hoopoes, herons and egrets were therefore still at home here.

Our 'dock' for the night was a lake in a quiet offshoot of the canal. Three white and one Dalmatian pelican were there as we arrived bringing thoughts as to what the morning might bring.

Another great meal in a great location. Bliss and wonderfully noisy. Eugen told us about some of the work ROS does with young people in the area and how Honeyguide's donation was used in previous years before Malcolm handed over two cheques totalling the equivalent of a little over £700 towards this work. This brings Honeyguide's total donations in Romania to more than £4000.

Day 7, 6th June

Up at 05.30, well, some of us were, to a fantastic dawn chorus, mainly of frogs but the rest of the world was very much up and about. From the deck of the boat, excellent close telescope views were had of little bitterns and it was delightful to see seven white pelicans doing their collaborative fishing whereby they form a circle and surround a shoal and then dip beaks in at the same time, all rear ends going up in the air together. Purple, grey, squacco and numerous night herons were fishing from the reeds and lilies; marsh warblers were feeding at the reed edge as pygmy cormorants and egrets flew to more distant feeding areas. Whiskered terns and the occasional black tern constantly flew back and forth while in the background could be heard bittern, Cetti's warbler and bearded tit. Quite a sight and all before another fine breakfast.

At 09.00 we were off again to some of Eugen's favourite areas of lakes and canals. Lilies were the order of the day in this part of the delta. As we entered the lakes we could see how the white and yellow lily platforms provided nesting areas for whiskered and black terns and cover for fish from white and Dalmatian pelicans.

All the areas Eugen took us to had their own 'character' and a different mix of birds. In some lakes there were just black terns and coots yet on another, whiskered terns and black-necked grebes were there with pelicans, ferruginous duck, pygmy cormorants and a marsh harrier trying to sneak past the avian guards.

Upon leaving the lake we came to a 'T junction' where grey-headed woodpeckers finally decided to allow themselves to be seen. In a dead tree, everyone got very good views of the head of this special European bird, not unlike our green woodpecker.

A new channel took us alongside a dry area of the delta where banks of mud provide a nesting site for kingfisher

and the telegraph poles for white stork. Kingfisher and storks were duly seen along with a head-on view of a little bittern as it flew straight toward the boat. More squacco and night herons and glossy ibis flew up as we approached.

A black woodpecker gave away its presence with its very distinctive call but refused to be lured down by Eugen's speakers, but it didn't matter as we enjoyed close views of red-footed falcon while waiting and any time with the engine off was quite special.

A final lake to visit before lunch. This time the route took us down very narrow channels with willow branches breaking on the metal roof supports and depositing a number of hairy caterpillars on the boat. These caterpillars are responsible for eating much of the willow foliage in this area of the delta and they expose the nests of penduline tits to predation by crows, but they are also eaten by cuckoos and rose-coloured starlings.

The lake was surrounded by trees and covered with water chestnut and again very different in character to all the others, although it did have the now familiar but still very pleasant sight of a large flock of white pelicans.



So, back to the houseboat for our last lunch on this fine vessel and then a tow to Tulcea to stay overnight before our departure for Bucharest.

The route taken to Tulcea took us through canals with mature banks of reed and willow and past lakes similar to those with which we had become familiar – but without the pelicans. The whole journey was full of interest with plenty of birds along the way: red-necked grebes, rollers, kingfishers, egrets and herons and a thrush nightingale in good voice as we drifted past.

Eventually the tree-lined riverbanks gave way to a more industrial scene as we approached Tulcea and as a hobby was being chased away by a number of swallows we moored alongside another Ibis houseboat. Meanwhile, Ceresella had been preparing the table again – each night had been in a different style and we eventually sat down to our final evening meal as a group. This particular evening was enlivened by the talented and lively playing of a variety of traditional musical instruments by two music teachers in traditional dress.

In the morning we awoke to Tulcea in sunshine with golden orioles just audible above the noise of the town. It was a pleasant morning and after a fine breakfast we parted as a group with eight going to the Carpathians and the rest of us to Bucharest for the flight to Heathrow.

Thank you everyone for a great week.

Ivan and Eugen.

Highlights

Steph David	The 'Mexican wave' of pelicans across the lake and the fields of poppies and larkspur. The spiraling pelicans; rose-colored starlings and when the engine was off on the boat and we drifted down the canals.
Helen Y Norman	Pelicans! The short-toed eagles on 'Eugen's hill'.
Helen C Malcolm	The best views ever of 'special' birds (GBH gull, bluethroat, pelicans, etc). The great black-headed gull in flight; the bluethroat; and the sheer volume of space that is the delta.
Jaqui Bill	The rose-coloured starlings and pelicans. The rose-coloured starlings, pelicans and sousliks.
Angela Pauline	Rose-coloured starlings, pelicans, larkspur and poppy fields. Sousliks, wryneck, pelicans and the way the table was laid out on the pontoon by Ceresella.
Helen J Pat	The marsh harrier at lunchtime on day 1, pelicans, larkspur and poppy fields. The pelicans in flight, poppies and larkspur, the bee-eaters.
Mary Ivan	The great black-headed gull, pelicans and souslik. The rose-coloured starlings, the great black-headed gull and sitting on the deck at dawn watching the marshes come alive.
Eugen	The rose-coloured starlings and the great black-headed gull.



Birds

Little grebe
Great crested grebe
Red-necked grebe
Black-necked grebe
Cormorant
Pygmy cormorant
White pelican
Dalmatian pelican
Bittern
Little bittern
Night heron
Squacco heron
Little egret
Great white egret

Grey heron
Purple heron
White stork
Black stork
Glossy ibis
Spoonbill
Mute swan
Greylag goose
Ruddy shelduck
Shelduck
Garganey
Gadwall
Mallard
Shoveler

Red-crested pochard
 Pochard
 Ferruginous duck
 Tufted duck
 Honey buzzard
 White-tailed eagle
 Marsh harrier
 Short-toed eagle
 Marsh harrier
 Levant sparrowhawk
 Common buzzard & Steppe buzzard
 Long-legged buzzard
 Lesser spotted eagle (?)
 Common kestrel
 Red-footed falcon
 Hobby
 Saker
 Pheasant
 Moorhen
 Coot
 Black-winged stilt
 Avocet
 Collared pratincole
 Ringed plover
 Kentish plover
 Lapwing
 Curlew sandpiper
 Black-tailed godwit
 Curlew
 Redshank
 Green sandpiper
 Turnstone
 Great black-headed gull
 Mediterranean gull
 Little gull
 Black-headed gull
 Yellow-legged gull
 Gull-billed tern
 Common tern
 Little tern
 Whiskered tern
 Black tern
 White-winged black tern
 Stock dove
 Woodpigeon
 Collared dove
 Turtle dove
 Cuckoo
 Swift
 Kingfisher
 Bee-eater
 Roller
 Hoopoe

Wryneck
 Grey-headed woodpecker
 Black woodpecker
 Great spotted woodpecker
 Syrian woodpecker
 Middle spotted woodpecker
 Lesser spotted woodpecker
 Calandra lark
 Short-toed lark
 Crested lark
 Woodlark
 Skylark
 Sand martin
 Swallow
 House martin
 Tawny pipit
 Black-headed wagtail
 White wagtail
 Thrush nightingale (h)
 Nightingale (h)
 Bluethroat
 Black redstart
 Redstart
 Stonechat
 Isabelline wheatear
 Pied wheatear
 Rock thrush
 Blackbird
 Song thrush
 Cetti's warbler
 Savi's warbler
 Sedge warbler
 Paddyfield warbler
 Marsh warbler
 Reed warbler
 Great reed warbler
 Olivaceous warbler
 Icterine warbler
 Barred warbler
 Lesser whitethroat
 Garden warbler
 Blackcap
 Bonelli's warbler
 Spotted flycatcher
 Bearded tit
 Long-tailed tit
 Sombre tit
 Blue tit
 Great tit
 Nuthatch
 Penduline tit
 Golden oriole
 Red-backed shrike

Lesser grey shrike
Woodchat shrike
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded crow
Starling
Rose-coloured starling
House sparrow
Spanish sparrow

Tree sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch
Yellowhammer
Ortolan
Reed bunting
Corn bunting

Plants

List on request.

Butterflies *Note: many more species were seen but none with clear identification due to the very warm weather and consequent speed of quarry!*

Clouded yellow
Spotted fritillary
Bath white
Common blue

Moths

Herald moth
Nine-spotted
Hummingbird hawkmoth

Others

Spur-thighed tortoise
Cricket – *Bradiporus longicaudis*
Grass snake
Terrapin

Horn wasp
Violet carpenter bee

Dragonflies & Damselflies *Note: again, many more species were seen but none with clear identification due to the very warm weather and consequent speed of quarry!*

Broad scarlet dragonfly
Black-tailed skimmer
Norfolk hawk
Banded demoiselle
Small emerald damselfly

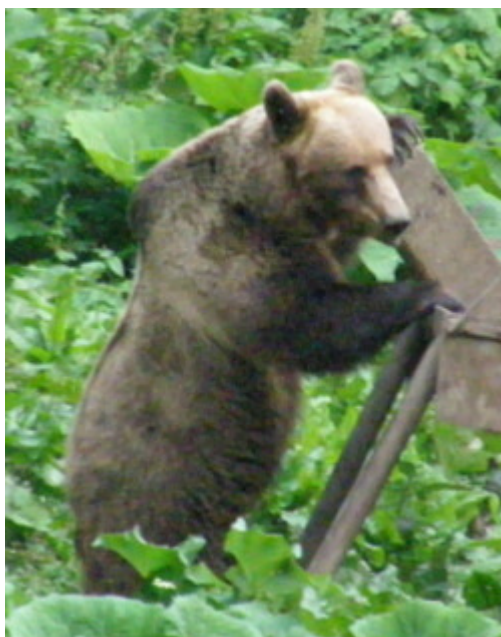
Mammals

Muskrat
Hare
Souslik

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Romania
The Carpathian Mountains
7th-11th June 2008

Saturday 7th June

Having said our goodbyes to those going home after the Delta, we took our places on Tudor's bus for the long trip westward to Transylvania and the southern Carpathians, the last part of our Romanian trip. Our new guide, Bebe, bounded onto the bus and introduced himself in perfect English (learned at an early age, he told us, from English language TV programmes), his energy and enthusiasm apparent from the outset.

At Smardan we had to cross a wide section of the Danube by ferry and while we waited by the shore in hot sunshine a little ringed plover potted about, its white crown bar and yellow eye ring clearly visible even without binoculars. Whiskered terns accompanied the short crossing, during which only the desperate risked the lavatory facility.

Reboarding the bus, we drove through town, woods and the vast Braila plain, where it began to rain quite heavily. Bebe told us he had a surprise in store – for lunch he was going to take us to the “gates of hell”, the name superstitious local people use for the muddy volcanoes of Berca-Arbanasi. About 30 kilometres from Buzau the rain stopped and we turned off the main road, crossing a concrete bridge over the river Buzau, through the village of Berca and onto a winding country road surrounded by hills. We passed through the village of Policiori, with satellite dishes on each mud dwelling. Several kilometres on we stopped by a noticeboard which guided us towards “piclele mici”. Our packed lunches were eaten on the hillside where we saw buzzard, crested and sky larks, goldfinches and a corn bunting, fed scraps to a couple of stray dogs, and then climbed to the top of the hill to be faced by a moonscape of mud-bubbling craters.

These cone-shaped “volcanoes” are formed by natural gas rising from pockets 3,000 metres below the earth's surface in the continental crust. The gas pushes through layers of clay and water, driving the resulting (cold) mud to the surface in a bubbling cauldron, excess mud dribbling out in rivulets and drying hard. Mud volcanoes are direct indicators of deep hydrocarbons, the gas being associated with crude oil deposits in sedimentary rocks, hence the presence of a few oil derricks on the surrounding hills. The air smelled of oil and salt and the sound was broken only by the intermittent eruption, occasionally quite vigorous, of viscous, bubbling mud.



Tudor and Bebe
by mud volcano

This was a truly strange and little-visited place, well worth the slight detour and worthy of much closer inspection than we were able to give, especially of the few salt-tolerant plants.

We sped on through the Siriului mountains, stopping to stretch our legs by the Siriu reservoir, where we saw a female redstart, a northern wheatear and glimpsed a black-eared wheatear. After another brief stop for a possible spotted eagle (and ravens, white stork and steppe buzzard) and a very last stop for two beer bottles uncannily resembling an owl, we finally arrived at dusk to Zarnesti and Vila Elena. Gigi and Elena immediately made us welcome with a powerful drink, followed by a dinner of vegetable soup, chicken and polenta and a selection of mini-cakes.

Sunday 8th June

We awoke to warm, bright sunshine, which was to be the case each morning of our four-day stay.

Zarnesti was the base for the Carpathian Large Carnivore Project (1993-2003) set up to develop and implement a comprehensive conservation programme for bears, lynx and wolves in Romania (although strictly speaking, bears are omnivorous) and involving many organisations. Working with the local community, an eco-tourism programme was developed, based in the area of Piatra Craiului National Park, which the project helped to create. The Carpathian mountains are amongst the most pristine ecosystems left in Europe and the Romanian Carpathians are home to about one-third of all European large carnivores, with an estimated 5,000 brown bears, 2,500 wolves and 1,500 lynx as well as high concentrations of red deer and wild boar. The 'big three' species are now protected in Romania, although 'sport' hunting is still allowed at certain times of year. All three are gradually declining in number.

Today was to be a long one, culminating at the bear hide. After a pleasant breakfast (cereals, yogurt and honey, eggs cooked to order, bread cheese and sliced meats) and having made our sandwiches, we bussed the short journey through the town to the edge of the National Park and the Crapaturii mountain, pausing en route to look at a strange building roofed in black wooden shingles which was to have been a visitor centre but has not been completed. Both the financial purse and the building are empty.



Unfinished Visitor Centre at
Piatra Craiului National Park

Alighting by a flower meadow filled with thyme, meadowsweet, pinks, flax, yellow rattle, violas and spreading bellflower, we followed our leader upwards through typically beautiful alpine scenery. A horse was tethered on a mountain ridge and showed in perfect silhouette. The inevitable hooded crows and a red-backed shrike perched in branches, chiffchaff and chaffinch sang, ravens and an occasional buzzard glided through the trees. Further up the path near the forest edge were pink spikes of *orchis palustris* and a few intensely blue spring gentians. Bebe showed us the impression of a lynx pad in the soft mud, rounded and with no claw marks. Lynx are notoriously difficult to see, living in dense forest on high and inaccessible mountain crags and feeding mainly on roe deer.

Nearby was a spruce tree with scratch and rubbing marks made by a bear, soft, brown hair caught up in the bark. Bears communicate through smells and sounds as their eyesight is poor. By scratching and rubbing on trees they mark their territory and indicate their reproductive state. Brown bears usually forage morning and evening, resting in dense vegetation during the day.

We climbed upwards, past obvious evidence of logging which is not supposed to take place in the national park but has a blind eye turned to it ("illegal but legal", said Bebe). The wooded path rose steeply, dusky cranesbill bordering each side. Marsh tits were seen and then, in a tall beech tree, the classic pose of a red squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* nibbling on a pine cone, ear tufts and bushy tail very prominent. The red squirrel can be red, shades of brown, or black, but always with white underparts. In winter, all colour forms assume a greyish appearance. This individual had a dark colouration and we admired its agility as it leapt through the tree tops.

We continued upwards to a hollow tree trunk where a Ural owl and chicks had recently been seen. The typical nest site for this medium/large species is in a 'chimney' trunk. The owl is described as having a deceptively gentle look - we were warned that parent birds can be very aggressive. We were in dangerous territory here, belonging to bears, lynx, attack owls and possible marauding dogs! However, the owls seemed to have flown.

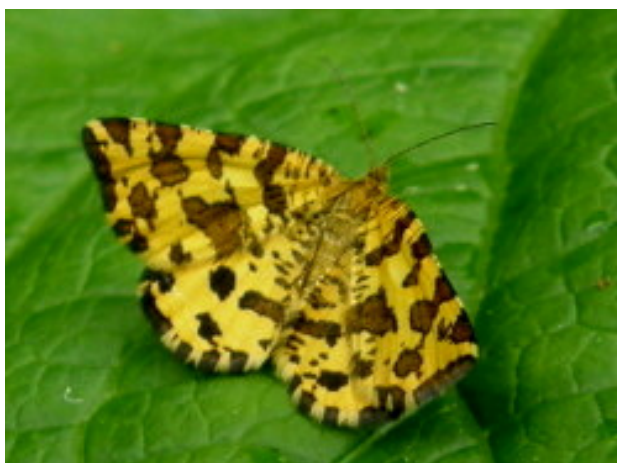
Our next encounter was with a pale brown, small Agile frog *Rana dalmatina*, not uncommon in moist woodland, and then a rather large thigh bone from some predator's past meal. Bear and deer prints were visible underfoot.



Agile frog

A rotten spruce trunk clearly showed the spiralling drill holes of a three-toed woodpecker and, while the rest of the group were watching a mistle thrush, David glimpsed a pale bushy tail disappearing into the rocky overhang – a lynx?

We started our descent in a short shower of gentle rain, passing a robin with newly-fledged young, more marsh tits and a Speckled Yellow moth, a day-flyer of open woodland, wood sage being the main larval foodplant.



Speckled Yellow moth

On regaining open ground by the bear tree we scanned the mountainside with telescopes to look for chamois but found instead the bright pink *Rhododendron myrtifolium* and clinging to the rocks everywhere the scrub-forming dwarf pine *Pinus mugo*.

We followed the track to a small lane leading to a monastery, marked on the map as Crucea lui Garnita Gura Barsei, where resides, apparently, an ATV-driving, long-haired monk. Our quest was for the nutcracker bird and, in company with the local barbequists ("sausage people"), there they were, two birds, like a cross between a jay and a starling. Hazel nuts are its favourite food and these are hidden in the ground during late summer/autumn, the odd forgotten one assisting the tree's regeneration. To see nutcracker was a first for all of us Honeyguiders. This was turning into quite a day and we hadn't even had lunch yet!

By a viewpoint of the spectacular vista up the valley, globe flowers were growing, and further along in the high meadows were several spikes of lesser butterfly orchid. Grey wagtails and a female kestrel accompanied our descent to the bus and a passing ATV revealed that the aforementioned monk was on an excursion.



Barsa river valley

Calling in briefly at Vila Elena for afternoon coffee (no cakes, the cake lady was at a funeral) we drove a few kilometres north through Sinca Noua and a short way down an unmade track which lead ultimately to Tagla and the bear hide, for a late picnic lunch in a wildflower meadow. It was hot and raptors were appearing – first, a golden eagle with white patches on the wings and tail base clearly visible, then a dark lesser spotted eagle, a possible short-toed eagle, although light common buzzards can look confusingly similar, and definite common buzzards. Two lesser spotted woodpeckers alighted on a nearby tree, perhaps not noticing us in the long grass. Whitethroat, yellowhammer and corn bunting were seen. We started walking up the track, meadows on each side, with Tudor following in the bus for those wanting to ride. Bebe pounced on a small sand lizard *Lacerta agilis*, a locally common ground-dwelling species.



Sand lizard

A small yellow-bellied toad was found in a wet ditch, with its yellow and black patched underside and rather drab upper. Steph noticed a very small swimming snake, dark, with orange patches on the back of the head – possibly a juvenile Grass snake *Natrix natrix*. Green and middle spotted woodpeckers were seen, and a meadow pipit in a tree.

The evening was drawing in and we passed the bear warden's isolated cottage in the bus, waiting further up this remote track bordered by a stream for permission to proceed to the hide. During this time some of us had good views of white-backed woodpecker. We also laid bets on how many bears would appear – the most Bebe had seen on any one occasion was fourteen – the winner to be awarded a bottle of wine. Nobody guessed more than an optimistic eight.

The man with the gun gave the all clear and we proceeded singly across the stream on a rickety wooden bridge and up to the hide, set on stilts well off the ground but still not immune to foraging bears, as indicated by the patched wooden floor where a food box had been stored. Adult male brown bears can reach a weight of 350 kg, females 200 kg – that's a lot of powerful muscle. We quietly took our places, closed the viewing window, and waited...

The first to arrive at about 19.40 hrs from down the wooded slope to our left was a pale brown, rather nervous female, probably two years old. Females are not reproductive until about 5 years old and are then serially monogamous. She paced up and down, unsure of her safety, eventually deciding to clamber up the nearest food tree. This food, provided entirely by the warden at his own cost which is supplemented by visitor donations, consists of factory confectionary rejects – sweets, basically, and everyone knows that bears love honey. Honeyguiders especially! This sweet stuff is hidden in various locations at the feeding area so that the bears have to work to find it. A second young bear soon arrived, a darker brown male, possibly the female's sibling. He found his reward in a raised trough and promptly sat in it.



Young female notices approach of sibling



Young male

Usually the bears feed for a limited time in a strict pecking order – youngsters and females first - before ambling off to make way for the next. They are mostly solitary animals but sometimes form family foraging groups at important food sources. In these cases a dominance hierarchy involving aggression is established. Breeding males are known to practice infanticide, killing another male's cubs in order to bring the female into oestrus and mate again. The big males usually come to feed last, as night falls, and so the arrival of the next bear was a surprise – he was the third male in the known hierarchy and looked big and mean.

The post marker is two metres high.

Adult male



Obstructions to the caches of food were no problem and heavy logs and covers were casually hefted aside.

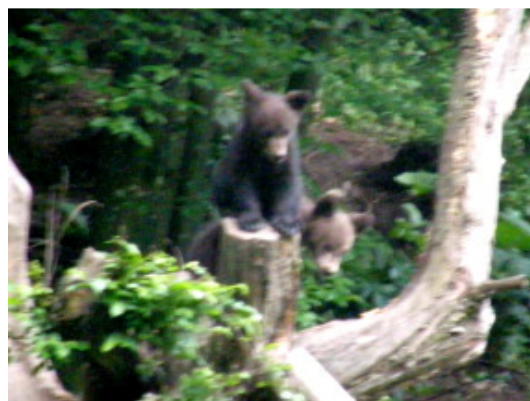
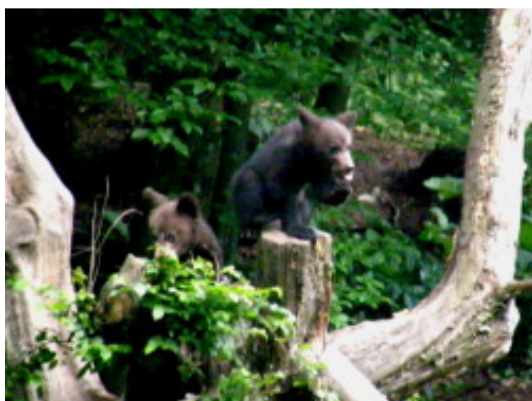
So far, three bears (but no Goldilocks) and someone was winning a bottle of wine. Then, in fairly rapid succession, three females and an orphaned youngster arrived – it is not unusual for females to adopt stray cubs. One female nervously prowled and didn't feed at all.



Adult female and orphan

A succession of seven bears in good light, a constant performance from almost the moment we sat down. This couldn't get much better, could it? It could...

Enter stage left a mother bear with two young cubs born in January, only the second appearance they've ever made – we must be forgiven for all going 'aaaah'.



4 month old sibling cubs

We watched the cubs' obvious enjoyment of the sweet, sticky food and their playfulness on the tree. After a while the mother became anxious to leave and one cub scrambled down, the other having difficulty tearing itself away. Eventually they moved into the forest and the show was over.

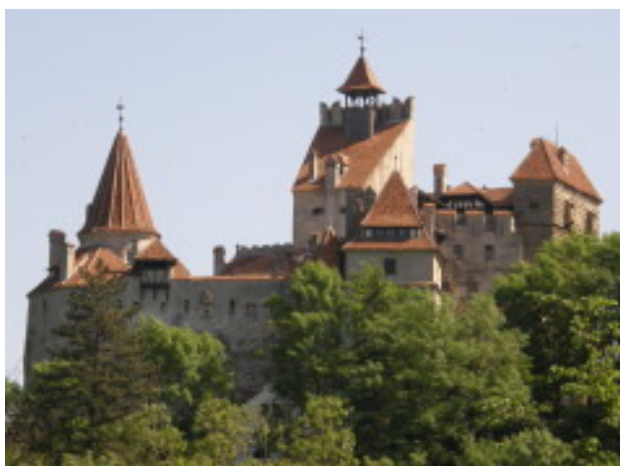
During all this, the warden's van had sustained a puncture. Changing the wheel with bears so close was dangerous and it was lucky that Tudor was on hand to assist.

There was much hilarity during the bus ride back to Vila Elena. Ten bears, so nobody had won the bet but we didn't care. It was noticed that fourteen hours had elapsed since breakfast which might have accounted for the light headedness. Bebe told a joke in English against the

Germans which was funny on several levels. Dinner was served at 23.00 hrs – what excellent service. What an excellent day. We went to bed tired but happy.

Monday 9th June

After a slightly later start we were on the road to Castle Bran for a quick look at the official Dracula destination, passing a group of white storks in a field on the way. Vlad Tepes (the Impaler) was a 15th century Prince and the original castle was a garrison for his soldiers guarding the border between Transylvania and Wallachia. The etymology of Dracula is thus: Vlad's father was called Drac, which means devil. In Romanian, the 'ul' suffix means 'the' and the 'a' suffix means 'son of' – hence son of the devil.



Castle Bran

The area is quite touristy (for Romania) and we moved on, but not before Tudor (pronounced Twodoor) had found us a foraging jay – we'd got the bus driver interested in wildlife! He was immediately promoted to Threedoor.

Our approach to the Cheile Rasnoavei gorge was on foot, frisky ponies in a meadow to our left and a small stream on the right. The debris of sausage people was very evident. Three cheerful cart-drivers passed us, their unshod ponies looking sleek and with red tassels on their blinkers to help keep flies and evil spirits away. Several fieldfares were feeding on the meadows and we saw a nuthatch with a caterpillar. Loud squawking indicated the presence of magpies, and on a dead branch near the stream were three big fledglings flexing their immature wings, not long out of the nest and demanding parental attention. Further on were alpine swifts high in the sky. The track became steeper and we crossed the stream, which became more promising. Rounding a corner the gorge closed in and we came across an army group on a rock climbing exercise. Cheile Rasnoavei is a popular place for bungee jumping – not an activity which interests climbers as all their instincts are for clinging on.

At the next bend the stream became faster-flowing and on a small rock sat a dipper, dark brown on its head and beneath the white bib, unlike the red-brown ones we see at home. It allowed us a good observation before we moved away from the probable nest site.

Our picnic lunch was hastened by the onset of rain and we reboarded the bus for Poina Brasov, just over 1,000 metres above sea level and Romania's most famous ski resort. We parked outside an ancient Romanian Orthodox church, intricately constructed of wood, its ornate roof clad in dark and light timber shingles, and beautifully restored. Orthodoxy does not permit the presence of women and we headed instead to an outdoor cafe where we had been promised coffee and a local delicacy – kurtos kalacs – a thin piece of sweet dough wrapped around a wooden cylinder and then baked and rolled in a topping – we had cinnamon and it was delicious.

Reinvigorated we made our way to the forest edge with its chalets and ski lift, along a path which cut through a parkland meadow rich in flowers and grasses. Scanning the skyline, a peregrine falcon was seen to launch itself from a treetop. Common swifts and house martins swooped over the meadow and goldfinches and linnets disappeared into the long grass. Male and female black redstarts ferried food to a nest by the chalets. We moved up the slope to look for woodland birds and found a grey-coloured red squirrel, another variation but still looking like squirrel nutkin. A powerful shower of rain had us sheltering under the conifers and admiring the classic Christmas tree shape of huge Norway spruces.

As we returned through the meadow after the rain a foraging black bird suddenly revealed itself to be a female ring ouzel, collecting food to take back to a nest somewhere, and a pair of linnets frolicked on the path, the male with a strongly rufous crown and blushing breast. During a brief change of leadership we took the pretty route back to the bus, passing by a damp meadow where the more strongly marked male ring ouzel was busy collecting worms. He was totally unconcerned by our presence and we all saw how the scaling of his breast feathers resembled the shingling on the church roof. Amongst the conifers we spied our third red squirrel, this one living up to its name.

Next stop the viewpoint over medieval Brasov, with unattractive additions, including a monstrously high chimney on a power station, in the distance.

We parked by the 15th century white watchtower, pausing to watch nuthatches and admire the profusion of patchwork roofs and fine buildings in front of us. The pleasant main square (Piata Statului) was clearly visible, surrounded by red-roofed merchant buildings recalling the region's German heritage.



City Hall Square, Piata Statului,
and Council House
(now History Museum)
with ornate white tower,
Brasov

The origins of Brasov as a medieval town are lost but archaeological finds suggest occupation of this land since the Bronze Age, 60,000 years ago. For centuries the city has been Transylvania's gateway to the south and east and not surprisingly such a location means a turbulent history, hence the massive defence fortifications.

We descended steep steps to the bastion, now a museum, and walked along Strada Dupa Ziduri ("behind the walls" street), the black tower with its modern glass "hat" visible on our right. Bebe showed us the school building founded by Johannes Honterus in the 14th century and opposite, a statue of Honterus directing children to the place of learning.

We wandered through many interesting streets in a drizzle of rain and at the end of another stimulating day it was difficult to give the place due attention. We all agreed that Brasov was a vibrant, living medieval city, and worth revisiting. In any case there was a distinct inclination to return to Vila Elena by 19.00 hours and the Romania v France Euro 2008 football match.

After another delicious dinner and local wine, during which Romania drew 0-0 with France, it was time to watch a video of a BBC Natural History Unit programme filmed locally in 1998 and called 'Living with Predators'. Briefly, this fascinating film gave an insight into rural Romanian life and explored the conflicts of interest between humans and other animals.

Later, some of us took a telescope outside to look at the moon and stars.

Tuesday 10th June

To another part of the National Park today at Magura, south of Zarnesti, first stop a scenic former quarry with stream and meadows. Orange tip and ringlet butterflies were on the wing. A common brassy ringlet was caught and identified.

By the stream was a patch of bright yellow wallflowers, grey and pied wagtails, black redstarts and a song thrush, and overhead alpine swifts and a few crag martins swooped. We drove along the track a short distance to the gorge proper, inaccessible to vehicles, and left Tudor with the bus, loading Bebe with a telescope and a heavy looking wooden-handled hoe for reinstating a landslipped track further on. The walls of the gorge closed in, creating a temporary gloom. We passed through to a place where, the previous year, a bear had fallen to its death from the rocky scree above and, further on, where two startled local children had surprised a lynx at its kill.



"Here it gets a little bit difficult"
Bebe in customary jovial mood

The walls of the gorge receded and became massive and we hopefully, but unsuccessfully, scanned the place where Bebe's fellow guide, Adi, had seen a family of wallcreepers the previous week. However, this was wallcreeper territory and there were further areas to explore. A harsh call from high above and there was a female peregrine falcon, and then the smaller male – it was easier to view them from a recumbent position – and then a pair of buzzards displaying. This was a good place for raptors.

We stopped to eat our sandwiches by a small wooden shelter on the bank of a dry stream, a good vantage point for wallcreeper searching and close to a previous nest site – but again to no avail. Some birds are just destined to elude.

A single swallowtail butterfly glided by. A weevil, shiny black with blue markings, was photographed (possibly *Otiorhynchus clavipes* but there are more than 50,000 known species!) This one has elbowed antennae which can be neatly folded and retracted, presumably during the business of boring into vegetation.



Beautiful weevil

We walked onwards and upwards, 950 metres above sea level, past an (illegal) log jam in the stream, and came to the place where the path needed mending, a shepherds' trail rising steeply to our right and skirting the forested mountainside. A reduced group scrambled along a very narrow earth track, past bear-marked trees and dead trunks gouged with black woodpecker holes, to a vertiginous view of the main path we had just trod. We forded a forest stream and sat above it on a steep, treed slope to watch and recover. It was quiet and peaceful but not a lot was happening on the wildlife front and as the afternoon grew chill we fairly yomped back down to the bus.

Our last night and we had a barbeque to look forward to at Gigi and Elena's mountain chalet at Padina Badoaiei. A brief stop at Vila Elena to collect Bill and Jackie (they'd met some friendly locals during their exploration of Zarnesti and been invited in) and we were on the now familiar track past the deliquescing building, alongside the river Barsa. It was a feat to get the bus up to the chalet, through deeply flooded tracks which a 4x4 might have had difficulty with, but Tudor was heroic and we were calling him Fourdoor now.

The chalet is a small, two-storey, wooden summerhouse, built into the hillside, shutters on windows and an eaves-covered deck area facing south for eating, with no electricity, running water or loo! It was charming. Cooking was taking place over a bonfire as we arrived, rather wet in the drizzle which soon eased off. Glasses of firewater were handed round, a crate of beer and bottles of wine appeared and the evening was underway. We feasted on sausage and chicken, sautéed potatoes and salad, a purée of aubergines, and afterwards Gigi, who used to be in a band and apparently still has a local female following, played his guitar and sang.



Gigi plays, we admire

We packed up as the light faded and made a brief, somewhat poignant visit to see Crai, a captive, semi-tame, neutered male wolf rescued from a fur factory with his sister, Poina, who died recently. Crai is now 15 years old and he bounded to the enclosure fence to take a titbit. He must be rather lonely.

Wednesday 11th June

Our flight from Bucharest was at 15.50 hrs which meant we had time for a couple of stops on the way, the first being at a roadside market for souvenirs.



One of half a dozen roadside stalls en route to Bucharest

As we passed Peles Castle, the former Romanian royal family's summer palace, a motorcade approached. Ex-king Michael 1, who is 86, has returned after the palace was confiscated when the Communist regime forced him to abdicate in 1947. He has pledged to maintain the main palace as a museum while the family occupies a smaller one on the estate.

After refuelling the bus we pulled over by a fishing lake. Both we and the tethered ponies were feeling the heat. We watched a longish snake swimming and submerging, dark and strongly patterned along its length - possibly a Dice snake, the most aquatic of European species, although we didn't know then to inspect its nostrils to see if they were directed upwards (a diagnostic feature).

We arrived at the airport in good time, gave a glowing account of Bebe to his boss, Florin (much to Bebe's embarrassment) and said our farewells. It had been a wonderful time in a fascinating country and we were going home for a good, long sleep.

Report and photos by Helen Crowder
June 2008

Here are a few interesting related web sites:-

www.rounite.com/2008.05.14/muddy-volcanoes – for more about this natural phenomenon.

www.clcp.ro - for photos and information about the large carnivore project.

www.brasovtravelguide.ro – for images and much more information about the city of Brasov.

<http://www.donlinke.com/drakula/vlad.htm> - for all you ever wanted to know, and much you didn't, about "Dracula".

I also googled "Romanian liquor" for the firewater name and came up with the following:-

"Pelinka is a Romanian liquor that is good for starting a fire in wet conditions. Can also be taken orally."