



Romanian Hamster (Photo: Zoltán Gergely Nagy, 2023)

EUROPEAN MINK SPECIAL TOUR

with **SAKERTOURS**

13rd - 17th September, 2023

Leader: Zoltán Baczó

Sakertour`s has been organizing mammal watching tours since 2020 and this special tour was first run in 2021. It was now our third in a row since the beginning. This main target on this tour is Europe`s most endangered mammal species, the European Mink. Sadly, this species declined extensively in Europe and now the last stronghold is in the Danube Delta where the estimated population is about 1500 individuals. The status of the species critically endangered in Europe therefore a conservation project was started in Romania in 2017 to prevent this species from the extinctions. The conditions are still good in the delta, so hopefully we can admire this fantastic species for a long time!

In 2023 the August and September information was not promising as we had three mammal watching tour and none of them managed to connect with the Mink. The water level conditions were perfect, and we have been visiting the sites we had several sightings in the previous years, but we had no luck. On the Mink tour however, we had 3 full nights (more than any other mammal tours) so we were still hopeful! But regardless how hard we tried on the 2023 Mink tour we could not see any, so our third tour missed the species. Our success rate is now down to 66% seeing the Mink on this special tour. We were disappointed of course, but this is nature. It was also shows that seeing a *Mustelidae* is far from guaranteed despite all the knowledge and effort! Eventually two days after our Mink tour we had our first autumn sighting of Mink on a custom tour.

We had no change in the itinerary from previous years with 3 nights in the delta and one night in the Dobrudja area. The 2023 group recorded 20 species and although we missed our main target, we enjoyed seeing hard-to-come by species like Romanian Hamster or Forest Dormouse. The weather was warm and sunny throughout the tour but of course at night you need proper clothing on the boat!

Steppes and fields of coastal Dobrudja

We had left Bucharest Airport in time and reached our first accommodation North from Constanta before sunset. First time ever we had teenagers in the group which means looking for mammals can be interesting to all ages! After dinner we prepared for the first evening watching session. As soon as we were out in the field right by the edge of the village, we have found our first Jackals, European Hares, and White-breasted Hedgehogs. We drove a little further where the much sought-after Romanian Hamster was seen on our previous tours. First, we have found Common or Sibling Voles and Mound-building Mouses but bang we soon came across a Romanian Hamster! A localised and great looking mammal species and not so long ago was out of the radar (we did not see it in 2020 on our first mammal tour). The hamsters had a gradation year because we had far more sightings of far more individuals in 2023 than in previous years! On our first night we also encountered several Red Foxes and a Eurasian Badger too. Around the accommodation Nathusius Pipistrelles were feeding under the car park light. We used the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro for Bat ID but also by now we have a good knowledge of bats from the experts!

On the next day we had a quick visit to a small cave, where we had more than 50 Schreiber`s Bent-winged Bats and around 30 Greater Mouse-eared Bats alongside with some great looking Cave Spiders. This cave was surrounded with some nice steppe area where we could enjoy some other species too. Grazed steppe lands of Dobrudja are home of Ground Squirrels and of course their predators. We could watch eight or more European Ground Squirrels in a field when suddenly a Saker Falcon appeared from nowhere. A great sighting! We had lunch in a nearby Hotel terrace where a little search around the back pool between meals produced three species of frogs: European Tree Frog, Pool Frog and Common Spadefoot. Nice surprize! After lunch we were drove to an area where we have installed many nest boxes, creating a `colony` for birds and especially for dormouse! We have checked several boxes and quite quickly found our desired species, the cute looking Forest Dormouse. This little `bandit` with its black goggles can be found in Eastern Europe and central Asia and always a welcome bonus on any mammal tour!



Forest Dormouse and Schreiber`s bent-winged Bats (Photo: Zoltán Baczó)

The Danube Delta

We arrived to Tulcea early in evening and quickly boarded the 'Harrier', our wildlife watching boat. Our plan was to discover the area between Tulcea and our accommodation in the dark, to look for European Mink! On our first evening on the boat, we have found several Golden Jackals, a Raccoon Dog, Brown Rats and recorded the following bat species: Noctule, Nathusius, Common and Kuhl Pipistrelles. We have reached our accommodation before midnight.

During daytime we were visiting lakes and channels mainly for birds. Mid-September still a very good time to enjoy birdlife of the Danube Delta. We have seen many White Pelicans, Ferruginous Ducks, Caspian Terns, Whiskered Terns and even Dalmatian Pelican or White-tailed Eagles. On the second night we have visited a different part of the Delta where we had lots of Brown Rat sightings and the same sort of Pipistrelle species like the day before. Unfortunately, no Mink sighting. As there were no Mink sightings at any of our 'usual spots' for weeks now we decided to discover a new area on our last night where we have never been looking for Mink on the tours before. We covered quite a large area and travelled a long distance, but again we could only find Golden Jackals, Brown Rats and the same sort of Pipistrelles like before plus Pond and Daubenton's Myotis. We had wonderful nights out but in 2023 we were not lucky enough to connect with the rare European Mink. These species are not exclusively hunting in the water; they can cover dry areas along rivers while looking for prey so they obviously not always easy to find!



A curious Golden Jackal from the Danube Delta (Photo: Zoltán Gergely Nagy)

Mammals – list of mammal species seen on 2023 tour

1. **European Hare** *Lepus europaeus*

We have seen two individuals in our first night. A common species throughout Romania.

2. **Romanian Hamster** *Mesocricetus newtoni*

This rarely seen hamster species only lives in the Dobrudja region of Romania and in a few spots in Bulgaria. It has a mostly nocturnal lifestyle, using steppe grasslands and agricultural fields, but it is very localized. We have seen two individuals in our first night.

3. **Northern White-breasted Hedgehog** *Erinaceus roumanicus*

A common species in Romania. During the tour we found two individuals in our first night.

4. **Common Vole** *Microtus arvalis* / **Sibling Vole** *Microtus rosiaemeridionalis*

8+ seen in our first night in Dobrudja steppe and agricultural land.

5. **Forest Dormouse** *Dryomys nitedula*

One was found in a nestbox specially made for dormouses but not only.

6. **Mound building Mouse** *Mus spicilegus*

10+ seen in our first night along agricultural lands and steppe lands of Dobrudja

7. **Brown Rat** *Rattus norvegicus*

A rather common species in the Danube Delta. 40+ individuals were found in the Danube Delta

8. **European Souslik** *Spermophilus citellus*

The most widespread ground squirrel species in Europe is very common in the steppes of Dobrudja. We have seen 8 individuals feeding in a heavily grazed field.

9. **Golden Jackal** *Canis aureus moreotica*

A locally common species in Dobrudja, were a total of 27 were seen on the tour. This species was once sporadic in Romania but since the late 1990's their numbers increased in the Dobrudja area and especially in the Danube Delta and around the lagoon system to the south where suitable reed beds (hiding places) can be found.

10. **Raccoon Dog** *Nyctereutes procynoise* (introduced)

An introduced mammal in Romania and the main stronghold is in the Danube Delta. On our night session we spotlighted only one individual this year.

11. **Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes*

A commonly encountered species on the tour. We saw a total of 4 individuals on our first night.

12. **Eurasian Badger** *Meles meles*

Just one Badger was seen on our first night in Dobrudja

13. **Schreiber's Bent-Winged Bat** *Miniopterus schreibersii*

50+ were seen in a cave in Dobrudja. This species is a fast flyer (60-80km/hour) and has got very long wings. The only species in Europe where the end of the wing folds in hence the name 'bent-winged bat'

14. **Greater Mouse-eared Bat** *Myotis myotis*

30+ were seen in a different chamber of the cave we have visited in Dobrudja.

15. **Daubenton's Bat** *Myotis daubentonii*

Identified by the Bat detector while on the boat in the Danube Delta

16. **Pond Myotis** *Myotis dasycneme*

Only one night heard and identified by the bat detector in the Danube Delta

17. **Noctule** *Nyctalus noctula*

These large bats are often seen flying at dusk and were observed several in the Danube Delta

18. **Soprano Pipistrelle** *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*

Detected in multiple times while on the boat in the Danube Delta

19. **Nathusius's Pipistrelle** *Pipistrellus nathusii*

Most commonly detected bat species during the tour. We have detected every single night on the tour. Common species in the Danube Delta

20. **Kuhl Pipistrelle** *Pipistrellus kuhlii*

Detected only in the Danube Delta nights.



Saker Falcon and Jonathan while holding and showing us a Grass Snake. Thank you for choosing us!



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