

Curlew Sandpipers with Little Stint (Dániel Balla)

# DANUBE DELTA & DOBRUDJA IN SPRING with SAKERTOURS 18<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2023

#### Leader: Dániel Balla, Márton Molnár

The Danube Delta being one of the few remaining well preserved aquatic habitats in Eastern Europe provides a great opportunity for every birder to enjoy the vast numbers of waterbirds in a truly unique set up. Outside the Delta the open steppe like habitat along the coastline with the lagoons look are like habitats design by birdwatchers so they can enjoy themselves with their fantastic hobby. We completed our itinerary visiting the old Oak forests in Southeast Romania to search for the very localised Semi-collared Flycatcher and also visited the Macin Mountains which is close by on the way after coming out from the Delta. All the time in the wonderful Spring weather and with all the colourful breeding plumage birds everywhere. This year we did outstandingly well and recorded 194 bird species on the tour our list being boosted with some regional rarities which we found while birding.

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, the elusive Little Crake, 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 run into a flock of fly-hunting Rosy Starlings as well. Birding the different habitats in the Dobrudja area and Macin Mountains we found breeding plumaged Curlew Sandpipers, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope, Levant Sparrowhawk, Long-legged Buzzard, Booted Eagle, Saker Falcon, European Nightjar, Lesser Grey Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, Pied and Isabelline Wheatears, Common Rock Thrush, Paddyfield Warbler, Barred Warbler, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks and Hawfinch while Yelkouan Shearwater and Little Terns were seen from the coast.

#### 18<sup>th</sup> May (Thursday)

After everyone was in the bus, we left the airport area near Bucharest-Otopeni heading West. We had several stops on the way to our first accommodation, an old hunting lodge in the woods just a few kms after crossing the Olt River. On the way we were crossing open areas and a few scrubby patches all providing great opportunities to search for a few species and to give an excuse for a birding stop. A small patch of water near a sunflower field had the first singing Ortolan and Black-headed Buntings, we had chance to have a good look at a Black-headed type Western Yellow Wagtail and saw a Long-eared Owl sitting on a milestone near the road. Crossing a patch a pasture we saw the first Lesser Grey Shrike and a scrubby patch had a singing Barred Warbler. We stopped to check a calling Syrian Woodpecker and found a Little Owl at the same spot. The reservoir on the Olt River held Pygmy Cormorant, Whiskered Tern, Black Tern and a few Pied Avocets before arriving to the lodge and going for dinner.



Western Yellow Wagtail – a Black-headed form, Long-eared Owl and Ortolan Bunting (Dániel Balla)

19<sup>th</sup> May (Friday)

The beautiful woodland around the lodge was full of birdsong in the morning. One of the first birds was a Black Woodpecker coming really close and found Short-toed Treecreeper, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Icterine Warbler and Common Redstart to name a few before hearing our main target here. It took some time till we located the singing Semi-collared Flycatcher, but finally, after finding a track going in, we found the singing male at probably its nesting hole and the female as they both were hanging around. A Black Stork flying over above us was one of the last birds here before we departed and spent the rest of the day driving East. On the way we had a short stop at a small patch of paddyfields where we found the first wader flocks of the tour and had Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints in good number complemented with Ruffs and a few Ruddy turnstones there before reaching the Danube and settling in our hotel near Calarasi for the night.



Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Semicollared Flycatcher (Dániel Balla)

#### 20<sup>th</sup> May (Saturday)

We crossed the Danube in the morning with one of the first ferries and stopped near the Bulgarian border where a few blocks of flats are home to a colony of Swifts. After some time we found the Pallid Swifts amongst the Common ones and had chance to compare them side-by-side.

We were getting closer to the Dobrudja area and were seeing the first wetlands along the roads we were taking. With a short detour we visited a larger lagoon and had close Glossy Ibis from the shore, beautiful breeding plumage Garganey, the first flock of Great White Pelicans, Red-backed Shrike and European Beeeaters and Rollers around. Our main goal visiting this spot was to find Cetti's Warbler which species has a limited distribution in southeast Romania – we heard a few singing birds and had good views of one we tried.

A known breeding spot of Alpine Swifts was along the way and we spent a few minutes to check the birds completing our Swift collection in one day. Another stop was made on the way when passing a pasture with woods and we thought we heard a calling Levant's Sparrowhawk from the car. After stopping we soon found a bird circling up and flying away. Luckily the same spot had a pale morph Booted Eagle which showed itself very well.

We arrived in the Southern part of Dobrudja at lake Techirghiol by afternoon. We decided to bird the lake in the rest of the day and started exploring the water and the shore. At a point while watching Curlew Sandpipers Márton had a strange bird crossing behind us which he immediately called out to check as it looked like a Spur-winged Plover. The seemed to disappear in the distance so we followed it and found it further down along the shore – it turned out to be only the 6<sup>th</sup> record for Romania. Driving further along the shore we found several smaller flocks of waders mainly consisting of Little Stints and magnificent looking Curlew Sandpipers. Luckily, we bumped into a pair of Eurasian Stone-Curlews. At a point we finally found a Broad-billed Sandpiper which we could observe from a close distance.



Broad-billed Sandpiper (Dániel Balla)

#### 21<sup>st</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> May (Sunday-Monday)

We had two full days to bird the coastal sites in Dobrudja. We framed the first day in sea watching. Both the morning and the late afternoon time spent on the coast yielded some Yelkouan Shearwaters and we also had a nice pair of Little Terns staying around. Flocks of Mediterranean Gulls were coming and going above the sea and with patience we saw some Sandwich Terns. A big surprise was to see at least five Eurasian Nightjars hunting above the sea. On the way back from the sea we stopped to check the local breeding Collared Pratincoles and the same spot we found a Golden Jackal in the late afternoon. Close to our hotel we saw a lovely pair of Red-rumped Swallows and we had a male Levant's Sparrowhawk once disappearing above the nearby forest.



Levant Sparrowhawk and Lesser Grey Shrike (Dániel Balla)

We visited several wetlands in the area, on the larger ones we found Ruddy and Common Shelducks, Garganey, a few Eurasian Wigeon and Common Teal, Common and Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck and Northern Shoveler. Some shallow wetlands had nice numbers of shorebirds and we had some nice close views again of Curlew Sandpipers, Little Stints, Common Ringed Plovers and Common Redshanks. Searching for the best waterbody finally resulted in a nice one, where a good flock of Pelicans containing both Great White and Dalmatian were visible from a great distance. We had perfect afternoon lights while slowly going closer and checking the birds around which included White-winged, Whiskered and Black Terns, Ruffs,

Common and Spotted Redshank, Wood Sandpiper and a breeding plumage Red-necked Phalarope was spotted to delight every one of us. Another highlight was an adult Pallas's Gull on the same water which finally took off thanks to a Gull-billed Tern which started mobbing it.

We checked a large quarry twice and going back for a second time turned out to be the right thing to do as it added a nice Saker Falcon to our list. The main targets being Pied, Isabelline and Northern Wheatears which we easily found and also had Tawny Pipit and some other common passerines around. The area is famous for raptors and besides the Saker we had great views of a Long-legged Buzzard pair, a Lesser Spotted Eagle and a distant Levant Sparrowhawk.

Moving between the sites we opted going on the less frequented dirt roads, where some local farmland birds were seen well such as a Grey Partridge, Crested, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks, Corn, Ortolan and Black-headed Buntings, Lesser Grey Shrike, Red-backed Shrike, Roller, European Bee-eater and Red-footed Falcons hunting literally everywhere. We had a few small flocks of Rosy Starlings passing by but a real good view was waiting itself.

Knowing the habitat needs of the Paddyfield Warbler made us easily finding a few singing birds and we had a superb male Common Reed Bunting and Savi's Warbler as well in the same habitat. When driving back to our hotel we heard a weird song from the car and stopped to listen carefully. We soon realised that the singing bird is an Eastern Bonelli's Warbler – such a mega, it was a shame that despite searching for the bird we could not locate it anymore after it stopped singing.



Pallas's Gull and Gull-billed Tern in the Dobrudja (Dániel Balla)

### 23<sup>rd</sup> May (Tuesday)

We were aiming to reach the Danube Delta today. We took off early in the morning from our accommodation and had only one birding stop on the way in a forest reserve near Babadag. Our main target was to find the local breeding Red-breasted Flycatchers which we tracked down rapidly. Other birds we saw in the forest were Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper and the seemingly common Icterine Warbler.

We reached Tulcea early afternoon and boarded our boat which took us into the remote lagoon system of the Delta. We enjoyed a selection of waterbirds from really close as most of them seems to accept the boats around them. We stopped along a canal to observe the superb Collared Flycatcher. we had great views of Penduline Tits and Bearded Reedlings. We found a pair of Red-necked Grebes breeding along one of the canals, their iridescent plumage really glowing in the late afternoon lights. White-tailed Sea Eagles were

guarding some of the canals and we made a short visit to one of the colonies where Eurasian Spoonbills, Squacco Herons, Little and Great Egrets, Purple Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons breed together with Pygmy and Great Cormorants.



Male Spanish Sparrow and a Red-breasted Flycatcher (Dániel Balla)

The open waters of the larger lagoons had flocks of Great White Pelicans while the Dalmatian ones were mostly solitary. Great Crested Grebes were common and we had a few Pallas's Gull amongst the Caspian ones, before arriving to our nicely built hotel on a really remote spot in the Delta.



Red-necked Grebe – the gem of the Delta, Penduline Tit and White-tailed Eagle (Dániel Balla)

#### 24<sup>th</sup> May (Wednesday)

A prebreakfast walk around the hotel resulted in seeing singing Marsh Warbler, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and a nice Penduline Tit.

After breakfast we were heading to a colony on a lagoon with our boat where we enjoyed the loud pairs of Black-headed Gulls, Common, Whiskered and Black Terns, while the local Black-necked Grebes were harder to find as they stay motionless for several seconds before decide to swim away.



Dalmatian Pelican, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Marsh Warbler all seen in the Delta (Dániel Balla)

We spent some time in the narrower canals to see Thrush Nightingale, which finally showed itself. A male Golden Oriole hunting insects from the water surface was a fantastic sight, and the lovely trio of European Rollers, Common Kingfishers and European Bee-eaters were frequently seen from the boat so as the Common Cuckoo which really explains its name here. In the reedbeds we found again Bearded Reedlings and had a Grey-headed Woodpecker in the bush along one of the canals. Our final highlight before heading out from the Delta was a male Little Crake which we first heard calling from the boat and managed to lure out from the dense reeds. On the way out we saw our last Glossy Ibises feeding along the shore and bumped into a small flock of Rosy Starlings hunting on some swarming insects in the air.

We reached the port in Tulcea in the middle of the day and were back in our bus for the afternoon to arrive in the Macin Mountains area in time to do some birding there.

After spending a short time at our accommodation, we were back on the road and headed to a close site at the foothills where we luckily immediately found our prime target – a male Common Rock Thrush. The bird was feeding on the dirt road and hopping on the fence posts enabling us great views. We sat in a local hide to try our luck with Sombre Tit, but the birds refused to turn up, fortunately we were compensated with a lovely Turtle Dove which came down to drink. Later in the afternoon we spent our time at the open pasture near our accommodation and had nice views of Isabelline Wheatear, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard and found a Woodchat Shrike which turned out to be in a flighty mood.

#### 25<sup>th</sup> May (Thursday)

We started the morning with the Woodchat Shrike and were luckily finding its mate as well as the pair sat together on a bush on the pasture. Scanning the hills for raptors we spotted Long-legged Buzzard and a Lesser Spotted Eagle before we departed from the area.

On the way to the airport we had a short stop in the morning at a woodland where we had nice views of Hawfinch, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, a showy Wryneck, Golden Oriole and Marsh Tit. While walking on the path we had a pale morph Booted Eagle and a European Honey Buzzard circling above us sometimes flying together.

We were lucky to see a flock of Great White Pelicans of the car close to the airport to remind us of the great time we had here before we said goodbye to Romania.



This male Common Rock Thrush was seen in the Macin Mountains (Dániel Balla)

## 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	С
2	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	С
3	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna	С
4	Ruddy Shelduck*	Tadorna ferruginea	С
5	Garganey	Spatula querquedula	С
6	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata	С
7	Gadwall	Mareca strepera	С
8	Eurasian Wigeon*	Mareca penelope	6
9	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	С
10	Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca	2
11	Red-crested Pochard	Netta rufina	14
12	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	С
13	Ferruginous Duck	Aythya nyroca	С
14	Smew	Mergellus albellus	2
15	Grey Partridge*	Perdix perdix	2
16	Common Quail*	Coturnix coturnix	1
17	Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus	С
18	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	1
19	Red-necked Grebe	Podiceps grisegena	5
20	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus	С
21	Black-necked Grebe	Podiceps nigricollis	С
22	Black Stork*	Ciconia nigra	10
23	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	С



Flock of pelicans in the Dobrudja (Dániel Balla)

24			
24	Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus	C
25	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia	С
26	Eurasian Bittern	Botaurus stellaris	1
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
37	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	С
38	Osprey	Pandion haliaetus	1
39	European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus	6
40	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus	2
41	Lesser Spotted Eagle	Clanga pomarina	2
42	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	2
43	Levant Sparrowhawk	Accipiter brevipes	3
44	Eurasian Sparrowhawk*	Accipiter nisus	1
45	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	С
46	Montagu's Harrier***	Circus pygargus	2
47	White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla	8
48	Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus	С
49	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	С
50	Little Crake**	Porzana parva	1
51	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	4
52	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	С



This Spur-winged Plover turned out to be only the 6<sup>th</sup> record for Romania (Dániel Balla)

53	Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus	3
54	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	С
55	Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta	С
56	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	С
57	Spur-winged Plover***	Vanellis spinosus	1
58	Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola	10
59	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula	С
60	Eurasian Curlew*	Numenius arquata	2
61	Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa	С
62	Ruddy Turnstone*	Arenaria interpres	11
63	Ruff	Calidris pugnax	С
64	Broad-billed Sandpiper	Calidris falcinellus	1
65	Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea	С
66	Sanderling**	Calidris alba	1
67	Dunlin	Calidris alpina	9
68	Little Stint	Calidris minuta	С
69	Common Snipe**	Gallinago gallinago	6



Little Tern on the Black Sea coast (Dániel Balla)

70	Red-necked Phalarope**	Phalaropus lobatus	1
71	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	1
72	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	2
73	Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola	С
74	Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus	2
75	Common Greenshank*	Tringa nebularia	1
76	Collared Pratincole	Glareola pratincola	С
77	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	С
78	Little Gull	Hydrocoloeus minutus	10
79	Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus	С
80	Pallas's Gull	Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus	7
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81	Caspian Gull	Larus cachinnans	С
82	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	С
83	Gull-billed Tern*	Gelochelidon nilotica	7
84	Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis	10
85	Little Tern	Sternula albifrons	2
86	Common Tern	Sterna hirundo	С
87	Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybrida	С
88	White-winged Tern*	Chlidonias leucopterus	5
89	Black Tern	Chlidonias niger	С
90	Yelkouan Shearwater**	Puffinus yelkouan	50
91	Feral Pigeon	Columba livia f. domestica	С
92	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	С



European Turtle Dove as we saw it in the Macin Mountains (Dániel Balla)

93	European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur	С
94	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	С
95	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus	С
96	Little Owl	Athene noctua	5
97	Long-eared Owl*	Asio otus	2
98	European Nightjar	Caprimulgus europaeus	5
99	Common Swift	Apus apus	С
100	Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus	5
101	Alpine Swift	Apus melba	4
102	European Roller	Coracias garrulus	С
103	Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis	С



European Bee-eaters are a common sight in the area (Dániel Balla)

104	European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster	С
105	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	С
106	Eurasian Wryneck*	Jynx torquilla	1
107	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocoptes medius	3
108	Syrian Woodpecker	Dendrocopos syriacus	4
109	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	3
110	Black Woodpecker	Dryocopus martius	2
111	European Green Woodpecker*	Picus viridis	1
112	Grey-headed Woodpecker	Picus canus	3
113	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	С
114	Red-footed Falcon	Falco vespertinus	С
115	Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo	4
116	Saker Falcon*	Falco cherrug	1
117	Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio	С
118	Lesser Grey Shrike	Lanius minor	С
119	Woodchat Shrike*	Lanius senator	2
120	Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus	С
121	Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius	С
122	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	С
123	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	С
124	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	С
125	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	С
126	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	4

127	Marsh Tit	Poecile palustris	2
128	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	С
129	Great Tit	Parus major	С
130	Eurasian Penduline Tit	Remiz pendulinus	3
131	Bearded Reedling*	Panurus biarmicus	5
132	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	С
133	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	С
134	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla	С



Calandra Lark in the Dobrudja (Dániel Balla)

135	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra	С
136	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia	С
137	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	С
138	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	С
139	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica	7
140	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus	С
141	Wood Warbler	Phylloscopus sibilatrix	4
142	Eastern Bonelli's Warbler***	Phylloscopus orientalis	Н
143	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	2
144	Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	С
145	Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus	С
146	Paddyfield Warbler	Acrocephalus agricola	6
147	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus	С
148	Marsh Warbler	Acrocephalus palustris	1
149	Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	Iduna pallida	3

150	Icterine Warbler	Hippolais icterina	С
151	Cetti`s Warbler	Cettia cetti	1
152	Savi's Warbler	Locustella luscinioides	С
153	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	С
154	Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin	С
155	Barred Warbler	Sylvia nisoria	2
156	Lesser Whitethroat	Sylvia curruca	6
157	Common Whitethroat	Sylvia communis	5
158	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea	9
159	Eurasian Treecreeper*	Certhia familiaris	1
160	Short-toed Treecreeper**	Certhia brachydactyla	1
161	Rosy Starling	Pastor roseus	100+
162	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	С
163	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	С
164	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	С
165	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata	С
166	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	2
167	Thrush Nightingale	Luscinia luscinia	1
168	Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos	С
169	Collared Flycatcher	Ficedula albicollis	2



Isabelline Wheatear (Dániel Balla)

170	Semi-collared Flycatcher	Ficedula semitorquata	2
171	Red-breasted Flycatcher	Ficedula parva	2
172	Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus	С
173	Common Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis	1
174	European Stonechat*	Saxicola rubicola	1
175	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	С
176	Isabelline Wheatear	Oenanthe isabellina	С
177	Pied Wheatear	Oenanthe pleschanka	3
178	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	С
179	Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis	С



181	Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava	C	
182	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	C	
183	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris	C	



Common Reed Bunting is a real beauty in the right lights (Dániel Balla)

184	Tree Pipit**	Anthus trivialis	1
185	Red-throated Pipit	Anthus cervinus	2
186	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	С
187	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes	С
188	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	7
189	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	7
190	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	С
191	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra	С
192	Ortolan Bunting	Emberiza hortulana	6
193	Black-headed Bunting	Emberiza melanocephala	5
194	Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus	С



Golden Jackal in the Dobrudja (Dániel Balla)



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