

Pallas's Gull (Dániel Balla)

DANUBE DELTA & DOBRUDJA IN SPRING with SAKERTOURS 18th May – 25th May, 2019

Leader: Dániel Balla

Visiting the Danube Delta offers a truly unique opportunity in Europe to get a hint of the wildlife once was found almost all along on the river's lowland sections. The lagoons and channels still hold masses of waterbirds and extended with the Dobrudja lowlands and Macin Mountains this tour gives a special selection of birds in Eastern Europe. 2019's Sakertour tour to the region ended with 183 recorded bird species from which 9 was heard only. We were somehow lucky with the weather as we missed the serious rains and heat as well but we birded almost always in wind which sometimes became quite strong and disturbing.

Highlights species this year were Ferruginous Duck, both Great White and Dalmatian Pelicans, four Grebe species, Little Bittern, Pygmy Cormorant, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Levant Sparrowhawk, Broad-billed Sandpiper, breeding plumage Red-necked Phalaropes, Slender-billed and the magnificent Pallas's Gull, European Roller, Red-footed Falcon, Sombre Tit, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Barred Warbler, Thrush Nightingale, Common (Red-tailed) Rock Thrush, Pied Wheatear, Rosy Starling and Black-headed Bunting.

18th May (Saturday)

The members of this year's group met each other at the Bucharest Otopeni International Airport where we left in time to insert a birding stop as well on the way to our first accommodation in the Dobrudja area. We chose a quarry near the main road to start our bird watching tour. As we got out of our vehicle we got our first sights of Common Swifts, European Bee-eaters and Hoopoes while some specialties were also showing themselves like the elegant Isabelline Wheatear and the Pied Wheatear. We were rewarded with a smaller flock of Ortolan Buntings which held stunning males some of them singing sometimes. Later we spotted a few migrating Black Storks in the sky and a Black Kite which is not a hard species to get elsewhere but was a good observation in this area. We left the site just after observing a party of three Collared Pratincoles which we spotted after catching their unique calls from the other side of the hill. We reached our accommodation just at sunset and after a dinner went for a refreshing sleep.



Male Pied Wheatear (Dániel Balla)

19th May (Sunday)

A short walk around our hotel before breakfast produced the first Common Cuckoo, Golden Oriole and Spanish Sparrow sightings of our tour. After breakfast we left the hotel excitedly and went around the area in search of the specialties waiting for us. A close site to our hotel produced magnificent views of several singing Paddyfield Warblers which species reaches the easternmost edge of its distribution here. We were also gifted with views of the sometimes tricky Bearded Reedlings as they were chasing each other above the reeds. On the way out we flushed a usually hard to see Common Quail near the road. Arriving to our next site at the sea coast was in nice sunny weather so we immediately started searching for birds which produced all together three Black-throated Divers, Sandwich Terns and Little Terns. We moved on to investigate another wetland system in the area where we saw Ferruginous Ducks, Red-crested Pochards and other commoner wetland species. The afternoon started with a stunning flock of 15 Lesser Spotted Eagles circling up together with Long-legged Buzzards and a single Sparrow Hawk just after we finished lunch. We drove toward to a close site where grazed

grasslands linking each other are forming a significant size habitat. Here we collected the lark species of the region including Calandra Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark and Skylark all of them sometimes visible just few meters from European Susliks (Ground Squirrels) which are the main prey for several raptors in the region.



Greater Short-toed Lark and different subspecies Western Yellow Wagtails (Dániel Balla)

A small puddle gave us the opportunity to compare the different races of Western Yellow Wagtail from a very close distance, so we could separate the nominate flava, thunbergi, superciliaris/dombrowski and feldegg ones as they were presenting near each other at the same time. As moving on to a the next site we saw a dark morph Booted Eagle and further on we just found ourselves surrounded by Collared Pratincoles, as they were feeding on flying insects above the agricultural fields near the road. After arriving to our targeted wetland site it didn't take too much time for us to find a Broad-billed Sandpiper as it was feeding in a larger flock of Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers some in stunning breeding plumage. The last gift of this site was a pair of Red-necked Phalarope of course also in breeding plumage. To end the day, we took a fast visit to a lake close to our village, which produced Western Cattle Egret and again one of the group's favourite shorebird, the Collared Pratincole.



Breeding plumage Cattle Egret (Dániel Balla)

20th May (Monday)

In the morning after leaving our accommodation we strait drove to an area with bushes and trees near the coast in hope to spot some migrating birds searching shelter and taking a rest in the vegetation. At the edge of this habitat path we could compare the very common Red-backed Shrike to the beautiful Lesser Grey Shrike as they were sometimes sitting near each other on the tree branches.



Lesser Grey Shrike (Dániel Balla)

In the same area we found skulking Icterine Warblers, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Lesser Whitethroat but the highlights were the Long-eared Owls, we tracked down 6 flightless chicks following their typical begging calls and also managed to see at least 6 different adult birds as well. Before leaving this site a Golden Oriole gave us unusually prolonged views trying to eat something from the underside of the leaves on a close by tree.Later we went back to the coast for some sea watching which put Yelkouan Shearwater on our list and an unexpected European Nightjar as it was flying above the water. We also found Mediterranean Gulls along the coast and pretty Little Gulls at a huge Common Tern colony. To end the day we went to a beautiful calcareous gorge. On the way we stopped at a special spot in the agricultural desert which held numerous Black-headed Bunting, Corn Bunting and Ortolan Buntings all of them singing close to us – what a fantastic experience. Arriving to the gorge the site gave us close views to investigate the light rufous colours of Long-legged Buzzards as they were hunting on Susliks. We could watch male Pied Wheatears as they were restless fighting for the best singing rock while Black Redstart, Golden Oriole were singing in the background and Isabelline Wheatears were trying the Suslik's holes in search of the most suitable home.

21st May (Tuesday)

The plan for the day was to reach the port at Tulcea early in the afternoon where were planning to start the inner Danube Delta part of this trip. Before breakfast we had a rush to the wetland close to the hotel to check if there were any interesting birds roosting there and it was a fantastic decision as we found an immature

Pallas's Gull in a flock of roosting Caspian Gulls – we had no idea what was waiting for us in the Delta... After breakfast we packed our luggage and left the hotel and had a stop in a nice forest just on the way to the port. In the forest we found singing Red-breasted Flycatcher, uncountable numbers of singing Icterine Warblers, Marsh Tit, Song Thrush, Spotted Flycatcher and European Greenfinch but the star of the show were the Hawfinch. In the afternoon we arrived to the port according to our plans except that the weather was mysteriously cloudy. We jumped into our boat and started the journey into the unspoilt parts of this huge wetland. The boat took us to our next hotel in less than three hours form which only 30 minutes were spent in heavy rain and the chilling driving wind – an experience that could have been missed. However on the way we got beautiful views of grebes, we saw our first Pelicans in the Delta and got a glimpse of the amount of egrets and herons presenting in the area.



22nd & 23rd May (Wednesday & Thursday)

Ortolan and Black-headed Bunting (Dániel Balla)

Two full days were given to enjoy the beauty and peace of the inner Delta, the huge lagoons and the numbers of birds and living creatures found in this amazing part of the world. We enjoyed several times the Red-necked Grebes, sometimes 6 together showing their shining colours best seen in light just before sunset.



Red-necked Grebe pair (Dániel Balla)

Some smaller inner lakes held hundreds of Whiskered Terns forming breeding colonies and a few Black Terns also appeared at a few sites. Black-necked Grebes were only found at two of the visited sites this year suggesting that it was not a really good season for them this year. We had several close views of the Ferruginous Duck the males stunning white eyes easily visible most of the time.



Black Tern pair (top), Grey-headed Woodpecker (left) and Penduline Tit (right) by Dániel Balla

On a single day one could easily count more than a hundred Squacco Herons as we passed them with our boat and could enjoy Little Egrets, Grey Herons, Purple Herons and Pygmy Cormorants coming out of nowhere or passing us in the sky at almost any time. In the bigger lagoons we found flocks of Great White Pelicans fishing together sometimes with hundreds of Great Cormorants but the Dalmatian Pelicans which usually turn up individually also gave us close views. This year's highlight all above this was undoubtedly the Pallas's Gulls appearance in a bigger lake. Sakertours managed to feed them in the past days so when we arrived to the feeding point the birds turned up immediately and waited while we throw some delicious snacks for them, in exchange they sometimes flew just a few meters from us without showing any fear of the bird watchers enjoying their magnificent look.

The Delta gave us the opportunity to try some species not that straightforward to see like the waterbirds on the open water. We tracked down several Bearded Reedlings, Savi's Warbler, Garden Warbler and got clear views of singing Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. While cruising in our boat on the channels with denser woodlands we saw several Red-footed Falcon, Eurasian Hobby, European Roller and Golden Oriole. We could not believe how common Common Cuckoo is as we saw one almost every minute. On a suitable spot we even

managed to get clear views of the skulking Thrush Nightingale. On the woodpeckers' side we had several sightings of Grey-headed Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker and the tiny Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.



European Roller (top left), Squacco Heron (bottom left) and juvenile Bearded Reedlings (right) by Dániel Balla

The time of our Danube Delta spring tour is set to have the best chances of finding Rosy Starlings around the Delta. This year we had a few sightings outside the Delta, but the best experience was from the boat as a flock of cc. 40 individuals were feeding on a willow tree - hanging above the canal we drove on – their noisy flock giving us fantastic views.



Pallas's Gull with Great White pelicans (left) and Dalmatian Pelican (Dániel Balla)

24th May (Friday)

In the morning we left our hotel in the Delta early to reach the port in Tulcea in time. On the way out we had the best views of a Little Bittern pair and waved good bye for all the waterbirds which has fascinated us in the past days. On a suitable spot we slowed down with the boat to catch the song of the Collared Flycatcher which we found in a few minutes. This black-and-white beauty gave us magnificent views as singing and defending his territory against us. A few meters driving down with the boat a Middle Spotted Woodpecker showed well on a dry branch. arriving back to the port we rapidly packed our car and said good by to our boat driver.



Male Little Bittern in the Delta (left) and record shot of female Levant Sparrowhawk in the rain from the Macin mountains (Dániel Balla)

We drove to the Macin Mountains where we found ourselves in pouring rain, so heavy that we had to wait 30 minutes in our vehicle till it eased a bit. When the circumstances got better, we immediately climbed to a spot where we expected Levant Sparrowhawk. We had to wait about 15 minutes when a female bird perched in eyelevel of us giving clear views. We left this site and visited a close quarry where a beautiful singing Common Rock Thrush entertained us and Pied Wheatears were also letting close views. To finish the day, we visited an open forest close to the National Park where we had stunning views of Hawfinch and managed to find the Sombre Tit as well. We left the site in the last lights to have a longer drive to our last hotel after we crossed the Danube with a ferry. We arrived late so had a fast dinner and everyone got to bed rapidly.

25th May (Saturday)

Our last morning found us near a salt lake on the Baragan Lowland. In the garden of our hotel we managed to see the stunning Barred Warbler and heard a River Warbler which was singing in a very unusual habitat - in tall weed near a grape field between the houses near the hotel – migration makes almost everything possible. We had breakfast and went down to investigate the wetland surrounding us. We found Black-tailed Godwits, Collared Pratincoles, Kentish Plovers, Pied Avocets and a Greater White-fronted Goose with the Greylag Geese, a single Dunlin and a single Ruddy Turnstone just to mention a few. We enjoyed the amazing numbers of Black-wing Stilts and Common Shelducks around. Moving to another part of the lake produced a Slender-billed Gull. We rapidly checked another lake before we started our way back to the airport. This last site gave us Shelduck sighting of Great White Ruddy and the last Pelicans and Glossy Ibis. On the airport we said goodbye to the leaving part of the group as some of us were continuing this vacation with Sakertours Transylvania tour.



Ruddy Turnstone and male Barred Warbler (Dániel Balla)

Sakertours Eastern Europe: Danube Delta & Dobrudja in Spring tour 2019 sakertour.com & ultimatesakertours.com

BIRDS – list of bird species recorded on the 2019 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	Greater White-fronted Goose	Anser albifrons	1
3	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	C
4	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna	C
5	Ruddy Shelduck	Tadorna ferruginea	2
6	Garganey	Spatula querquedula	C
7	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata	C
8	Gadwall	Mareca strepera	C
9	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	C
10	Red-crested Pochard	Netta rufina	С
11	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	С
12	Ferruginous Duck	Aythya nyroca	С
13	Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix	3
14	Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus	Č
15	Black-throated Diver	Gavia arctica	2
16	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	3
17	Red-necked Grebe	Podiceps grisegena	С
18	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus	С
19	Black-necked Grebe	Podiceps nigricollis	С
20	Yelkouan Shearwater	Puffinus yelkouan	2
21	Black Stork	Ciconia nigra	С
22	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	С
23	Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus	С
24	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia	С
25	Eurasian Bittern	Botaurus stellaris	Н
26	Little Bittern	Ixobrychus minutus	7
27	Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax	С
28	Squacco Heron	Ardeola ralloides	С
29	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	1
30	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	С
31	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea	С
32	Great Egret	Ardea alba	C
33	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	С
34	Great White Pelican	Pelecanus onocrotalus	C
35	Dalmatian Pelican	Pelecanus crispus	C
36	Pygmy Cormorant	Microcarbo pygmeus	C
37	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	C
38	European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus	С
39	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus	1
40	Lesser Spotted Eagle	Clanga pomarina	18
41	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	4

42	Levant Sparrowhawk	Accipiter brevipes	2
43	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	2
44	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	С
45	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus	1
46	Black Kite	Milvus migrans	1
47	White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla	С
48	Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus	С
49	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	С
50	Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus	Н
51	Little Crake	Porzana parva	Н
52	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	С
53	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	С
54	Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus	Н
55	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	С
56	Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta	С
57	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	С
58	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula	8
59	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius	2
60	Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus	10
61	Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	3
62	Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa	3
63	Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	1
64	Ruff	Calidris pugnax	С
65	Broad-billed Sandpiper	Calidris falcinellus	1
66	Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea	С
67	Temminck's Stint	Calidris temminckii	1
68	Dunlin	Calidris alpina	2
69	Little Stint	Calidris minuta	С
70	Red-necked Phalarope	Phalaropus lobatus	2
71	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	С
72	Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola	С
73	Collared Pratincole	Glareola pratincola	С
74	Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei	1
75	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	С
76	Little Gull	Hydrocoloeus minutus	12
77	Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus	10
– Q			18
78	Pallas's Gull	Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus	
79	Caspian Gull	Larus cachinnans	С
79 80	Caspian Gull Yellow-legged Gull	Larus cachinnans Larus michahellis	
79 80 81	Caspian Gull Yellow-legged Gull Gull-billed Tern	Larus cachinnans Larus michahellis Gelochelidon nilotica	С
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79 80 81 82 83 83	Caspian Gull Yellow-legged Gull Gull-billed Tern Caspian Tern Sandwich Tern Little Tern	Larus cachinnans Larus michahellis Gelochelidon nilotica Hydroprogne caspia Thalasseus sandvicensis Sternula albifrons	C C 5 1 4 C
79 80 81 82 83 84 85	Caspian Gull Yellow-legged Gull Gull-billed Tern Caspian Tern Sandwich Tern Little Tern Common Tern	Larus cachinnans Larus michahellis Gelochelidon nilotica Hydroprogne caspia Thalasseus sandvicensis Sternula albifrons Sterna hirundo	C C 5 1 4 C C
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79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88	Caspian GullYellow-legged GullGull-billed TernCaspian TernSandwich TernLittle TernCommon TernWhiskered TernWhite-winged TernBlack Tern	Larus cachinnans Larus michahellis Gelochelidon nilotica Hydroprogne caspia Thalasseus sandvicensis Sternula albifrons Sterna hirundo Chlidonias hybrida Chlidonias leucopterus Chlidonias niger	C C 5 1 4 C C C 5 5 C

92	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	С
93	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus	С
94	Little Owl	Athene noctua	2
95	Long-eared Owl	Asio otus	6 ad. 6 juv.
96	European Nightjar	Caprimulgus europaeus	1
97	Common Swift	Apus apus	С
98	European Roller	Coracias garrulus	С
99	Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis	С
100	European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster	С
101	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	С
102	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocoptes medius	1
103	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor	4
104	Syrian Woodpecker	Dendrocopos syriacus	3
105	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	С
106	Black Woodpecker	Dryocopus martius	Н
107	European Green Woodpecker	Picus viridis	2
108	Grey-headed Woodpecker	Picus canus	С
109	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	С
110	Red-footed Falcon	Falco vespertinus	С
111	Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo	С
112	Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio	С
113	Lesser Grey Shrike	Lanius minor	С
114	Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus	С
115	Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius	5
116	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	С
117	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	С
118	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	С
119	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	С
120	Sombre Tit	Poecile lugubris	2
121	Marsh Tit	Poecile palustris	3
122	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	С
123	Great Tit	Parus major	С
124	Eurasian Penduline Tit	Remiz pendulinus	С
125	Bearded Reedling	Panurus biarmicus	С
126	Woodlark	Lullula arborea	Н
127	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	С
128	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	С
129	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla	С
130	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra	С
131	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia	С
132	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	С
133	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	С
134	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus	С
135	Wood Warbler	Phylloscopus sibilatrix	Н
136	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	6
137	Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	С
138	Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus	С
139	Paddyfield Warbler	Acrocephalus agricola	С
140	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus	С
141	Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	Iduna pallida	5

142	Icterine Warbler	Hippolais icterina	С
143	Savi's Warbler	Locustella luscinioides	С
144	River Warbler	Locustella fluviatilis	Н
145	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	С
146	Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin	С
147	Barred Warbler	Sylvia nisoria	4
148	Lesser Whitethroat	Sylvia curruca	С
149	Common Whitethroat	Sylvia communis	6
150	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea	5
151	Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris	Ĥ
152	Rosy Starling	Pastor roseus	4 times
153	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	С
154	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	С
155	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	С
156	8	Muscicapa striata	С
157	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	2
158	Thrush Nightingale	Luscinia luscinia	2
159	Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos	1
160	Collared Flycatcher	Ficedula albicollis	1
161	Red-breasted Flycatcher	Ficedula parva	6
162	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	2
163	Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus	5
164	Common Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis	2
165	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	С
166	Isabelline Wheatear	Oenanthe isabellina	С
167	Pied Wheatear	Oenanthe pleschanka	С
168	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	С
169	Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis	С
170	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus	С
171	Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava	С
172	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	С
173	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris	С
174	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	С
175	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes	7
176	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	С
177	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	С
178	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	С
179	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra	С
180	Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella	2
181	Ortolan Bunting	Emberiza hortulana	С
182	Black-headed Bunting	Emberiza melanocephala	15
183	Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus	С

MAMMALS - list of mammal species recorded on the 2019 tour

C = Commonly seen, more than 10 individuals 'Numbers' = Actual number seen on the tour

1	Golden Jackal	Canis aureus	2
2	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	2
3	European Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus	С
4	European Ground Squirrel	Spermophilus citellus	C



Rosy Starling (Dániel Balla)



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