



SAKERTOURS

European Mink in the Danube Delta (Zoltán Gergely Nagy)

EUROPEAN MINK SPECIAL - ROMANIA **with SAKERTOURS** **10th – 14th September, 2021**

Leaders: Zoltán Gergely Nagy and János Oláh

Sakertours has been specializing in birdwatching and bird photography tours in the last 27 years. Since 2020 we have also started to offer mammal-watching tours and the 'European Mink Special Tour' is our second one that we have developed. Based on our inaugural 'Romania Mammal Tour' in 2020 when we spent just a single night in the Danube Delta and managed to see two different wild European Minks. This tour focuses on the best potential places for this scarce and threatened mammal, and devotes three nights for it in the Danube Delta. Before entering the Delta, the first day of the trip is spent in the Lagoon areas of the Danube Delta, where a mosaic landscape of steppe grasslands, agricultural fields, reed beds, and cave systems offer a chance for seeing a diverse array of wild mammals. Golden Jackals are common here, but this habitat is also home to some rare European mammals such as Steppe and Marbled Polecats, Romanian Hamster or Giant Noctule – species that are much more probable outside the actual lakes and channels of the Danube Delta. Nevertheless we would consider ourselves very lucky to see any of the aforementioned species!

The 2021 tour certainly lived-up to its expectations and delivered a list of special mammals to our clients besides the obvious main target, the European Mink! We have seen 31 species of mammals in 5 days which included the rare Romanian Hamster and other goodies such as Greater Noctule, Golden Jackal, Kuhl's Pipistrelle, as well as Eurasian Harvest Mouse. For 2022 we plan to locate the territories of some more European Minks, to grow the chances of these unforgettable encounters.



Romanian Hamster in the Dobrudja area (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Steppes and fields of Dobrudja

The tour started in Bucharest Airport and we made our way to our first base near Constanta. The weather in September 2021 was very good with warm days, cool nights and no precipitation throughout the tour. We spent one night spotlighting near the lagoons of the Danube Delta, visiting an old deciduous forest first, then focused our attention onto the steppe habitats and agricultural fields later in the night. While bat-detecting at a forest clearing, we managed to see Grey and Brown Long-Eared Bats, Soprano and Nathusius Pipistrelles and also had reasonable views of two Greater Noctules, a special opportunity where we could really appreciate their great size.

Thanks to our fieldwork for the Romania Mammal Tour earlier in August, we already had a good location for Romanian Hamster, a rarely seen rodent that is highly localized. This spot was close to our base so it was possible to reach on the single night we had. After a good effort trying to spotlight them in the right area, we finally found a young and quite tame individual that offered some stunning views for the whole group, along with several Common or Sibling Voles. After this stunning encounter, we drove on to a different area, in the hopes of seeing Golden Jackals, Northern White-Breasted Hedgehogs and Steppe Polecats. Within an hour we have already seen 9 Golden Jackals, but sadly no polecats or hedgehogs. As it was already quite late, we made our way back to our hotel for some sleep.

On the next day we have visited a small cave, where we had Greater and Lesser Mouse-Eared Bats, more than 200 Schreiber's Bent-winged Bats and two Greater Horseshoe bats in the deepest part of the cave. After the visit to the cave, we have spent some time in steppe habitats that are inhabited by

European Ground Squirrels and their predators, such as Steppe and Marbled Polecats. Unfortunately the steppes were very dry and quiet, and despite the mild weather during the tour, just a few days before it, a strong cold snap could have made the European Ground Squirrels less reluctant to venture outside.



A group of Lesser and Greater Mouse-Eared Bats (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

The Danube Delta

After leaving the steppes of Dobrodja behind, we boarded the 'Harrier' – the Sakertours wildlife watching boat, that is used for transfers and excursions to and from our hotel deep in the Danube Delta.

On the first night of spotlighting from the boat, we stumbled into a beautiful European Mink that offered us great views for about a whole minute, to the delight of everybody on the boat. With 'mission accomplished' right on the first night in the Delta, we had two more nights where we had the chance to scan new areas, look for the territories of other minks, but in the end we had to make do with the first mink that we have found, as no others were seen on the tour. It is difficult to assess the exact number of European Minks still living in the Delta, but it is clear that the population here of this critically endangered mammal is viable.

From what we have gathered from the scientists working on conserving this species, it looks like the dangerous American Mink still hasn't found its way to the Danube Delta. Hopefully this will not change in the future, and the protected Mink population here will actually expand.



European Mink, the star of the tour (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).



European Mink habitat in the Danube Delta (János Oláh)

Mammal watching from the 'Harrier' is a fantastic experience, besides the European Mink, on the first evening we had 2 Eurasian Otters, Raccoon Dogs, a probable hybrid wildcat, Golden Jackals that delighted our evening session. On the next evening we visited a different area, and in the calm weather we observed lots of bat activity. Apart from the tens of Daubenton bats hunting above the water, we had seen Soprano, Kuhl's, Common and Nathusius Pipistrells, a Serotine bat, and 5 stunning Eurasian Harvest Mice on the vegetation at the edge of the water.



Raccoon Dog (top) and a Striped Field Mouse crossing a channel in the Danube Delta (left and right) (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

During the day we had seen two Long-tailed Field Mice, and it was great to visit some of the European Mink habitats, to get a better understanding of the biology of this threatened mammal, and to get a better feel for the landscapes of the Delta. Amongst the floating reed islands it was great to spot hundreds of Great White Pelicans with their recently fledged, surprisingly dark young – scenes that can only be witnessed here for a short few weeks, before these birds leave the Delta to overwinter further south.



Great White Pelicans (left) preparing to fish next to the 'Harrier' – the Sakertours wildlife watching boat (right) on one of the lakes of the Danube Delta (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

The surprises of the last evening came in the form of swimming Striped Field Mice – we had seen this behaviour before, also on our Romania Mammal Tour in August, but it appears that instead of an exceptional behaviour, swimming across channels (even quite large ones) is a more common behaviour than we have previously anticipated. We also had a swimming water vole, a couple of Golden Jackals, and noticeably fewer bats flying around. It was a more humid night and experienced some patches of thick fog from 22:00. Because we had a transfer to the airport the next day, we headed back a little bit earlier than on the previous nights. By the time we were about to finish the fog was constant and thickening, still couldn't stop us from seeing some more of the ever present Brown Rats.

On the last day our boat took us back to Tulcea, from where we drove on to Bucharest Airport, concluding this short but exciting mammal watching tour. A special thank you to the whole Sakertours team for the help and support before and during the entire trip as well as to all participants for choosing this short adventure with us!

MAMMALS – list of mammal species seen on the 2021 tour

Romanian Hamster *Mesocricetus newtoni*

This rarely seen, and very special hamster species only lives in the Dobrudja region of Romania and Bulgaria. It has a mostly nocturnal lifestyle, using steppe grasslands and agricultural fields where suitable within its range, but it is very localized. We were very fortunate to have located a very good site in August, on our longer 'Romania Mammal Tour'. In total we have seen 3 individuals.



Romanian Hamster found while spotlighting (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Common Vole *Microtus arvalis* / **Sibling Vole** *Microtus rossiaemeridionalis*

We had seen five individuals while looking for Romanian Hamsters in Dobrudja. Without DNA analysis they are impossible to tell apart.

Eurasian Water Vole *Arvicola amphibious*

One was seen on our last night from the boat. It was not identified on the spot but later from photographs. All participants saw it.

Striped Field Mouse *Apodemus agrarius*

A total of 5 individuals were seen on the tour. All of them were either swimming across a channel, or feeding just on the edge of the water. The striped field mouse has an extensive but disjunct distribution, split into two ranges. The first reaches from central and eastern Europe to Lake Baikal

(Russia) in the north, and China in the south. The second includes parts of the Russian Far East and from there reaches from Mongolia to Japan.

Long-tailed Field Mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus*

A total of 3 individuals were seen on the tour, one in a forested habitat on the first night, and two more were seen one morning in the Danube Delta.

Eurasian Harvest Mouse *Micromys minutus*

There were 5 individuals identified and seen on the tour. There were probably more of them on the edge of the channels, but we often didn't have a clear enough view for a definitive ID.



Eurasian Harvest Mouse found while spotlighting (János Oláh).

House Mouse *Mus musculus*

A single individual was identified on a channel in the Danube Delta.

Mound-building Mouse (Steppe Mouse) *Mus spicilegus*

A very common species in the steppe area of Dobrudja but this year there were less of them active on the agricultural fields. We managed to get good views of one individual on the single night session outside of the Delta. It is found in grasslands and other open areas from Austria eastwards.

Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus*

It was very common in the Danube Delta on the night session, where we counted a minimum of 60 individuals. They were all along the edge of channels as well as in the more forested areas too.

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*

A locally common species in Dobrudja, where a total of 19 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. In the lagoon system the extension of reed beds rapidly increased when the lagoons were blocked from the sea and the brackish water became increasingly less salty (almost freshwater for most lagoons nowadays).

Raccoon Dog *Nyctereutes procyonoides* (introduced)

An introduced mammal in Romania and the main stronghold is in the Danube Delta. On our night sessions we spotlighted 8 individuals. This species is native to Asia and was introduced to Europe and Russia between 1927 and 1957 by the fur-farming industry.



Raccoon Dog along one of the channels in the Danube Delta (János Oláh).

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

A commonly encountered species outside of the Danube Delta. We saw three on the tour.

European Wildcat *Felis silvestris*

Only a probable hybrid wildcat was seen by everybody. One most likely not hybrid was seen by the leader only. It was at the very spot where we had a fantastic wildcat last year. But only seen through thermo by participants and spotlighted by Janos only. When they are not visible clearly it is difficult to spotlight it for everybody to see from the boat. Frustrating!

European Mink *Mustela lutreola*

The real highlight of the tour, this critically endangered mammal is considered the rarest terrestrial mammal in Europe, living in only a few scattered locations on the continent. Over the past few years we have identified a couple of key locations in the Danube Delta where we have chances to see this fantastic creature. One individual was observed, at the edge of a channel in the Danube Delta.

Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*

Two individuals were seen, both on one of the channels in the Danube Delta. They are widespread in Romania in all sort of aquatic habitats but difficult to observe in riverine habitat and somehow in the Danube Delta they tend to be very shy.

European Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*

8 Individuals were observed along the motorway after leaving Bucharest on the first day, and 2 more were seen later, in the Danube Delta during the day. One of the most common mammals and we often see them on our birdwatching tours as well.



Schreiber's Bent-Winged Bat with a parasitic fly on the body (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Schreiber's Bent-Winged Bat *Miniopterus schreibersii*

It was the most numerous bat species on the tour. We have observed more than 200 individuals in the cave in Dobrudja. This species is a fast flyer (60-80km/hour) and has very long wings. The only species in Europe where the end of the wing folds, hence the name 'bent-winged bat'. It is classified as Near Threatened.

Lesser Mouse-eared Bat *Myotis blythii*

A few individuals were identified from photographs taken of the masses of Greater Mouse-Eared bats in the cave in Dobrudja. They have a pale spot on the top of the head, the ears are slimmer and the top of the tragus is usually not dark.

Greater Mouse-eared Bat *Myotis myotis*

A large and common bat species. We have seen at least 50 individuals in the cave in Dobrudja.



Greater Mouse-Eared Bat (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Daubenton's Bat *Myotis daubentonii*

The second most common bat species seen in the Danube Delta, we could see them hunt all around our boat. In total we had seen at least 25 individuals on the tour. It is usually associated with water and their main prey items are flies, midges and caddisflies.

Noctule *Nyctalus noctula*

These large and common bats are often seen flying at dusk, and one was observed clearly in the Danube Delta.

Greater Noctule *Nyctalus lasiopterus*

These rare bats have the largest wingspan of any bat in Europe. We have clearly observed two individuals hunting above the trees in a forest clearing in Dobrudja. A rare bat! Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

Lesser Noctule *Nyctalus leisleri*

Three individuals were observed near a forest in Dobrudja. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

Grey Long-Eared Bat *Nyctalus noctula*

This fairly large and relatively slow flying European bat was clearly seen and identified only once at a forest clearing in Dobrudja, at a special place, famous for its bat diversity. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

Brown Long-Eared Bat *Nyctalus noctula*

This fairly large and relatively slow flying European bat was clearly seen and identified only once at a forest clearing in Dobrudja, at a special place, famous for its bat diversity. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

Serotine Bat *Eptesicus serotinus*

Observed both inside and on the outskirts of the Danube Delta. In total 5 individuals were seen. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

Common Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*

We have observed four individuals in the Danube Delta. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

Soprano Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*

One of the most common bat species observed in the Danube Delta, with at least 25 individuals seen hunting. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

Kuhl's Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus kuhlii*

One individual was detected and clearly identified as it hunted around our boat in the Danube Delta. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

Nathusius's Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus nathusii*

This small bat was widespread in Dobrudja, and it was the most common bat species seen in the Danube Delta, with over 75 individuals seen. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

Greater Horseshoe Bat *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*

Two individuals of this relatively large bat were seen and identified in a cave in the Dobrudja area. This cave used to be a stronghold (50 years ago) of the threatened Mehely's Horseshoe Bat, but unfortunately none were seen on the tour.

Following bats were recorded by the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro but not seen on the tour (remained 'heard-only':

Brandt's Myotis *Myotis brandtii*

Alcathoe Whiskered Bat *Myotis alcathoe*

Pond Myotis *Myotis dasycneme*



Golden Jackal on the edge of a channel in the Danube Delta (János Oláh).

Next tour dates:

2022: 9 – 13 September (1090 euro/person; SRS 100 euro/person):

availability and updates on our website:

<http://www.sakertour.com/bw.php?tour=romania-european-mink-tour>



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