



**SAKERTOURS**

*European Mink in the Danube Delta (Zoltán Gergely Nagy)*

## **ROMANIA EUROPEAN MINK SPECIAL**

with **SAKERTOURS**

**9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2022**

**Leader: Zoltán Gergely Nagy**

Sakertours has been specializing in birdwatching and bird photography tours in the last 28 years. Since 2020 we have also started to offer mammal-watching tours, and our “European Mink Special” is already at its second time running, again with great success. Timeframes in the first half of September have so far been fully successful in finding European Minks on our Mink Special and Romania Mammal Tours. This year we had two European Mink sightings, and in total 23 species of mammals were seen. In 2022 we have planned a similar itinerary to the previous tour in 2021, meaning that there was one night session and one day session outside the Danube Delta, in the steppe and lagoon areas of Dobrudja, and 3 full days in the Danube Delta, fully concentrating on the very rare, and critically endangered European Mink. The weather in September 2022 was quite warm, with some showers during the night in the second half of the tour.

### **Steppes and fields of Dobrudja**

The tour started in Bucharest Airport and we made our way to our first base near Constanta. Here we have spent one night spotlighting near the lagoon areas of the Danube Delta, visiting steppe grasslands, farmlands and some wetlands at the end of the night session. Thanks to our Romania Mammal tour visiting the same area just a few weeks before, we had quite a good idea of where we



could find the resident mammals, still only one night proved too short for finding Steppe Polecats and the rare Romanian Hamster, like we did on our longer tour and in 2021. We managed to find numerous Golden Jackals, a beautiful Northern White-breasted Hedgehog, and Long-tailed Field Mice, Steppe Mice and Common or Sibling voles were teeming on some of the fields.



*Long-tailed Field Mouse (top), a Stone Curlew and a Red Fox in the steppes of Dobrudja (left and right) (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*

On the next day we have visited a small cave, where we had more than 100 Schreiber's Bent-winged Bats but sadly no Greater Horseshoe bats or other bat species at this time. After the visit to the cave, we have spent some time in steppe habitats, that are inhabited by European Ground Squirrels and their predators, but we were only graced by the sight of a Saker Falcon on the hunt, and four European Ground Squirrels. Before heading to the Danube Delta, we have visited a forest where we have



nestboxes for dormice, in particular for the shy Forest Dormouse. After a short hike to one of the boxes, we were greeted by a family of three Forest Dormice.



*Forest Dormice in a nestbox (top) Saker Falcon looking for prey (left) and a European Ground Squirrel (right) (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*

## The Danube Delta

After leaving the steppes of Dobrudja behind, we boarded the 'Borzas' – 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 had a fantastic experience discovering the night-time activity of all the resident mammals.





*Common or Sibling vole swimming in the Danube Delta (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*



*Grey Heron with a fresh prey, a Common or Sibling Vole (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*



There were Golden Jackals, Brown Rats, a fantastic Wildcat, a Wild Boar, a Raccoon Dog, and a brief glimpse of a European Mink. There were also a couple of Striped Fieldmice swimming in the channels, but curiously there were lots of Common or Sibling Voles swimming too, we managed to ID at least 15 of them. Obviously, their activity hasn't gone unnoticed, there were Long Eared Owls hunting near the channels, and we even managed to see a Grey Heron with a freshly caught Common or Sibling Vole.

On the second night with the boat, we had visited a different part of the Delta, where we had a couple of new species for the trip, such as the introduced Common Muskrat, a Long-tailed Field Mouse and quite a few Daubenton's Bats that were hunting just above the water. Sadly, a large storm has cut our mammal-watching time short that night, even though we were on a covered boat.



*Stone Marten (top), a Brown Rat on a reed (left) and Long-tailed Field Mouse in the Danube Delta (right) (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*



During the days in the Delta, we made short excursions with the boat, looking for mammals that could be active during the day too, but we mostly saw only the masses of pelicans and other birds that are thriving in the Delta. Still, it was great to get an impression of the places and habitats during the day too.

On the third night in the Delta, we were again graced by perfect weather and perfect conditions, so it was no surprise that we managed to find another beautiful European Mink, as it was gracefully hunting on the edge of one of the channels. 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. So far, from our experiences in looking for this shy and endangered species, it looks like they are quite localised even within the Danube Delta.

There were much more bats on this night, and with the help of spotlights and the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro we were able to identify Nathusius Pipistrelles, Soprano Pipistrelles, Noctules, and the very common Daubenton's Bats. We missed out on the Eurasian Harvest Mouse, a species we typically see feeding on the vegetation near the cannels, but we did see one more wildcat, and as a fitting end to this action-packed and exciting short trip, we saw a Eurasian Otter, swimming in the middle of one of the large channels, as we were going back to our hotel for the night.

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 trip.



*Our 'Borzas' Sakerstours wildlife watching boat (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*

## MAMMALS –list of mammal species seen on the 2021 tour

### **European Hare** *Lepus europaeus*

A commonly encountered species in Romania. We saw a total of 3 individuals on the first night of the tour. It is also known as Brown Hare and it is among the largest hare species in the World which adapted to temperate, open country.



*European Hare in Dobrudja (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*

### **Northern White-breasted Hedgehog** *Erinaceus roumanicus*

One individual was seen on the first night. It is interesting that all individuals we encounter in Dobrudja are rather dark individuals. Taxonomically, it was for a time considered to be a subspecies of *E. europaeus*, and later a subspecies of *E. concolor*. Since the 1990s, it has been considered a separate species in its own right.

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

We had seen at least 21 individuals. Most of them were swimming across the channels in the Danube Delta. Without DNA analysis they are impossible to tell apart.

### **Common Muskrat** *Ondatra zibethicus* (introduced)

In total 2 individuals of this introduced species were seen on the tour, all of them in the Danube Delta.



**Forest Dormouse** *Dryomys nitedula*

Excellent looks of three individuals in our nest box project for mammals. On our pre-tour checks we have found that 4 of the boxes were occupied by this charismatic species. The work we have started in 2020 is coming to some results!

**Striped Field Mouse** *Apodemus agrarius*

A total of 8 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. Its expansion across Eastern Europe appears to be relatively recent. The species is thought to have reached Austria in the 1990s.

**Long-tailed Field Mouse** *Apodemus sylvaticus*

At least two individuals were seen on the tour, one on the fields of Dobrudja, and one at the edge of a channel in the Danube Delta.

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

A very common species in the steppe area of Dobrudja, this year they were very active on some of the fields in Dobrudja. We managed to get good views of at least 3 individuals on the single night session outside of the Delta. It is found in grasslands and other open areas from Austria eastwards.



*Golden Jackal in the Danube Delta (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*



**Brown Rat** *Rattus norvegicus*

It was very common in the Danube Delta on the night session, where we counted a minimum of 24 individuals. They were all along the edge of channels as well as in the more forested areas too.

**European Suslik** *Spermophilus citellus*

The most widespread ground squirrel species in Europe is very common in the steppes of Dobrudja. We had seen 4 individuals on the tour at numerous locations.

**Golden Jackal** *Canis aureus*

A locally common species in Dobrudja, where a total of 29 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). Both Wild Boar and Golden Jackal found refuge in the reed beds and their numbers started to increase.

**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 3 individuals. This species is native to Asia (Eastern Siberia, China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan) and was introduced to Europe and Russia between 1927 and 1957 by the fur-farming industry.

**Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes*

A commonly encountered species outside of the Danube Delta. We saw at least 17 individuals on the tour.

**European Wildcat** *Felis silvestris*

In total 2 individuals were seen on the tour, both of them in great shape and showing the characteristics of the species.



One of the wildcats seen in the Danube Delta (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).



### **Eurasian Otter** *Lutra lutra*

One individual was seen, at the end of the last night session of the tour 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.

### **Stone (Beech) Marten** *Martes foina*

Three individuals were observed on the tour, all of them in the channels of the Danube Delta at night. It is a fairly common species around villages but they are infrequently seen due to their secretive and nocturnal habits.

### **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 the chances are relatively high for seeing this fantastic creature. Two individuals were observed, at the edge of some channels in the Danube Delta.



*The star of the tour, a stunning European Mink in the Danube Delta (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*

### **Wild Boar** *Sus scrofa*

Since the African swine fever virus has decimated the wild boar populations in the past few years, numbers have started to recover recently, and we did manage to observe one individual on the tour, in the Danube Delta.



### **Schreiber's Bent-Winged Bat** *Miniopterus schreibersii*

We have observed more than 100 individuals in the 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'. It is classified as Near Threatened.



*Schreiber's Bent-Winged Bat in a cave in Dobrudja(Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*

### **Daubenton's Bat** *Myotis daubentonii*

A common bat species in the Danube Delta, we could see them hunt all around our boat. In total we had seen and ID-d at least 15 individuals on the tour. It is always associated with water and their main prey items are flies, midges and caddisflies. They roost in tree holes and there is plenty of suitable habitat for them in the delta.

### **Noctule** *Nyctalus noctula*

These large and common bats are often seen flying at dusk, and at least two of them were observed clearly in the Danube Delta.

### **Soprano Pipistrelle** *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*

At least one individual was seen while hunting. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.

### **Nathusius's Pipistrelle** *Pipistrellus nathusii*

This small bat is widespread in Dobrudja, and it was interesting that we only managed to definitely ID only one individual on the tour. Identified with the help of the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro.





*Striped Field Mouse swimming in the Danube Delta (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).*

## Next tour dates:

**2023: 13 – 17 September** (1190 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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