



SAKERTOURS



'Caucasian' Horned Lark pair (Dániel Balla)

TRANSYLVANIA BIRDING TOUR
with **SAKERTOURS**
25th May – 1st June, 2019

Leader: Dániel Balla

Transylvania gives the opportunity to enjoy the enthralling landscape of various hills and mountains, beautiful deciduous and pine forests, to mix bird and nature watching with the different aspects of culture and cuisine. The best time to visit for birdwatching is probably the first half of May, however our tour runs later to have the chance collecting higher altitude species – especially the balcanica subspecies of Horned Lark – after the snow melts.

This year's tour was special in ways of participants as all of us were doing the Transylvania tour as an extension of Sakertours' Danube Delta and Dobrudja tour making the connection much faster and some species less and some even more important for us on this tour. The main aim of this tour is to see species like the Horned Lark or Wallcreepers at their breeding sites and to see the Carpathian Brown Bear – none of these turned to be hard for us this year. Despite the sometimes unfavourable weather this year's tour were successful again getting 7 woodpecker species, 5 owl species and other all-time-favourites like the beautiful Ring Ouzel, Firecrest, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Ortolan Bunting or the Sombre Tit.

25th May (Saturday)

Instead of meeting each other at the airport we just had to drop those not coming with us to this awaited tour. We left the airport's surrounding at Bucharest in the early afternoon and started driving to the Bucegi mountains which we reached in dark. On the motorway we collected Red-footed Falcon and a few commoner species. We planned to go out for some night drive after dinner. We left our hotel and drove up the road in a beech forest to try some Owls as the weather was calm and looked perfect for them. Unfortunately the forest was very silent not just in terms of the wind, but we saw at least 5 Red Fox on our way and were very lucky and saw a Carpathian Brown Bear family just crossing in front of us in the lights of our vehicle – just a second from the giants of the forests.

26th May (Sunday)



The breeding habitat of Horned Lark in the Bucegi Natural Park (top), male 'Caucasian' Horned Lark (left) and *alpestris* subspecies of Ring Ouzel (Dániel Balla)

After an early morning breakfast we drove up to the alpine zone of the mountains above us, so go for our main target here. The alpine meadow was still covered with snow on some smaller patches. We climbed on a ridge to search for the Horned Lark which we spotted soon after reaching the top. After a few minutes rest we

tried to get better views and walked closer following the trail. We were treated with exceptionally good views of a pair of this high altitude specialist. We spent some time up on the ridge scanning for birds which resulted in a total of 6 different individuals of Horned Lark and flushed two Alpine Accentors from the edge of a remained snow patch. We took our time and enjoyed the singing Water Pipits then turned back to have a lunch and reposition ourselves to a different habitat.

After lunch we drove up the hill in a nice beech forest and had short walks on side trails. Our walks produced superb views of a singing Red-breasted Flycatcher, which we enjoyed for several minutes when a Firecrest came close “disturbing” our programme. We were also lucky finding a nesting hole of a White-backed Woodpecker just near the trail and watched the birds from an undisturbing distance as they were both feeding their chick. In the higher regions we found a friendly Ring Ouzel singing on pine giving us unlimited time to enjoy him. Deeper in the forest we found Eurasian Treecreeper, Coal Tits, more Firecrests and Goldcrest. Driving down from the mountain we stopped for a roadside Collared Flycatcher which was singing excitedly on a smaller beech. To end the day, after dinner we drove again up the mountain for owls but again just Red Foxes were seen unfortunately.



Red-breasted Flycatcher (left) and Willow Tit (Dániel Balla)

27th May (Monday)

Today we were planning a longer drive to the Rimetea area. On the way we stopped at a reservoir near the Olt River where we had a few common waterbirds like Great Crested Grebe, Great Cormorant, Great Egret, Little Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper or Caspian Gull. During the drive we spotted a European Honey Buzzard from the car. Later two, roadside Lesser Spotted Eagle and a Lesser Grey Shrike were easing the long drive. We arrived to our target area in the afternoon and stopped in a gorge for a few minutes where we saw a pair of Red-rumped Swallows and Eurasian Crag Martins. Near small plots of plough fields we found a wetland where Marsh Warblers and Savi's Warbler were singing and we got good views of both. After reaching our hotel we went for a short walk in the garden and the village where we bagged Syrian Woodpecker. After dinner we heard Eurasian Scops Owls calling, so went out to find one. It took us some time but finally managed to see one calling from a tree near the road from where we also heard a Corn Crake calling but we failed seeing it.

28th May (Tuesday)

Our day started with a short walk in the hotel garden where we found singing Ortolan Bunting and Common Whitethroat. After leaving the hotel we drove to a bushy slope of the calcareous hill behind the hotel. On the way we stopped for a Great Grey Shrike sitting on a tree top and a beautiful Ortolan Bunting which was singing on a telegraph wire near the road. Arriving to the site heard River Warbler calling from behind us, never mind we started a modest climb up to the foot of the hill. On the way we saw a Woodlark sitting out

open, found the singing Tree Pipit around us, Red-backed Shrikes which seemed to be abundant at this spot and Hawfinch allowed nice views but the show was taken by a singing Barred Warbler. Arriving to the dedicated site it took us a few minutes to locate a family of Sombre Tits. After enjoying these cute birds we walked back to our vehicle where we picked out a calling Wryneck which we managed to see in a few minutes. A few Crag Martins were flying unusually low today enabling cool views as they were almost touching the ground. We checked the site where the River Warbler was still calling, but turned out to be inaccessible without wellingtons, so we decided to try another place later.



Landscape near Rimetea (top), Eurasian Scops Owl (left) and Sombre Tit (Dániel Balla)

After lunch we drove to another point at the bottom of the hill where following the trail we managed to get almost half the way up. From this point we were enjoying as Ravens were chasing the local pair of Golden Eagle while Alpine Swifts were just flying around in the sky. Yellowhammers and Ortolan Buntings were singing below us when we heard the call of a Rock Bunting close to us which we found after a few minutes search. The main aim of climbing up to this point was to see the Common (Rufous-tailed) Rock Thrush which took some time but finally everyone saw this beautiful species. When walking back to the car we heard Grey Partridges calling and had very close views of a singing Yellowhammer near the trail. In the late afternoon we went for the River Warbler at another spot where we saw a singing bird as it was skulking in the dense

vegetation of a narrow stream. After dinner everyone got back to his/her room and fell asleep listening to the lullaby of calling Scops Owls.

29th May (Wednesday)

Early morning we had a short walk in the hotel's backyard where singing Ortolan Bunting and Common Whitethroat were showing well. After breakfast we started driving to the Hargitha area. As we were facing a longer drive we planned to split the day and stop for a lunch. Before arriving to the restaurant we stopped at a few place, one was near a colony of European Bee-eaters. After lunch we visited a beech forest with patches of oak. While walking the trail we saw some nice Collared Flycatchers, Marsh Tits and started collecting the local Woodpeckers with a few Great Spotted, a flying Black Woodpecker but the star of this trail were the 2 Middle Spotted Woodpeckers feeding on an old oak. Reaching the top of the hill, the habitat changes to an open, grazed meadow with few hundred years old oaks giving shade for sheep. At a point a drumming was heard which, after getting closer, was clearly a White-backed Woodpecker so we started searching for it. On a one of these giants we spotted a male bird and when we got closer a female just popped on the same branch and they started a drumming duet – unbelievable moments. We were following the birds as they were going back in the deeper parts of the forest when a Grey-headed Woodpecker was calling very lose. It took us some time to locate the bird as it was calling from its nest hole just the forehead and bill sticking out.



White-backed Woodpeckers (left), Rock Bunting (right top) and singing Marsh Warbler (Dániel Balla)

Going back to the vehicle a Golden Oriole flew across and another White-backed Woodpecker started drumming in the distance. Leaving this site in time was crucial to have enough left for one more rapid stop on the way where we arrived in the golden hour (after a short rain). This last stop for the day was at a small

river where we successfully saw Thrush Nightingale and Garden Warbler. We reached our accommodation – the Bear Lodge – after sunset and finished our day with a delicious dinner.

30th May (Thursday)

The day was dedicated to the Hargita Mountain. In the early morning after a short breakfast we drove slowly up the hill. We took a trail on foot going slightly closer to the top which was our main route in the morning session. After the first few meters on the track we flushed a male Capercaillie probably roosting in the middle of a pine, but just had a glimpse on it as it disappeared in the dense pine forest – this really woke us up. We slowly walked along the trail and had good views of Firecrest, Coal Tit, Willow Tit or Chaffinch. We reached a small clearing where a Eurasian Pygmy Owl started alarming on us, it didn't take too much time to locate this tiny owl. We spent more than satisfying amount of time watching the Pygmy Owl while another was calling closer to the top. We continued walking down the trail sometimes heard Grey-headed Woodpecker and Black Woodpecker. At the end of the trail we climbed higher where a Black Woodpecker was loudly marking his territory and flying around us a few times. Under us a clearing had a few higher trees where Water Pipits were perching and a distant Nutcracker was calling. Walking back on the trail we had Crested Tits, another Black Woodpecker and Ring Ouzels.



Eurasian Pygmy Owl and Crested Tit on the Hargita (Dániel Balla)

We drove down the hill to have a lunch and had a refreshing walk around the lodge where we saw Common Redstart, Black Redstart, Red-backed Shrike and Eurasian Wryneck all of these the breeders of the garden. Afternoon we went for the bear hide. This time we chose to stay in a smaller one inside a beech forest giving a beautiful surrounding for these beasts if they appear. And of course they appeared. This time a mother bear with three cute cubs came in front of the hide. We had a fantastic time watching the small ones playing and learning the tricks of life while their mother was always alert and careful. It was not a question that these moments are going to be one of the bests of this tour.

31st May (Friday)

In the very early morning we drove up the Hargita Mountain again to try to get the Capercaillie better than yesterday. When we reached the parking spot and started walking on the trail close from yesterday's site we flushed a bird but again just a glimpse - so frustrating. We decided to give up and get back to the car. We stopped at a spot to try the Three-toed Woodpecker for the last time which again not showed up but a hen Capercaillie was just feeding below the shoulder of the road. We didn't noticed it so we unfortunately flushed it while walking closer but this time everyone had clear views of this massive bird. Gone back to the lodge for breakfast and left rapidly to the Békás (Bicaz) Gorge. We arrived in rain but started searching for the Wallcreeper on the huge walls of the gorge. It took us some time to locate them – however Grey Wagtails always and a Peregrine Falcon for seconds were entertaining us – but finally we found a bird which soon was

joined by another, they were going back to the same small hole on the wall – probably their nest. We enjoyed the Wallcreepers until get bored of the continuously changing intensity rain. Before leaving we stopped in the gorge at another spot where we saw a White-throated Dipper in the stream. As the weather was not changing we left the site and started driving back to have a lunch in a traditional restaurant on the way. It seemed that the rain stopped for the afternoon and it was just overcast when we arrived to the Görgényi Basin where we were searching for birds in the bushes on a wet meadow. We easily found Marsh Warblers and Garden Warblers, heard Icterine Warbler when a few rain drops appeared again. We speeded up the birding here and went to the best spot of the area where we bagged Common Rosefinch just before the rain started pouring again. We all agreed going back to the lodge and spend the rest of the afternoon inside.

1st June (Saturday)

On our last morning we rushed out to a final short birding in the forest where we collected Tawny Owl and Bullfinch. After breakfast we left the lodge and headed to the airport. On the way to Bucharest we saw Little Owl in a village and stopped at the Sanpaul Fishponds for a few minutes where we saw Ferruginous Ducks, Common Pochards, Common Kingfisher, singing Sedge Warblers, Great Reed Warblers, one of us even saw a Little Bittern for a few seconds. As of course it was raining and we had flights to reach we didn't spent too much time here and left to the airport.



Mother bear from the bear hide (Dániel Balla)

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	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	C
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	C
3	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	1 site
4	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	6
5	Western Capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>	3
6	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>	H
7	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	C
8	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	4
9	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	C
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	C
11	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	NL
12	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	3
13	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	C
14	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	3
15	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	C
16	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2
17	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	C
18	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	7
19	Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga pomarina</i>	8
20	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	2 ad. + 2 chick
21	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	C
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	C
23	Corn Crake	<i>Crex crex</i>	H
24	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	2
25	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	C
26	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	C
27	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	3
28	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1
29	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	C
30	Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	C
31	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia f. domestica</i>	C
32	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	C
33	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	C
34	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	C
35	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	C
36	Eurasian Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>	1
37	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1
38	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>	H
39	Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>	2
40	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1
41	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	1 site

42	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	C
43	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	3
44	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	1 site
45	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	4
46	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	4
47	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>	2
48	Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	3
49	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	C
50	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>	5
51	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	2
52	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	3
53	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>	1
54	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	C
55	Red-footed Falcon	<i>Falco vespertinus</i>	2
56	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	C
57	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1
58	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	C
59	Lesser Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius minor</i>	1
60	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	1
61	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	1
62	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	C
63	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	C
64	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	1
65	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	C
66	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	C
67	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	C
68	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	C
69	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	C
70	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	4
71	Sombre Tit	<i>Poecile lugubris</i>	4
72	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	3
73	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>	C
74	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	C
75	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	C
76	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	2
77	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	C
78	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	4
79	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	6
80	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	2 times
81	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	C
82	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	C
83	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	C
84	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	2
85	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	H
86	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	C
87	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	C
88	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	1 site
89	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	1 site

90	Marsh Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus palustris</i>	C
91	Icterine Warbler	<i>Hippolais icterina</i>	H
92	River Warbler	<i>Locustella fluviatilis</i>	1
93	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>	1
94	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	C
95	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	4
96	Barred Warbler	<i>Sylvia nisoria</i>	2
97	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	H
98	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	C
99	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	C
100	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	C
101	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H
102	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	C
103	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	5
104	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	2 times
105	Common Starling	<i>Strunus vulgaris</i>	C
106	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>	6
107	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	C
108	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	C
109	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	C
110	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	C
111	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	2
112	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	C
113	Thrush Nightingale	<i>Luscinia luscinia</i>	1
114	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	H
115	Collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>	C
116	Red-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>	2
117	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	C
118	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	3
119	Common Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>	2
120	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	1
121	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	C
122	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	C
123	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	4
124	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	C
125	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	C
126	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>	2
127	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	C
128	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	C
129	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	C
130	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	C
131	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	C
132	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	8
133	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	C
134	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	5
135	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	2
136	Common Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>	2
137	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	3

138	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	C
139	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	2
140	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	C
141	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	6
142	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	C
143	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	C
144	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	6
145	Ortolan Bunting	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>	8



Eurasian Pygmy Owl on the Hargita (Dániel Balla)

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	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	1
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	1
3	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	5
4	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	5
5	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	7
6	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>	1



One of the three Brown Bear cubs seen from the bear hide (Dániel Balla)



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