

## **Glamorgan Bird Club Foreign Tour**

### **The Danube Delta and Dobrogean Plain**

**28 May to 4 June 2005**

The holiday, arranged by Celtic Bird Tours was the second foreign outing for the Club following last years highly successful trip to Lesbos. The Glamorgan based crew of John and Anne Wilson, Clive Ellis, Tricia Wood, Gareth Jenkins Neil Donaghy and me were joined by three very amiable shipmates in Fiona Grant from London, Chris Bamford from Oxford (both Club members) and Gerry Sterns from Montanna, USA. Everyone flew from Heathrow except Gerry whom we met at Bucharest Airport.

After landing at Bucharest, we soon found our luggage and changed some pounds to Romanian lei. At 46,500 to the pound we were all instant millionaires! Marian and driver from the ground agents were waiting for us as we emerged from passport control and we were soon leaving the busy capital, on our way to Tulcea, travelling by mini bus with our luggage in a trailer. Tulcea is the main town of the Delta region and our birding would be based here. The journey was about four hours and was broken by a very pleasant stop at a small café. **Night Heron, Honey Buzzard** and **Lesser Grey Shrike** were our first birds as we sampled our first taste of Ursus, the excellent local beer. As we boarded the mini bus again, fork lightning crashed across the darkened sky whilst a thunderstorm rumbled. This soon cleared and we had two further stops; our driver was booked for speeding and a brief interlude at Lake Hasarlic where we picked up several **Bee Eater, Hoopoe, Golden Oriel, Little Bittern** and **Purple Heron**. Arriving at about 8.00pm local time, we feared the worst when we discovered the hotel was called Hotel Select. We needn't have worried, Neil had found a real gem; comfortable, clean and with an excellent three course meal waiting for us after a quick shower.

Over dinner we met Eugen Petrescu our guide, regarded by some as probably the best birder in Eastern Romania. After discussing what we might see and how the tour should progress, we decided to spend the first three days in the Delta and the remaining three exploring the Dobrogean Plain. With our appetites already whetted we retired to dream of the fantastic birds we hoped to see in the days ahead.

The next day dawned and after an early breakfast we were lead to the quayside by Eugen where a **Syrian Woodpecker** was the first bird of the day. We boarded a small boat and were taken out into the Sulina Channel. As wide as the Thames, this is the main passage through the delta to the Black Sea. **Yellow Legged Gull**, the common local gull were evident and a **Common Tern** passed us. After a short time we broke off north into a narrower channel and a flock of 20 **Rose Coloured Starlings** jumped out of a tree and flew past. **Nightingale, Thrush Nightingale** and **Blackcap** were all heard. **Cuckoo** seemed to be calling everywhere and both grey and rufus variety were seen. Excitement grew as we saw our first **Roller** at which Eugen warned we would become tired of counting them by the end of the day! As we progressed down still narrower tree lined

waterways, our first flock of **Pygmy Cormorants** passed overhead. The maze of channels became increasingly complex and from time to time the trees retreated to reveal areas of reed and small lakes. Without a guide we would have become hopelessly lost. All the time we were finding interesting birds including **Night Heron**, **Great White Egret**, **White Pelican**, **Grey-Headed Woodpecker** and the first of several magnificent **Black Woodpeckers**. A soaring **White-Tailed Eagle** was a tremendous sight. The numbers of birds became so overwhelming that we stopped counting, content to just enjoy the spectacle. We reached Lake Fortuna where two **Black Terns** were noted amongst the many **Whiskered Terns** and then continued to the village of Malluc. En route a colony of 10 **Red Footed Falcons** was found nesting with **Rooks**. We disembarked and after a short walk Eugen found **Olivaceous** and **Icterine Warblers**. It was now early afternoon and we were led to the house boat, home for the rest of the week, our luggage having already been transferred. Each had their own cabins and after these had been allocated, we started lunch as the boat pulled off, towed by a tug. A **Mediterranean Gull** was a good find over some lagoons. We re-entered the Sulina Channel and spent the rest of the afternoon sat in the hot sun birding from the deck. As we eased our way down stream, aided by the strong current, the true vastness of the Danube Delta region became increasingly apparent. Reed beds stretched out as far as the eye could see, intersected by small lakes, woods and areas of habitation. Hardly a moment went by without someone calling **Night Heron**, **Purple Heron**, **Hoopoe**, **Marsh Harrier**, **White Stork**, **Glossy Ibis**, **Hobby** or some other bird that is uncommon at home. The ever present **Rollers** seemed to occupy every post and wire along with smaller numbers of **Red Backed Shrike** and **Lesser Grey Shrike**. By late afternoon we left Sulina and took a narrower channel north, entertained by several **Marsh Harriers** and 3 **White-Winged Terns**. A **White-Tailed Eagles** nest was found in a distant tree, its two young occupants visible, surveying their kingdom.

The house boat was moored for the night adjacent to a vast reedscape and we once again took to the smaller boat to explore before dinner. Several pairs of **Red-Footed Falcons** were found together with a family of **Bearded Tits**, **Squacco Herons**, **Great Reed Warblers**, **Little Bittern** and several **Savi's Warblers** gave excellent views. After dinner the log was called and to give a flavour of the numbers seen, following selected totals for the day were noted; **Roller** 150, **Pygmy Cormorant** 200, **Night Heron** 100 , **Great Reed Warbler** 12, **Purple Heron** 70, **Glossy Ibis** 100, **Whiskered Tern** 400, **Squacco Heron** 45, **Little Bittern** 10, **Hobby** 25, **Cuckoo** 200 and **Golden Oriel** 15.

The sun disappeared over the horizon and Eugen played a **Baillon's Crake** call to the reed bed. Three responded but frustratingly, could not be seen. Darkness took over and the sound of marsh frogs and insect life seemed to reach an incredible volume in the absence of man made background noise. It had been a sensational introduction to the Delta and a day that will be long remembered.

Most were up by 7.00am the next day sipping coffee and taking in the warm morning sun as **Whiskered Terns**, **Purple Herons** and **Great White Egrets** went about their business. A **Baillons Crake** was again heard but not seen, it was going to be another beautiful day. We travelled north in the small boat through reed bed channels to the

picturesque water-side village of Letea with its traditional blue and white painted cottages and thatched roofs. **Squacco Heron** and **Ferruginous Duck** seemed especially numerous on the way. In addition, two very obliging **Blue Throats** of the white spotted race gave excellent views and three wonderfully constructed **Penduline Tits** nests were found. The adults at one repeatedly returned with food giving superb views. At Letea, a **Yellow Wagtail** of the blue headed race, flava, was found and several soaring pelicans overhead turned out to be **Dalmations**, our first of the trip. Villagers tended crops in their gardens oblivious to the heat of the sun as we found a **Red Backed Shrike** and **Black Redstart** on our way back to the boat. Upon our return to the house boat we left this idyllic setting and cruised back to Sulina and then south to Caroroman. The journey produced more of the same birds in similar numbers. We arrived late in the afternoon, mooring in view of a large lake that held **Gargany**, **Red-Crested Pochard** and a **Whiskered Tern** colony. There was time to explore some nearby brackish lagoons that produced nesting **Avocet**, **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Black-Winged Stilt** and **Little Stint**. The log call in the evening again recalled the stunning numbers of birds seen for the second day.

We again woke to another glorious day and set off early in the house boat north. A **White-Tailed Eagle** was found sitting on a mound whilst **Black-Tailed Godwit** was a new bird for the trip. We stopped at the Eracle Cannal mid morning and travelled in the smaller boat along more reed flanked waterways. Several **White-Winged Terns** flew around the boat giving excellent views as we entered an area with several huge pools covered in Lilly. Here were found many **Ferruginous Ducks** and also nesting **Red-Necked Grebes**. Another part held 20 pairs of splendid **Black-Necked Grebes** nesting with **Black Terns** and yet more **Whiskered Terns** whilst a male **Tufted Duck** amongst the **Ferruginous Ducks** was a good find for Romania. This was a truly magical place. Later, another short excursion from the house boat found us watching **Black Woodpecker** perched on a tree trunk and also another **Olivaceous Warbler**.

The rest of the day was spent travelling back to Tulcea, this time along the tree lined Mila Canal and against the current. Whilst we saw many of the same herons, cormorants, Roller etc, they seemed to be fewer in number than previous days. Late afternoon, an unusual long-billed, adult Yellow Legged type gull flew up from the water in front of us, showing pink legs. This was almost certainly a **Caspian Gull**. Unfortunately, it disappeared over the boat before most could secure a good look. Eventually, we rejoined the Sulina Channel passing many rusting hulks moored on its banks as we approached Tulcea. A **Black Redstart** was found flitting between small Romanian navy vessels.

The evening log call confirmed the huge numbers of birds we had seen over the three days, a reflection of the Deltas vast unspoilt ecosystems. Here are some of the highlights; White Pelican 600, Pygmy Cormorant 600, Purple Heron 200, Great White Egret 100, Squacco Heron 275, Night Heron 200, Little Bittern 20, Glossy Ibis 250, Ferruginous Duck 125, White-Tailed Eagle 6, Marsh Harrier 40, Hobby 50, Red Footed Falcon 60, Whiskered Tern 950, White-Winged Tern 30, Black Tern 55, Cuckoo 350, Roller 250, Savi's Warbler 30, Great Reed Warbler 45, Golden Oriole 20, and Hoopoe 20.

The Danube Delta had certainly lived up to its billing as the last great wilderness in Europe and though sorry that this part of our tour was over, we looked forward with anticipation to exploring the Dobrogean Plain. Eugen asked what we wanted to see there. We simply replied “everything”.

The second half of our holiday was spent exploring the Dobrogean Plain whilst still based aboard our house boat in Tulcea. We gave Eugene, our guide, a list of what we wanted to see and it quickly became apparent to him that we weren't the dudes he may have initially taken us for; our continued happiness would be directly proportional to the number and quality of birds we could squeeze out of our remaining time! He explained the days in the field would be long, he would be taking us down some pretty rough tracks and consequently he would use one of his more “worn in” buses and amenable drivers. We couldn't wait and I think he relished the challenge!

Our first day on land was much cooler and overcast with a northerly breeze. We all really wanted to see Levant Sparrowhawk, one of the target species for the trip and we hoped the change in weather would not reduce our chances on what would be our most likely day to see one, given our planned itinerary. If we dipped today we would have to reschedule the remaining time. The day was spent to the west and north of Tulcea in rolling hills and plains. Our first stop was Samova where there was a **Bee-eater** colony, **Long-legged Buzzard**, **Lesser Grey** and **Red Backed Shrike** and **Golden Oriole** were also found. Nearby at Teleta, we found **Ortolan Bunting**, **Tawny Pipit**, **Woodlark** and **Hoopoe**. Much of the morning was spent searching the hills and woods for raptors and we found more **Long-Legged Buzzard**, **Common Buzzard**, **Goshawk** and a pale **Booted Eagle** but frustratingly no Levant Sparrowhawk and this area was our best chance to find one. Eugene explained that the best place to see them was woodland edges and we intensified our searching. A **Grey-headed Woodpecker** and **Wryneck** were also seen but did little to boost our spirits. Time was slipping by and we were taken a short distance to Celec Dere. We stopped at the edge of a wood and the driver prepared a picnic lunch. Ann had wandered further than most, beyond the overhanging canopy and called **Black Kite** just above our heads. We all shot out to where she stood to see a second appear, mobbed by a smaller long-tailed raptor. Neil immediately called female **Levant Sparrowhawk!** Relief all round, not least from Eugene. Well done Ann.

With spirits lifted and refreshed, we continued to Jijila at the foot of a range of rocky hills where we picked up **Crested Lark** and Macin where we found **Pied Wheatear**, **Isabelline Wheatear**, **Calandra Lark** and several beautiful **Rock Thrush**. Also, some were lucky enough to flush an **Eagle Owl** whilst tracking an uncooperative **Barred Warbler** in a wooded area. Our final stop for the day was Greci so called due to the Greek origins of its inhabitants. We searched unsuccessfully for Saker Falcon after travelling for some time along a dirt track but did see an obliging **Stone Curlew** that ran around the bus, **Red-Rumped Swallow** and also heard **Quail**. We were also entertained by our first Souseliks, small lemming-like rodents that live down holes and a major source of food for the many raptors that live on the steppes. A colony of **Spanish Sparrows** that inhabited roadside poplars provided a quick tick as we returned back to Tulcea, happy with our days birding. John and Ann were in celebratory mood, not just because of the

Levant Sparrowhawk, but they found they were grandparents after a phone call home. Congratulations!

The next day was warm and sunny again and we spent our time to the south of Tulcea. We headed first to Denis Tepe an area of steppe where we found **Calandra Larks**, **Short-toed Larks** **Tawny Pipit**, **Long-Legged Buzzard** and the black headed race of **Yellow Wagtail**. We continued through the town of Babadag. Here, the people were different in appearance to those we had seen previously on our travels, wearing big gold earrings and brightly coloured cloths, an indication of their gypsy origins. Our destination was the nearby Babadag Forrest. Here Eugene tape lured a **Middle Spotted Woodpecker** and we all had great views of this bird. An **Icterine Warbler** was also found but no Red-breasted Flycatcher or Sombre Tit. We were destined not to find these species.

When we asked Eugene where we were going next, he would often refer to “special places” and the next stop at Histria fitted the bill. Any trip to the area must include a visit here. The wonderful marshes are viewable from the side of a quite road and highlights include **Gull-Billed Tern**, **Collard Pratincole**, **Marsh Sandpiper**, **Kentish Plover**, **Red Crested Pochard** and the star bird; **Paddyfield Warbler**. Although there were several, they were difficult to see at first but after a little perseverance gave superb views at close range, another key trip bird safely bagged.

We continued to Vadu, a series of coastal lagoons where we found 250 **Little Gulls**, **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Sandwich Tern**, a **Common Tern** colony and **Collared Pratincole** colony. Sadly, the Pratincoles were under threat by a dog that roamed around the nests and a shepherdess who insisted on walking her sheep close by whilst knitting! Eugene explained how he was trying to get some protection for the site. We took pictures of this to later send to Eugene to help support his case. International boundaries are no obstacle to the Club’s conservation efforts! We were made to suffer here though as most were badly bitten by insects despite the use of insect repellent, but it was well worth it. Being so near to the Black Sea we couldn’t leave without standing at its shores so we travelled in the bus the short distance seeing up to nine **Hoopoes**. There were many **Cormorants** moving on the sea and we found several **Grey Plover** and **Kentish Plover**. A **Black-throated Diver** was a good find settled on the sea. A large immature gull glided along the beach and passed close by. It was one we couldn’t immediately name but our notes enabled us to later identify it as first summer **Pallas’ Gull**, an excellent end to another fantastic day.

The final day was sunny and warm and we went first to an area of steppe near Babadag. The countryside never ceased to amaze me, being so flat and vast. Fields would stretch out as far as the eye could see and there would be small parties of peasants hoeing or attending crops by hand. The peasants would travel by pony pulled carts often piled with hay upon which they would perch. I wondered how long it will be before vast American style wheat fields spring up with their combines and GM crops and this way of life will end. Back to the birding, we were treated to **Honey Buzzard**, **Crested Lark**, **Steppe Buzzard**, **Lesser Spotted Eagle**, **Black Kite**, **Tawny Pipit** and **Isabeline Wheaters**. We

all noticed Clive had developed a large itchy rash on his arm, a reaction perhaps to the insect bites experienced the day before. He didn't look at all well and we feared we would have to take him to a doctor. Luckily, someone had some antihistamine tablets and once administered he felt much better. From here we headed to an impressive place called Cheia Gorge where we had lunch. Here the star bird was **Pied Wheatear** and also the more familiar **Northern Wheatear** for comparison. **Long-legged Buzzard** and **Short-toed Eagle** cruised overhead. From here we went to Gura Bobrogoa where we had excellent views of **Barred Warbler** and **Bee-eater**. On the way back a harrier was spotted on the brow of a hill in the distance. It was a ring-tail and was joined by another. We watched the two for forty-five minutes gliding up and down as they approached closer, a very memorable sight. With the help of Eugene and the excellent Forsman guide we decided they were young female **Pallid Harriers**.

That evening, we were "serenaded" by a three piece band playing traditional music as we had dinner. The cook also had a further surprise in the shape of a cake decorated with fireworks to ensure the evening finished with a bang! We thanked the cook, crew and other staff for looking after us so well and bid our farewells to Eugene, thanking him for his efforts and for showing us so many fantastic birds and special places. Our final log call showed we had seen about 170 species.

The next day was spent travelling home. On our way to Bucharest Airport we stopped at Lake Hasarlic again to stretch our legs. Here similar birds were seen as on the outward journey. We continued on and as we entered the busy outskirts of Bucharest a gleaming yellow combine harvester stood in a showroom window patiently awaiting its day.

All agreed this had been a very memorable trip and one we would recommend to others. Like many eastern European countries, Romania is relatively unspoilt now and has a wealth of wild life but how long will it last? Thanks again to Neil for arranging it and for his calm laid back and efficient organisation during the tour.

Wayne Strong