

Grand Tour: Kiskunság & Hortobágy National Parks in HUNGARY Transylvania, Carpathian Mts. & Danube Delta ROMANIA ; 14 days



Several strikingly different birding areas in Central and Eastern Europe make this journey a GRAND TOUR! The combination of such interesting areas as **Kiskunság and Hortobágy National Parks in Hungary** and **Transylvania in Romania** will be most rewarding. Add to this a few days in the **Danube Delta** and on the **Black Sea Coast** and you have a truly great adventure!

If you are looking for something really exciting and original, you are warmly invited to participate in this tour! During the trip you will encounter several different habitats thus your bird list will contain amazingly varied species, hopefully including **Saker Falcon, Red-footed Falcon, White-tailed Eagle, Imperial Eagle, Common Crane, Ferruginous Duck, Pygmy Cormorant, Eurasian Roller, European Bee-eater, Dipper, Nutcracker, Wallcreeper, Rock Bunting, most species of European woodpeckers plus White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Glossy Ibis** and many more. You will be surprised by encountering so many different ethnic cultures, medieval monasteries, churches, castles, everyday village life, craftsmen and nomadic shepherds as well.



Fact File

- 4 days in Hungary
- 10 days in Romania
- starting in Budapest and finishing in Bucharest
- visiting Kiskunság NP and Hortobágy NP in Hungary
- crossing Transylvania, Eastern Carpathians Mts., Danube Delta, Black Sea coast and Dobrogea
- using 6 accommodations

Highlights

- exploring Kiskunság and Hortobágy National Parks in Hungary, steppe habitats, oxbow lakes
- visit to the Turda Gorge in Transylvania
- 3 days in the Eastern Carpathians, including bearwatching as an optional extra
- stay 1 night close to the Dracula Castle at Bran
- 2 full days in the Danube Delta
- 1 day in Histria and Vadu, one of the best birding areas in Europe
- visit to the famous Babadag Forest
- birding in the Macin Hills and Cheia Gorge

Accommodation

- 2 nights at our Kondor EcoLodge, Kiskunság National Park, Hungary
- 1 night close or at Hortobágy National Park, Hungary
- 2 nights in Torockó, Transylvania, close to Turda Gorge
- 3 nights in the Eastern Carpathians
- 1 night at Zarnesti/Magura area close to Bran Castle
- 3 nights at the Danube Delta area
- 1 night at Mamaia or similar at the Black Sea coast area

Tour Starts: Budapest Airport, HUNGARY

Tour Ends: Otopeni Airport, Bucharest, ROMANIA

Our price includes:

- all travel as noted in the itinerary;
- all accommodation based on shared rooms (most rooms are twin bedded), at most locations there are single rooms as well for extra charge
(Please ask for a single room at the time of booking!);



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- 3 meals per day, generally breakfast at the accommodation, packed lunch, dinner (consists of at least two courses);
- services of the leader(s) and trip materials

Not included:

- flights to Budapest and from Bucharest;
- optional programs to places of interest and entrance fees involved, such as visit of Bear Hide or entrance fees of cultural sights;
- airport and other departure taxes, tips;
- drinks; food beyond generally 3 meals/day as in the itineraries;
- excess baggage charges;
- telephone calls and any other personal expenses
- compulsory personal insurance

If you have questions about inclusion of any cost item, please ask



Activity level

Generally easy to moderate walks;
Some longer drives expected

Optional programs: bear-watching in the Carpathians and visit of Bran Castle

Itinerary

Days 1 & 2

We will wait for you at Budapest Airport in the morning. Our Kondor EcoLodge is less than 60 miles from the airport in the heart of the Kiskunsag National Park if we go on the quick way. But instead we would cross some of the attractive parts of the protected area on small rural roads, so within less than an hour we could start to see great species.

One of the typical habitats of Kiskunsag is the flat, perfect plain of the "puszta" which has several different types ranging from dry grassland to marshy meadows. Kiskunsag grassland is the typical habitat for population of **Great Bustard**. This is also a home to **Stone Curlew, Tawny Pipit, Lesser Grey Shrike, Wheatear**, and a set table for foraging **Imperial Eagle, Red-footed** and **Saker Falcon**. If we want to see **Collared Pratincoles** we should go where puszta meets arable land.

If we should choose the flag species of this area we would go for **Eurasian Roller** and **Great Bustard**. The best Hungarian populations for both are at Kiskunsag. To see the Great Bustard we have to drive to vast plains of north Kiskunsag while core breeding area of the Eurasian Roller can be found just around our lodge.

The lodge grounds itself can yield some of the birds that could become easily the highlight of our day in the field. **Bee-eaters** abound in the National park and lot of them breed nearby as well as **Rollers** and **Red-footed Falcons**. Other birds that can postpone our morning departures from the lodge are **Golden Oriole** and **Hoopoe**. **Common** and **Black Redstart** both breeding in the garden, **Spotted Flycatcher** as well. Mammals are also noteworthy – **Eastern Hedgehog, Red Squirrel, European Souslik** are common and there are some other species which are usually more difficult to be located.



Red-footed Falcons are also numerous and they add to the color range of local birds. Indeed, the most colorful species seem to abound here.

During our stay we will check the most important natural alkaline lakes which generally have very high salt concentration. They are rather flat and rich in nutrients and thus very suitable for birds to stop by. Different species can be found at gravel pits and alongside the canals connecting Tisza and Danube rivers with drier areas. **Marsh** and **Montagu's Harriers** hover over the fields and

sometimes a **Short-toed Eagle** turns up.

A panic in the flocks of **Ferruginous Duck, Shoveler, Garganey** and **Red-crested Pochard** announces a presence of **White-tailed Eagle** or **Saker Falcon**. **Whiskered Terns** should be common while **Black** and **White-winged Black Terns** have a presence just during favorable wet years only. Alongside **Black-headed** and **Yellow-legged Gulls** there are a few colonies of **Mediterranean Gulls** as well.

We shall visit one of the seasonal farms on puszta and observe livestock and birds like **Tawny Pipit, Crested Lark, Little Owl** or **Lesser Grey Shrike**.

Day3

After our last morning at the Kiskunság we start to travel to East. Within an hour we stop at a great floodplain forest which offers excellent birding. First we check out the old trees and look for different **Woodpeckers** which can include **Lesser, Middle and Great-spotted**, but also **Black** or even **Gray-headed**. **Hawfinch** is quite common and we have a good chance for several other forest species, including tits, treecreepers and flycatchers as well.

Later we visit a large open oxbow lake of River Tisza which offers a good observation of many **herons, egrets** and **waterfowl**. Floodplains and these type of lakes are really perfect birding spots. Depending on the water level birds include **Ferruginous Duck, Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Pygmy Cormorant, Black-necked Grebe, Squacco** and **Purple Heron** or **Spoonbill**. Reedbeds are teeming with **Penduline Tit, Bearded Reedling, Great Reed, Savi's** and very rarely you can find **Moustached Warbler** as well. It is usually more common to hear than to see **Bittern, Corncrake, Spotted Crake** and **Little Crake**, but we might be able to catch a glimpse of some of these.



During the afternoon we travel further East towards the famous Hortobágy National Park. At Hortobágy we try to catch up with any of those species which we perhaps missed at Kiskunság. On the way we cross other large open areas, so it worth to scan the sky, because we might spot some good raptor species such as **Saker Falcon, Imperial Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard** or very rarely a migrating **Pallid Harrier**, depending on the timing of your visit.

Day4

This morning we spend again at other areas of Hortobagy, checking some steppe like grasslands locally called Puszta, traditional extensive farms and perhaps some fishponds and then we travel towards the Romanian border. This will be a long travel through some hills, later start to descend into the Transylvanian Basin after crossing the Bucin Pass. Our final destination will be close to a secluded village which is actually a World Heritage site, partly because of several beautiful mediaeval traditional houses & the local folklore, partly because of the attractive limestone hills around.

We should have time to look for some locally common species such as **Wood Lark, Yellowhammer, Red-backed Shrike** and perhaps **Rock Bunting**.

Day5

Today we visit the spectacular Turda Gorge which is not just a famous gorge in Transylvania, but actually one of the largest ones in whole Romania. Here we will look for **Golden Eagle** which earlier during the year usually breeds successfully on one of the cliffs. This place is also a breeding area for **Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush** but it starts to migrate South early, so it is questionable that we can still find it. On the other hand **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** and **Peregrine Falcon** is quite common. We should have some **Alpine Swifts** and **Eurasian Crag Martins** in the air, plus **Red-rumped Swallows**. Checking the cliffs will give another chance for **Rock Bunting** as well.

Day6

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After a morning birding close to our hotel we will leave this limestone area and continue to travel East towards the towering Eastern Carpathian mountains. Basically we will cross most of the Transylvanian Basin. During the several hours long journey we can stop both for birding alongside the road and for taking some photos of landscape or cultural highlights such as amazingly decorated wooden carved gates made by the local Hungarian speaking Szekely or Secler people or mediaeval fortresses or churches. Some of the city parks are surprisingly good for birding as well so it can be easy to find **European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, European Blackbird or European Robin. Eurasian Collared Dove** and some of the **Woodpecker** species inhabit these areas as well. Finally we reach the Hargita region and our small guesthouse/pansion which will be our base for the next 3 nights.

Day7

After the previous day's long journey today we will spend most of the time relatively close to our accommodation, mainly trying to reach good forests of the Hargitha Mountain. At lower elevation with some search we should find some typical species which include here **Coal** and **Crested Tit, Firecrest, Siskin**, sometimes **Red Crossbill, Wood Warbler** and on the adjacent meadows also **Woodlark** and **Black Redstart**. We will also look for **Gray-headed** and **White-backed Woodpecker** in a deciduous forest. At higher elevation at spruce and pine forests we will call for **Eurasian Pygmy Owl** which can alert the nearby songbirds as well such as **Coal and Willow Tits** or **Common Treecreeper**. Typical, but not easy woodpecker of the old conifer forests is **Three-toed Woodpecker**. It is very hard even during early Spring when there is much higher chance to find **Hazel Grouse** or **Capercaillie**, but with extreme luck we might get a view of at least one of them. At more open areas closer to the peak we hope to enjoy the sight of species which generally inhabit subalpine slopes. Walking around a bit should produce **Water Pipit, Ring Ouzel**, plus **Mistle Thrush** and **Fieldfare** common as well. We should listen for **Nutcracker** as well.

Either this or for the next evening we will offer an optional extra evening outing to spend some time in a professional bear watching hide. There is a very good chance to see **Brown Bear** up close from a safe and comfortable place. Sometimes **Wildboar** comes out to the meadow as well at dusk.



Day8

This day we make an excursion first through the Northern Hargita driving to higher elevation, crossing a mountain town of Gheorgheni and passing a strange mountain lake with a former forest's broken stumps sticking out of it. According to the story the lake was created by a landslide, but killed a shepherd with all his herd as well so people gave the name Killer Lake. Rarely we can spot **Chamois** on the walls. Later on we start to descend into an incredible valley which is called **Békás/Bicaz Gorge**. It is even bigger and deeper than Torda Gorge what we visited before. The huge limestone cliffs really towering above the surrounding area. There are a couple of incredible twist and turns and hairpins as we go, so not much possibilities to stop but we will find a place where we can admire not just the scenery, but try to find a giant butterfly-like **Wallcreeper**. It is usually easy to add **Gray Wagtail** and **White-throated Dipper** to the list here as well alongside the small river. On our travel back depending on timing we might stop at other forested areas as well to look for woodpeckers and other woodland species.



Day9

Today we will travel alongside the Eastern Carpathian Mountains from North to South, crossing partly the second largest city, Brasov which is referred as the entrance or exit gate of Transylvania. We will brake the journey a few times to look for **Lesser-Spotted Eagle** and other **raptors**. Shortly after we will arrive to the Easternmost edge of the Southern Carpathian mountains where there will be a possibility to visit the famous **Bran Dracula Castle**. We will stay nearby at the foot of the mountain.

Days10-12

Today we have a long journey first down from the hills and then to East through a huge lowland area towards Tulcea, capital of the **Danube Delta**.

The Danube Delta is a huge area, several thousand square kilometers, protected as a **Biosphere Reserve** which we will be able to discover just partly however we will have 3 nights and more than 2 full days in this area.

During the days we expect to see **Dalmatian & White Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants**, large number of herons and egrets. **White-tailed Eagles** are in good number, but with some luck we might find a **Steppe Eagle** as well.

Ducks include **Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested and Common Pochards, Gadwall and Garganey**. The most common grebe is **Great Crested**, but there are other species as well such as **Little-, Eared or Black-necked and Red-necked Grebes**. Numerous **Greylag Geese** should be around as well.

The reedbeds are home of thousands of songbirds, including **Great Reed and Reed Warblers, Savi's Warbler, Penuline Tit and Bearded Reedling**.

We should regularly check the sky for various raptors from the enormous **White-tailed Eagle** through the colorful **Red-footed Falcon** till **Saker** and **Peregrine Falcons** there are several species in good numbers.

Depending on the season we will look for **Golden Orioles, Cuckoos** and a number of other songbirds in the reeds as well.

There are many more species to look for, it would be too long to list all!

Day13

We will spend the last full day with discovering various habitats both alongside the **Black Sea coast** and further inland which can be surprisingly dry area.

The small **Macin Hills** is a place to look for **Pallid Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard** and **Isabelline Wheatear**. We also visit **Cheia Gorge** to search for **Pied Wheatear** and some more raptors.

On the coast we visit Histria and Vadu for another chance to see **White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorant** and perhaps even **Ruddy Shelduck** and **Paddyfield Warbler** in the reeds.

We will be birding and raptor spotting whilst travelling to **Babadag Forest**, home to **Booted Eagle & Levant Sparrowhawk, Sombre Tit**, however neither is easy at all.

Day14

We leave early, depending on your flight schedule and head for Otopeni Airport North of Bucharest.

Various Dragonflies, Butterflies, Wildflowers will be around during the tour, including many rarities as well and during your stay at Kondor Ecolodge we can run a professional moth trap or detect bats as well.

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