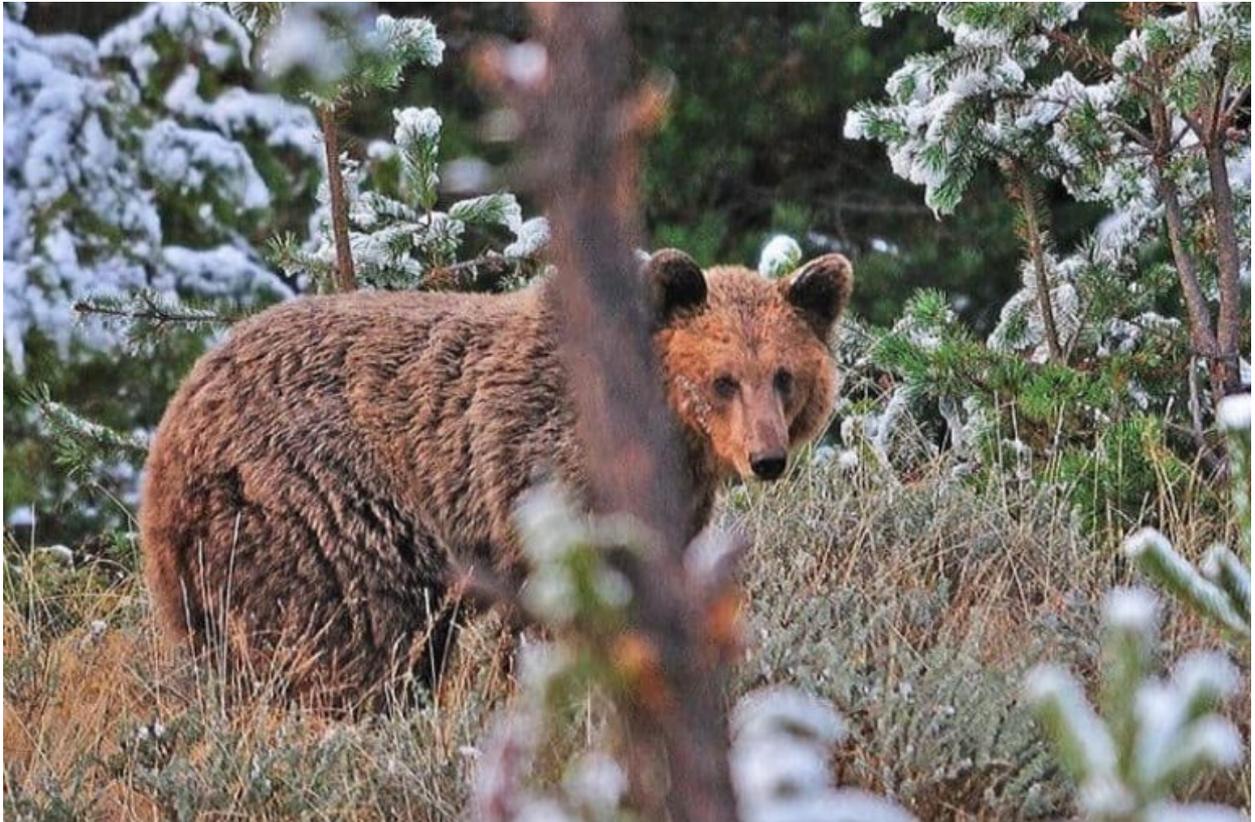


Tour of Romania 27th June to 2nd July 2018

Trip Report



Introduction

This short five-day tour was principally a recce to check out bird sites, hotels, terrain, tracks and bear hides in the spectacular Hargita Mountains in preparation for SPEC's grand tour of Northern Bulgaria and Romania planned for May 2019. Hargita lies in the heart of Transylvania, a fascinating place within the Carpathian Basin with varied habitats and one of the last strongholds for bears in Europe. I was accompanied by my son Mark and guided by Minko Madjarov who has led groups for us many times in the Balkans and we've never been disappointed. We had very much hoped to see the Carpathian Brown Bear, part of an estimated national bear population of 5,000-8,000 individuals of which 350 of them still live in and around Hargita. We would also be looking at the region's amazing birdlife as well as hunting for the butterflies and dragonflies of the region.

Wednesday 27th June

Our plane arrived late-evening but on time at Bucharest Airport and we were pleased to find Minko waiting for us in arrivals. We were driven across the city for our overnight stay at the Complex Herăstrău, situated in Herăstrău Park on the northern side of Bucharest. En route we collected a few beers as we feared that the bar would be closed

following our late-night arrival! Before retiring, we chatted over the itinerary for our long-weekend tour of Transylvania.

Thursday 28th June

The Colentina River, a tributary of the river Dâmbovița, runs close to our hotel and a large lake (Lake Herăstrău) could be seen from our hotel balconies. However, we awoke to torrential rain with gushing guttering and water everywhere, so little could be seen on the lake, although a brief scan from the hotel veranda revealed at least two Night Herons and a few Common Terns, Swallows and Swifts. With the rain persisting, the sooner we were on our way the better, so we helped ourselves to a buffet breakfast and left.

Our four-hour journey to Hargita Bear Lodge was marred by the persistent heavy rain. The first two hours took us through featureless lowlands and we saw few species, the single highlight being a Purple Heron. However, once we reached a commune called Homored, the birdlife livened up. Lesser Spotted Eagles were common here and we noted several Great Grey, Lesser Grey and Red-backed Shrikes on the wires, Fieldfares singing from gardens, Ravens and a Northern Wheatear in one of the villages. White Storks were tending very large young in almost every village including at least 29 nests in the commune of Sânpaul (Mureș County).

We arrived at Hargita Bear Lodge late afternoon and met the National Park Ranger, Zsolt, who manages the lodge with his girlfriend Christina. The Lodge is set in beautiful surroundings close to the commune of Zetea Zeteváralja (Sub Cetate) at the base of the Hargita Mountains. The rain had eased a bit on our arrival and there were one or two butterflies fluttering over the meadows in front of the lodge including Bath White and Ringlet. Black Redstarts were singing from the rooftops of nearby farm buildings.

We dropped of our bags and were soon ushered into a four-wheel drive that quickly sped away and headed up a mountain track through thick forest to the bear hide. It was a bumpy ride and there were some real off-road moments! A Southern Hawker dragonfly and a Roe Deer were seen on the drive and then Yellow-bellied Toads in puddles as we began a short walk from a parking spot to the hide. On reaching the hide Zsolt and his young assistant laid out food for the bears. They then left and told us to stay in the hide and if we wanted a pee use the bucket provided! Zsolt said that he would be back to collect us at 9.30 pm. This allowed over four hours in a spacious hide containing comfortable seating, narrow glass windows and an air-conditioning system to stop the inside of the glass steaming up. We waited patiently in anticipation and watched a squadron of Jays and a few Stock Doves making regular forays to search out the food that had been laid out especially for the bears. We began to wonder whether there would be any food left as so much was being gobbled up by the Jays!





Goliat - the King of the Mountain

After two hours, there had been no sign of bear activity and we began to wonder whether the beasts we going to show. However, at 7.20 pm Minko whispered "there's a bear coming" and we were soon watching a massive male performing directly in front of us. He was truly enormous and Zsolt told us later that he was 18 years old, the biggest bear on the mountain named Goliat (Goliath in English) and this was only the third time that he had been spotted this year! With thumping hearts, we watched him for 17 minutes and had to pinch ourselves as we could hardly believe what we were seeing. Our vigil continued for a further hour or so in the hope that he would return, but alas he did not.

As 9.30 approached there was still no sign of Zsolt and we listened intently for the sound of his pickup truck. 9.45 passed and then a dilemma, did he mean he would collect us at the hide or at the barrier where we had been dropped off? It was now almost dark and there was a reluctance to walk back knowing that this colossal bear may be lurking and may still be hungry! Eventually, we decided that it was safer for the three of us to walk back together rather than Zsolt walking to us on his own, so we gingerly walked back in a tight group. We noted a Woodcock flying over during this short walk and, as we approached the barrier, we were relieved to see the headlights of the approaching truck.

Back at the lodge, we were treated to a celebratory glass of either blueberry or pear-flavoured snaps (one of our party had both!) followed by a wonderful dinner – wild boar and roast potatoes and vegetables, followed by ice-cream – scrumptious!

Friday 29th June

There had been more rain overnight and, as it was still falling steadily, there was no urgency to get out early. We surveyed Zsolt's back garden and watched a colony of Tree

Sparrows attend their nest boxes, Fieldfares in the trees and Black Redstarts singing from the fence posts.

We checked out the delightful Deság Hotel (where we will be staying during our May 2019 tour) that lies beside a fast-flowing Deság River at the foot of a woodland track leading into the mountains. By now the rain had eased and there were a few sunny periods that encouraged butterflies to emerge from their hiding places. We accrued 21 species during the day including Hungarian Glider (a tick for me!), Large Copper, Queen of Spain, Silver-washed, High Brown and Nickerl's Fritillaries, Purple Emperor, Large Wall Brown and Chestnut Heath. We walked up a rocky stream bed to a small bear hide where Minko had seen Collared Flycatchers feeding their chicks the previous week but, unfortunately for us, the birds had fledged and were nowhere to be seen. We did see both Roe and Red Deer, the latter quite scarce in Transylvania.

In the afternoon, we walked a second woodland track that led to Zetea Harghita National Nature Reserve. The forest birds were what would be expected with no real surprises, the best perhaps being Alpine Tit (subspecies of Willow Tit) and a noisy group of Common Crossbills. Frequent showers meant that dragonflies were few and far between, although Mark did manage to find a Brilliant Emerald beside one of the boggy streams.

We returned to The Bear Lodge and Zsolt took us to a different and much closer bear hide known as Deság 2, the most popular hide on the mountain. The pickup time was set at 9 pm and we were left alone to wait for the bears. Again the bucket was pointed out! Soon after we started our vigil, we heard the very high-pitched, dog-whistle call of a Hazel Grouse and then spotted three birds on the forest edge, one of them giving prolonged views on bare ground as it foraged for green, clover-like shoots a few metres from the hide. As we watched intently, the bird suddenly scuttled away as a young bear bounded in from our left. It immediately began to feast on the food in front of the hide, so close that you could have touched it if it wasn't for the glass! This youngster spent some time scooping food out of holes that had been so strategically placed by Zsolt, but it appeared nervous, so we suspected that another bear was approaching. Sure enough, a bigger bear (a female) appeared causing the smaller one to quickly hightail and disappear into the forest.





Female bear at Deság 2

A third bear of similar size then appeared and the two of them seemed to be quite tolerant of each other perhaps they were pair? Soon a fourth, a fifth and sixth bear appeared. Zsolt returned on time, but drove his pickup directly in front of the hide and dropped off some sheep's offal. He was keen to get away as he said that one of the females was pregnant and that's why he had brought the extra food.

We returned to The Lodge for yet another celebratory tot of snaps followed by another superb dinner – this time roast chicken.

Saturday 30th June

We again awoke to torrential rain, but there was no immediate hurry as we had elected to visit the Bicz Gorge, which was a two-and-a-half hour drive from The Lodge, so there was a chance that the rain would ease before we got there – no such luck! On arrival, we found that the road followed the path of the Bicas River for eight kilometres through a spectacular high-sided gorge with towering cliffs – wow! This fast-flowing water must have sliced its way through the limestone for centuries creating ravines, often in serpentine with rock on one side and a sheer drop on the other. Lacul Roşu (the Red Lake) could be seen at the head of the gorge.





Dark Red Helleborine at Bicas Gorge

Bicas Gorge is famous for its Wallcreepers and we were delighted to get this spectacular bird on our trip list. Other birds of note included Spotted Nutcracker and White-bellied Dipper. The rain continued to pour down and there were hundreds of tourists scurrying around in plastic macs, hiding in tunnels and doing anything to shelter from the downpours. Beside one of the tunnels, Minko showed us a Dark Red Helleborine, which was a first for me! It soon became obvious that the rains were not going to ease soon, so we made our retreat and headed back to Zetea Zeteváralja.

The highlight of our return journey was huge flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings that were part of a massive invasion into southeast Europe with a few reaching the UK. The flocks were rapidly stripping cherry trees of their fruits in a picturesque little village and, as we scoped the birds from the roadside, bemused residents looked on. We stopped off to explore the banks of Zetea Reservoir where we saw more Spotted Nutcrackers and a Great Egret alighting from the water's edge. Mark found a Small Pincertail Dragonfly, but the weather was hardly good enough to entice too many insects out to play.

We returned to The Lodge and were taken to the same bear hide (Deság 3) that we had visited the previous morning and set about another vigil for bears, but this time hopeful of other mammal species. As we began to climb up the mountain stream, a wild boar bolted into the undergrowth, hardly giving enough time to determine its identity. We didn't have to wait long before a small bear arrived and began feeding in front of the hide and we could tell by the markings on its flanks that it was the same young bear that was first in the queue the previous evening. A rather grey-looking Red Squirrel also showed, but it was otherwise very quiet, so we decided to walk back down the track. A Eurasian Hobby flying over the track was our last bird of the day.

Sunday 1st July

We awoke the next morning to sunshine (hooray!), but heard that much of the region had fallen victims to severe flooding following yesterday's persistent torrential downpours. After a quick breakfast we said our goodbyes to Zsolt and Christina and vacated The Bear Lodge, setting off for the Southern Carpathians Mountains, which are also known as the Transylvanian Alps. We planned to stop briefly stop at Sânpaul Fish Ponds en route. We spotted a pair of Eurasian Hobbies at a petrol stop and again Lesser Spotted Eagles and Great Grey Shrikes were plentiful.

As we approached Sânpaul Fish Ponds, we noted a Bee-eater on a wire, which signalled the start of a bonanza of birds. The ponds were amazing and our trip list increased rapidly. We noted two Spoonbills, many Night Herons, Pochard and Ferruginous Ducks with ducklings, Great Reed, Marsh, Savi's and Sedge Warblers, Syrian Woodpecker,

Yellow Wagtails of the Romanian race Dombrowski and more Bee-eaters. Mark was busy recording dragonflies, the highlights being White-legged and Winter Damselflies. A Dingy Skipper and several Berger's Clouded Yellows butterflies were also noted.

We were limited for time so we continued our journey towards the Făgăraș Mountains. In the foothills, we noted a fly-over Caspian Gull that turned out to be our only large gull of the trip, but more Dombrowski Yellow Wagtails. We stopped off in some superb mature beech woodlands halfway up the mountain slopes where we could hear Red-breasted Flycatchers singing. Mark pointed out a magnificent Sombre Golden Ringed Dragonfly and a Camberwell Beauty butterfly.

One of the most spectacular roads in Europe, known as the Transfăgărașan crosses the Făgăraș Mountains and had been featured on Top Gear. The birding at the tops was rewarding to say the least and we soon located a pair of Alpine Accentors and several Water Pipits. However, being a Sunday, there were hordes of people with cars everywhere, so we retreated further down the mountain towards our hotel. We followed a forest track which led to some superb alpine meadows and found an Alpine Newt in one of the puddles on the track. Mark also noted a Southern Skimmer Dragonfly. However, there were few birds of note with Firecrest and Bullfinch being the highlights.

We booked into our hotel and saw that they had also fell victim of the flooding with a cellar full of floodwater and no electricity! We had planned to eat there, but once the proprietor had gone through the menu telling us what could be cooked on his frying pan over a gas stove and what couldn't, we decided to go elsewhere. Minko said that he had enjoyed a nice lunch at a hotel a few hundred metres down the road the previous week, so we decided to give it a try. We had been spoilt at The Bear Lodge, so unfortunately the dinner didn't meet our expectations. The waiter had recommended that we tried the salt-dried lamb, so we all nodded and said that would do nicely. He must have been rubbing his hands as this meat must have been in his freezer for decades and as at last he'd got rid of it! In fact, it was so tough that it could have prolonged the life of a pair of shoes for many years if their soles were replaced with this piece of leather labeled as lamb! Anyway, we chewed away, smiled and nodded and eventually forced it down our throats! Us Brits, we hate to complain! Surprisingly, Minko thought the meal was delicious – no doubt men are men in the Balkans, blessed with exceptionally strong jaws and razor-like teeth?

Monday 2nd July

We awoke to brilliant sunshine without a cloud in the sky, which was rather a shame as we needed to be back at the airport early afternoon and only had about two hours birding. We went back to the mountain tops and saw much the same species as yesterday, although we did manage to spot at least six Chamois feeding in pairs on the slopes. With great reluctance it was soon time to make our three-hour trip back to Bucharest Airport to fly home. What a wonderful country with such an abundance of wildlife.

Steve Piotrowski
6th July 2018

Your Guide

Steve Piotrowski is an accomplished tour guide and has birded The Balkans on many occasions. He is familiar with the best wildlife sites and will be able to locate key species that inhabit the mountains and marshes.