

Tour Report

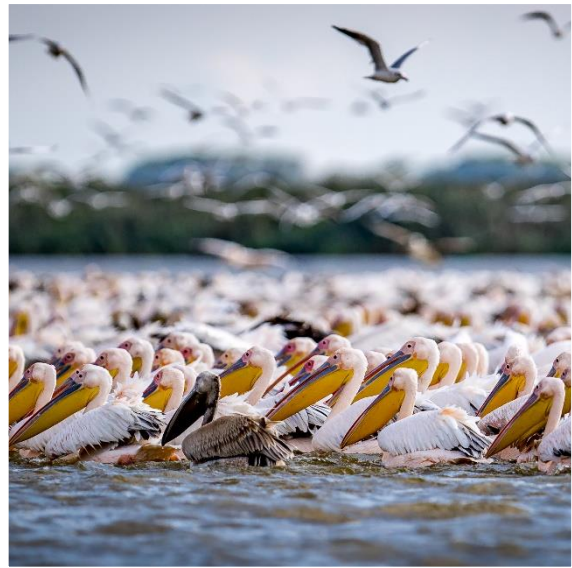
Romania - Focus on The Danube Delta

3 - 10 September 2022

Golden jackal



Great white pelican



Common kingfisher



Marsh frog



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Day 1: London Heathrow to Bucharest

Saturday 3 September 2022

At Heathrow, the airport departure lounge was the busiest I have seen in some time. I met up with two of the guests I had previously travelled with, and it is always nice to meet up with them both and have a general catch-up.

We had some time to kill, so we headed to a coffee shop before heading to our gate. It was good to have some spare time; after relaxing with a coffee, it was time to head to our gate. For some reason, I always get caught out by having the furthest gate away possible; the extra exercise can only be a good thing especially knowing I will be sitting in photography hides for the remainder of the week!

Once at the gate, I found two other guests joining us on this trip. After a brief hello and introduction, it was time to board the flight. Everyone was in good spirits, and we were all looking forward to the trip. The flight left on time at 12:40, it was a nice short flight, and we arrived a little ahead of schedule. We were met by our driver Nikolas who was taking us to our hotel around 30 minutes away in Bucharest.

Once at our hotel and checked in, we had about 30 minutes to settle into our rooms before it was time for dinner, which was superb! I then gave the group a short briefing about the week ahead, after which we retired to our rooms for the night to rest up before another day of travelling in the morning!

Day 2: Bucharest to Ultima Fronteira

Sunday 4 September 2022

Weather: 18°C Cloudy

It was a fairly early start as we had a long day of travelling. We all met in the hotel's restaurant and enjoyed a nice breakfast after a good night's sleep. We were then picked up by our driver Marios at 9:00 to start our drive to the town of Tulcea to collect our boat, which would be around a 4-hour drive taking in the sights of Romania.

After a nice clear route of driving and a few coffee/ toilet stops, we arrived at Tulcea around 13:30. It was soon time to get on our speed boat and head to our accommodation at Ultima Fronteira via the Danube River. The river was nice and calm, allowing us to make up some decent time to look for wildlife on route briefly. We had a few nice sightings of a white-tailed sea eagle perched in a tree along the Danube.

We also enjoyed a close encounter with a roe deer swimming across the river to land. Quite surreal to see a lone deer swimming across such a vast expanse of water, it had swam over from Ukraine to Romania. A really cool sighting. Sadly all our cameras were still packed away as we were travelling. Nonetheless, I doubt I will witness such an incredible moment again for a while.

After a few hours of boat travel, we finally made it to the reserve and the Ultima Frontiera lodge. We were met by our local guides, who gave us an introduction and briefing for the few days ahead. Once we were settled into our rooms, we met the guides outside, who then gave us a tour of the reserve before dinner. On the drive, we spotted a few little owls, a hobby, and quite a few golden jackals. We then arrived back at the lodge and enjoyed dinner before heading to bed for an early night.

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Day 3: Golden jackal hide

Monday 5 September 2022

Weather: 15°C Cloudy

Today was our first proper hide session, and we had another early morning start with breakfast at 5:30am to give us the best photographic opportunities in the hides. The rest of the group and I were going to the golden jackal and white-tailed eagle hide. It was a pretty early start as we were in the hide, fairly tiring after a late night whilst in the wild cat hide. So we were all hoping for a morning of nice activity to make the early start and lack of sleep worthwhile.

It didn't take long before we were treated with our first jackal sighting of the day. Two jackals were sighted at 6:40, with lots of jackal activity around the perimeter of the hide and we also enjoyed some visits from ravens and hooded crows too. We hoped that all the bird activity on the ground may get the attention of some white-tailed sea eagles. Wouldn't that be nice! The jackals were performing well with lots of digging in the sand and climbing a dead tree stump to get food that had been placed on top. We were also surprised to see two wild Letea horses trotting through the area in front, and as such we were unable to take any photos of these.

By 7:50 we soon had two more jackals appear that we spotted in the reed bed some distance away from the sand dunes in front of us. It took about another hour or so until the two jackals felt comfortable and safe to come on and feed, but when they finally came in, they spent about 30 minutes feeding on the ground until it managed to rip away the food and run off. After the morning session, it was back to our lodge for a nice warming lunch. Our afternoon photography sessions started around 15:30, where myself and two of the guests were put in the pond hide in the hope of photographing common kingfisher and pygmy cormorant.

We had already seen the kingfisher make a few successful dives soon after arriving in the hide, however, it was a bit too far for any good photos. The kingfisher soon upped its antics and put on a decent show, perching just metres away from us which was a great opportunity for some nice close-up portraits. We also had a juvenile night heron land on a perch in front of us, annoyingly though as soon as we slowly moved our cameras to get a shot, it flew off. It took us a little while to identify it as it was such a short visit. We first thought it was a juvenile bittern but then narrowed it down to a young night heron. The light was starting to drop at this point but the backlit kingfisher was posing nicely again. It was a little bit too far away for me for nice shots, but the other two guests with longer lenses were getting some great backlighting opportunities.

The other two guests spent the afternoon in the drinking pool hide, and they had good sightings of: chaffinch, great tits, hooded crows, magpies, great spotted woodpecker, pheasant and a few rats.

Day 4: Jackal hide number two

Tuesday 6 September 2022

Weather: 12°C Cloudy

We were all in a different jackal hide this morning, and about ten minutes after our guide had left, we already saw two jackals about 30-40 metres away from the hide. This was still a bit of a distance for any close photos, so it would just be a matter of waiting and seeing what would happen. After another 30 minutes, we had our third jackal in and around the hide. One golden jackal briefly came within a reasonable distance for photos. She wanted to feed but was a bit weary due to all the corvids around, so it pushed further back to the bushes.

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Another jackal came into the area, which we think was from a different territory as the other jackals quickly aggressively chased it away and never returned.

After around an hour in the hide, we counted five separate jackals in the area. They were still very weary, so photographically it was not easy; however, we all still made the most of the opportunity and managed to get some photos. After our hide session, I gave the group a short master class on lighting techniques and how to use light in different conditions. They all found this very useful and interesting.

After our lunch we headed back out again to our hides for the remainder of the afternoon, I was in the lagoon hide on a floating pontoon as the other four guests were both in two-person hides. I had no sightings in the first hour, although there were many marsh frogs though, which kept me entertained with their constant chattering and gave me some excellent photo opportunities. Overall it was a very quiet session for me. I had one very short visit from a female kingfisher towards the end of the day, which was a nice encounter.

Two of the group were in the drinking pool, hide number 1, and had lots of activity, including great tits, great spotted woodpeckers, hooded crow and rats. Just as they packed up, a juvenile sparrowhawk turned up and drank in the reflection pool. They were pleased and got some great shots. The other two group members were in hide 5, the floating hide. They had lots of activity from pygmy cormorant, mallard, little egret marsh harrier flying over, a few terrapins, redshank, great egret and a common kingfisher that stayed for around an hour fishing and went on every single post. They were practising some backlit images after my masterclass of the kingfisher and were delighted with the results for the first attempt.

Day 5: Lagoon hide and floating hide

Wednesday 7 September 2022

Weather: 15°C Cloudy

Today I was at the dried-up lagoon hide with one of the staff first thing in the morning. We were waiting for jackals but sadly had no sightings. We had a few excellent sightings of a sandpiper and dunlin taking their pickings from the shallow waters edge, which gave some lovely low-level reflection shots.

The rest of the groups were in the same hides as yesterday, as the two in hide 5 wanted some more kingfisher shots. They also had a marsh harrier land in the reeds, giving them some nice shots, a few pygmy cormorants getting mobbed by gulls for fish, and lots of pictures of egrets catching fish!

The other group members had a small group of great white pelicans flying over, lots of marsh frogs giving lots of low-level picture opportunities, common kingfisher fishing, marsh harrier, pygmy cormorant, a grey heron, female moorhen and a juvenile water rail (glimpse sighting). They then had the most magical sighting of a Eurasian otter fishing, which stayed for around ten minutes and came very close to the hide. They got some fantastic shots.

We all spent the afternoon in the jackal hide with the sand dunes. We had two jackals that we spotted at a distance around 15:30, however, it was an extremely quiet session with no jackals or bird activity at all, which is how wildlife photography sometimes goes. We did get a brief visit from a little owl perching in front of us, which was great!

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Day 6: Boat trip to Lake Merhei**Thursday 8 September 2022***Weather: 12°C Sunny*

Today we took a boat trip along the Danube River and the surrounding tributaries. And it was a beautiful, calm, crisp morning. We were on the boat by 6:00 and all excited for the day ahead. We travelled for about 40 minutes to a smaller tributary off the Danube River, heading to a lake deeper in the delta in search of great white pelicans. Loads of white-tailed eagles perched on surrounding trees on the Romanian and Ukrainian sides of the Danube, giving us lots of sightings through binoculars. We also found a hobby perched in a tree which was a nice sighting, we tried to approach a little closer for photos but sadly, it flew off.

After some time down the smaller tributaries, we finally made it to one of the first lakes. A couple of great white pelicans were some distance away, sadly, we couldn't get closer to them due to the shallow water in the lake, but it was certainly a good start. Carrying deeper into the reserve, there were many sightings of night herons, grey herons, purple herons and cormorants. We had a lovely photo opportunity of a squacco heron perched on some lily buds, which was nice. After another hour or so, we finally found a huge pod of pelicans fishing in Lake Merhei. Our guide estimated around 3,000 or so adults and juveniles. It was an incredible spectacle and produced some magical images. In the afternoon, we visited the steppe forest, with many red-footed falcons. Although it proved tough to get close to, seeing lots around at dusk was interesting.

Day 7: Another session in the jackal hide**Friday 9 September 2022***Weather: Sunny 18°C*

We all decided to return to the jackal hide for hopefully another action-packed morning. The session started fairly quiet for the first hour, with virtually zero activity from the corvids. But soon after the jackals made an appearance, we had three jackals sitting around the perimeter in the long grass watching a couple of ravens, most likely the same group as before. It didn't take long before one came in and started digging around for food, followed by another jackal who was a bit timider and stayed further back sniffing around.

So far, the activity kept us busy, and all three jackals came in to feed. It didn't end there, though, we soon had a good sighting of a sparrow hawk perched on a tree branch that was watching the magpies and hooded crows. It then started to hunt both the magpies and crows, and it was amazing to watch the agility of the hawk hunt. Sadly for the hawk, numerous hunts were unsuccessful. We had had a good morning with plenty to look at and photograph before we were picked up and returned to the hotel for our lunch and downtime.

In the afternoon, we drove around the reserve looking for bearded tits. It took a while, but we eventually found a few. It was very tricky for photos as they were deep in the reeds and the wind was strong, but it was still nice to see them

Day 8: Ultima Fronteira to Bucharest Airport**Saturday 10 September 2022***Weather: Sunny 21°C*

It was our last day today, so after breakfast, we loaded onto the boat, ready to depart on our one-hour journey to Tulcea. The boat was nice and smooth, and we arrived at the port on time, where our boatman Marios then drove us to Bucharest Airport.

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