

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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## Tour Report

### Romania - Focus on the Danube Delta

16 – 23 April 2022

Golden jackal



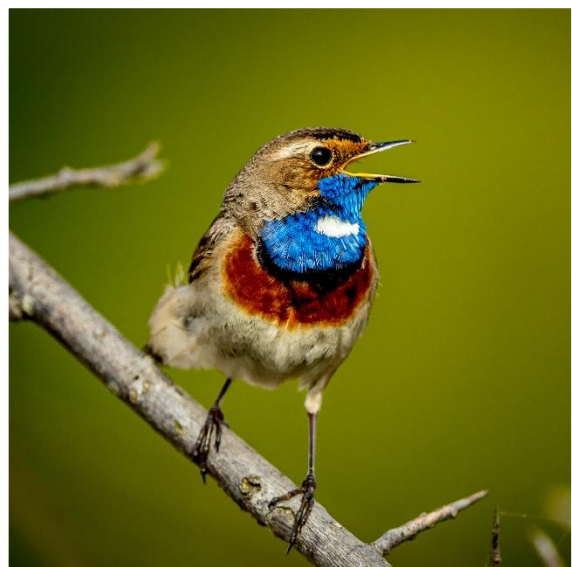
White-tailed eagle



Marsh harrier



Bluethroat



Compiled by Sean Weekly

## Day 1: London Heathrow to Bucharest

Saturday 16 April 2022

*Weather: Sunny 18°C*

At the airport departure lounge, I met up with two of the guests who I had been in communication with before today, advising them on what camera gear to bring etc. It was nice to meet up with them both and put a face to the name. 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 and after a nice relaxation 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! Once at the gate I found the other two guests that were joining us on this trip. After a brief hello and introduction it was then time to board the flight. Everyone was in good spirits and were looking forward to the trip.

The flight arrived in Bucharest around 10 minutes earlier than scheduled and we touched down at 17:50 local time. We were met by our driver Nikolas who was taking us to our hotel around 30 minutes away. He took us on a slightly longer route driving us through Bucharest central, where we saw the impressive Presidential Palace (the heaviest building in the world).

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 Hotel

Sunday 17 April 2022

*Weather: Raining 4°C*

We had a nice fresh start to the day with a great breakfast at the hotel. We were then picked up by Nikolas at 09:30 to start the long drive to Tulcea which is where we would be getting our boat from in the Danube Delta.

Sadly the weather was terrible with heavy rain, but thankfully today was another day of travelling so it did not affect us much. It was quite a pleasant drive to Tulcea taking four hours in total including a coffee stop at a service station around the halfway mark.

Our boat was at 13:50 which was going to be around a two and a half hours journey to get to the Ultima Fronteira hotel, located deep in the Danube Delta.

The boat trip was good fun, at first taking wide rivers and then moving into small tributaries around the Danube. We had some nice wildlife encounters too including some wild horses grazing on the riverbanks. We also enjoyed some good sightings of cormorants, a marsh harrier, and little egret, and we were lucky to see a small group of female and juvenile Dalmatian pelicans, although not close it was a nice surprise to the long boat trip.

Eventually, we arrived at the reserve and were greeted by the Skua Nature Guides who took us and our luggage by 4x4 to the Ultima Fronteira hotel, we arrived around 16:15.

Shortly after settling into our rooms, we were given a brief tour by 4x4 of the north part of the wildlife reserve, stopping off to look at a few of the hides on the way. Following that it was time to get back to the hotel for our dinner which was lovely after a day of travelling.

That evening we all had our first hide session in the golden jackal/wild cat hide from 21:30 to 00:00. Sadly we were not lucky and did not see either the jackal or cat, so we went back to the hotel to get some sleep before an early start tomorrow.

### **Day 3: Golden Jackal Hide**

**Monday 18 April 2022**

*Weather: Cloudy 6°C*

Today was our first proper hide session. 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 by 7:00, 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 disappoint! About ten minutes after our guide had left we already had a sighting of two jackals about 30-40 metres away from the hide, still a bit of a distance for any close photos, so it was just going to be a matter of waiting and seeing what happens. Another 30 minutes and we had our third jackal in and around the hide. One golden jackal briefly came within a good distance for photos. She tried to feed but was a bit weary due to all the corvids around so pushed further back to the bushes. It was not too long later when we had the same jackal come back in again to feed. She gave us some great action by digging up the sand and snarling at the corvids.

Sadly by 8:00 all three of the jackals left. We then waited another hour or so when two of the same jackals came back. One climbed a dead tree stump to get some food from the top. It was pretty impressive to see one climb. Again they were both very weary and soon ran off.

Another 30 minutes had passed and we had our first white-tailed eagle sighting as it flew over the hide and then disappeared. The same eagle then came back a little while longer and landed on a distant sandbank. It was a little too far for some close-ups but it was good to get a few record shots as it flew off.

So far the activity was keeping us busy and it didn't end there, we soon had a marsh harrier that came in to grab some food from the tree stump, it then briefly landed on the floor allowing us to get a few images, before getting mobbed by the corvids and flying off.

We had had a good morning with plenty to look at and photograph. We were then picked up and headed back to the hotel for our lunch and a bit of downtime.

In the afternoon we were back in two separate hides, one group were in the cormorant hide and two were in the woodland hide photographing smaller woodland birds. The cormorant hide was very quiet with very little activity, there were some distant sightings of purple heron, cormorant, mute swan, marsh harrier, gadwall, mallard and great egret.

I was in a floating hide overlooking a reed bed, sadly I had no luck and had one sighting of a distant swan.

### **Day 4: Jackal North Hide**

**Tuesday 19 April 2022**

*Weather: Sunny 4°C*

Another early start this morning, I joined one group in a different jackal hide and the other group were in the woodland hide.

The jackal hide was very quiet with distant jackal sightings, however, they did not come close and disappeared into the distance. We had a brief visit from a white stork but apart from that, we had nothing else. The other group enjoyed some nice photos in the woodland hide.

We then got picked up around midday to go back to the hotel for our lunch. After lunch, we made use of the afternoon by using the hotel's golf buggies to drive ourselves around the reserve looking for subjects to photograph. There were quite a few birds around but nothing within close distance for nice images. Once we returned one of the guides took us out to some reeds where we looked for bearded tits, this was great fun although a tricky start, the birds soon showed themselves briefly for a few photos.

That evening one group went to photograph badgers, which came out fairly promptly and stayed whilst they are the food. There were three badgers in total, two adults and one juvenile. I stayed behind with the other group and did some post-processing and Lightroom tuition back in the hotel before we retired to our rooms.

#### **Day 5: Golden Jackal/Eagle Hide**

**Wednesday 20 April 2022**

*Weather: Raining 6°C*

This morning due to the lack of activity and the limitations in the hides available we decided to head back to the first jackal hide we were in on Monday as it had some good activity. The session started fairly quiet for the first hour, with virtually zero activity from the corvids. Another hour had passed and again the jackals made an appearance, we had three jackals again, 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.

After about 15 minutes or so the bolder jackal managed to tear away the bait (fish) from the ground and ran off with it followed by the other two jackals. It was still 09:00 and as they took the bait they did not return that morning.

Again after lunch, we headed back out on the buggies looking for photo opportunities. We then came back around 17:00 to head back out with one of the guides in search of a bluethroat. A stunning little bird that eventually showed and gave us all some nice poses in the nearby bushes

#### **Day 6: Boat Trip**

**Thursday 21 April 2022**

*Weather: Sunny 7°C*

Today was an exciting day as we were heading out on a boat tour through some of the nearby tributaries of the river. We left at 07:00 and once we arrived at our destination we were loaded onto the boat. In addition to our group, there were a couple of other photographers and four guides so space was a bit limited. We started the trip visiting a local lake that the waterways led into and came across our first sightings of white pelicans who were feeding some distance away with cormorants. It was a good first sighting for the group. We also saw a few Pallas's gulls and a couple of juvenile Dalmatian pelicans.

We spent some time exploring the lake and watching/observing the pelicans. After an hour or so we headed to the edge of the lake where we saw a nice female white-tailed eagle perched upon floating driftwood. It was a little distant but a great sighting. It flew off as we approached to get closer, we decided to follow the direction it was flying when we eventually found its nest high up in a tree with both the male and female flying around behind the tree. The guides on the boat said it was the first time they had located the nest in years.

Carrying on down the waterways we eventually came across a huge flock of white pelican fishing in the shallow waters, there must have been a few hundred at least. Our guide said it was the biggest flock he had seen in 10 years and it was certainly a great sight. After our boat trip, we went on a 4x4 tour through the steppe, stopping off at open plains to look for birdlife and wild horses.

That evening after dinner one group went into the badger hide and saw badgers which kept them entertained. I stayed behind with the other group giving them my editing and post-processing masterclass which they enjoyed.

**Day 7: Golden Jackal Hide**

**Friday 22 April 2022**

*Weather: Cloudy 7°C*

Today was our last day at the Ultima Fronteira Reserve, so we decided to give the jackal hide another try. It was a very quiet session with a brief visit from two ravens and a distant marsh harrier. After a few hours of waiting, we had our first jackal sighting again at a distance, sadly it did not come in and soon left the area. During the hide session whilst we were waiting I was going through some manual camera settings with the group and how to optimise and select the best settings in quick situations.

Once we had finished lunch back at the hotel we spent the afternoon with our guide Marvin searching and photographing a bluethroat, which was a successful session. We also went looking for grey-headed woodpecker and black woodpecker, fortunately, we saw both in distant trees.

**Day 8: Ultima Frontiera to Bucharest**

**Saturday 23 April 2022**

*Weather: Sunny 21°C*

It was our last day today, so after breakfast, we loaded onto the boat ready to depart on our two and a half hour journey to Tulcea. The boat was nice and smooth and we arrived at the port on time where we were met by our driver Nikolas who then drove us back to Bucharest airport to drop off two of the guests who were flying back that night.

The rest of us flew early the next morning back to Heathrow.