

ORNITHOLIDAYS TOUR TO ROMANIA AT LEISURE
Red-breasted Goose Chase
6 – 13 December 2008



Leader: Alexandru Dorosencu

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6th December

The BA flight arrived on time, and soon we all met up. It was a nice afternoon, not sunny but warmer than expected for this time of the year. The short time left before dusk was a great opportunity to have a quick tour of the most important sites of Bucharest – the capital city of Romania. Following the oldest and most famous route, we passed the Folk Museum of Romania, The Arch of Triumph and then drove along the Victory Avenue ('Calea Victoriei' – on which the first 'victorious' army of the Independence war have marched in 1877) which led us to the House of the People (Parliament Palace) – the second largest building in the world, after the US Pentagon. It's an impressive building, placed on a site in the centre of the city, constructed in an eclectic neoclassical architectural style, entirely from materials of Romanian origin. We got the chance to see it from three sides. After enjoying the old and new Bucharest, we had a three hour drive eastwards to Constanta and by 7pm we were at our hotel at the seaside. An 'old fashioned' elevator, which was still working well, with a woman lift attendant, made our luggage transfer very easy and pleasant. We had a nice dinner in a private saloon downstairs, followed by making plans for the next day, which sent us to bed eager to start this new adventure.

7th December

It rained continuously over the night. The morning was warm, but it was still raining. After a pleasant breakfast, we headed south towards Techirghiol Lake, where we first stopped on the shore of the lake. The impressive numbers of Black-necked Grebes in winter plumage, spread all over the lake in small parties, were a highlight and gave us great close views. We continued our drive along the lake to its end. Lake Techirghiol, with its saltish waters, is the well-known wintering site for the rare White-headed Duck. Besides the numerous Black-necked Grebes and Shelduck found in a small gulf, there were few waterfowl. During a short break in the rain we stopped near the lake dyke. A dozen Crested Larks were hopping around. We walked up to the



plateau overlooking the lake. Several Eurasian Kestrels were hovering over the arable fields and we spotted our first Long-legged Buzzard, an adult bird, perched in a small tree. On the way back, a late migrant Whinchat was well seen from the bus. At the south side of the lake we had a good lunch, with hot coffee, tea and excellent views of the flocks of Goldfinches, Linnets, Corn Buntings and Greenfinches on the nearby wires. The weather seemed to improve, and we could feel the first sunrays of the day. We headed to our next birding hot spot, and the number of Mediterranean Gulls seen in the sunlight was even more impressive after the dull start to the day. Along with the Mediterranean Gulls there were Caspian, Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls, plus Little Grebe, Grey Heron, Pochard, and Teal. As the recent weather had been very warm for the time of the year, the White-headed Ducks had not arrived at Lake Techirghiol. We also looked for them further to the north, at Lake Siutghiol, where I had seen half a dozen two weeks previously. Unfortunately, we did not find any White-headed Ducks, only Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes and a few Mallard seen in the last sunlight of the day. We returned to our hotel where we had a review of the day and a very good dinner, with bottles of pleasant Romanian white wine. It seems that today was our only chance to see Mediterranean Gulls in winter.

8th December

After breakfast we made a short re-check of the Siutghiol area for the White-headed Duck but with no luck. We soon realized it was starting to get colder and headed north to Histria in search of Red-breasted Geese. We stopped on the way to watch a Peregrine, spotted by Brian. We stopped close to Histria village, where

there were some extraordinary sprouting winter wheat and rape fields, the best feeding areas for the geese. Due to the heavy rains we had previously, the off-roads were not suitable for car driving, and there were few chances to go on the arable fields in the minibus. We walked to a vantage point – an ancient grave (‘gorgan’) overlooking parts of Lake Sinoe. This gave us the chance to see a flock of 10 Dalmatian Pelicans in flight, but also to feel the sleet and the east wind cutting into our faces. We returned to our car where hot coffee and tea were much appreciated. Once we were warmed up and settled in the car we drove to the Histria ruins, where, on the wheat fields next to the road, we spotted our first flock of White-fronted Geese. We stopped the car immediately and scanned the flock through the scopes finding a couple of beautiful Red-breasted Geese among the White-fronts. Great! Our next target was the wetlands outside the walls of the Histria ruins.



Histria was a Greek and then a Roman colony on the shore of the Black Sea and dates back to 657 BC. The wetlands to the east of the old citadel ruins held a good assortment of dabbling ducks, including Shoveler, Pintail, Wigeon, Gadwall and Teal. A couple of Whiskered Terns in winter plumage proved to be a great surprise for all of us, considering they should have been in Africa by this time. Along the reeds Great Egrets and Pygmy Cormorants were in good numbers and a dozen Marsh Harriers foraging completed the palette of species here. At Vadu, we took a detour to the Black Sea shore, where unfortunately there were no birds, but the panorama of the sea and marshes in the red sky of the sunset made us anticipate good weather tomorrow. Our last dinner at the seaside was accompanied by one of the

best genuine Romanian red wines and was delicious.

9th December

Today was a day with blue skies from morning to dusk - warm and nice. We left Constanta in the morning and had a stop at the roadside fields next to the coast at Vadu. A spectacular flight of about 200 Calandra Larks, characteristically calling and flying up and down over the fields and then up again above our heads and vanishing on the ground, fascinated us for about half an hour. They gave great views of their black under-wings with the white trailing edges. Dragging ourselves from here we arrived at the southern part of the Black Sea lagoons. The water level was very shallow, the margins a bit dried out and the birds weren't very close. Hundreds of waterbirds populated the marshes. Among them, 13 Dalmatian Pelicans were split into two parties, and the collection of ducks included Pintail, Shoveler, Wigeon and Teal. Moving on



we stopped at Nuntasi, where there wasn't much movement, but we had good views of a handsome male Hen Harrier. Again, a major surprise for us was to find another Whiskered Tern and then a new one for the list, a Common Tern, both in winter plumage. Lunch was taken up on a vantage point overlooking the lagoons. In the lagoon just below us, thousands of waterfowl were showing. There were more than 3,000 Pochard, the dominant species, to which we soon added 20 Red-crested. In the distance, we spotted Whooper Swans and four White-tailed Eagles of different ages quartering the reed-beds. Going farther north, we arrived at a roosting area for the geese. As we waited for the geese, we enjoyed the late migration of more than 50 Steppe Buzzards. In the wonderful sunset light, a Hawfinch male was feeding from a Hawthorn just in front of us. At the geese roosting site Great White Egret, Pygmy Cormorant, Lapwing and one tricky Little Gull were seen. The light was failing and it became colder, so we decided to leave the “goose chase” for the next day and headed to our hotel in Tulcea, where we arrived in the evening. After settling in at the hotel overlooking the Danube River, we met up for a nice evening, chatting about the geese, followed by an excellent dinner.

10th December

Early in the morning, after breakfast, we drove towards Murighiol. It was a wonderful morning, bright and warm and we found a large number of waterfowl at Lake Saraturii. Shoveler, Wigeon, Teal, Little Grebe,



Little Gull and a flock of hundreds of Greylag Geese were on the lake. In the reed-bed patches singing Bearded Tit and Reed Buntings were flying every once in a while. We soon started our search for the geese, driving along covering all the area and finally we found a huge flock on a field between Murighiol and Plopu. A commendable lunch

with hot soup, tea and coffee warmed us up and we moved south to Plopu. Lying in wait for the geese to show up for their midday drink, we watched a Syrian Woodpecker and tiny flock of Tree Sparrows in the trees skirting the village. As expected, the White-fronted Geese, which were grazing on the wheat fields across the lake became clamorous and at once they all flew up landing just in front of us for a drink. It was a spectacular view to see the thousands of geese, of which over 800 were Red-breasted, drinking, washing and preening so close. The best view, no doubt! Besides the geese, the lake also held a Dalmatian Pelican and a genuine Ruddy Shelduck amongst Pintail, Teal and Common Shelduck. Moving on to the next wetlands we stopped at Sarinasuf. Liz found a Black-tailed Godwit and we had good views of a Dalmatian Pelican, Pied Avocets and hundreds of Curlews piping on the muddy edges. The Eastern speciality - Pallas's Gull, was found here in good numbers and made a fabulous end to our birding experience today. The light was just about gone so we returned to our hotel. A couple of hours later we had a delicious dinner, preceded by the checklist and a review of the day.

11th December

After a buffet breakfast we started the day with a drive to Babadag Lake, towards the south. A compact flock of White-fronted Geese was immediately spotted by Brian, grazing on the fields aside the road. As we were getting closer to the lake, Roger spotted a Grey-headed Woodpecker, which was very cooperative and posed to us in a walnut tree close to the bus. At Lake Babadag, there were an impressive number of Pygmy Cormorants and Great White Egrets along the reed-beds and water channels. While watching them closely, a

Peregrine flew over us offering a good view. Three Goldeneye spotted by Liz and a few White-fronts and Greylags were on the lake water, so we moved southwards to Babadag Forest. A stop on the way at a loess cliff splendidly revealed a Little Owl at the nest hole. At Enisala we pulled over in the village overlooking the lake down the hill. Among the hundreds of Teal and plenty of Shoveler, we could really admire a compact flock of 35



Red-crested Pochard which was tremendous. Snacks, hot coffee and tea were a pleasant interlude, after which we arrived in the north part of Babadag Forest. The woodland edge was full of Greenfinches and it was quite a spectacle to see them flying around us from one tree to another. Middle Spotted Woodpecker proved to be the highlight here and we as we drove south a gorgeous male Merlin stood on a tree beside our bus. It was closer than we would ever have dared to imagine. Hot soup at lunch-time was very well received,

while enjoying watching Calandra Larks flying over the fields in the distance. At the south side of the forest, a Goshawk flew off near us and soon disappeared from our sight and finally a Sombre Tit in the top of a bush offered a spectacular view. As an introduction for tomorrow's excursion into the Danube Delta, we went to the pre-deltaic area of the Danube – the wetlands of Somova. From the top of a hill, overlooking the marshes and the Danube River, the panorama was superb and we could watch hundreds of Mute Swans, ducks like Wigeon, Gadwall and Red-crested Pochard, Great White Egrets and a Marsh Harrier quartering the reeds. The evening meal was very good and we chatted about tomorrow's excursion which we were all anxious to begin.

12th December

After a leisurely breakfast we boarded our elegant small motor boat for a day's excursion into the Danube Delta. It was a very modern boat, with an open air deck and a dining saloon downstairs, which proved to be very practical when sailing on shallow waters. We first went downstream onto the large Danube River and entered the narrow channels towards the wildest area of the delta. The channels became much narrower and shallower and we were soon finding ourselves in the unspoiled wetlands of the delta. As we were sailing, common passerines like Blue and Great Tits were flying over and at times small parties of Long-tailed Tits were joining them. We stopped at a central area of Lake Nebunu. From the deck of our boat we easily spotted a White-Tailed Eagle perched in a willow tree beside the lake. In a few seconds our attention was distracted by a sharp call of a Peregrine attacking a Saker Falcon right above us. Soon, a Merlin was splendidly revealed to our eyes. Penduline Tits were singing to each other, flying over and climbing nimbly on the reeds, most probably in search of insects, due to the warm weather. Another two adult White-tailed Eagles joined the previous one and we sailed on. A second Merlin at close quarters flew alongside our boat. Views along the channel were of Common Buzzards and a juvenile Goshawk flew from one tree to another beside the channel, showing well. A juvenile Greater Spotted Eagle took off from a willow tree and flapped over the marshes and reed-beds beside the channel, not far from us. This gave us a great chance to clearly see the characteristic pattern of the upper wings. Soon after, an adult bird appeared and we had them both in close sight, and were able to compare them. Perfect! We continued to Lake Baclanesti, where several hundred Mute Swans were present and in the old willow trees surrounding the lake we spotted five White-



tailed Eagles again. We then moved on to Lake Fortuna - the largest lake of the delta area where we were travelling. The picture of the lake hosting thousands of waterfowl was amazing. Going closer to the huge flocks of ducks, we witnessed the flight of 400 Red-breasted Pochard. Very impressive! On the water, among the innumerable grebes which surrounded our boat, we watched a couple of Red-necked Grebes in winter plumage. Mooring up by the bank beside the lake, we had a tasty lunch which included mushroom salad, olive oiled Romanian cheese, beans, aubergine salad and the famous Romanian “Zacusca”, cake and grapes. Mulled wine, hot tea and freshly-made coffee were well appreciated and warmed us up after the hours spent in the fresh but cold winter air on the deck. While enjoying all the goodies, we were captivated by the hunting strategy of five White-tailed Eagles over the Common Coots. In the same period, 16 Dalmatian Pelicans were fishing at one of the lake edges. What more could a birder want! On the way back to Tulcea,

we scrutinized the area and kept our eyes open for the Black Woodpecker, which we finally found on an old tree trunk and saw well. Continuing our journey, we came through a huge 'river' of Rook and Jackdaw flocks going to their roosting sites. Unfortunately, dusk came and we were forced to finish this unforgettable trip into the Danube Delta and moored at the docks in front of our hotel. At 7pm we headed to the restaurant for our last meal. A beautifully arranged festive table was waiting just for us in the middle of a private saloon. The tasty dishes, the Romanian wine (served with the compliments of Ornitholidays), the festive cake, the spirited conversation about the boat trip we all enjoyed so much, gloriously ended the day and the tour.

13th December



After breakfast we headed to Bucharest, enjoying a range of landscapes as we passed through. A brief stop in a forest on the way produced several Middle Spotted and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Treecreeper, and Nuthatch. Our second stop on the way was at Lake Hasarlac where we were lucky to watch 30 genuine Ruddy Shelduck feeding on the muddy shore and then taking off right in front of us. A Great Grey Shrike sitting on a power line was spotted from the bus before we crossed the bridge over the River Danube. As we got closer to Bucharest, the weather started to get worse but thanks to our excellent driver we arrived at the airport right on time for the British Airways flight to London.

Acknowledgements

Thank you very much for coming on this tour with us. I trust you all enjoyed it and that the photos will bring back great memories. Thank you to Valentin for driving us.

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Locations & Weather

During the tour, the weather was much warmer than expected for this time of the year, with temperatures over 0° C, no or light wind on 7th, 9th and 10th December, mostly sunny. The continuous rain which poured down during the first night and half of the next day made our off-road access by car almost impossible for the following days of our tour.

6 th December	Bucharest airport – Bucharest city tour – Constanta 6-12 °C, overcast
7 th December	Constanta – Techirghiol Lake – Agigea – Siutghiol Lake – Constanta 6-12 °C, rain, no wind
8 th December	Constanta – Siutghiol – Histria – Vadu – Constanta 2-3 °C, variable, strong wind
9 th December	Constanta – Vadu – Grindul Lupilor – Dolosman Cape – Tulcea 2-10 °C, sunny, light wind
10 th December	Tulcea – Murighiol – Plopu – Sarinasuf – Tulcea 0-12 °C, sunny, light wind
11 th December	Tulcea – Babadag Lake – Enisala - Lunca – Babadag Forrest – Somova – Tulcea 2-4 °C, wind
12 th December	Tulcea – Mila 36 – Nebunu Lake – Baclanesti Lake – Furtuna Lake and return to Tulcea 2-3 °C, wind

Sites Visited

During this tour we visited four of the most important Special Protected Areas (SPA) and Important Bird Areas (IBA) of Romania:

Danube Delta is the most extensive and important IBA and SPA for waterbirds in Romania and Eastern Europe.

Lake Techirghiol is an important wintering area for the waterfowl coming from the north, when the weather gets colder, IBA and SPA.

Babadag Forest is one of the most important breeding areas for raptors in Eastern Romania, IBA and SPA.

Plopu Lake is one of the key sites for wintering Red-breasted Geese population and breeding area for waders, terns and gulls, IBA and SPA.

CHECKLIST OF SPECIES SEEN DURING THE TOUR

During this winter tour we watched 101 bird species, of which the highlights were: three Red-necked Grebes in Danube Delta, 600 Black-necked Grebes on Techirghiol Lake, 400 Pygmy Cormorants in Danube Delta, 80 Great-White Egrets in the south side of the Black Sea Lagoons, 800 Red-breasted Geese at Plopu Lake, 400 Red-crested Pochards in Danube Delta, two Ferruginous Ducks in Danube Delta, a total of 25 Dalmatian Pelicans in the area of the Black Sea Lagoons and 16 in Danube Delta, one Ruddy Shelduck at Plopu and 30 at Hasarlac Lake, 17 White-tailed Eagles in Danube Delta and four near Sinoe Lagoon, two Greater Spotted Eagles in Danube Delta, one Northern Goshawk at Babadag Forest and one in Danube Delta, a total of five Long-legged Buzzards seen during the first part of the tour, one Merlin close to Babadag Forest and one in Danube Delta, two Peregrine Falcons in the area of the Black Sea lagoons and one in Danube Delta, one Saker in Danube Delta, one Black-tailed Godwit at Sarinasuf, 212 Eurasian Curlews at Sarinasuf, 500 Mediterranean Gulls at Agigea, three Whiskered Terns, 18 Pallas's Gulls at Sarinasuf, four Penduline Tits in Danube Delta and one Sombre Tit in Babadag Forest.

SPECIES	December	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Little Grebe		4	6	4	3	4	1		<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe		150	35	200		2	2		<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Red-necked Grebe							3		<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>
Black-necked Grebe		560	12	20			10		<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Great Cormorant		20	60	1,000+	40	4	200		<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Pygmy Cormorant			50	40		120	400		<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>
Dalmatian Pelican			10	13	2		16		<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>
Great Egret			36	80	6	48	60		<i>Ardea alba</i>
Grey Heron		14	28	60	12	16	45		<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Red-breasted Goose			2		800				<i>Branta ruficollis</i>
Greylag Goose			14	50+	400	18	20		<i>Anser anser</i>
White-fronted Goose			100	200	5,000	381	30	30	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
Mute Swan			120	800	70	170	500+		<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Whooper Swan			12	17					<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Shelduck		86		50	100				<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Ruddy Shelduck					1			30	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
Gadwall			12	20		4	200		<i>Anas strepera</i>
Common Teal		12	40	200	700	430	1,000+	500	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Eurasian Wigeon		1	20	150	35	10	20		<i>Anas penelope</i>
Mallard		28	400	400	320	60	500	200	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail			10	40	25				<i>Anas acute</i>
Northern Shoveler			500+	200	20	60	30		<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Red-crested Pochard				20		35	400		<i>Netta rufina</i>
Common Pochard		6		3,500		2	200		<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Ferruginous Duck							2		<i>Aythya nyroca</i>
Tufted Duck		3	6	15			400		<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Goldeneye		6	2			3			<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
White-tailed Eagle				4	2		17		<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Western Marsh Harrier			27	50	5	8	4		<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier			4	4	3	6			<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Northern Goshawk						1	1		<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk		1	3	2	3	3	4		<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Buzzard			2	60	8	4	9	1	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Rough-legged Buzzard				1					<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
Long-legged Buzzard		1	2	1	1				<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
Spotted Eagle							2		<i>Aquila clanga</i>
Common Kestrel		8	18	10	9	4			<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Merlin						1	2		<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Saker Falcon							1		<i>Falco cherrug</i>
Peregrine Falcon			1			1	1		<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Common Moorhen		1							<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Common Coot		1	200+	12,000		400	5,000+	500	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Pied Avocet				10	90				<i>Recurvirostra avocetta</i>
Northern Lapwing				30	45				<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Dunlin					1				<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Sanderling					3				<i>Calidris alba</i>
Eurasian Curlew				1	212				<i>Numenius arquata</i>

SPECIES	December	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Green Sandpiper						3			<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Black-tailed Godwit					1				<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Ruff					6				<i>Philomachus bugnax</i>
Mediterranean Gull	500								<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>
Little Gull				1	6				<i>Larus minutus</i>
Black-headed Gull	50+	80+		50	300	100	200		<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull					30				<i>Larus canus</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	√	√							<i>Larus cachinnans</i>
Caspian Gull	65	55		50	180	80	50		<i>Larus cachinnans</i>
Pallas's Gull					18				<i>Larus ichthyaetus</i>
Common Tern				1					<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Whiskered Tern		2		1					<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>
Feral Pigeon	400	200		√	√	√	√	√	<i>Columba livia</i>
Common Wood Pigeon					45		1		<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	√	√		√	√	√		√	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Little Owl				1		1			<i>Athene noctua</i>
Grey-headed Woodpecker						1	2		<i>Picus canus</i>
Black Woodpecker							1		<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker							2	3	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Syrian Woodpecker					1	1			<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>
Middle Spotted Woodpecker						1			<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
Calandra Lark	1	1		200		50+			<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>
Crested Lark	13	2		20					<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Skylark		2				1			<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Grey Wagtail					2				<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White Wagtail		2							<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Whinchat	1	1							<i>Saxicola rupetra</i>
Winter Wren		1			2	2			<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Common Blackbird					2				<i>Turdus merula</i>
Eurasian Penduline Tit							4+		<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>
Bearded Reedling				h	7				<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>
Long-tailed Tit							15		<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Sombre Tit						1			<i>Poecile lugubris</i>
Eurasian Blue Tit					1		20		<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Great Tit	2						6	6	<i>Parus major</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch								2	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Eurasian Treecreeper								1	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Great Grey Shrike								1	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
Eurasian Jay						3		3	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Eurasian Magpie	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	<i>Pica pica</i>
Eurasian Jackdaw	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Rook	√	√		√	√	√	10,000	√	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Hooded Crow	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Common Starling	20	4,000		5,000	50	200			<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
House Sparrow	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Tree Sparrow		2		4	80	20			<i>Passer montanus</i>
Chaffinch					5	6	30	10	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
European Greenfinch	30			10	20	120			<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
European Goldfinch	200	100		100	30	90	20		<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Eurasian Linnet	80								<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Hawfinch				1					<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Yellowhammer						1			<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Reed Bunting		20		h	27	2			<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Corn Bunting	35	70		50		20			<i>Emberiza calandra</i>

This list represents those birds and other animals as seen by party members of the tour.

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