

ROMANIA MAMMAL TOUR with SAKERTOURS 2nd - 10th of September 2023

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Sakertours has been specializing in birdwatching and bird photography tours in the last 30 years. Since 2020 we have also started mammal watching tours and our fine-tuned main tour, the so-called Romania Mammal Tour is an amazing adventure for mammal lovers. As the tour runs only annually, this was our fourth tour ever. So far, every tour had a longer mammal list. But this will not be the case on the next tour as 2023 was a remarkable record.

With a unique mix of habitats and schedule, this tour has been tailored to offer the chance to see the specialties as well as **the biggest possible list of European mammals on a short, single tour**. Without a doubt, our 2023 tour will go down in history as we have not only seen more species than our record number set in 2022 (50 species), but we managed to absolutely smash it by 10 more, taking the total to 60 mammals seen in 9 days / 8 nights! A number we were only dreaming to reach one day. Still we missed many potential mammals, so we keep working for our guests and there are no limits!

Logistics are not easy, and it is quite hard work (for an entire team behind the scenes), but it is also very exciting and rewarding. In only 9 days this tour provides a chance for a long list of sought-after species, in beautiful scenery under fantastic starry sky! Romania has wonderfully diverse habitats, and we visit the eastern and central part of the country. Starting in the east where the remnants of great steppe grasslands still hold numerous typically eastern species, such as Marbled and Steppe Polecats,

European Ground Squirrels, and the rare Romanian Hamster. Still in the east we also visit the Danube Delta UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, which is the continent's largest wetland ecosystem as well as the largest reedbed in the World. This amazing wilderness is still home to the critically endangered European Mink and a lot more! In the second part of the tour, we have been in the mighty Carpathian Mountains which harbours the continent's highest number of large carnivores (Wolves, Bears and Lynx) outside of Russia.

Unfortunately, despite our best efforts – the European Minks have managed to remain elusive on this trip as well as on almost all our 2023 autumn tours. We have only seen one individual on a private tour, right at the end of our autumn trips. Clearly a mustelid cannot be guaranteed regardless how much effort we put into seeing one. We have done exceptionally well with the Romanian Hamster though and seeing several individuals! It looked like they have had a good year. We still remember that it was not always like this, it was only a dream mammal on our first tour in 2020.

In Transylvania, this year we have teamed up with researchers searching for the rare Northern Birch Mouse, and we were lucky to have been there when one of them was caught, measured, and released. A new species for everybody on the trip, including all Sakertours guides! Thanks to the scientists, we have seen a great variety of other small mammals too, 4 species of shrews for example, and thanks to perfect weather conditions during the bat monitoring, there was fantastic swarming activity for many forest living species, and not only did we get to see almost constant action near the net, but we managed to see 10 species of bats in a few hours. Remarkable! We have seen the much sought-after Bechstein's Bat on every tour so far.



Forest Dormouse (János Oláh).

Dobruja and the Danube Delta

The tour has started in Bucharest Airport and we made our way to our first base near Constanta in Dobrudja region. Nice weather, and warm, pleasant nights awaited us here just like in the past couple of years. We have spent two nights spotlighting near the lagoon areas of the Danube Delta and scanning the steppes and agricultural areas plus also visiting a small forest. On our first night we soon found ourselves on a field literally teeming with one of our main target species, the Romanian Hamster. We put down 20+ individuals seen on the list, but there were obviously more of them around – a unique and absolutely stunning sight! Not too long ago we were still searching how to see this little-known mammal and nowadays we have a good score of seeing them! Other highlights of the night included 7 Northern White-breasted Hedgehogs, 5 Mound-building Mice and a huge number of Common/Sibling Voles, among other species.



Romanian Hamster (top,) Northern White-breasted Hedgehog (left) and Golden Jackal (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

On the next day after breakfast, we went out for some sea watching to the Black Sea coast, with the aim of trying to spot some marine mammals. After a few hours we were rewarded by a beautiful Harbour Porpoise swimming close to shore. In the meantime, Zsolt Babos has located an active colony of Lesser Blind Mole-rats and has carefully prepared a promising area for viewing. After spotting some activity, we all went to try to see these shy and elusive animals. We didn't have to wait for too long and the secretive Lesser Blind Mole-rat came up to the entrance of its tunnel, offering short but good views to most participants. They are not easy to see, and it was a very welcome addition to our mammal list.



Lesser Blind Mole-rat (top; János Oláh) and our group (left) while sea watching and spotting a 'Black Sea' Harbour Porpoise (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

On the second night we have visited a small forest in the area where we got lucky with a very friendly Forest Dormouse as well as had good bat activity. Only the most common species were seen but it

was great start with bats! We were using the Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro, and then illuminated with spotlights. These included the very common *Nathusius Pipistrelles*, *Noctules*, but also a lone *Serotine Bat* that was hunting in a clearing. Later on in the evening we had our first *Golden Jackals* of the trip and after a thorough search of a vast network of fields, we were finally reward by a fantastic *Steppe Polecat* that was out hunting. Even though we had great views of the animal, as it was initially very close to the road, we have only managed some truly sub-par pictures of the encounter unfortunately.



Romanian Hamster (top) Steppe Polecat (left) and Raccoon Dog (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

On the next day we have visited a small cave to look for the bat species that might be using it as a roost. Right at the entrance we have encountered a bat that threw us off a little and was ultimately identified from the pictures by the local bat experts. The mystery bat was a *Long-fingered Myotis (Myotis capaccinii)* – a lifer for everybody on the trip, even for all Sakertours guides, as it is a rather rare bat in Romania. We have also seen 150+ *Schreiber's Bent-winged Bats*, and we have also counted

6 Greater Mouse-eared Myotis too. After the visit to the cave, we have stopped in an area famous for European Ground Squirrels, and despite they were more shy than usual - probably already getting ready for their long hibernation - we still managed to see five individuals.



Long-fingered Myotis (top) Schreiber's Bent-winged Bats and Greater Mouse-eared Myotis (left) and a flying Schreiber's Bent-winged Bat (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

In the afternoon we have arrived to Tulcea, where we boarded a floating hotel and started making our way deep into the Danube Delta. During the two nights here, despite our best efforts we have missed out on the European Mink. Despite knowing several areas now, where we had many sightings in the last years this critically endangered mammal is still not easy! We had a great time under the starry sky of the delta though and managed to see 2 Eurasian Otters, 3 Stone Martens, 24 Golden Jackals, 1 Raccoon Dog, 2 Eurasian Badgers, 3 Striped Field Mice and 2 Wildcats, although one of them was probably a hybrid.



Golden Jackal (top) looking for mammals from the floating hotel (left) and looking for subjects from the 'Harrier' boat (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Regarding bats, we have seen hundreds of Daubenton's Myotis and at least one Soprano Pipistrelle. Particularly on our first night there were amazing number of bats flying. During the limited daylight outings, we explored some parts of the wild Danube Delta. There were no new mammals for us – even dipped on the introduced Muskrat - but we had a wonderful time and enjoyed the local birdlife. A juvenile Little Crake was a welcome sight for some of our participants and of course seeing pelicans is always a treat. Sadly, our time quickly ended in the Danube Delta and when we woke up next morning our boat was already moving and soon docking at Tulcea harbour while were having our last breakfast on the boat.



Stone Marten (top) Little Crake (left) and a Eurasian Otter in the Danube Delta (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Transylvania

After leaving the Danube Delta on the next morning, we have made a stop in a very rich steppe habitat, and despite the stop not bringing new mammal species for the trip, it was still rather enjoyable to observe the biodiversity and the unique geology of the Macin Mountains.

After this short stop we headed towards the Carpathian Mountains and after dinner at the foothills, we have started our night-drive across the mountains, towards our hotel near Zetea in the Harghita Mountains. This night is usually action-packed on this tour, and it was no different this time!



Our first 'Carpatian' Brown Bear (top) and Western Red Deer (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

On this exciting leg of our journey, we have seen a massive change in habitats, and lots of the resident mammals that we were hoping to see. Highlights from the night include 2 stunning Brown Bears, 4 Hazel Dormice, herds of Western Roe and Western Red Deer, 2 Wild Boars and one Eurasian Beaver very close to the road. Once we have crossed into Transylvania we were almost constantly in potential Wolf and Lynx habitat, but unfortunately these very secretive species have managed to remain elusive during the days of our trip. Top predators are easier to see wintertime in Transylvania.



Eurasian Beaver (top), Hazel Dormouse (right, János Oláh) and a Eurasian Badger (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

After a late breakfast we headed out to join Zsolt Hegyeli, a biologist and mammal expert from Romania as he was checking some of the traps in the area where he often studies mammals. He has managed to show us a few Yellow-necked Field Mice and a Eurasian Harvest Mouse before we had to leave him, and head to the depth of a local dam for some of our first bats in Transylvania.

After a short walk, and a long flight of stairs, we were treated to the sight of 11 roosting Lesser Horseshoe Bats. Wonderful to see them preparing for winter. In the afternoon, we headed towards the caves of the Varghis (Vargyas) Gorge for our evening of bat netting with Csaba Jére, a local bat researcher who has been monitoring the bats of the gorge for many years. We have been particularly lucky with the weather and the timing this year. After the resident Schreiber's Bent-winged Bats, Greater and Lesser Mouse-Eared Myotis have left the cave at dusk, all sort of interesting, mostly forest dwelling bat species started to enter the cave (called swarming – this behavior is not fully understood). In a few hours we managed to see 1 Geoffroy's Myotis, 1 Alcathe Whiskered Myotis, 3 Bechstein's Myotis, 5 Lesser (Mouse-eared) Myotis, 7 Greater (Mouse-eared) Myotis, 3 Western Barbastelles, 3 Common Pipistrelles, 1 Grey Long-eared Bat, 10 Schreiber's Bent-winged Bats and 1 Lesser Horseshoe Bat. Great!



Bechstein's Myotis (top) Varghis Gorge (left, Zoltán Gergely Nagy) and Geoffroy's Myotis (János Oláh).

The late-night drive back from the gorge produced some nice new species, such as a stunning Edible Dormouse. However, we were all looking forward getting back to the lodge and catch up with some sleep when we have received a phone call ... and the plans were quickly changed! Four different shrew species were caught by Zsolt Hegyeli at the same time in a relatively small area, so we made a little detour to see them! It was an unforgettable experience to see Common Shrew, Eurasian Pygmy Shrew, European Water Shrew and a Bicolored White-toothed Shrew together at one time. We had great looks; it was a rather unique opportunity and experience! After this amazing evening we were happy to collapse to our bed.



Edible Dormouse (top, Zoltán Gergely Nagy), Bicolored White-toothed (left) and Eurasian Water Shrew (János Oláh).

Still before the morning coffee with beady eyes we heard the phone ringing, Zsolt was calling again! And this was exactly the call we guides were hoping for! He whispered in the phone, 'I have got a

Northern Birch Mouse in one of the traps'. Needless to say the process of breakfast was quickened up and of course we quickly joined him in releasing this special individual. Zsolt regularly trapping in this area, and he has caught Northern Birch Mouse before but it's a rare event! He tried to show us one in 2022 as well but the entire mammal trapping process was hampered by a cold front and heavy rain. Almost no mammals were caught last year. In 2023 weather was perfect and our strategy was finally working, so small mammal trapping was possible and yes, Zsolt managed to find a *Sicista* for us! There was also a Field Vole in the traps, a common species in the region, but a new species for the tour.



Northern Birch Mouse (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

After the adventures with the Birch Mouse that was a lifer for everybody - except the mammal specialist Zsolt Hegyeli - we headed east, towards the scenic Bicz Gorge. This area is famous for the Northern Chamois that can be seen from the road with a bit of luck and perseverance, and we needed both in 2023. Hours were passing and we still had no Chamois in sight. These animals are of the *carpatica* race, which was once suggested to be a separate species but now it's an endemic race to the Carpathians. Finally, just as we finished our afternoon coffee and were about to leave, a small group emerged from the shady forest, onto the bright cliffs of the gorge. Although they were a little distant, they still offered some nice views in the end.

The last two evenings were spent trying to locate Wolves or Lynx (always hoping for these top predators), or other potentially new species such as Pine Martens - but unfortunately without success. We did see several Stone Marten, and plenty of Western Roe and Red Deer. During daytime we kept checking the potential roosting areas for Brandt's Myotis and joined Zsolt Hegyeli once more, as he had caught a Bank Vole. It is a common mammal in the region, but a new one for the trip, so a very welcome addition!

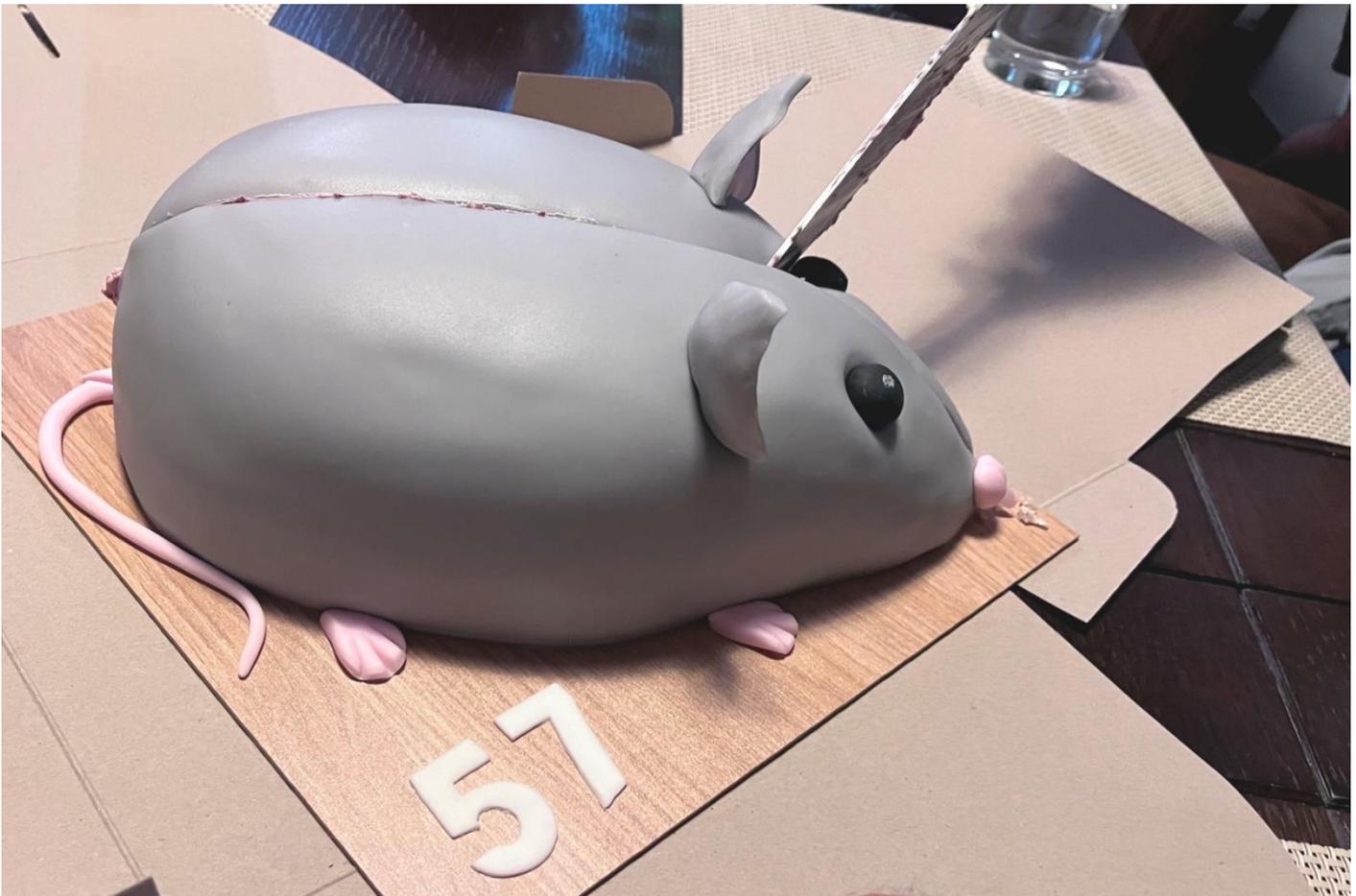


Carpathian Chamois (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

In the last afternoon we have visited one of our bear hides, where we were treated to quite a spectacular show, as we saw a male Brown Bear, and a mother with two cubs trying to chase away a Red Fox from the small meadow. It was a remarkable sunny and tranquil afternoon with many bears in action. A truly great way to finish the tour. Did we really finish? Not quite! After the bear hide, we had our farewell dinner where the Hargita Bear Lodge produced a surprise celebration cake for the new mammal tour record. At this stage we had 57 species, this is why that is visible on the cake! But the tour was not over, and we never stop exploring. After dinner we did yet another night excursion which started with more bear sightings! Next, we were checking some traps for the European Mole, and finally we have managed to see not one, but two individuals of this common but hard-to-see mammal on the trip! We even saw Zsolt Babos dancing in joy as he had the mole as his personal challenge since our very first tour in 2020. The number 57 on the cake was already history!



European Mole (János Oláh).



'Carpathian' Brown Bear family and surprise celebration cake by Hargita Bear Lodge – special thanks to Paula Babos (János Oláh)!

On the last morning, before breakfast János checked one last time the hide in the forest where we sometimes have the Brandt's Myotis roosting. And bingo, on the 4th morning eventually one individual was there! Great news and after breakfast the group also visited the hide, and everybody saw this tricky-to-find bat. This was mammal species number 59 seen on the tour! A skulking Red Squirrel also showed for some, but it was time to leave for Bucharest airport. In the meantime, we got one more phone call...

Before crossing the Carpathians towards Bucharest Szabolcs Kovács was eagerly waiting for the group to arrive as he had a big male Common Hamster in one of his traps! He has travelled down here previous day in search of hamsters and managed to catch three individuals. When we arrived, we got great views of the second hamster species of the tour and soon released him back into the wild. With the Common Hamster marking the 60th species seen on the tour, the 2023 Romania Mammal Tour has officially ended. A great tour with remarkable success!

It was time to say goodbye to each other and the group has parted. Some of the participants were continuing to an interesting extension looking for the endemic Méhely's Blind Mol-rat, while others departing towards Bucharest Airport to fly home.



Common Hamster in Transylvania (János Oláh).



A Carpathian Brown Bear cub cooling down in a stream (János Oláh).

Romania has once again proved to be a very rewarding and diverse place to look for mammals, and the trip has certainly been a very memorable one to all the participants. The combination of Dobrudja with Danube Delta and Transylvania provides uniquely varied opportunities for mammal watching in Europe, and the sheer number of 'mega' species possible means that chances are high that at least one or two of them will be seen every year on this tour. This year the Carpathian Brown Bear was voted the mammal of the tour. This tour might have just ended, but we are already looking forward to what we can tweek and fine-tune for 2024, although beating this crazy number seems unrealistic at the moment, we would settle for more consistency with some of the most sought-after species, especially the European Mink.

After the secret vote of the participants, the TOP5 mammals of the tour were:

- 1) Carpathian Brown Bear
- 2) Romanian Hamster
- 3) Northern Birch Mouse
- 4) Hazel Dormouse
- 5) Forest Dormouse

A special thanks to all participants for joining the 2023 adventure and to their unstoppable enthusiasm throughout! Also special thanks to the entire Sakertours team for the help and support during this trip, especially to János Oláh for bringing it all together and my co-leader and main thermo camera spotter Zsolt Babos. Szabolcs Kovács, Milán Sebestyén and Balázs Sebestyén were helping tirelessly in the background. And finally, the two brilliant mammal experts we have collaborated with and without whom this tour would never been such a great success: Zsolt Hegyeli and Csaba Jére. It was a fantastic tour with many great memories. We are looking forward to a great adventure in 2024 as well!

MAMMALS –list of species recorded on the 2023 tour (60 seen and 3 heard-only)

European Hare *Lepus europaeus*

A commonly encountered species on the tour. We saw a total of 41, slightly less than last year. There were 30 in the Dobrudja area and a further 9 in Transylvania. It is also known as Brown Hare and it is among the largest hare species in the world which has adapted to temperate, open country.

Eurasian Beaver *Castor fiber*

Three individuals were seen on the tour, all of them in Transylvania. One individual was seen near a massive beaver dam close to a road, and two more individuals in the river near the Varghis Gorge. It has been reintroduced to Romania.

Northern Birch Mouse *Sicista betulina*

One individual was caught in the traps in Transylvania. A very rare and localized species in Romania. It is a rather difficult mammal family to come across because they are very secretive. Hopefully we will be able to see more on some future tours too! A real highlight of the 2023 tour for all participants!

Lesser Blind Mole-rat *Nannospalax leucodon*

One was seen in the Dobrudja area. Any mammals living permanently under ground are notoriously difficult to see but with persistence and special techniques you do have a chance to see them. In 2025 we are hoping to run a Mole-rat Tour to Romania for some rare cousins!



European Hare and Romanian Hamster (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Romanian Hamster *Mesocricetus newtoni*

One of the true highlights of the tour was to see several individuals of this main target! This rarely seen hamster species only lives in the Dobrudja region of Romania and in a few spots in Bulgaria. It has a mostly nocturnal lifestyle, using steppe grasslands and agricultural fields, but it is very localized. This year was incredible in terms of individuals seen. We logged 22 individuals in two nights (but estimated cc 50 with thermo camera sightings). An exceptional year for this species!

Common Hamster *Cricetus cricetus*

The last new mammal species (number 60!) of the tour was trapped and released in southern Transylvania, as we were driving to the airport. Szabolcs Kovács has caught 3 individuals, but only showed a big male to the group when we released it back to its hole. This hamster species is larger

than the Romanian Hamster, and although it is more widely distributed it is a critically endangered mammal species nowadays. Sadly in parts of Eastern Europe they can still be hunted with local permission.

Field (Short-tailed) Vole *Microtus agrestis*

A single individual was seen in Transylvania. A total of 13 were caught.

Common Vole *Microtus arvalis* / **Sibling Vole** *Microtus levis*

At least 15 individuals were seen in Dobrudja, but without DNA analysis they are impossible to tell apart.

Bank Vole *Clethrionomys glareolus*

A single individual was caught in the traps in Transylvania, where it is a relatively common species in the coniferous as well as beech forests.

Eurasian Harvest Mouse *Micromys minutus*

Two individuals were seen on the tour, both of them were caught in the traps in Transylvania.

Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus*

It was common in the Danube Delta on the night sessions, we counted over 17 individuals. They were all along the edge of channels as well as in the more forested areas.

Striped Field Mouse *Apodemus agrarius*

A total of 3 individuals were seen on the tour, all of them in Dobrudja. The striped field mouse has an extensive but disjunct distribution, split into two ranges. The first reaches from central and eastern Europe to Lake Baikal (Russia) in the north, and China in the south. The second includes parts of the Russian Far East and from there reaches from Mongolia to Japan. Its expansion across Eastern Europe appears to be relatively recent. The species is thought to have reached Austria in the 1990s.

Long-tailed Field Mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus*

In total 15 individuals were seen, All of them during the night sessions in Dobrudja.

Yellow-necked Field Mouse *Apodemus flavicollis*

In total 2 individuals of this species have been in Transylvania, but several were caught with the traps of which we only saw one.

House Mouse *Mus musculus*

One individual was seen in the Danube Delta.

Mound-building Mouse (Steppe M) *Mus spicilegus*

A very common species in the steppe area of Dobrudja, with at least 7 seen on the agricultural fields in Dobrudja. It is found in grasslands and other open areas from Austria eastwards.

Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Still common in the forests of Transylvania, in total 3 individuals have been seen, two crossing a road in Transylvania, and one individual near a feeder in Transylvania at a forest photography hide.



Yellow-necked Field Mouse (top; Zoltán Gergely Nagy) and Eurasian Harvest Mouse (János Oláh).

European Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus citellus*

The most widespread ground squirrel species in Europe is very common in the steppes of Dobrudja. We saw 15 individuals on the tour at numerous locations.

Edible Dormouse *Glis glis*

A single individual was seen in Transylvania on the night sessions, considerably less than most years but we have not been looking for it specifically once it was seen.

Hazel Dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*

A total of 15 individuals were seen on the night sessions in Transylvania. There were most probably more that have gotten away before we could have identified them. It is the only living species of the genus and the distribution is across Europe from the UK to Russia. They make their own little nest and hibernate starting in October.



Hazel Dormouse (János Oláh).

Forest Dormouse *Dryomys nitedula*

One individual was seen during the night session in Dobrudja. A fantastic little creature and an Eastern European speciality.

Northern White-breasted Hedgehog *Erinaceus roumanicus*

A commonly encountered species, and this year we saw 15 on the tour. It is interesting that all individuals seen in Dobrudja were rather dark individuals. Taxonomically, it was considered to be a subspecies of *E. europaeus* for some time, and later a subspecies of *E. concolor*. Since the 1990s, it has been considered a separate species.

Common Shrew *Sorex araneus*

One individual was caught with the traps in Transylvania.

Eurasian Pygmy Shrew *Sorex minutus*

One individual was caught with the traps in Transylvania. Look out for the thick tail!

Eurasian Water Shrew *Neomys fodiens*

A large and superb looking shrew! One individual was caught with the traps in Transylvania.



Eurasian Water Shrew (top), Eurasian Pygmy Shrew (left) and Bicolored White-toothed Shrew in Transylvania (János Oláh).

Bicolored White-toothed Shrew *Crocidura leucodon*

One individual was caught with the traps in Transylvania. ID from *C. suaveolens* can be tricky.

European Mole *Talpa europea*

Eventually we managed to see this shy species as Zsolt Babos was dedicated to catch one for the group. We had to wait until the last evening of the tour but finally two individuals were caught, seen, and released in Transylvania.

Lesser Horseshoe Bat *Rhinolophus hipposideros*

In total we have seen 12 individuals. 11 individuals inside a dam, and one individual in the Varghis Gorge (caught and released).



Lesser Horseshoe Bats in Transylvania (János Oláh).

Greater Horseshoe Bat *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum* **HEARD-ONLY**

One was heard in the cave in Dobrudja but unfortunately we could not see it.

Schreiber's Bent-winged Bat *Miniopterus schreibersii*

It was the most numerous bat species on the tour. We observed 150+ in the cave in Dobrudja and another 10+ were seen in the Varghis Gorge area. We have also trapped several. This species is a fast flyer (60-80km/hour) and has got very long wings. The only species in Europe where the end of the wing folds in hence the name 'bent-winged bat'. It is classified as Near Threatened.

Noctule *Nyctalus noctula*

These large bats are often seen flying at dusk and were observed in Dobrudja and Transylvania too. We had 7 individuals in total, 5 individuals in the forest in Dobrudja and 2 in the Danube Delta.

Lesser Noctule *Nyctalus leisleri*

One individual was seen hunting in a forest clearing in Dobrudja.



Schreiber's Bent-winged Bat in Dobrudja (János Oláh).

Common Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*

Three individuals were seen on the tour, all of them were caught in the Varghis Gorge.

Soprano Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*

At least one individual was seen hunting above the lakes and channels of the Danube Delta.

Nathusius's Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus nathusii*

This small bat was widespread in Dobrudja, and it was the second most common bat species seen in the Danube Delta, with over 20 individuals seen. Interestingly we have not seen or detected it in Transylvania this year either.

Kuhl's Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus kuhlii* **HEARD-ONLY**

Unfortunately, this year we had no sighting of this species. It was heard-only in the Danube Delta.

Serotine Bat *Eptesicus serotinus*

One individual was observed in a forest clearing in Dobrudja.

Western Barbastelle *Barbastella barbastellus*

In total 3 individuals have been seen on the tour; they have been caught in the Varghis Gorge. A great looking bat and always a crowd-pleaser!



Western Barbastelle (top) and Grey Long-eared Bat in Transylvania. Amazing bats to see (János Oláh).

Grey Long-eared Bat *Plecotus austriacus*

One individual was caught in the Varghis Gorge. The genus has the longest ears of the European bats. They also have very long tragus.

Brandt's Myotis *Myotis brandtii*

A rather hard to come by species. They prefer forest habitat and rarely visit caves. We saw 1 individual roosting under the roof of our forest photography hide. It is a supposedly rather rare in Romania but ID problems could cause this status, so perhaps data deficient. It was a last minute find on the very last morning and it was species number 59.



Brandt's Myotis in Transylvania (János Oláh).

Geoffroy's Myotis *Myotis emarginatus*

A single individual was trapped and seen in Varghis Gorge in Transylvania. It has a special ear-shape hence the Hungarian name 'Truncated' Bat.

Alcathoe Whiskered Myotis *Myotis alcathoe*

A single individual was trapped and seen in Varghis Gorge in Transylvania. A scarce bat in Europe and we have been lucky to see it on most of our tours.

Pond Myotis *Myotis dasycneme* **HEARD-ONLY**

One was recorded in the Danube Delta but no sightings.

Long-fingered Myotis *Myotis capaccinii*

A real surprise bonus to find one in the cave we have been visiting in Dobrudja. This was the first bat species we saw when entering the cave and we had no idea what it could be. Our guess was Pond Myotis *M. dasycneme* but later it was identified by various bat experts to be this species. It is rather rare in Romania. It was a new species for all guides and participants.



Long-fingered Myotis in Dobrudja (top) and Alcaethoe Whiskered Myotis in Transylvania (János Oláh).

Bechstein's Bat *Myotis bechsteinii*

We have trapped and seen 3 individuals in the Varghis Gorge. An amazing mammal species with huge ears (only the *Plecotus* bats have larger ears) and it is severely declining and in Europe it is considered Vulnerable. We have seen this scarce species on every tour since we started the mammal tours and a top tour target.

Daubenton's Bat *Myotis daubentonii*

The most common bat species seen in the Danube Delta, we could see them hunt all around our boat. We saw hundreds of individuals on the tour, especially one evening there were big numbers around! It is always associated with water and their main prey items are flies, midges and caddisflies. They roost in tree holes and there is plenty of suitable habitat for them in the delta.

Lesser (Mouse-eared) Myotis *Myotis blythii*

A large sized bat resembling to *Myotis myotis* which is more common. It is possible to ID in the hand. They usually whiter below, have a pale spot on the top of the head, the ears are slimmer and the top of the tragus usually not dark. We have trapped and seen 5 individuals in Varghis Gorge. It is classified as Near Threatened in Europe.

Greater (Mouse-eared) Myotis *Myotis myotis*

A large and common bat species. We saw at least 16 individuals. At least 6 were seen in the cave in Dobrudja and 7 individuals were trapped in the Varghis Gorge. It was great to see them in hand and see the differences with the previous species.



Lesser (left) and Greater Myotis. You can see the pale tipped tragus on the Lesser myotis (János Oláh).

'Black Sea' Harbour Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena relicta*

One individual was seen on the Black Sea coast. A widely distributed species in the Northern Hemisphere but one of only three species of marine cetaceans occurring in the Black Sea.

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus moreoticus*

A locally common species in Dobrudja, were a total of 29 were seen on the tour. This species was once sporadic in Romania but since the late 1990's their numbers increased in the Dobrudja area and especially in the Danube Delta and around the lagoon system to the south where suitable reed beds (hiding places) can be found. In the lagoon system the extension of reed beds rapidly increased when the lagoons were blocked from the sea and the brackish water became increasingly less salty (almost freshwater for most lagoons nowadays).



Golden Jackal during the day (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Raccoon Dog *Nyctereutes procyonoides (introduced)*

An introduced mammal in Romania and the main stronghold is in the Danube Delta. On our night session we spotlighted only one individual this year. This species is native to Asia (Eastern Siberia, China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan) and was introduced to Europe and Russia between 1927 and 1957 by the fur-farming industry. They are rather shy creatures but usually we see several individuals in the delta but this year they were thin on the ground.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

A commonly encountered species on the tour. We saw a total of 46 individuals on the tour. There were 27 in the Dobrudja area and a further 19 in Transylvania. magical sighting in perfect afternoon

light from our bear hide where could see interaction between the two species. Young bear cubs were chasing the Red Foxes.



Red Fox and Brown Bear on our last afternoon in Transylvania (János Oláh).

European Wildcat *Felis silvestris*

Two individuals were seen in the Danube Delta. One of them showed some hybrid characters. Sadly, even the healthy population of Wildcat in the Danube Delta has increasing hybridization.

Stone (Beech) Marten *Martes foina*

In total 4 individuals were observed on the tour, three of them on the channels in the Danube Delta at night, and one individual in Transylvania. It is a fairly common species around villages, but they are infrequently seen due to their secretive and nocturnal habits.

Steppe Polecat *Mustela eversmanni*

One individual was seen in the steppes of Dobrudja. It was probably out hunting late into the night. Mustelids are never easy, but we managed to see this species now two years in a row. In 2023 there was rodent gradation which was helpful for us to know here to focus our search.

Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*

Two individuals were seen, all of them in the Danube Delta. They are widespread in Romania in all sorts of habitat but difficult to observe in riverine habitat and somehow in the Danube Delta they tend to be very shy.

Eurasian Badger *Meles meles*

A total of 5 individuals were seen, 2 in the Danube Delta and 3 in Transylvania at night. They are rather secretive in Eastern Europe due to hunting pressure.

Brown Bear *Ursus arctos*

The nominate race occurs in the Carpathians. We saw 13 individuals in total, 5 at our special bear hide on the last afternoon and there were 7 more sightings at night, all in Transylvania. Romania has the largest population in Europe outside of Russia.



A fantastic male Brown Bear (János Oláh).

Northern Chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra*

We made a visit to the scenic Bicaz Gorge where we managed to see 3 individuals on the cliffs. This is the *carpatica* race in Romania.

Common Fallow Deer *Dama dama* (introduced)

We saw five individuals in Transylvania where they were introduced and now breeding.

Western Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

The Red Deer were preparing for their autumn rut, and despite not hearing them at all on the tour, we could see that their antlers have fully grown, and they are ready for the mating season to start. In total we saw 51 individuals, all of them in Transylvania.

Western Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*

In total we have observed 35 individuals. One of the most common mammals, and we often see them on our birdwatching tours as well. They are active at daytime as well but most of our sightings were at night and especially at dawn. They are the main prey item for Eurasian Lynx in the Carpathians.



Western Roe Deer (top) and Wild Boar at night in Transylvania (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*

Since the African swine fever virus has decimated the wild boar populations in the past few years, numbers have started to recover recently, but we still only managed to observe 2 individuals on the tour, all of them in Transylvania.

Méhely's Blind Mole-rat Extension in 2023

In some years we are offering a possible extension to our main tour. In 2023 we were trying to see the endemic Méhely's Blind Mole-rat *Spalax antiquus* with those participants who had extra time and were up for a challenge. The tour leader was Zsolt Hegyeli a biologist and mammal researcher who has been involved with the study of the Romanian *Spalax* species. After the main tour we spent 4 nights in Central Transylvania in search of this rare and endemic mammal. It was a difficult target, and it took us 3 days to see this threatened species, but we managed, and everybody got to see it! Mole-rats and generally all mammals permanently living under ground are difficult to observe but with persistence and special techniques we can observe them – but you need to get lucky too!

After the success of this extension, we decided to try and run a dedicated tour in April 2025 for the four species of Mole-rats in Romania. If you are interested in this highly specialized tour, please contact our office for details (sakertour.office@gmail.com).



Méhely's Blind Mole-rat looking out of its hole (tour participant Martin Gottschling).

Next tour dates:

Romania Mammal Tour 2024: 24 August – 1 September

(2270 euro/person; SRS 200 euro/person): **availability and updates on our website:** <http://www.sakertour.com/romania-mammal-tours.php#romania-mammal-tour>

Nordmann's Birch Mouse & Gray Dwarf Hamster Extension: 1 –6 September 2024.

We will be trapping in Northern Romania at historical locations for both species. The Nordmann's Birch Mouse distribution is mostly in Ukraine and unlikely to be visited by any mammal watchers in the next 10 years while the Gray Dwarf Hamster would be an excellent European tick as there are no other locations where it occurs. Although success cannot be guaranteed but there is chance, we can find one of them or if we are lucky both! Come and join us for this one off special! **Extension can be taken as a stand-alone tour as well, if you interested contact our office.**

We will be also running a 10 day long **Romanian Mole-rat Special Tour** in **April 2025** where we going to target 4 species of Mole-rats **(if you interested get in touch with our office):**

- Mehely's Blind Mole-rat – Spalax antiquus
- Bukovina Blind Mole-rat – Spalax graecus
- Lesser Blind Mole-rat – Nannospalax leucodon
- Hungarian Lesser Blind Mole-rat – Nannospalax hungaricus



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