



# **SERBIA 2026: VOJVODINA HAS EVERYTHING!**

By Seva Rudyi and Katya Sichinava

## Introduction:

Serbia is a small country in the Balkan Peninsula with a rich and often tragic history, amazing national cuisine and very friendly and hospitable people. However, even if you try hard, you'll find almost zero information online regarding its nature and wildlife. On Mammalwatching, there's only one report from 2009 and a short mention of the country in another 2016 report. Even the birding resources are relatively empty. However, this April me and my fiancée Katya decided to visit and see some wildlife. Turns out, it can be easy and quite productive – with the help of right people, of course!

The people in question are **Irina Barabanova** — a Russian immigrant and an IT worker turned birder/naturalist, and **Dávid Grabovac** — an ornithologist and nature park warden from Serbia. We've known Irina for a long time and have met through our wildlife blog in Telegram. Because of it, she picked up birding, and in no time began working closely with local ornithology experts and nature conservancies, meeting David in the process.

They have many amazing projects going on, and are both very knowledgeable of the wildlife in Serbia – not only birds, but also mammals, reptiles, etc. They also offer guiding, and both speak excellent English. Travelling with David and Irina offers you not just target ticks, but also a rare opportunity to take part in actual science and conservation, which is an amazing experience! They also told us, that they plan to set up mammal hides in the future, so keep your eyes open! You can contact them by **WhatsApp, Viber and Telegram** (+381616440792 – Irina, +381 65 3311 781 - David) or by **emailing** [love@owlyouneed.is](mailto:love@owlyouneed.is)!

Initially, we planned to drive around for a bit with Irina, and, after a few days, join David and his colleagues on an annual spring bird ringing camp. However, a sudden cold spell prevented songbirds from migrating to the area, and the camp was cancelled when we got there. In a way, this was even better, since it allowed us to travel around and see more in different places. The trip total was **9 mammals, 92 birds** and **8 herps** – definitely not bad for a week of travelling in suboptimal weather!

## April 5<sup>th</sup>. Belgrade – Djerdap National Park.

We met at the Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade – Irina picked us up in a rental car, since hers was in the workshop at the moment. We stopped at the nearest gas station – to top up the fuel and wash the car. Before meeting us, Irina made a mistake of parking under a rookery while searching for a Red-footed Falcon pair, and now the whole car was heavily “bombed” by the Rooks... Finally, after taking care of that, we set off towards the Djerdap National park – our first destination!

This area of limestone mountains is located right on the Romanian border. Locals and tourists mostly come here for the gorgeous canyon of the Danube River, which is definitely a wonderful sight, but we had other targets in mind as well. Namely - to visit the Gradašnica Cave, which was supposed to harbour many species of **bats** and, on the way, look for Nose-Horned Vipers – beautiful species of snake, which none of us has ever seen before. The drive was mostly uneventful, but we began to tick our first birds for the trip – the infamous *Rooks*, *Common Kestrels*, *Ring-Necked Pheasants* and *Common Buzzards*. Those species are well adapted to the agricultural landscape, which covers most of Serbia nowadays, and therefore can be seen absolutely everywhere. We started losing count of each species already on the first day!



However, it was quiet so far on the mammal front. It took us around 3 hrs of driving, but eventually the endless fields gave way to the forest, and then – to the mighty limestone mountains covered in trees. We couldn't help ourselves but marvelled at the landscape – what a beautiful area it was! In the foothills, especially by Danube's shores, there was quite a lot of people – mostly fishing or doing barbecue, - but, as we climbed up the winding road, we started seeing less and less faces around. At some point, we also saw the first mammal of the trip – in the form of a **Beech Marten** hit by a car... Very sad - especially since the species would've been a lifer for both of us. The road led uphill, and eventually we ended up in a lovely apartment "Horizonti Miroc", which Irina has booked for us. The owner was very friendly, even though all conversations were done in Serbian by Irina, and we were offered our first rakia – a homemade fruit brandy, that will haunt you in every Balkan restaurant and household.

After dropping our bags, a quick look around yielded our first herp lifer – a beautiful *Green Lizard* (that's a species name, not a description) basking on a pile of planks and stones behind the house! Feeling hungry, we left it alone after a quick photo session and drove to the nearby town of Donji Milanovac for a meal.



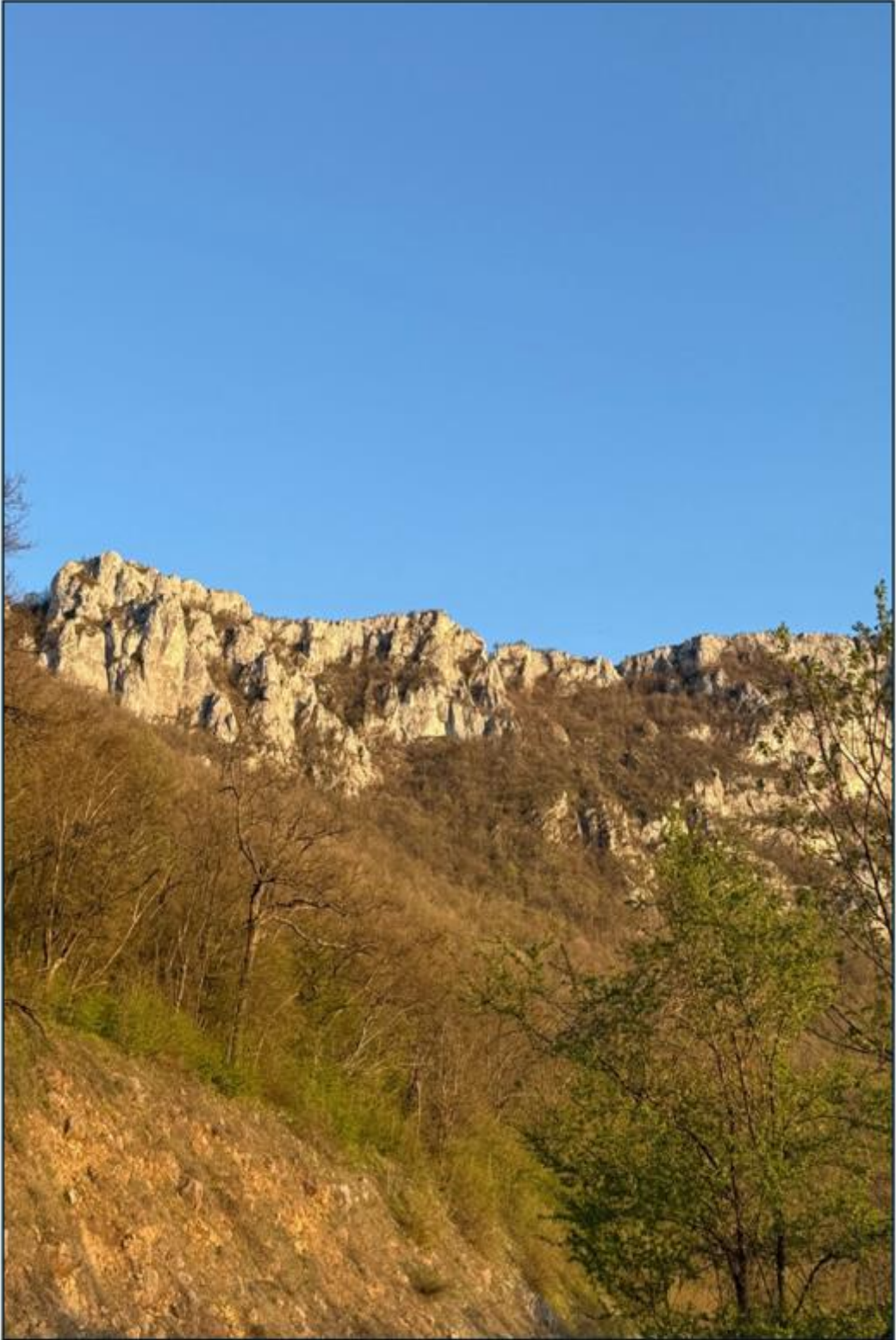
On the way back to the car, Katya and Irina spotted some movement in a well on the street filled with filthy-looking water. It turned out to be a *Green Toad* struggling to surface – as it often happens, the well became a death trap for the animal. Of course, we had to save it, and I spent a good five minutes trying to fish it out with a plank found nearby. However, when I succeeded, we realized, that there's no suitable spot for release. Danube's shores were encased in concrete, and the park nearby only had lawns with short grass. Therefore, we had to drive the poor toad to the nearest suitable spot, while it was probably trying to comprehend the eldritch horrors of our car's insides. But we found a perfect spot along Danube's shore - and the toad now has a thrilling alien abduction story to tell his new pals!



Afterwards, we drove along the Danube's canyon, stopping on the way to admire the views and look for animals. Here, we actually saw our first live mammals for the trip: many large bats, flying around very high with a flapping flight, manoeuvring and occasionally diving down for prey. At the time we didn't think that they'll be ID-able, but, after consulting bat people on iNat and doing our own research, we concluded that this most likely is a **European Serotine!** Out of the 19 bat species recorded in the park, only Common Noctule and Serotine are large enough and fly at dusk, but the flight pattern for our bats is more consistent with Serotine (as opposed to Noctules' powerful, direct flight on narrow pointed wings). We decided to count it for our lists, but feel free to object or give other suggestions on its identity!



For both of us, this was a lifer, but at the time we didn't know that, and just enjoyed the views and wildlife. While checking the potentially suitable viper habitats on the way, Irina and Katya found a *Smooth Snake*, which escaped before I got to it. Would've been a lifer for me, but I had to settle for more *Green Lizards* along with first *Common Wall Lizards* of the trip. Also, some nice Mountain Fritillary flowers were in bloom, and I was happy to find a tiny *Euscorpium carpathicum* scorpion while flipping! The sun was slowly setting, and we drove to our cabin once more - to leave stuff we didn't need for the night and then grab a dinner in the nearby village of Miroc.







I briefly checked the forest around our apartment with my thermal, but it was empty – maybe because of the cold wind that has picked up at the hilltop. However, on the way downhill, we managed to have a few more sightings. First one was a *Woodcock* – an uncommon bird for Serbia, that made Irina very excited! It stood on the roadside for a few seconds, before taking off into the night. Right after it, a **Brown Hare** ran across the road, and then we had our first **Western Roe Deer** cross right in front of the car! This species actually was a lifer for Katya, so we were very happy to see it – yet unaware, how tired of those 2 species we'll be in the following days...

And we'll get back to the wildlife soon, but first I have to say a few words about the restaurant that we were in, called "Kod Mirocanca". Irina promised us, that the visit will be a "cultural experience" – and it, indeed, was one! As we entered, we could see tobacco smoke filling the air – so thick, you could cut it with a knife. Inside, the owner was sitting with his family, chatting and loudly blasting some music. Again, Irina did the talking in Serbian, and we were shown to our table. Soon, the first plate with "starters" appeared – in many other restaurants, this would be considered a whole meal! But here, we still had to brace ourselves for more food – the pictures will speak for themselves, because it's hard to describe, HOW full we were at |



the end. Of course, we couldn't finish even half of the meal and asked to pack it for takeaway, but still! The ever-present rakia and some homemade wine were cherries on top. The owner was also very cheerful, talkative, and completely unfazed by the fact, that among us only Irina knew Serbian. Well, we could understand some phrases because of the similarity to Russian, but still... He was rightfully proud of his restaurant and could talk about it for ages! This was an amazing evening, but eventually, we had to leave. Of course, only after some pancakes with nuts and honey for dessert... When those appeared on our table, the expressions on Katya and Irina's faces were like those of Christian martyrs going through a torment. I'm pretty sure, mine was no different – the food was amazing, but also too plentiful!

On the way back, I was really hoping for a Marten, but that didn't happen. Instead, we got to see a **Roe Deer**, an unknown owl and two **Brown Hares** – they were playing by the roadside and completely ignored us. Satisfied, we went to sleep – happy and looking forward till tomorrow...

#### **April 6<sup>th</sup>. Djerdap National Park – Novi Sad.**

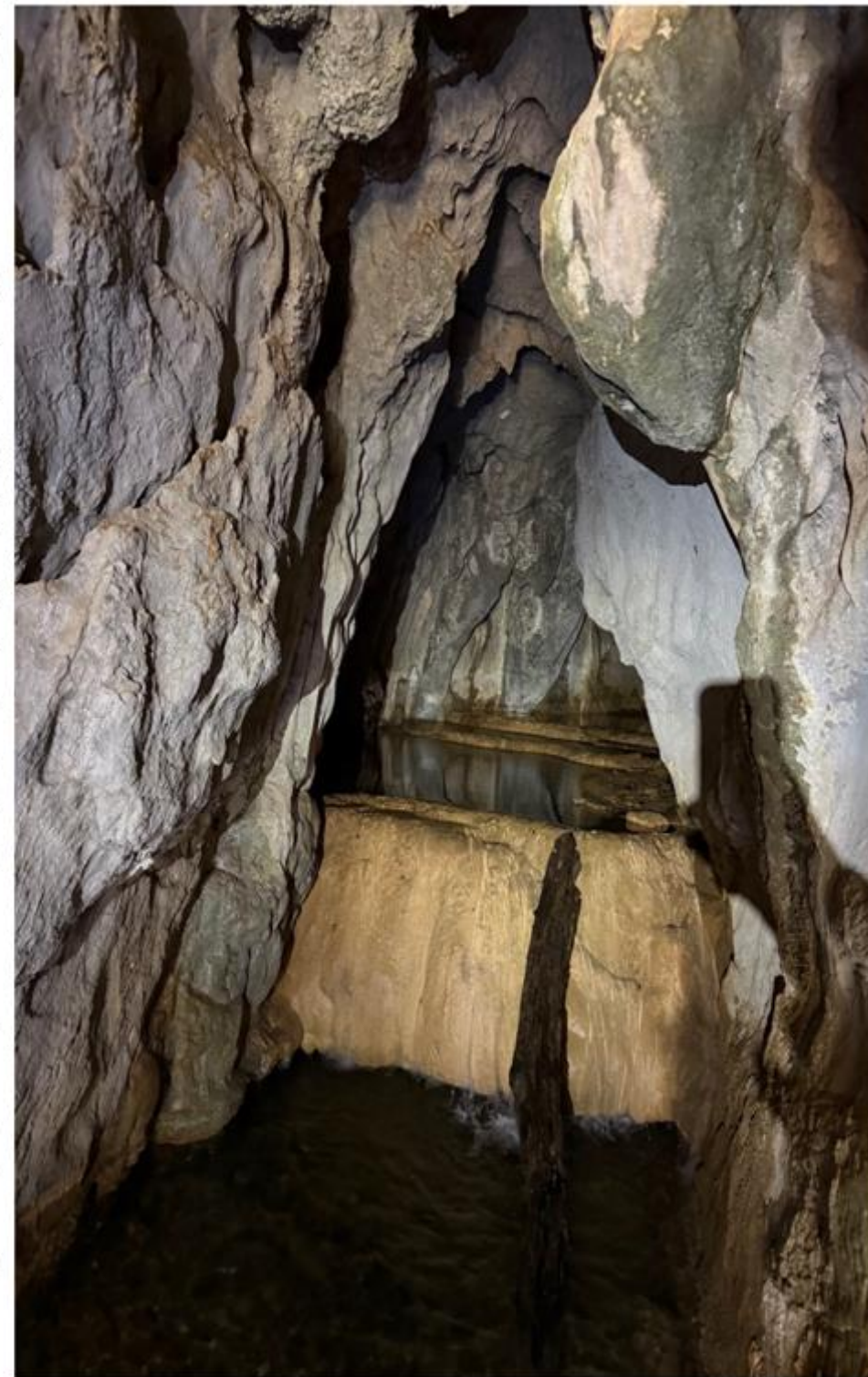
In the morning, it was time to the most exciting part of our visit. It was only a 10 min drive from our cabin to the start of the hiking trail to Gradašnica. The trail itself was around 2 km long, and of medium difficulty – sometimes we had to follow the stream beds, when it disappeared, or steeply climb uphill. However, most of it was marked



with signs showing way, and the surrounding area was beautiful – limestone peaks, a sea of purple flowers, and bird songs filling the air! There was even another, tiny cave on the way, with a billboard about bats nearby, but nothing was roosting in this one.

At one point, we were passing a hillside littered with huge flat stones exposed to the sun. Earlier, in a message to Irina, David has mentioned, that this is a perfect habitat for the Nose-Horned Viper. So, while the girls went further ahead, I stopped and began flipping. First rock – nothing, second rock – nothing... Just as I began to lift a third rock, huge and flat, I glanced under it and saw two reptilian eyes and a grumpy face staring back at me. As it dawned on me, what exactly I was looking at, I reached for my hook... and realized I've left it in the car! Thankfully, Katya had a spare one, and me screaming "VIPER!" at the top of my lungs was enough to get the girls running back to me. After some manipulations using Katya's hook, we had a beautiful, huge female *Nose-Horned Viper* out in the open – a first for us all!

What a perfect snake – the little snub "nose", fat "cheeks" with venom glands giving it a grumpy look, and gorgeous pattern! However, - and I cannot stress this enough, - if you encounter one, treat it with extreme care! This is the deadliest snake in Europe and has around 4% mortality rate if the bite is not treated in time! Don't try to handle it without special equipment and prior experience and just let it be!





After some viper admiration, we finally reached the enormous cave entrance and ventured deeper. At first, we didn't see any life, only signs of it – some feathers and pellets from *Tawny* and *Barn Owls*, which often take up residence in caves in this part of Europe, and some dried up caudate amphibians at the entrance. But as we ventured deeper, we saw some live ones, too – the damp floor was crawling with juvenile *Fire Salamanders*! We counted at least 5 freshly metamorphosed ones, plus a few larvae with gills further upstream. For Katya, this was a lifer, and I'm always happy to see this beautiful species.

And right above, we saw our first bat – a **Greater Horseshoe Bat**, to be precise! This was our first “shared” lifer of the trip, and now I was hoping for *Mediterranean Horseshoe Bats*, which are also known to roost and breed in the cave. However, I only found a few single bats, and they all were Greater Horseshoes. The cave is quite deep, and we didn't manage to explore it all the way, but I suppose that the lack of bats close to the entrance can be attributed to the now-resident owls – especially the Barn Owl. As David later told us, Barn Owls are so effective at plundering bat colonies, that, when putting up nestboxes for them, ornithologists first have to check for vulnerable roosts nearby... In one area, the cave floor was littered with wing bones and skulls of bats together with owl feathers, confirming my suspicions. So, probably, most of the bats are residing deeper inside the cave – keep that in mind if you ever visit!









After wandering around the cave for a while, we turned back – today we had to drive back north towards Novi Sad, so we could be there in time for the ringing camp. If only we knew at the time, that it was going to be cancelled! I would love to stay in Djerdap a few more days, as it definitely has great potential for mammal watching (which I’ll talk more about in the “Stuff we missed” section). However, we did have one more sighting before leaving – another **Roe Deer**, which rushed past us from atop the hill at a very close range. A brief stop at the park entrance, in an area that sometimes has *Wallcreeper*, yielded nothing. We drove towards Novi Sad, a lively (and lovely!) city close to Belgrade. And now, we were finally approaching a magical area of Serbia called Vojvodina...



Now, I know this sentence needs explanation. During our travels, we were often pestering Irina with questions about the different species one could see in Serbia. And 90% percent of the time, the answer was something along the lines “I saw it in Vojvodina”. Eurasian Otters, Fire-Bellied Toads, Saker Falcons – Vojvodina had so much stuff, that it was becoming a meme at this point. And I’m sure this had nothing to do with the fact, that the conservation projects Irina is involved in are centred in that area...

Anyhow, we were in Novi Sad soon enough. After checking into a hotel, we went to town to have a drink with Anton and Stas - Irina’s friends, who were both wildlife enthusiasts. We spent a great evening chatting about wildlife – and Stas (who also has a [cool wildlife photography Instagram](#)) generously shared with us two spots for European Ground Squirrels! Thus, we hatched a plan for tomorrow: in the morning, we planned to visit the Sousliks, then quickly check another spot for European fire-bellied toads and birds and afterwards have a stakeout at the medieval church ruins, where a pair of Barn Owls is known to reside. Exciting!

## April 7<sup>th</sup>. Novi Sad and surroundings.

After breakfast it was Souslik time! Me and Katya haven't seen this species before, despite having met several of its congeners. Sadly, the situation in Serbia is same as elsewhere – this former keystone species, which once supported populations of avian, reptilian and mammalian predators throughout its range, is now confined to a few localized pockets of grassland, that haven't yet been converted into monoculture fields. As Irina and David told us, even these tiny populations remain an important food source for, e.g., Imperial Eagles – but, of course, it's a pale shadow of what it once used to be.



The main area to visit for seeing Sousliks is called “Specijalni rezervat prirode Titelski breg”. It's a hilly area, where native steppe vegetation is preserved – and this vegetation is key to finding the animals. It took some time to locate our first animals on a hillside – just three or four **European Ground Squirrels** running around, munching on grass and disappearing in the holes, – but they were wary and didn't let us close. Probably the presence of many *Kestrels* and *Common Buzzards* around didn't help them to relax. We decided to move to another spot within the nature reserve. The grass here was so lush, that we couldn't see the animals at first, but I quickly saw at least 6 animals through the thermal. Eventually, though, we found one at incredible close range, frozen motionless in a field of white flowers. It took some time, but eventually it relaxed and started munching on grass. The sun came out, and, with the sweet scent of flowers, Sousliks and a mechanical song of *Corn Buntings*, it was easy to forget, that we're not in some primal steppes of the past.



After that, we drove towards Melenci – a small village with a spa town standing on a saline Rusanda lake. We parked under the same rookery, that left Irina's car in dire need of wash two days ago and marched towards the lake. Irina and Katya put up a scope and were treated to a flock of 700+ *Whimbrels*, 50+ *Ruffs*, a lone *Common Crane* and some other shorebirds and waterfowl. I preferred to explore the surrounding pastures and soon found a good-looking puddle. Sure enough, I almost instantly noticed some *Fire-Bellied Toads* chilling at the surface. This is one of the most beautiful frog species in Western Palearctic – on the topside, they don't look like much, but their bellies have a majestic pattern, which look like a mix of marble and burning fire.

And, while I was busy with the toads, probably the stupidest story of this trip began to unfold. While scanning with the scope, Katya and Irina noticed a tree with a huge nest of an *Imperial Eagle*. We decided to try and come closer, to check out, whether it's occupied. The tree was far away, so we went back to the car and drove towards that area. Needless to say, next 1,5 hours were spent driving around and searching for the



damn tree! We could have sworn that we were in the right area and even saw one of the *Imperial Eagles* flying around but never found the nest site! To this day, I don't know how that was possible – especially since the girls saw it from a low-lying depression near the lake! After we left, Irina was able to find the damn tree and confirm that it had an occupied *Imperial Eagle's* nest, but “searching for the tree” became a running gag for the rest of the trip.

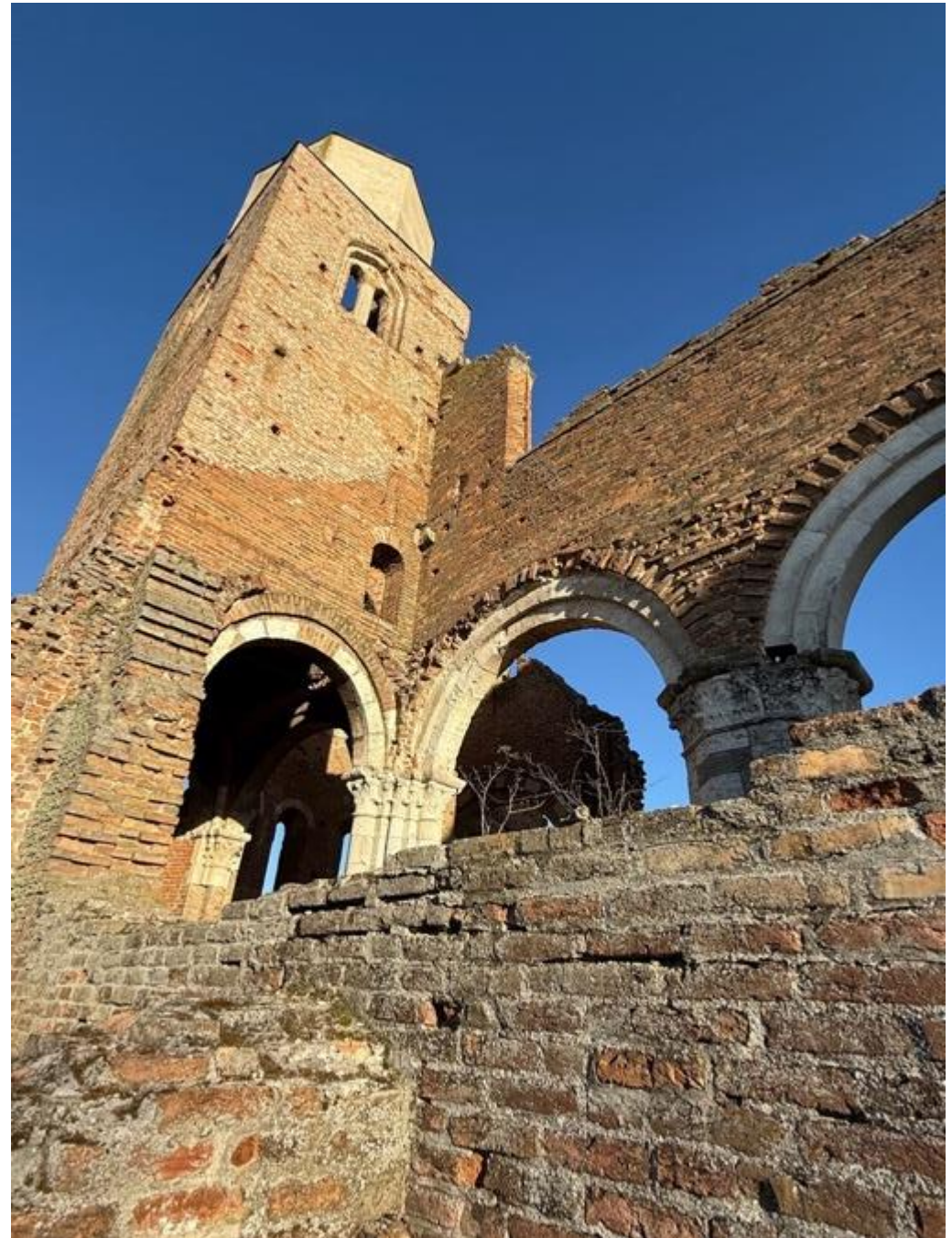






We ate in town and still had a lot of time on our hands, so decided to drive around birding towers and nature reserves in the area. Almost immediately we began seeing groups of **Western Roe Deer** and incredible amounts of **Brown Hares** in the fields. The cover photo with ears sticking out of the grass, was also taken at that moment. Near one of the towers, we also found another small **Souslik** colony on the edge of a pasture. Birds were abundant on the lakes we visited – we saw hundreds of *Shovelers*, many *Common Shelducks*, *Grey Geese* and other waterfowl. I was constantly looking for badgers and other possible species, but to no avail.

Eventually, we carried on towards Arača. The church ruins there are wonderful and are worth a visit even without all the wildlife. A quick walk around revealed pellets from *Little* and *Barn Owls*, and the waiting game begun. Stas and Anton also pulled up for the stakeout. Eventually the air filled with howling of **Golden Jackals**, and I tried to find with them with the thermal, but with no success. I did not try too hard, to be honest, as both of us saw the species in Sri Lanka in broad daylight. Soon, they were joined by meowing calls of *Little Owl* and the blood-curling screams of the *Barn Owls*. We managed to see them flying out after dark, but the best views of that species were still days away...

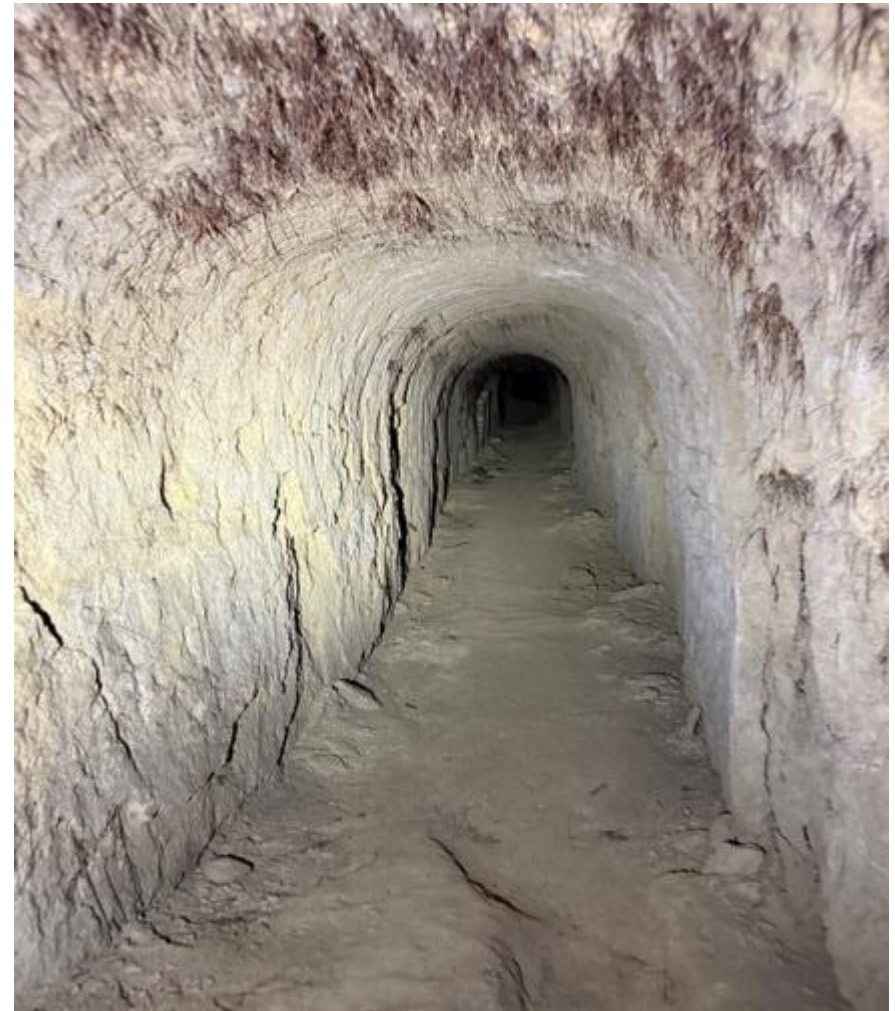




It was a magical experience – listening to the chorus of night lurkers under the starry sky, in front of the beautiful ruins, - but eventually it was time to head to Novi Sad. On the way, we drove around some dirt roads hoping for mustelids or jackals, but it was just an endless stream of **Hares** and **Roe Deer** in the scope. Still, we couldn't really ask for more – and we had more mammal plans for tomorrow!

### **April 8<sup>th</sup>. Novi Sad – Ada.**

One of the reasons why we came to Novi Sad was a unique opportunity for bat-watching: the catacombs of Petrovaradin Fortress. A network of tunnels was dug here to defend the fortress from the troops of Ottoman Empire. They ended up never being used, but nowadays they serve even more important purpose, than stupid human wars: a bat paradise! At least 8 species have been recorded here – some only hibernating in wintertime, but others have chosen the tunnels as maternity roosts. Important note: the catacombs are long, deep and hard to navigate, and there's no cell phone connection inside the tunnels, so NEVER venture inside by yourself! We used the help of Leon Šurbanović ([lav@leonsurbanovic.com](mailto:lav@leonsurbanovic.com)). He's a great guide, and we specifically asked to show us the bats this time. There were a few more people with us, but they were all interested in wildlife. We even had an actual bat scientist on the team – Lana Lesnika from Slovenia, who is working with pipistrelle genetics. She was sharing a lot of awesome facts along the way – Lana, if you are reading this, thank you so much!



After a briefing, we ventured into the catacombs towards known roosts. The first bats were soon found by Lana – in a ventilation shaft, she noticed a group of **Greater mouse-eared bats**. It's hard to be sure of the exact species here, since they were very high up, but at least they definitely are from *Myotis myotis* species complex. And nearby, a **Common Bent-wing Bat** was resting on the wall! They turned out to be very common here. This species breeds in the tunnels, and a lot of work has been done on them by local scientists – we even saw some ringed bats during the tour.



We got some familiar faces, too – a lot of **Horseshoe Bats**. I hoped for some Lesser or Mediterranean, but, upon close inspection, they all turned out to be **Greater Horseshoe Bats**.



And finally – a lifer! At first, I mistook this bat for a *Plecotus* species, because of the ridiculously long bunny ears, but Lana correctly identified it as a **Bechstein's Bat!** This was one of the cutest Chiroptera species I've ever seen! We found only a couple specimens during the tour, which makes me wonder, if there were any rarer species, that we missed. And, to top it up, we also found two large colonies of *Bent-Winged Bats!* It was amazing and extremely cute to see them tucked against each other.









We finished the tour with a debriefing and some rakia in the headquarters of Leon and his colleagues, thanked everyone and set off towards the town of Ada, where we were supposed to finally meet David in the morning. From here onwards, our trip was mostly dedicated to birds, but I'll go into a bit of detail anyways for anyone interested. And also, I still got one more mammal lifer for myself before the trip ended – but I won't tell you yet, which one and when!

### **April 9<sup>th</sup>. Ada and surroundings.**

In the morning, it was cold and gloomy – the cold spell has finally hit the area, and we learned that the camp is cancelled. However, we met David in the morning and set off to search for some target bird species together. He turned out to be an awesome person – always calm and collected, with a great sense of humour and a ton of knowledge about almost every species in Serbia. Safe to say, that we immediately liked each other. And now we had some feathered targets to find!

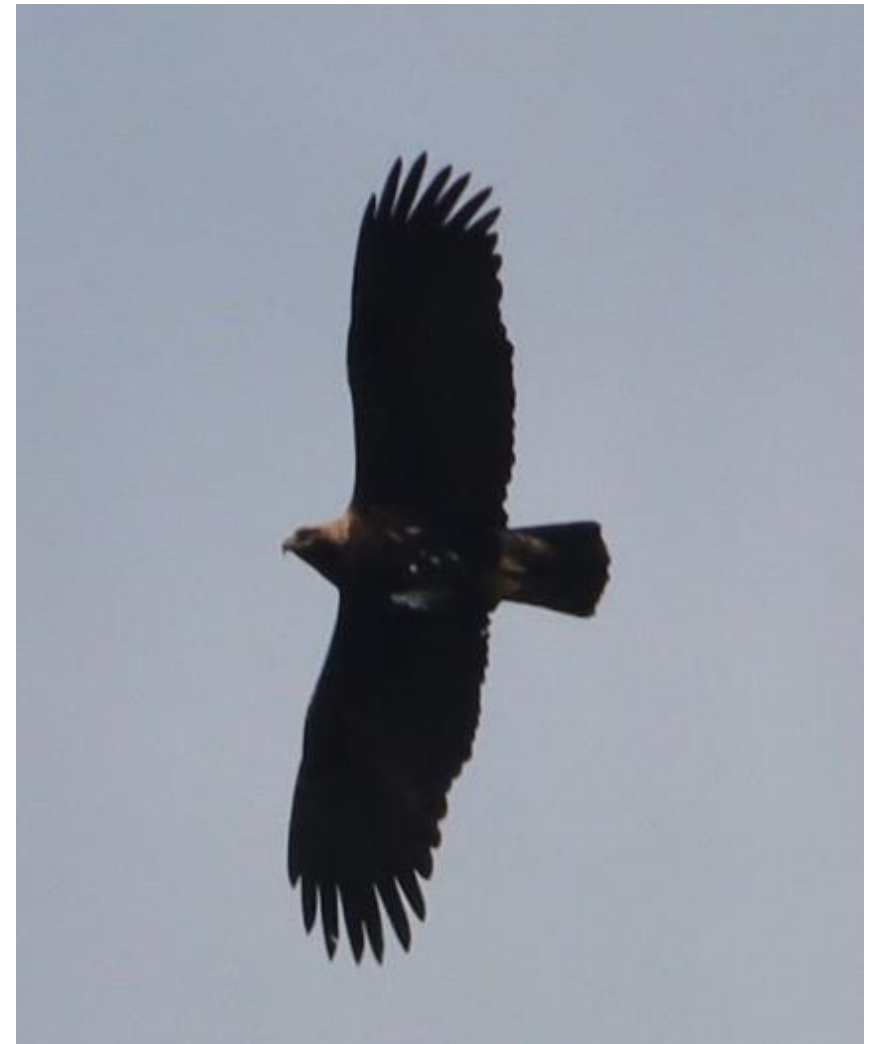
First, we stopped at a fish farm, where I soon picked up my lifer *Savi's Warbler*. Many other species, common for this type of biotope, were also present – *Reed Buntings*, *Common Reed Warblers* and *Stonechats* popped up here and there, *Marsh Harriers* slowly cruised above the reeds, huge groups of *Barn Swallows* darted over the water... Probably, the most interesting bird was a low-flying *Osprey* getting bullied by a *Caspian Gull*.

But this was only the start. Afterwards, with a couple more stops along the way, we drove to a nestbox occupied by a pair of *Saker Falcons*! Serbia still has around 40-50 pair of these awesome birds. The male was foraging somewhere, but in the scope, we could clearly see the female sitting on eggs inside the box. This is one of the species, that used to be dependent on the Ground Squirrel population but eventually shifted to avian prey as they declined. We had a long stakeout waiting for the father to return. Eventually it started to seem that the dad went to get some milk, but David assured us, that long absence of the male is normal for this species.





After grabbing lunch, we went to see another species of raptor – this time, a nesting area of two *Imperial Eagles*. This species also likes Ground Squirrels, and they still rely on these rodents for raising their chicks, even though nowadays they also learned to hunt Brown Hares and other larger mammals and birds. However, these two showed up just as Katya was finishing her gyros – it seems, some individuals are fond of Serbian cuisine as well... Maybe we should have brought them some rakia for even better views!





The next spot we visited was located nearby – the “Pastures of Great Bustard” nature reserve. This area of the steppe harbours the last tiny population of this iconic bird in Serbia – just 10 individuals, 9 females and 1 male. The area itself was lovely, with a wooden visitor centre building, endless plains stretching towards the horizon, and flowering Blackthorn bushes everywhere. To try and see the birds, we climbed a birdwatching tower, which was a part of the building. Due to absence of humans, it was occupied by hordes of nesting *Rock Pigeons*, which scattered in panic as we went up the ladder.

Up there, it took some time, but eventually Irina picked up 5 *Great Bustards* scattered among the cows in the distance! They were far away and visible only in the scope, so you’ll have to believe me that they were there. We did try to get closer with the car afterwards, but the birds have already left, when we arrived at the spot – probably, were spooked by a farmer or a tractor. Still, it was great to see them – even if those 5 birds were basically half of the country’s population... While going back to the car, we also saw a *Little Owl*, which darted out of the nestbox on the centre’s wall. And now, the most exciting part of the day was coming...





Before it got dark enough for owl ringing, we visited one more fishpond. It was an awesome area with a great diversity of waterbirds! Tons of ducks, hundreds of waders, including *Black-Tailed Godwits*, *Black-Winged Stilts* and *Avocets*, *Spoonbills*, *Great Egrets*, a lone *Caspian Tern* – this place had it all! The sunset was pretty as well, illuminating the pond and reedbeds with a soft orange hue. And then we were off to catch owls!



We pulled up to a willow grove along the river Tisa, hoping to get a Tawny Owl, which are common in this type of habitat. We stopped at the water's edge and started to unload the gear. Here, we got another example of David's attitude to everything: when Irina asked "Is this broken?" about some gear, he replied, with a completely straight face: "No. It's just not working." After a good laugh, we went to a nearby clearing and set up the net on extendable plastic poles near the river, startling a **Coypu** from the shore. Two speakers were put up – with alternating mouse sound and sounds of different owl species.



David and Irina also set up an infrared camera, which connected to the phone. We would drive away in our car, stay there and watch the stream, until something would fly in. It felt like a spy movie, no less! Sadly, that day we didn't get anything – even though we heard an owl, and one even flew right above the net! But spring is not the perfect season for this – autumn, when the birds are not busy breeding, is much more productive. Irina told us, that in the autumn they sometimes caught up to 100 birds per a 10-day camp! Anyway, this was a magical experience, with the starry sky and the voices of owls, jackals and frogs around. And we still have two more days to try!

## April 10<sup>th</sup>. Ada and surroundings.

Today, David and Irina were supposed to pick us up later, and we walked to grab our breakfast in the morning. While walking, I noticed something interesting on the grass lawns – huge mounds, clearly too big to be mole hills. They were clearly molerat mounds – and some of them very fresh, too! The only species in the area is **Lesser Blind Molerat**. After breakfast, I opened a couple mounds, but staring in the holes didn't produce a lifer – probably, because of the cold they were staying deeper in the tunnels. After that, it was time to meet our guides, and we set off.

Firstly, we needed to check some *Barn Owl* nestboxes and refill them with sawdust. It was quite an experience – we stopped near an abandoned building and climbed on the second floor through a broken window using a step ladder! Irina went in first to cover the entrance of the nestbox with a net, so that any owls flying out would be caught. Videos of this probably made my family and friends question my sanity – an unusual thing to do on holidays! Sadly, one nest box wasn't occupied yet, and a *Little Owl* escaped from the other before Irina came close. Instead, we got to photograph a *Little Owl* perched on a chimney in the village. We've seen them multiple times at that point, but it was the first one that was facing us and in OK light.





The next area was a new fishpond, with a field of beautiful Spring Adonis flowers in bloom nearby. It was an extremely birdy area – we got 50 species in a single checklist! Among them was my long-awaited lifer *Black Stork*, another *Saker Falcon*, 8 *Spoonbills* in beautiful breeding plumage, and so on. We also saw many *Marsh Frogs* and an unfortunately dead *European Pond Turtle*.





In the evening, we drove back to the Great Bustard Pastures to try more owl ringing. This open area is a hunting ground for several species, and it's where Irina and David had the most success in autumn.

For now, we only witnessed another striking example of David's attitude to problems. As we approached the visitor centre, Irina noticed that the ladder on top of David's car was close to falling and called him to warn about this. David grabbed it with one hand, but Irina wasn't satisfied and told him to secure it properly. David calmly got out of the car, adjusted the ladder to a different angle—and then continued holding it with his hand. Malicious compliance!

Upon arrival, we were greeted by a calling *Long-Eared Owl* and chorus of **Golden Jackals** at incredibly close range. Irina told me, that she has seen them around here often, so I was hopeful. After we set up the net, I climbed the tower with my thermal and began scanning the fields. Over the passing hours, I saw tons of **Roe Deer** and **Hares**, as always, but still no Jackals! It's beyond my understanding how we didn't manage to see a single one. Another animal I saw might have been a **Badger**, but it never got close enough to be 100% sure. Eventually, I turned the scope towards the net... to see an owl sitting on one of the poles!!! Needless to say, it refused to fly in the net, and after more fruitless waiting, we had to eventually turn back. I was starting to worry we had run out of luck, but we still have one more day ahead...



## April 11<sup>th</sup>. Ada and surroundings.

In the morning, we went to check one more *Barn Owl* nest box. It was located on an abandoned farm, which has become an elite apartment complex for many bird species. There were *Hooded Crows*, Pigeons, and, upon arrival, we immediately heard an alarm call of a *Common Kestrel* pair. Irina went in with a net, and we followed. She informed us, that she saw a Little Owl outside of the nestbox – probably, it flew out, alarmed by the Kestrel calls. We prepared for another empty run, as David climbed the ladder. He opened the box and suddenly announced: “Bird!”

We watched in awe, as he came down with a female *Little Owl* in hand! Turns out, the mum has been sitting on eggs quietly the whole time, and she had EIGHT of them! Because of that, we had to hurry, and after a swift ringing session and a couple photos, David put the heroic mother back into the box! This was so awesome to see this tiny predator up close! Katya even took a video of me baby-talking to the owl, because I couldn't hold back my joy! This pair of Little Owls probably

enjoyed their new “penthouse”, but we also saw signs of Barn Owl's presence in the area – pellets and faeces under a perch. David told us, that, if that Barn Owl manages to find a partner, they will “evict” the Little Owls from their home. So now we hope that the chicks will manage to fledge, before that lonely Barn Owl pairs up!





After that, David had a flat tire, so we stopped at a familiar fishpond, while he quickly changed it. We saw some usual birds, and went to check out another nest box, which turned out to be empty. Most Barn Owls lay their eggs later, and in the start of April only visit the future nest sites for a short time. But we still had one more nestbox in store... This time, it was on an active farm, so there was a typical farm smell, some feisty Geese, Roosters and very cute, curly-haired Mangulica pigs. The procedure went as usual – Irina secured the entrance, David put up the ladder, and... As soon as the ladder touched the box, something bolted out and immediately got stuck in the net! I couldn't believe my eyes – we had a *Barn Owl*!

We have never seen this species in daylight before and were overjoyed – what a bird! Unlike the completely chill Little Owl, it was biting and clawing David. A face that looks like half an apple, the “cosmic” galaxy-like pattern on the plumage... It was the most beautiful owl I've ever seen! This male wasn't ringed yet, so it got a new ring and flew away. By the way, after we left Serbia, Irina reported, that the male (and his girlfriend) started frequenting the spot again! Let's wish them a good breeding season!





We had time to kill before the last ringing session and tried once more to find the Bustards – driving around and looking in the scope from atop small concrete bunkers, which were scattered everywhere across the fields. I'm pretty sure, that they should have bats hibernating inside in wintertime, but for now all the bunkers I checked were empty. We couldn't find the Bustards either – only a very curious *Pheasant* at a very close range. And just like that, it was time for our final night of ringing! We chose an area by the river to try for *Tawny Owls* once more.



When we pulled up to the spot, we discovered a couple poles with working streetlights – in the middle of nowhere, near a tiny abandoned house! This meant, that the net would be visible, and we have to move a bit further downstream. As David put it – “Nothing ever works properly in Serbia, except a fucking light in the middle of nowhere!”. There was also a couple of bats flying around – Irina told us before, that sometimes they get into the nets, and once they have accidentally caught a **Brown Long-Eared Bat**. Time flew by, and we had our dinner under the stars. After a few hours of waiting, we were beginning to fall asleep in the car when suddenly, an owl flew by the camera – again, missing the net! There was a lot of emotions in the air – so much, that me, Irina and Katya went outside to breathe. And, just as we prepared to go pack the nets, David opened the car door and loudly announced: “GO TIME!”

Two cars rushed to the spot, and, in the red light of our headlamps, we could see a *Tawny Owl* struggling in the net! It was much bigger, than both Barn and Little Owls, and extremely soft! Turned out, it was an already ringed male, that held a territory circa 1,5 km from here last year! All the necessary procedures were performed, and some feathers were plucked for toxicology analysis. We also got to see a cool thing – under an UV light, new feathers on the bird start to shine bright red! A truly perfect ending for a truly perfect day! After that, we celebrated with some wine, chatting about our trip and wildlife in general, and called it a night.





## April 12<sup>th</sup>. Belgrade.

In the morning, Irina dropped us to our hotel in Belgrade. We spent the rest of the day together with Katya, met some friends, and, in the evening, celebrated 4 years of relationship! But, after that, we got our final mammal of the trip, and a lifer for me. Before, Irina gave us a spot, where **Northern White-breasted Hedgehog** come to steal food, that is put out for stray cats. I haven't seen this species before, and it was just a 5 min walk from our hotel, so we decided to check it out.

The spot is located near the The Philological High School of Belgrade – the area is fenced off, but the food is put out right by the edge, so it's extremely easy to see those hedgehogs. We were treated to an almost Biblical event – the lamb with a lion, or, in that case, a native mammal with an invasive species coexisting somewhat peacefully. This was the last interesting sighting of a great trip, and I'm sure we'll be back eventually!



## Stuff we missed:

There are definitely more mammals to see in Serbia – for example, **Beech** and **Pine Martens** even live in human settlements, including Belgrade. **Badgers**, **Jackals** and **Foxes** are often encountered in fields during evenings. For all these species, David and Irina are planning to put up photography hides in the near future. Irina also knows a spot for **Eurasian Otter** in Vojvodina, and there were signs about otters crossing roads in Djerdap, but we have seen them before and didn't go trying for them. Over **30 bat species** have been registered in Serbia, so there's a good potential for bat watching. David also pointed to some areas, in which **Hungarian Birch Mouse** (*Sicista trizona*) might be encountered – namely, Deliblatska Peščara, a large area of sandy terrain in the south of Serbia. The fields and steppes are also home to other interesting rodent species, such as **Mound-Building Mouse** and **Lesser Blind Molerat**, and the forests, including Djerdap, are good for **Garden** and **Edible Dormouse**. Next time, I might try to bring some small mammal traps!

We thank David and Irina for the amazing time in Serbia – this country turned out to be so much more, than we anticipated! We'll definitely come back to take part in other projects (e.g., ringing and putting up nestboxes for *European Roller*). And a huge shoutout goes to Leon Šurbanović for showing us the wonderful catacombs!

The eBird trip report can be found [here](#).



**Mammal trip list (lifers for both of us in bold):**

<b>Species</b>	<b>Where seen</b>
Western Roe Deer ( <i>Capreolus capreolus</i> )	Djerdap NP, everywhere in Vojvodina
Brown Hare ( <i>Lepus europaeus</i> )	Djerdap NP, everywhere in Vojvodina
<b>Eurasian Serotine</b> ( <i>Cnephaeus serotinus</i> )	Djerdap NP
<b>Greater Horseshoe Bat</b> ( <i>Rhinolophus ferrumequinum</i> )	Djerdap NP, Petrovaradin
Greater Mouse-eared Bat ( <i>Myotis myotis</i> )	Petrovaradin
<b>Bechstein's Bat</b> ( <i>Myotis bechsteinii</i> )	Petrovaradin
Common Bent-wing Bat ( <i>Miniopterus schreibersii</i> )	Petrovaradin
<b>European Ground Squirrel</b> ( <i>Spermophilus citellus</i> )	Titel
Golden Jackal ( <i>Canis aureus</i> )	Heard only. Araca, Pastures of Great Bustard NP
Coypu ( <i>Myocastor coypus</i> )	Shore of Tisa river
Northern White-breasted Hedgehog ( <i>Erinaceus roumanicus</i> )	Belgrade

**Herping trip list (lifers for both of us in bold):**

<b>Species</b>	<b>Where seen</b>
<b>Green Lizard</b> ( <i>Lacerta viridis</i> )	Djerdap NP
Common Wall Lizard ( <i>Podarcis muralis</i> )	Djerdap NP, everywhere in Vojvodina and Belgrade
European Fire Salamander ( <i>Salamandra salamandra</i> )	Djerdap NP
<b>Nose-Horned Viper</b> ( <i>Vipera ammodytes</i> )	Djerdap NP
Smooth Snake ( <i>Coronella austriaca</i> )	Djerdap NP
European Fire-Bellied Toad ( <i>Bombina bombina</i> )	Rusanda
Green Toad ( <i>Bufo viridis</i> )	Around Djerdap NP
Marsh Frog ( <i>Pelophylax ridibundus</i> )	Every water body in Vojvodina