

Trip report – Romania, August/September 2022.

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In the fall of 2020 a particularly seductive item appeared on my computer. No, it's probably not what you're thinking- it was in fact the report of the inaugural Romanian mammal-watching trip with Sakertours in September 2020. Sakertours specializes in photography and birdwatching trips in Eastern Europe but had expanded its offerings that summer and managed to see 46 identifiable mammal species in nine days in Romania. This was followed by an equally successful tour in 2021, to the point that I could no longer contain myself while reading these reports and decided I had to join their next tour, which took place from August 26 to September 3 of this year. Sakertours will probably be providing a report of the trip but I thought I would share my perspective in a brief report of my own.

In keeping with the reports of travel chaos at European airports my trip got off to an inauspicious start. I had to switch planes in Frankfurt, which I didn't think would be a huge challenge as we arrived approximately on time at 8:23 am. Unfortunately there was a huge lineup for screening which moved at a glacial pace, even for passengers in transit. Given the retreat of glaciers these days, it was probably slower than a glacial pace. I ended up in a line behind a number of people each of whom was carrying several full water bottles in their carry-ons and, after making it through screening and running through the terminal, I missed the closing of the gate by two minutes. To add insult to injury, a number of flights scheduled to leave before mine still had gates open as they waited for the last passenger or two. This necessitated an unscheduled eleven-hour wait in the Frankfurt airport for the next Lufthansa flight to

Bucharest. I arrived in Bucharest just before midnight and breezed through customs and on to the hotel.

Early the next afternoon I was picked up by the leaders, Zoltan Nagy and Zsolt Babos, as well as the other tour participants. We drove for about four hours to Hotel Mondial in the Dobrudja region of Romania, arriving in time for a fantastic supper, and then headed out about 8:25 pm for a night drive. Dobrudja is the westernmost extension of the great Central Asian steppe. Bones of recently extinct megafauna such as wild horses, asses and saiga have been discovered there and the area continues to have a fauna with some interesting Central Asian steppe components. We saw and bat detected a couple of Nathusius' Pipistrelle before leaving for the drive. In the steppe we found a number of Common/Sibling Voles, Steppe (Mound-building) Mice, Red Fox, Brown Hares and a Northern White-breasted Hedgehog. A highlight came when Zsolt, after running madly across a field, caught a Romanian Hamster allowing for close observation by all. We had a brief glimpse of Golden Jackal, saw a couple of Brown Rats and later that evening had a good but fairly distant view of a Eurasian Badger. We arrived back at the hotel about 2:45 am.







After a lavish breakfast we left mid-morning the next day to visit a colony of European Souseliks and, for those so interested, to observe a variety of open-country birds. In the early afternoon we visited a cave which contained a number of Schreiber's Bent-winged Bats as well as Greater Mouse-eared Bats, then headed back to the hotel mid-afternoon for a brief nap. That evening we returned to the souslik colony and waited for dusk. We had distant views of a couple of Eurasian Badgers as well as closer views of Brown Hares, Red Foxes and Golden Jackals. We also found several Northern White-breasted Hedgehogs. Driving along a dirt road, we eventually saw a Steppe Polecat on the left and were able to follow it with binoculars for a while. We kept watch over the burrow where it appeared to have gone, hoping for a re-emergence, but without success. We then headed down towards some lagoons where we saw two further Romanian Hamsters as well as numerous jackals. We returned to the spectacle of a large wedding in progress at the hotel which significantly limited the night's possibilities for sleep.

The next morning we departed about 11:00 am, stopping in the nearest village so that Martin and Holga, whose luggage had not yet arrived, could pick up toothbrushes and other essentials. We drove to a patch of forest where Sakertours had placed nest boxes a couple of years previously. Nothing had been found in them last year, but recent checks had revealed some activity. We opened several nest boxes and found a Eurasian Forest Dormouse, a lifer for everyone on the trip except for Martin. We drove into town for celebratory Cokes and ice cream and then to the edge of the Macin Mountains National Park. Here we spent some time driving around a souslik colony, seeing several sousliks but no polecats. We then continued on Tulcea, arriving about 6:00 pm for a lovely dinner and at dusk boarded the boat Harrier, captained by Romi, for a trip into the Danube Delta.





It turned out to be one of those magical nights for mammal watching. A Raccoon Dog was noted on the left and a couple of jackals a little later on the bank of the river. Shortly after, we noticed something smaller moving on the right bank of the river, which turned out to be a European Mink that remained observable for several minutes. Amazingly, a short while later we saw another European Mink which remained in view for even longer. Three separate Eurasian Otters were seen and a Beech (Stone) Marten paused on the riverbank, allowing decent views. We got good views of several rodents, including two Eurasian Harvest Mice, numerous Brown Rats, several Striped Field Mice and three Common Muskrats. Numerous Daubenton's Myotis swooped low over the river. We arrived at the hotel about 2:40 am, cold but elated. The hotel was lovely. Built seemingly in the middle-of-nowhere down a short dirt road from a tiny village, it is owned by a Romanian construction magnate who occasionally uses it as a base for entertaining friends. The hotel is otherwise rarely visited and has an unmatched aura of peace and tranquility.









The next morning we watched a Grass Snake swimming in a little pond below the hotel while eating breakfast on the balcony. In the late morning we boarded the boat for a trip back to the local village of Mila 23. Going through the waterways we had a beautiful sighting of a Golden Jackal by the side of the canal. Unfortunately, being mid-day, I had not expected much in the way of wildlife on the trip and so by the time I retrieved my camera the best jackal sighting of the trip was commemorated by one of the worst jackal photos of the trip, which is saying something. After stocking up on Cokes and ice creams in the village we noticed a couple of jackals on the other side of the river and headed over to get a better view. A Dice Snake with a fish in its mouth suddenly appeared beside the boat, allowing for close observation. There was abundant birdlife on the waterways, from pelicans and swans to large numbers of terns, gulls and waders.



When we got back to the hotel we decided to dig out the entrances of several burrows in the hope that the excavators, Lesser Mole Rats, would come to the surface to repair the damage. After a couple of hours of fruitless waiting, the lure of air-conditioning back at the hotel won out and we gave up the search. That night we did another boat trip for six hours or so. We saw a couple of Raccoon Dogs and Golden Jackals, as well as lots of Brown Rats and some bats, but little else, highlighting how truly spectacular the previous night's boat ride had been.



The next morning after breakfast we went back to the mole rats. One burrow showed evidence of fresh activity, so Zoltan dug out the entrance and then we waited close by. I've never been particularly good at standing in the hot sun staring at a small patch of grass devoid of life, so I soon gave up and went back to the hotel to pack and shower. In hindsight this turned out to be the right move, as no rats showed up even for those with more endurance than myself. We left at noon on a faster route following the main channel back to Tulcea, where we picked up the vehicle and headed towards the Carpathians. As we drove near the Danube, vast truck convoys travelling to or from Ukraine were visible, a sobering reminder of the war not so far away. We had dinner that night in Focşani and then left about 8:00 pm for the drive to Zetia. Another magical night followed. We saw a large Wild Boar in a village field, quickly followed by a small group of Red Deer. Next up were views of Hazel and Edible Dormice. We had divided into two cars and the first one came to a screeching halt on a bend in the road. Jumping out, we saw a stunning European Wildcat which very thoughtfully posed for photos on an embankment at the edge of the road. Lots of Red and Roe Deer were seen and then the first Brown Bear of a total of nine observed during the drive. At one point we stopped for a midnight ramble across some fields where Zsolt and Szabi caught several rodents by hand. Hedgehogs, Red Foxes – I can't remember the last night drive in a temperate country where I saw so many mammals. Stopping at one bridge Zoltan had a brief view of a European Beaver. We drove a little further to a wetland area and saw two further beavers. Eventually we arrived at the hotel and headed up to our rooms. As I was settling into bed I wondered about the



strange light shining in through the window. This turned out to be the sun coming up - it was 5:30 in the morning.



After a few hours' sleep we were up and headed out to a photographic hide used by Sakertours for Eurasian red squirrels and a variety of birds. We then hiked into a small cave which contained several Lesser Horseshoe Bats, and checked out the scree area below a dam where weasels had been seen on several previous occasions. After a much needed nap, we left about 7:00 pm for another night drive. Most of the species seen had been viewed previously, including Wild Boar and Eurasian Badger, but we did see our first Western Barbastelle Bat hanging from a branch and an additional four Brown Bears.







The next day we revisited the squirrel hide and also briefly checked out a hide used by Sakertours for bear photography. After an early supper we left for Varghis Gorge. Here we met Csaba, a Romanian bat expert with whom we hiked through the gorge up to an extensive cave system to set mist nets. We captured a number of bats, including a Geoffroy's Bat, a Bechstein's Bat, Lesser and Greater Myotis, and others. We also had close views of an Edible Dormouse within the cave. On the way back to the vehicle we saw Eurasian badger and then a European Beaver in the small river. Driving slowly through the gorge revealed the usual foxes and deer in abundance. We arrived back at the hotel about 4:30 am for a few hours' sleep.



The next morning we headed to a marsh area where Zsolt Hegyeli (aka. Zsolt 2) had been trapping. Our first stop was at the Harghita Bear Lodge where the Zsolt Babos (Zsolt 1) had captured a House Mouse, Long-tailed Field (Wood) Mouse and a Yellow-necked Field Mouse. In the marshland, we had Eurasian Pygmy Shrew, two Field (Short-tailed) Voles and a Water Vole. We drove to Bicaz Gorge which was unfortunately rainy and foggy. Scanning the slopes through holes in the curtain of mist and fog for some time, we eventually resigned ourselves to missing out on Carpathian Chamois. At the moment when we were ready to concede defeat, John Pilgrim found a chamois with the thermal imager, which allowed for decent but distant views. We collectively breathed a sigh of relief and headed back to the lodge, arriving about 4:30 pm. After saying farewell to Zoltan, who was headed to his wife's cousin's wedding, we went to the bear hide with Zsolt 1. We saw eight bears in total and also an Edible Dormouse which scampered



around the inside of the hide. After dark, Zsolt mentioned that a dead cow had been dragged up to another hide for a group of photographers arriving the next morning. In order not to scare wildlife we walked along the trail in complete darkness. This may have avoided scaring the wildlife, but I'm not sure the same can be said for the tour participants. When we did turn on the lights, we got good views of five Brown Bears and a Red Fox. The drive back to the Lodge revealed two more bears at a garbage container close to the hotel where we were staying.



The next morning we learned that a Brandt's Bat had been located at the squirrel hide beneath the window shutters, at the same spot where they had been seen in the past. We headed back there and fortunately the Brandt's Bat was still present. The night's small mammal traps were all empty, perhaps as a result of the rain which continued unabated throughout our stay in the Carpathians. Good for the local farmers, less ideal for the mammal-watching contingent. We returned to Harghita Bear Lodge, arriving about noon to the sight of a Fallow Deer which had apparently escaped from a local petting zoo. We then headed down to some fields near Brasov where Szabi had caught two Common Hamsters which we observed and then released. Several of us transferred to a taxi for the drive back to Bucharest and our last night in Romania prior to flying home the next day.





In summary –wow! Prior to learning of this tour, I don't think I could have imagined a 9-day tour anywhere in Europe in which sighting 50 mammal species was a realistic possibility - kudos to the Sakertours team for pulling it together. Not a tour for those whose idea of a good time revolves around plentiful and uninterrupted sleep, but a fantastic smorgasbord of European mammals in some truly beautiful settings. Mulțumesc mult to Zoltan, Szabi and Zsolt for their tireless energy and unbridled enthusiasm and a big thank you to the other participants for their eagerness and good humour.

Mammal species seen:

1. European (Brown) Hare – *Lepus europaeus*
2. Eurasian Beaver – *Castor fiber*
3. Romanian (Dobrudja) Hamster – *Mesocricetus newtoni*
4. Common Hamster – *Cricetus cricetus*
5. Common Muskrat – *Ondatra zibthicus* (introduced)
6. Field (Short-tailed) Vole – *Microtus agrestis*
7. Common/Sibling Vole – *Microtus arvalis/Microtus levis*
8. Water Vole – *Arvicola amphibius*
9. Eurasian Harvest Mouse – *Micromys minutus*
10. Brown Rat – *Rattus norvegicus*
11. Long-tailed Field (Wood) Mouse – *Apodemus sylvaticus*
12. Yellow-necked Field Mouse – *Apodemus flavicollis*
13. Striped Field Mouse – *Apodemus agrarius*
14. House Mouse – *Mus musculus*
15. Mound-building (Steppe) Mouse – *Mus spicilegus*
16. Eurasian Red Squirrel – *Sciurus vulgaris*
17. European Souslik – *Spermophilus citellus*
18. Edible (Fat) Dormouse – *Glis glis*
19. Hazel Dormouse – *Muscardinus avellanarius*
20. Eurasian Forest Dormouse – *Dryomys nitedula*
21. Northern White-breasted Hedgehog – *Erinaceus roumanicus*
22. Eurasian Pygmy Shrew – *Sorex minutus*
23. Brandt's Bat/Myotis – *Myotis brandtii*
24. Geoffroy's Bat/Myotis – *Myotis emarginatus*
25. Bechstein's Bat/Myotis – *Myotis bechsteinii*
26. Daubenton's Bat/Myotis – *Myotis daubentonii*
27. Lesser Mouse-eared Bat/Myotis – *Myotis blythii*
28. Greater Mouse-eared Bat/Myotis – *Myotis myotis*
29. Western Barbastelle – *Barbastella barbastellus*
30. Noctule – *Nyctalus noctula*
31. Common Pipistrelle – *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*
32. Soprano Pipistrelle – *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*
33. Nathusius' Pipistrelle – *Pipistrellus nathusii*
34. Schreiber's Bent-winged Bat – *Miniopterus schreibersii*
35. Serotine Bat – *Eptesicus serotinus*

36. Lesser Horseshoe Bat – *Rhinolophus hipposideros*
37. Golden Jackal – *Canis aureus*
38. Raccoon Dog – *Nyctereutes procyonoides* (introduced)
39. Red Fox – *Vulpes vulpes*
40. European Wildcat – *Felis silvestris*
41. Stone (Beech) Marten – *Martes foina*
42. European Mink – *Mustela lutreola*
43. Steppe Polecat – *Mustela eversmanni*
44. Eurasian Otter – *Lutra lutra*
45. Eurasian Badger – *Meles meles*
46. Brown Bear – *Ursus arctos*
47. Carpathian Chamois – *Rupicapra carpatica*
48. European Roe Deer – *Capreolus capreolus*
49. Red Deer – *Cervus elaphus*
50. Wild Boar – *Sus scrofa*

Not countable: Fallow Deer (likely petting zoo escapee)

