



SAKERTOURS

European Mink in the Danube Delta (János Oláh)

ROMANIA MAMMAL TOUR **with SAKERTOURS** **12th – 20th September, 2020**

Leader: János Oláh

Sakertours has been specializing in birdwatching and bird photography tours in the last 26 years. However in recent years we felt a growing interest for mammal watching amongst our clients so we decided to create a special mammal watching tour. Our obvious choice in our operational range was Romania as it has around 110 species on its mammal list and there is a great number of sought-after species.

Our inaugural tour was run in September 2020 and it was a great success! We have seen 46 species of mammals in 9 days which included elusive and rare species such as European Mink, Wildcat, Carpathian Brown Bear, Grey Wolf and Brandt's and Bechstein's Bats. We divided our itinerary between the Danube Delta area and Transylvania. Both areas are excellent for mammals though we have recorded more species in Transylvania in 2020. This original itinerary will be fine-tuned for 2021 to maximize our chances for even more species. It is rather different to execute a mammal watching tour compared to birdwatching tours as most of the species are nocturnal. So if you wish to take part in such a mammal watching tour be prepared for long nights out in the wild with the most amazing sky full with stars. The light pollution is minimal in the region we visit, and it is quite incredible in the Danube Delta (part of the dark sky network in Europe). Apart from our own experiences we also use the help of local mammal experts. Most of the time we try to locate the mammals by sight (spotlighting at night) but we also use some live traps and visit bat monitoring places. Our tour date is carefully planned to coincide with such monitoring events so we can maximize our chances to see some interesting species but minimize the disturbance at the same time!

Next year we will also run a European Bison extension after the tour for those who want to see these magnificent mammals in their original habitat. They were roaming in the Carpathians 200 years ago but now there are three areas again in Romania where around 100 free-roaming reintroduced Bisons are located. We will visit the Vanatori-Neamt Natural Park for these amazing creatures (cc 40-50 individuals). They are not easy to see but 2 full days will give us a good chance to connect with these beauties. This species is gone extinct in Europe in 1919 (last one shot in Bialowieza, Poland) and in the World in 1927 (last wild one shot in the Caucasus).



A fantastic Wildcat gave us amazing looks in the Danube Delta (János Oláh)

Dobrudja and the Danube Delta

The tour has started in Bucharest Airport and we made our way to our first base near Constanta. The weather in September 2020 was perfect with still warm summery nights. Unfortunately there has been a long spell without rain and the conditions were very dry. We spent three nights spotlighting in the dry steppe as well as in the agricultural areas. We were hoping to see or catch Romanian Hamster but we only found old, unused holes and had not had a sniff of any live individuals. Could have been the drought affecting them? Something to work on for the next tour! It was amazing experience however that we saw a total of 28 Golden Jackals on our first night out and we had heard their chorus (2 or 3 different packs calling in the same time) at night in the Danube Delta. This was a species we knew will get to see on the tour but we had not much previous experience locating them at night. It is such a common species in the coastal area both in the delta and in the lagoon system. Common species regularly encountered were Red Fox, European Hare, Northern White-breasted Hedgehog, Steppe Mouse and Common Vole. We also had a single European Badger, a Stone Marten as well as Long-tailed Field Mouse (Wood Mouse) and a few European Souseliks before they disappear for the winter.



Golden Jackal (top) and Mound-building (Steppe) Mouse (right) were both common on the tour. Long-tailed Field Mouse was only seen once in Dobrudja (János Oláh).

We have visited a public cave near a monastery where we saw many Schreiber's Bent-winged Bat, Greater Mouse-eared Bat and Greater Horseshoe Bat. About 40 years ago Mehely's Horseshoe Bat was common in Dobrudja but nowadays it is very rare and unlikely to be seen without the help of real bat experts. Maybe another year, another tour? We saw many fresh mole-rat mounds all over Dobrudja but we had not much hope in finding this species. Our group member Zsolt however was really focused on finding the Lesser Mole-rat and he was running after ploughing tractors for several hours when finally he found one just unearthed by the machine. Unfortunately this individual died later so we took the specimen with us and gave it to a mammal researcher for possible use. This species is still common in Romania but who knows how many hundreds die because of such agricultural activities!?



Lesser Mole-rat (top) was a surprise find on the tour. Schreiber's Bent-winged (left) and Greater Horseshoe Bat in a cave in Dobrudja (János Oláh).

Following the Dobrudja days we arrived to Tulcea – the gateway of the Danube Delta – where our expert driver Romi has been waiting for us with the Sakertours' boat and we made our way deep into the delta. After arrival to our hotel we had a quick dinner and then we started our exciting spotlighting session from the boat. It was an amazing night under a starry sky and what a productive night it was! There were many Daubenton's Bats flying and hunting low over the water as well as Brown Rats feeding on the edge of the water. We have even seen them feeding on European Water Chestnut. After a few hours we spotted a foraging European Mink along the edge of a channel and it was amazing to watch him for several minutes before it swam off into dense vegetation. WOW! We could hardly believe we have just seen one of the rarest mammal species in Europe. Needless to say we were not

tired so the session continued and Raccoon Dogs, Golden Jackals and yet another European Mink was found. We also had several Eurasian Harvest Mouse and finally we did come across a fantastic Wildcat as well. It was not very shy and allowed terrific looks. It was one of those magical mammal watching evenings which you will remember forever!



European Mink (top) and Wildcat (right) by Zoltán Nagy and Raccoon Dog by János Oláh in the Danube Delta.

Next morning we checked the traps but only a few Mound-building (Steppe) Mouse and a Brown Rat was caught. After leaving the Danube Delta we had one more evening looking for the Romanian Hamster near Tulcea but with no luck again so we crossed the Danube River and started to climb into the Carpathian Mountains starting the second leg our exciting mammal watching tour!



Hazel Dormouse was common in the Carpathian (left) and European Harvest Mouse was found in the Danube Delta and in Transylvania too (János Oláh).

Transylvania

Our night-drive across the Carpathians was great, and added a few new mammals to the list. We saw several Red Deer as the rutting season started and the males were following females. Also spotted several cute Hazel Dormouse and a few Edible Dormouse too. We arrived to the Hargita Bear Lodge right after dawn. Later we have visited some small caves and had great looks of Lesser Horseshoe and Greater Mouse-eared Bats while the traps caught Eurasian Water Shrew and Field Vole. At dusk we made a quick visit to one of the Sakertours' bear hides where we had great looks of Carpathian Brown Bear. After dinner we set out for our first proper night-drive in Transylvania. We explored various parts of the Hargita Mountains searching for new mammals and always looking for the most elusive denizens of the forest: Eurasian Lynx and Wolf. Both of these mammals require a great deal of luck to connect with even if you know their territories. The Wolves are extremely clever while the Lynx is just like a 'ghost' in the forest. But when you are out there in Wild Transylvania you always hope!



Lesser Horseshoe Bats in Transylvania (János Oláh).



Carpathian Brown Bear in Transylvania (János Oláh).

We have not had any luck with those rarities but had a good selection of mammals which included yet another Carpathian Brown Bear in the forest, a Wildcat, Stone Marten, Both Edible and Hazel Dormouse, European Roe Deer. We also heard and seen many Red Deer. The rutting season is well under its way in mid-September and we heard the males all night as well as seen about 17 Red Deer in total. Our next day was for the bats! We were to join a bat expert for a few hours in one of the major cave systems where they carry out regular surveys. We were a little bit unlucky as a cold spell just arrived and the activity was predicted to be less good. The main bat time would have been in August and in 2021 we will run our tour to coincide with it!



Greater Mouse-eared (left) and Lesser Horseshoe Bats in Transylvania (Zoltán Nagy).

It was a scenic drive to the caves with Autumn Crocus carpets in the valley. When we arrived we set up a few traps and then met with a ranger who showed us Red Deer carcass which has been caught and eaten by Wolves just the day before. So they are around and we could hope they might return in the evening to the carcass. Our bat expert Csaba has arrived too and he showed us the caves in the Vargyas Gorge and their main places for netting bats. This site has been regularly surveyed and a total of 19 species of bats have been recorded – an outstanding place!



Autumn Crocus (top left), a roost of Schreiber's Bent-winged and Greater Mouse-eared Bats as well as Geoffroy's Bat (bottom) in Transylvania (János Oláh).

As dusk was approaching some tourist came back to the caves being afraid and excited by a huge Carpathian Brown Bear blocking the trail back to the car park. We knew it must have been by the Red Deer carcass and it meant the Wolves will not return. We escorted the tourist back to the car park but had no sign of the bear. So finally when it got dark the bat netting started. Activity was not overwhelming but continuous and over a course of 4 hours seven species has been caught. The majority of the catch was Greater Mouse-eared and Schreiber's Bent-winged Bats as they have resident colonies here but we also had Mouse-eared, Bechstein's and Alcatheo Bats as well as singletons of Western Barbastelle and Geoffroy's Bats. Also several Lesser Horseshoe Bats were seen and heard (with detector) but they eluded the mist net. It was a great few hours and we learnt a lot about bats and their conservation. Our walk back to the car park produced a few Edible Dormouse but not much else – certainly no Wolves. Back at the car we had a Striped Field Mouse in one of the traps which was the only catch. After a quick field dinner the night-drive could start. A nice Stone Marten was quickly found and also a mother bear with 3 cubs were seen still on the entrance road of the reserve.



Stone Marten (top left) and mother Bear with 3 cubs (Zoltán Nagy). Edible Dormouse (top right) and Striped Field Mouse (János Oláh).

On our final full day on the tour we made our way to Bicz Gorge to see Northern Chamois and we were not disappointed with as many as 9 were spotted on the impenetrable rock faces. It was such a great mammal to see in its original habitat. This is the *carpathica* race here in Romania. Although a common mammal species, we also had to devote some time to find Red Squirrel. Eventually we did see one but perhaps they are not as easy to see in September as we thought it would be. By one of our forest photography hides we also managed to see two roosting Brandt's Bats. These rather scarce bats are regular at this hide (located in deep forest) for the last few years and we were very much hoping to find them. Still it was a relief to see them on the tour! Finally we arrived back to the Hargita area by dusk where we managed to track down a male Wild Boar. Normally it would be such an easy mammal to see but since the African swine fever virus (ASFV) decimated the entire European population in the last 2 years we had to work hard to find this species. Later we returned to the Hargita Bear Lodge where we had a fantastic dinner and prepared ourselves for the last full night out for mammals!



Northern Chamois in Bicz Gorge, the carpathica race here in Transylvania (Zoltán Nagy).

We left our accommodation with high hopes for the last night out. We covered a fair amount of ground in beech woodlands (where the beech mast just started to fall) as well as in pine forests but could not locate any new mammals. We had several European Roe Deer, Hazel Dormouse, European Hare and Red Fox but not much else. Only a few hours of night-time left we decided to explore lower elevation where most of the Red Deer are located at this time of the year, speculating that all the predators should be there too. On our drive to lower elevation a European Otter crossed the road by a stream which was a great bonus. We were not disappointed at the edge of the forest as Red Deer

were heard from the hillside and we saw several stags with a few females around. Driving around finally Zsolt spotted a few mammals on a hillside. They were all together but it was still a bit far for the spotlight. We got closer and realized we were watching a pack of Wolves! Wow! Somehow they allowed rather close approach (not normal) and then we realized that a young Red Deer just been killed and they have not finished the feast. We retreated to safe distance and waited so the Wolves can return. They did, and as it was getting dawn by now we tried again and had seen them even in daylight. It was special, very special. It was a truly fitting final night out!



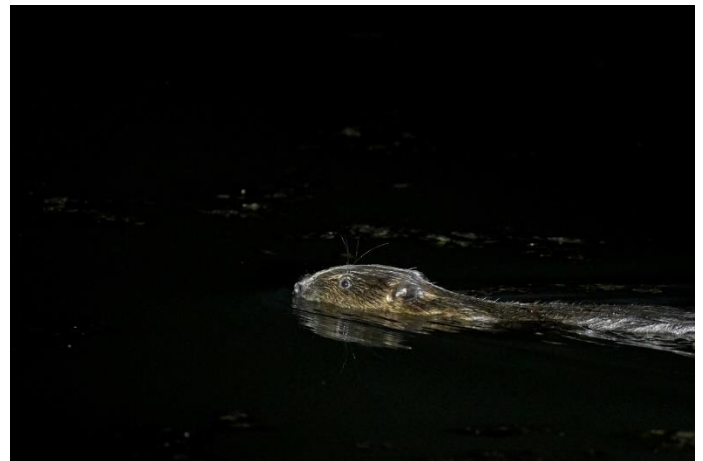
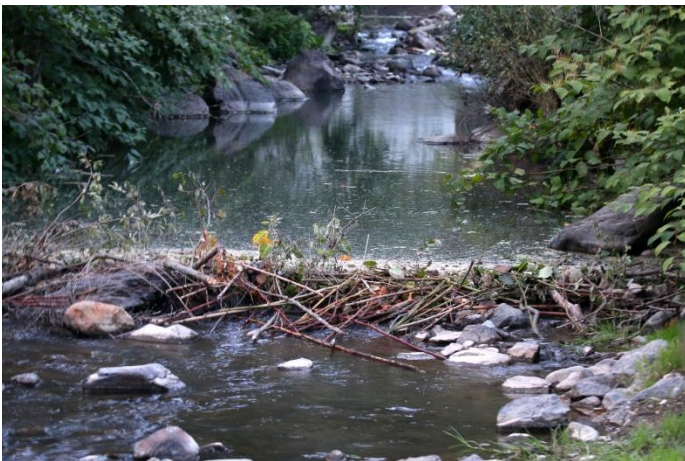
Wolves in Transylvania (János Oláh).

We were full with the experience, slowly soaking it in while having a morning coffee. Nobody felt like going to bed yet so we decided to check out the Red Deer carcass. Indeed there was still lots of it left and we were sure the wolves will come back tonight as well. Meanwhile Common Buzzards, Magpies and Hooded Crows were all gathering already in the prospect of an easy breakfast.



Red Deer carcass killed and partly eaten by the wolves and the alfa male Wolf (János Oláh).

We had a great sleep for the rest of the morning and the final afternoon was spent leisurely. Certainly the last few nights made us a bit tired, so it was great to get organized and check some images as well collecting the traps. One last mammal, a House Mouse was caught which was previously was seen only by some of us. We still had one more last quest as we were to look for European Beaver at dusk. But not everybody, as some of us were keen to return to the carcass and see if the wolves will return. So we split up and the beaver team managed to see four European Beavers with some local help while the others could watch the wolves returning to the carcass for a full dinner. We met up again for a final dinner together and then relaxed in the salty hot water barrel by the Hargita Bear Lodge to revive and discuss all the amazing experiences of this first Sakertour's mammal watching tour! The tour has ended but surely we are already looking forward to what we can improve and see in 2021!



European Beavers were reintroduced to Romania and doing well (Zoltán Nagy).

All in all our first tour has been a great adventure and we definitely learnt a lot about how to see mammals. It is not easy to find the special mammals and surely every single tour will be different but with hard work some great sightings are guaranteed. The combination of the the Danube Delta with Transylvania is unbeatable. We have seen 21 mammal species in Dobrudja and the Danube Delta while 33 species were seen in Transylvania. However these numbers are only indications as both habitat and area is very diverse and with a fine-tuning of the itinerary I am sure this tour will be a classic mammal watching tour in Europe for the mammal enthusiasts!



Some of us relaxing in the 'Székely jacuzzi' by the Hargita Bear Lodge on our final starry night (Chris Miller).

We would like to say thank you for all the help of local researchers, nature lovers as well as for all participants and the entire Sakertour team who has been involved to create this new tour! Special thanks should go to Zsolt Hegyeli for some valuable hints and tips on small mammals, Csaba Jéré for his amazing skill on bats and letting us to join a bat monitoring evening, Norbert Moraru for showing us European Beaver and finally to Zsolt Babos for his amazing spotting skills and the hospitality of Hargita Bear Lodge.

After summarizing the points the TOP5 mammal of the trip were:

1. European Mink
2. Wolf
3. Wildcat
4. Bechstein's Bat
5. Lesser Mole-rat

MAMMALS –list of mammal species seen on the 2020 tour

European Hare *Lepus europaeus*

A commonly encountered species on the tour. We saw a total of 72 on the tour. There were 52 in the Dobrudja area and a further 20 in Transylvania. It is also known as Brown Hare and it is among the largest hare species in the World which adapted to temperate, open country.

Northern White-breasted Hedgehog *Erinaceus roumanicus*

A commonly encountered species on the tour. We saw a total of 37 on the tour. There were 33 in the Dobrudja area and a further 4 in Transylvania. It is interesting that all individuals seen in Dobrudja were rather dark individuals. Taxonomically, it was for a time considered to be a subspecies of *E. europaeus*, and later a subspecies of *E. concolor*. Since the 1990s, it has been considered a separate species in its own right



European Hare (János Oláh) and Northern White-breasted Hedgehog (Zsolt Babos)

Eurasian (Northern) Water Shrew *Neomys fodiens*

A single individual was trapped and released in Transylvania. One of the largest shrew species and feeds on both aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates. These tiny mammals are difficult to locate by sighting so the best option to observe them is by trapping. One need to be very cautious though when looking for these tiny mammals. The traps must be checked in every 2-3 hours to avoid mortality and food has to be places into the traps (ground traps)!



Eurasian Water Shrew and Eurasian Beaver in Transylvania (János Oláh)

Eurasian Beaver *Castor fiber* (reintroduced)

We saw 4 individual on our last evening in Transylvania. Excellent looks in the water as well as in feeding action. Great to see this once extinct mammal in the wild. The species was reintroduced to Romania between 1998 and 2003 when 183 individual were released on the Olt, Mures and Ialomita Rivers. The survey ending in 2017 estimated about 2200 individuals in Romania so the reintroduction was a great success.

Field (Short-tailed) Vole *Microtus agrestis*

A total of 5 were caught with traps in Transylvania.

Common Vole *Microtus arvalis*

A commonly encountered species on the tour. We have seen several in Dobrudja mostly in agricultural habitat such as lucern fields. We also had one in a trap. We did not look for them later on the tour but none were encountered in Transylvania.

Bank Vole *Myodes glareolus*

A single individual was trapped and released in Transylvania.



Common Vole (top left), Bank Vole (top right), Striped Field Mouse (left) and Field Vole (János Oláh)

Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus* (introduced)

It was only observed in the Danube Delta where 2 individuals were seen on our afternoon session and possibly one more was seen at night. They were introduced to Europe in the beginning of the 20th century and have quickly become an invasive species. However recently population seem to be declining in the eastern part of its range.



Edible Dormouse (left; Zoltán Nagy) and Hazel Dormouse (János Oláh) were both common in Transylvania.

Edible Dormouse *Glis glis*

A total of 14 were identified in Transylvania on the night sessions but several got away which was most likely to be this species. It was common in various forest habitat but most often in mixed beech and pine woodland. The edible dormouse was farmed and eaten by the ancient Romans (usually as a snack), hence the word edible in its name. The Romans would catch dormice from the wild in autumn when they were fattest. The dormice were kept and raised either in large pits or (in less spacious urban surroundings) in terra cotta containers, the 'gliraria'. They fed these captive dormice walnuts, chestnuts, and acorns for fattening. The dormice were served by either roasting them and dipping them in honey or stuffing them with a mixture of pork, pine nuts, and other flavourings

Hazel Dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*

It was a surprise to see so many of these delightful little creatures. A total of 35 were seen on the night sessions in Transylvania. It was one of the most common mammal species at night. 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 in October.

Striped Field Mouse *Apodemus agrarius*

A single individual was trapped and released in Transylvania. 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*

A single individual was trapped and released in Dobrudja.

Eurasian Harvest Mouse *Micromys minutus*

We saw 4 individuals in the Danube Delta along well vegetated channels, usually climbing in willow bushes. Obviously the extensive reed bed is being its home. Later one more was seen in Transylvania. One of the smallest mammal species in Europe.

House Mouse *Mus musculus*

One was seen by some of the team at the pigeon shed by the Hargita Bear Lodge and later one was caught in a nearby house.

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

A very common species in the steppe area of Dobrudja but a few were also noted in the Danube Delta. We saw 100+ individuals on the night sessions and also had several in traps. It is found in grasslands and other open areas from Austria eastwards.



Steppe Mouse (top left), Eurasian Harvest Mouse (top right, Zoltán Nagy), Brown Rat munching on water chestnut root (left, Zoltán Nagy) and Long-tailed Field (Wood) Mouse (János Oláh)

Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus*

It was very common in the Danube Delta on the night session, we counted minimum 39 individuals. They were all along the edge of channels as well as in the more forested areas too. We saw them feeding on water chestnut (see image).

Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Still common in the forests of Transylvania but never easy to locate them when you want! Finally we saw one in a mixed pine-beech woodland. This was the only one of the tour. In spring and summer they are regular at some of our forest photography hides but somehow they were elusive by this time of the year.

European Suslik *Spermophilus citellus*

The most widespread ground squirrel species in Europe is very common in the Dobrudja steppes but by September they are not very active. We have looked at several known colonies and finally found 4 individuals.



Red Squirrel (left; Zoltán Nagy) and European Souselik (János Oláh) were rather scarce on the tour.

Lesser Mole Rat *Nannospalax leucodon*

An extremely difficult species to see as it spends its entire life under the ground. They are rather common in Dobrudja as we saw many fresh Mole-rat mounds in steppe and agricultural habitat. The only way to see them is when they are caught for research or translocation purposes. We have not had much hope for this species but have heard that they are regularly surfaced by working tractors. So we decided to spend some time with ploughing tractors when we saw fresh mounds in the vicinity. We got lucky as our most devoted member of the group Zsolt Babos who has been running after the tractor has found one! Unfortunately later it died as had severe wounds. The body was transferred to a mammal specialist in Targu Mures for scientific use.



Zsolt Babos looking for... (left; Zoltán Nagy) and eventually seeing Lesser Mole-rat (János Oláh).

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*

It was a great surprise that a total of 42 were seen on the tour, all in Dobrudja and the Danube Delta. 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). Both Wild Boar and Golden Jackal found refuge in the reed beds and their numbers started to increase.



Golden Jackal and Red Fox were both numerous on the tour (Zoltán Nagy).

Wolf *Canis lupus*

An absolutely amazing experience with these top carnivores! Good numbers inhabit the forests of Transylvania but seeing them is an all different matter. We really were not expecting to see wolves but did our best to cover areas where they occur. First we saw a two day old Red Deer carcass which was killed and eaten (mostly) by the wolves but only a Carpathian Brown Bear appeared on the third night at the location. Two days later – on our last night session – we randomly came across a pack of 4 individuals in the Hargita Mountains just before dawn. They just caught a young female Red Deer and they hardly eaten any of it yet. They were reluctant to go away (amazing!) as most probably only the alfa male has eaten well. They lingered around for about an hour so we even got daylight (barely) views! In the evening they returned to the carcass and consumed it all. This time we watched them from a considerable distance. What an unbeatable experience to spend a dawn and a dusk with wild wolves! We also learnt how clever they are and how they hunt, a real teamwork and using the advantages of the terrain. The pack we saw pushed the young deer to a fence and brought it down there.

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 at least two individuals. 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.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

A commonly encountered species on the tour. We saw a total of 105 individual on the tour. There were 73 in the Dobrudja area and a further 32 in Transylvania.

European Wildcat *Felis silvestris*

After an extensive search we had superb looks of one in the Danube Delta. It was a nice big individual which we could watch for minutes along a forested channel at night. Later we also saw one in Transylvania but it was a rather distant and quick view, as it was shy and quickly got away. It is not easy to see proper pure Wild Cats in Europe, there is much hybridisation with domestic cats. So one must take great care to rule out any hybrid when claiming this species.

Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*

It was only seen by some of the group when one was crossing the road in the Hargita Mountains by a small stream at 03:20 in the morning. They are widespread in Romania in all sort of habitat but difficult to observe in riverine habitat and somehow in the Danube Delta they tend to be very shy. The best bet to connect with one is on the large fishpond systems scattered around the country but we had no luck at our stake-out.

Stone (Beech) Marten *Martes foina*

It was suprising that we managed to see 4 different individuals. One was seen in Dobrudja, one in the Danube Delta and two in Transylvania. All observations were after midnight but habitat was variable ranging from Rocky Gorge to village gardens. It is a fairly common species around villages but they are infrequently seen due to their secretive and nocturnal habits.

Eurasian Badger *Meles meles*

A single observation of this handsome European mammal in the Dobrudja area. They are rather secretive in Eastern Europe due to hunting pressure.



Eurasian Badger (left) and Wildcat were handsome mammals to see (János Oláh).

Stoat *Mustela ermine* / **Least Weasel** *Mustela nivalis*

One small *mustellidae* was seen in Transylvania at night. Some of us saw it crossing the track while others had seen its shape and size and bits of the actual body. Final conclusion could not be made but it was most likely a Stoat and not a Least Weasel. The tail-tip was not observed properly so ID was left open, we included in the list as one of the two species.

European Mink *Mustela lutreola*

An absolute highlight of the tour to see two different individuals in the Danube Delta. We obtained perhaps the first notable photographs of wild European Minks in Romania (not camera trap images). This species is definitely amongst the rarest mammals in Europe and currently considered endangered. This species was once widespread from Northern Spain and Western France throughout Central Europe towards the Ural Mountains.

There are very few observations of the species as most surveys were done with live traps (or collected by hunters). In the winter period of 2003 an extensive survey was done when 28 European Minks were trapped (18 male and 10 female) in the Danube Delta area and no American Mink was captured on this survey. So the Danube Delta is probably the last stronghold of the species in Europe. In the Ukrainian part of the delta American Mink has been observed and a skull was identified when the skulls were examined in the Romanian collections (from 1999). So certainly the biggest threat for the species is the presence and expansion of the American Mink from the Ukraine. It is strictly protected species in the EU nevertheless poaching can still be a problem in the Danube Delta in winter (Kranz et al., 2004).



European Mink in the Danube Delta (top and right by Zoltán Nagy and left János Oláh).

Carpathian Brown Bear *Ursus arctos arctos*

The nominate race occurs in the Carpathians. We saw one at our special bear hide in full daylight and there were two more sightings at night. A mother with three cubs and a singleton. A total of six bears were seen.



Brwon Bears (left Zoltán Nagy and right János Oláh).

Northern Chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra*

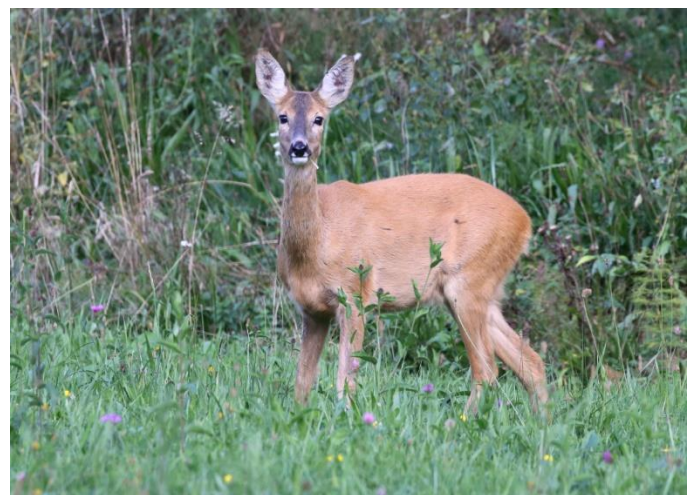
We made a visit to the scenic Bicaz Gorge where we managed to see nine individuals on the cliffs. This is the *carpatica* race in Romania.

European Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*

This species was only observed in Transylvania where we counted 33 different 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 at dawn. They rae the main prey item for Eurasian Lynx in the Carpathians.

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

The September timing of the tour certainly adds the atmosphere of the rutting Red Deer to the tour. We observed about 40 individuals and could hear the voice of the stag regularly at night and at dawn. Amazing creatures and a few nice stags were seen. It looks like they are the main prey item of wolves too as we saw two carcass killed by wolves during the tour.



Red Deer stag (Zoltán Nagy) and European Roe Deer (János Oláh).

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*

A single individual was tracked down in the Hargita Mountains in Transylvania. It was very strange indeed that we had to make a special effort to see one. They used to be so common (also in the Danube Delta area) but now it is rather scarce since the African swine fever virus (ASFV) decimated the entire European population. It is estimated that only about 6-10% of the population remained in Transylvania, but these are now immune to the virus. It will take years for the population to recover. It is great news for small rodents as well as for owls. We can expect their number to build up in the forests of Transylvania in the next 2-3 years as the Wild Boars will not consume all the fallen beech mast from the forest floor.

Greater Horseshoe Bat *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*

Just a single individual was seen and identified in a cave in the Dobrudja area. The *Rhinolophus* species are so much more difficult to trap (mist net) because their manoeuvring abilities by far the best. Their acoustic system is amazing! It is classified as Near Threatened.

Lesser Horseshoe Bat *Rhinolophus hipposideros*

A handsome little bat with the classic roosting position when they cover themselves with their wings. We have seen them at two roosting caves (26+13) as now in middle of September they started to move into their wintering grounds. We also have seen minimum 2 at the big caves where we have joined a bat monitoring excursion. It was interesting to watch them how they avoided the net and even could fly thorough it if there was a sufficiently big enough hole. It is classified as Near Threatened.



Lesser Horseshoe Bat roosting in Transylvania (Zoltán Nagy).

Western Barbastelle *Barbastella barbastellus*

A single individual was trapped in the Vargyas Gorge in Transylvania. Another species which has declined dramatically in Europe and now classified as Vulnerable.

Schreiber's Bent-winged Bat *Miniopterus schreibersii*

It was the most numerous bat species on the tour. We observed 80+ in the cave in Dobrudja and another 100+ were seen in the Vargyas Gorge area. We also trapped several. This species is a fast flyer (60-80km/hour) and 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.

Alcathoe Whiskered Bat *Myotis alcathoe*

We were lucky to see two of these fairly recently described species in the Vargyas Gorge. It was first described in 2001 and was only known from Greece and Hungary. Nowadays its known distribution has expanded to Romania, Spain, England, Sweden, and Azerbaijan, among other countries. It is similar to the whiskered bat (*Myotis mystacinus*) and other species and is difficult to distinguish from them. Our expert Csaba could easily ID it in the hand though!

Bechstein's Myotis *Myotis bechsteinii*

We trapped and seen three individuals in the Vargyas Gorge. An amazing mammal species with huge ears (only the *Plecotus* bats have larger ears) and it is severely declining and now considered as Vulnerable.



Western Barbastelle (top left), Bechstein's Bat (top right), Alcathoe Bat (left) and Schreiber's Bent-winged Bat in Transylvania (János Oláh).

Brandt's Myotis *Myotis brandtii*

A rather hard to come by species. They prefer forest habitat and rarely visit caves. We saw three individuals roosting under the roof of our forest photography hide. It is a supposedly rather rare in Romania but ID problems and roosting habitats could cause this status. So I would rather say it is data deficient.



Brandt's Myotis in the Hargita Mountains in Transylvania (János Oláh).

Lesser Mouse-eared Myotis *Myotis blythii*

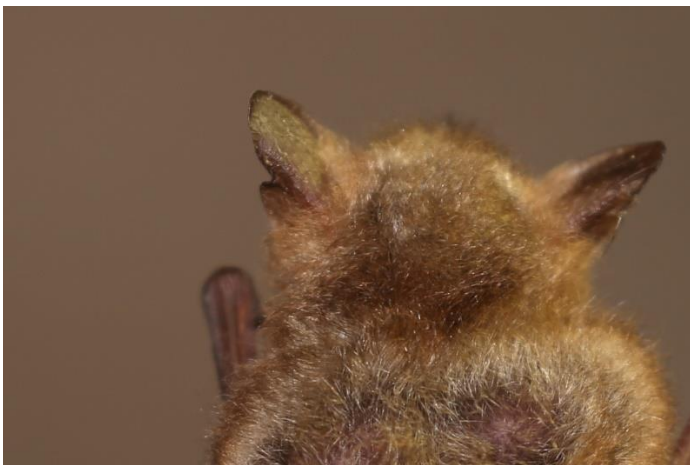
A large sized bat resembles the following species which is more common. It is possible to ID in the hand. They usually whiter below, have a pale spot on the top of the head, the ears are slimmer and the top of the tragus usually not dark. We trapped and seen 8 individuals in Vargyas Gorge. It is classified as Near Threatened.

Greater Mouse-eared Bat *Myotis myotis*

A large and common bat species. It was also commonly encountered on the tour. We saw several in Dobrudja and Transylvania as well. It was also by far the most numerously trapped bat and we caught about 30 individuals.

Daubenton's Myotis *Myotis daubentonii*

We observed several hunting low over the water in the Danube Delta. We estimated about 25-30 individuals in total. 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 Bat (top) and Noctule flying before dusk in Transylvania (Zoltán Nagy). The typical ear shape of Geoffroy's Bat (left) (János Oláh).

Geoffroy's Bat *Myotis emarginatus*

A single individual was trapped and seen in Vargyas Gorge in Transylvania.

Noctule *Nyctalus noctula*

These large bats are often seen flying in daytime especially in September and October when they migrate to their wintering grounds. We have observed several individuals both at dawn and dusk in Transylvania.



Red Deer stag on the run in Transylvania (János Oláh).

Next tour dates:

2021: 7-15 August (1590 euro/person; SRS 160 euro/person): **3 places left**

European Bison extension: 15-18 August (520 euro/person, SRS 60 euro/person)

2022: TBA

European Bison extension: TBA



SAKERTOURS

Sakertours Eastern Europe
Hungary, Slovakia and Romania birdwatching and bird photography tours

www.sakertour.com and www.ultimatesakertours.com

sakertour.office@gmail.com



Sakertours Eastern Europe: Romania Mammal Tour 2020
sakertour.com & ultimatesakertours.com