

Danube Delta - 16-17 May 2004

by Renton Righelato

In mid May, I had a business meeting in Bucharest on to which I managed to add a couple of days to visit the Romanian part of delta of the Danube. It is a huge area, the biggest wetland in Europe, and not easy to access without a guide. So I made contact with Dragos Onciulenciu who runs a fishing and bird-watching tour business in the Delta and arranged to spend a couple of days based on his "floating hotel", moored near Tulcea. I was the only guest, lavishly entertained by Dragos on what turned out to be a converted prison hulk that predated even Ceaucescu. The conversion was actually quite good, with the exception of the narrow board beds, and the site, in a quiet spot on the St Georges Channel, was lovely.

The Delta is huge and it takes at least a week to see it properly. I had a day and a half, so I planned an itinerary with Dragos to see the birds I was most interested in - my key targets were Slender-billed Gull and Paddyfield Warbler. Wherever we went, Lesser Grey Shrikes, Rollers, Bee-eaters covered telephone wires and any other suitable perch; Red Footed Falcons outnumbered kestrels. Herons were ubiquitous: I saw Grey, Purple, Night, Squacco, Little Egret, Great White Egret, Bittern, Little Bittern; and White Storks were as tame as Robins.

We took off first around the southern side of the Delta, to an area of lagoon which White and the rather dirty Dalmation Pelicans frequent. They were ther, but more importantly, in the reeds with a Marsh Warbler-like song, were several Paddyfield Warblers; much more distinct than the field guides would have you believe, with their capped appearance, sandy bodies and long tails.

A few kilometres further, beside a derelict shoe factory (post Ceaucescu much of the manufacturing economy collapsed, leaving derelict factories and towns full of unemployed people), in what was probably an old waste water reservoir, were hundreds of Black Headed and Mediterranean Gulls breeding and standing out among them a few giraffe-like, Slender Billed Gulls! Great! Ticks ticked, I could go on and enjoy the hundreds of Collared Pratincoles mobbing me, the Black-winged Stilts, Black, Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns and many of the other birds of southern European marshes. In scrub a little inland, singing Barred Warblers took me by surprise and it was a delight to see plentiful Red Backed Shrikes.

In my day and a half, I saw some 120 species and there were around 120 more species that I would probably have seen if I had spent a week there and done the area properly.

Although it is internationally recognised as a habitat of global importance, this is an area under threat. Much of the Romanian part of the old Delta is privately owned (by powerful establishment figures) and is gradually being eroded by development (the growing part of the delta is in the Ukraine whose environmental credentials I know nothing of). Hunting and fishing are major businesses in Romania - I was told that the Prime Minister is also President of the Hunting association - and so I was disturbed to find the carcass of a White-tailed Eagle on a beach in my wanderings, cause of death unknown (we collected it to take to the Biosphere Reserve's laboratory).

Although there was much I found difficult to accept in the country - all the Romanians I spoke to complained of the corruption, there is clearly a lot of racial intolerance, there are gross and growing inequalities in wealth and the central plain is a hedge-less agricultural desert - the Delta and the forests are still spectacular and I would love to spend enough time to see them properly.

For anyone interested in seeing the Danube Delta properly, Dragos has sent me a proposal for a week tour for a small group (no more than 10), using in his ship hotel as a base for going around the area; best time May to mid June. Contact me if you are interested.