MOLDOVA
24TH JUNE – 1ST JULY 2018

ORIOLE BIRDING TOUR REPORT
TOUR LEADERS
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24<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2018
It was with great excitement that we met at Luton Airport for our overnight flight to Chisinau. As a
ground breaking new destination, this was going to be a proper adventure and we had a really good
team to make it a success.

25<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2018
The flight arrived on time and we were through immigration in a flash and after collecting our
luggage, we met up with Laurentiu to begin the journey north. Only the most loyal Moldovan could
call Chisinau pretty as the wide boulevards contrasted sharply with the very soviet style tower
blocks, but there were plenty of Common Swifts circling overhead. We finally left the city behind
and stopped for breakfast at a service station where the coffee was good and where House Martins
and Barn Swallows were hawking over the adjacent fields. The roads were not in the best condition
so our journey was rather ponderous but the sun was out and the countryside although quite flat and
uninspiring looked good for birds as there were plenty of hedgerows and fields of wild flowers. Red-
backed shrikes began to appear regularly on overhead wires, Common Starlings and Tree Sparrows
were frequent roadside visitors, a small lake held fifteen Great White Egrets and a couple of Common
Coot, while another had a Little Egret, a Grey Heron and the first couple of White Storks. Two
European Bee-eaters and a Common Hoopoe flew overhead, while a brief stop saw a dark morph
Booted Eagle fly right overhead, and a Black Kite also drifted over here. We reached our very pleasant
guesthouse and after check in and time to refresh, we met for a pre-lunch walk around the village of
Glodeni on a sunny and warm late morning. Greenfinches, Goldfinches, House and Tree Sparrows
were common around the crops, a few Collared Doves were on wires or gravel piles and small
numbers of Linnets were also present. A pale morph Booted Eagle gave great views as it circled low
overhead before gaining height and drifting away, three Common Ravens included a displaying bird
and White Storks, Great White and Little Egrets, a Purple Heron with neck fully stretched and a
Great Cormorant also passed overhead. A Black Redstart sang from high in an avocado tree, a couple
of Eurasian Turtle Doves dashed through and were gone, a Crested Lark sang briefly from a roadside
perch and we saw three Scarce Swallowtails, an Eastern Dappled White and a Meadow Brown
butterfly before we headed back for a very tasty chicken lunch. The remainder of a hot afternoon was
spent scanning the roadside vegetation from the Cobani Road, where every other bird seemed to be a
Red-backed Shrike, but we also had superb views of Black Kites, Common Buzzards and a Lesser
Spotted Eagle, while further Common Ravens were in the ploughed fields, a couple of singing Corn
Buntings were noted and butterflies included Clouded Yellow and Marbled White. Moving along to
the Cobani Quarry, we enjoyed some lovely views of European Bee-eaters; probably five birds in total
as they hawked overhead or sat preening in bare branches. It was also lovely to hear purring Eurasian
Turtle Doves here, and this site capped a good day for this declining species with a day total of at
least twenty birds. A few Tawny Pipits were seen in display flights, but none really gave themselves
up for good views, juvenile Yellow Wagtails and Crested Larks were feeding on the mounds, as were
large numbers of Common Starlings, a few Linnets, Goldfinches and Greenfinches and Tree Sparrows
were pretty much everywhere we looked. A couple of singing Great Reed Warblers showed well but
briefly in the increasing breeze, we had exceptional views of at least five different Golden Orioles
with two males and a female, followed by a pair allowing us to get everyone on the through the
scopes; a rare occasions for this notoriously difficult to see species.
Sand and House Martins were overhead, a female Marsh Harrier quartered over a sunflower field, more Corn Buntings jangled from their exposed perches and a couple of male Northern Wheatears showed nicely. A couple of Common Cuckoos were heard but not seen, we added our first three Wood Pigeons of the trip, a Common Hoopoe flew overhead and several Silver-studded Blue butterflies added a splash of colour before the sun went in and we headed back at the end of an enjoyable, but tiring first day.

26TH JUNE 2018
The day began overcast but after an hour or so the sun came out and with there being no breeze, it was a hot day. We set off from the guesthouse, but were soon stopping for the first of many Great Spotted Woodpeckers seen today, and we hadn't got much further before a pair of Little Owls on telegraph poles had us stopping again and we enjoyed excellent views of these birds before they decided to move away. We also had nice views of a male Marsh Harrier here, as well as three Common Cuckoos flying overhead together. Continuing on, we came across a series of fishponds and soon added the first of seven Black-crowned Night Herons, four Purple Herons and two cracking male Little Bitterns. Great Crested Grebes were present on the water with chicks, a few great White Egrets flapped lazily overhead and a Black-winged Stilt feeding in the margins was a surprise before it was flushed by sheep coming to drink. Several Common Terns were present and a song flying Common Whitethroat was also noted. Moving on, we arrived at the Padura Domneasca; an area of mature oaks, birches and poplars, where we would spend most of the day and it provided us with some superb birding and butterfly watching. An area of reed beds at the entrance produced four very showy juvenile Bearded Tits, a couple of White Wagtails and brief views of a reeling Savi’s Warbler, while the first of today's eight Common Hoopoes and a Reed Warbler were also present. Blue and Great Tits, Yellowhammers and a few Common Nuthatches were the first birds seen along the track, and we enjoyed excellent views of a Middle Spotted Woodpecker. In fact we would see another seven of these birds today, but only one male. They were extremely vocal even when we couldn't see them, and the true count was into double figures. As the day warmed up butterflies began to appear with at least ten Scarce Swallowtails and scores of Holly Blues and Meadow Browns being joined by a few Common Blues and a couple of Marbled Fritillaries. A pair of Booted Eagles displayed briefly, one or two Eurasian Turtle Doves were seen in flight or heard purring out of view and amazingly a couple of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers flew in and landed on a telegraph wire giving excellent views, while a Wryneck sat on some dead vegetation underneath them. Silver-washed Fritillaries began to emerge and increased in numbers throughout the day with an estimate of almost two hundred being present, Green-veined and Small Whites were seen in small numbers, as were Red Admirals and a few more Commas and second generation Maps, as well as a single Large Skipper and Clouded Yellow which completed the morning's butterflies. We heard several Blackcaps, but only saw one male, a male European Robin was heard singing but not seen and a couple of marsh Tits seen briefly took us up to lunchtime. After, a very enjoyable al fresco picnic complete with the best sour cherry jam we'll probably ever taste, we headed deeper into the forest. A few Song Thrushes and Blackbirds were noted, as were two soaring Black Storks, the only Common Chiffchaff seen though others were heard and more of the commoner species already seen were added. A few Weaver’s Fritillaries showed nicely, a single Peacock flew by, as did a Speckled Wood. Three Eurasian Jays were counted in total but were seen poorly, a juvenile European Robin flitted low down and a frustratingly elusive female flycatcher could not be assigned to a species. Hawfinches were heard but not seen, a party of “white-headed” Long-tailed Tits passed through and we drove down to the river at the Romanian border along a track where literally hundreds of Chaffinches were flushed from the puddles as we went. We also had reasonable views of a Grey-headed Woodpecker here, as well as a White Admiral, a few Banded Demoiselles and our visit was completed by a flock of thirty or so Black-headed Gulls flying overhead. What a place!! We headed back towards Glodeni, but stopped at some steppe known as Suta de Movila and immediately had six European Bee-eaters when we got out of the bus. A couple of singing Corn Buntings were present and there was a large Great Cormorant colony is some dead trees. Careful scanning here also produced our first White-tailed Eagle of the trip; an adult that was sate really low in the cormorant colony.
A Sky Lark sang overhead, a male Golden Oriole perched up very obligingly for yet more scope views of this usually shy species following yesterday’s success, a distant pale morph Booted Eagle and Black Kite soared high and an Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow was a new butterfly and a great way to end what was an amazing day.

27TH JUNE 2018
Today was a long transfer day but we did manage a couple of short stops before lunch before the afternoon was punctuated by heavy rain. It began well with a female Syrian Woodpecker showing very well in the trees outside the hotel; its lack of the connecting black line on the moustachial stripe to the nape quite obvious as we watched it in the scope before it flew off. A Common Raven was also being mobbed by a pair of Golden Orioles before we set off. As we travelled en route, the usual roadside species were seen with a few Red-backed Shrikes, Turtle Doves, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harrier, Great White Egret, Grey Heron and Black Kites noted. A stop at Nicorei proved very productive as we picked up three Great Grey Shrikes including one with a sizeable mouse in its bill on a short stretch of telegraph wires and a pair of Lesser Grey Shrikes was also present nearby for a very good exercise in separation of these two similar species. These birds were busy catching beetles form the ground and returning to the same perch. Continuing on to Cherotsu, a roadside falcon had us pull over to the verge and we were soon enjoying excellent views of a pair of Eurasian Hobbies at a nest on an electricity pylon. We watched for them for five minutes or so before moving on, adding several Common Ravens feeding in a stubble field and a few White Storks too. A small pond in the town of Zgimuta held a pair of Mute Swans and the road to Holositna on the Ukrainian border produced our first Fieldfare of the trip, as well as a European Bee-eater, a Great Spotted Woodpecker, a few Linnets, Wood Pigeons and a couple of Common Hoopoes. The town is situated on the Dniester River and consequently there were a few Grey Herons, Great Cormorants and Mallards here; some with chicks, while Black Kites and Common Buzzard gave nice views too. A Common Kingfisher showed beautifully after being initially elusive, a Green Sandpiper was a surprise on the water's edge, a White Wagtail fed on a muddy island and an Eurasian Sparrowhawk circled overhead being mobbed by Golden Orioles again!! We set up everything for our picnic lunch, but the heavens opened and the rain set in for most of the afternoon, so we made our way to our next accommodation at Casa de Luna in the Orhei Gorge. Large numbers of hirundines, particularly Barn Swallows were brought down by the weather and we also saw more Common Hoopoes, while a stop at the Stefan the Great fortress in Soroca produced an unexpected Common Sandpiper on the river bank, as well as a couple of Hooded Crows and lots of Common Swifts. Another European Bee-eater and two Lesser Grey Shrikes were also seen en route. We arrived late afternoon and after checking in, we spent a bit of time scanning the gorge from the bottom of the garden, where we had great views of more Golden Orioles, a pair of Common Kingfishers and a flyover Grey-headed Woodpecker.

28TH JUNE 2018
We awoke to a hot morning with some mist over the gorge but this had cleared by the time we finished breakfast and were ready to go for a walk through the village and into the limestone valley. Progress was slow as we kept stopping for great views of Golden Orioles; Moldova surely has to be one of the best places in Europe to get good views of this species. Several Eurasian Turtle Doves, Common Buzzards and the first of at least fifteen European Bee-eaters were also noted, along with male Great Spotted and Syrian Woodpecker which also showed very well. A male Black Redstart flitted around the gardens, a Eurasian Hobby flew overhead and scanning of the ridge produced fantastic views of a pair of Eurasian Honey Buzzards drifted over, as did a pale morph Booted Eagle. Common Hoopoes were much in evidence with a double figure count, a couple of Northern Wheatears showed well, as did a couple of Black Kites, Common Ravens and White Wagtails, while a Common Kingfisher gave fantastic views as it perched along the edge of the river at close range, occasionally dropping into the water to catch a fish. A Common Moorhen was heard but not seen in a small reed bed, a couple of Sky Larks sang overhead and we finally managed to get views of Ortolan Bunting as we watched an adult feeding a fully grown juvenile before they dropped to the ground and out of view. Masses of Barn Swallows, Common Starlings, House and Tree Sparrows were in the gorge, a couple of Scarce Swallowtails drifted by and we saw our first mammal of the tour when a Red Fox went scrambling through the rocks.
We returned to the guest house to collect our luggage and enjoyed a fabulous picnic on the high ridge, though we saw just a few Common Ravens and Common Swifts, but the view was terrific. It was mid afternoon by the time we set off for the south of Moldova and this turned into a rather arduous and hot journey. However, we did make one superb birding stop at Lake Kongaz. As soon as we arrived Red-footed Falcons were hunting directly overhead with at least eight birds being present, a dark morph Booted Eagle sailed over and was mobbed by the calling falcons, and some of the group flushed a Eurasian Woodcock when getting out of the bus. A Tawny Pipit showed very well, as did a singing Corn Bunting, while Great Crested Grebes, Black-headed Gulls and a Common Shelduck nursery containing at least fifty chicks were quickly noted, and a very brief Ruddy Shelduck gave a fly by but we hope to get better views of this species elsewhere. A flock of twenty or so Caspian Gulls were settled on the shoreline with others in flight over the lake and a squadron of seventeen Great White Pelicans came in and sat on the water and began to fish. A single Black-necked Grebe showed briefly, a couple of great Reed Warblers flew around the reed edge, but it was the herons that were the stars of the show as we enjoyed excellent views of six male Little Bitterns, five or more Purple Herons, an adult and a juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron, at least one but probably two Great Bitterns, a few Grey Herons and three Glossy Ibis in just half an hour on the site. We had to tear ourselves away as another hour or so on the road awaited and we finally arrived in the early evening to our accommodations in the village of Valeni. We saw several large flocks of Rooks, a female Common Pheasant, a couple of Eurasian Turtle Doves, European Bee-eaters, and Red-backed Shrikes en route and the countryside looked a picture in the evening light.

29th JUNE 2018
We began the day with a Lesser Whitethroat in the hotel grounds; the first one that the whole group had seen, and following breakfast we set off to drive the road between Slobozia Mare and Chisimidioi which took us through some steppes and open countryside. This provided us with some superb birding on what was another hot day. Almost immediately, we picked up the first of five European Rollers perched on a wire, a couple of singing Skylarks and Corn Buntings, and shortly afterwards, we hit a hat trick of raptors with single Long-legged Buzzard, White-tailed Eagle and an unexpected Short-toed Eagle. Several European Bee-eaters were hawking overhead, and at least ten Lesser Grey Shrikes gave fantastic views as they perched at close quarters. Spanish Sparrows were also present in this area, but we only really got good views of a single male though others were present and the first Common Kestrels of the tour were also present as they hunted over the maize fields, from where a Common Quail could be heard calling, but as ever was not seen. We continued on to Etulia, where we enjoyed excellent views of a perched Common Cuckoo with another seen later in flight. More European Rollers were present and seen in display flight with one bird heard giving the prehistoric call, and more European Bee-eaters, Common Hoopoes and Red-footed Falcons were noted. A male Golden Oriole was seen in flight, a couple of Marsh Harriers drifted overhead, a male Northern Wheatear was sat on a mound and large numbers of Rooks and a few Western Jackdaws were noted, the latter the first of the tour, as was a Brown Argus butterfly. As we took lunch over the marshes, a female Syrian Woodpecker showed well on a lamp post, a flock eight Eurasian Spoonbills dropped in from high and several squadrons of Great White Pelicans totalling one hundred and eighteen birds passed high overhead. A few Red-footed Falcons, European Bee-eaters and Black-headed Gulls were also on the wing. The sky was darkening all the time and soon the expected thunderstorms passed through, though thankfully, the rain missed us. Eight Whiskered terns were dip feeding over the water, a similar number of Purple Herons was counted, along with a single Black-crowned Night Heron and Little Bittern, two Great White Egrets, three Glossy Ibis and a few Grey herons and we saw our first two Common Moorhens as well as a couple of Great Reed Warblers. The road to Alexandrou Ioan Cuza was poor and flooded in places, so progress was slow but scanning from a hill produced a rather soggy Eurasian Hobby that was at one point mobbed by three European Rollers, a fly over Tawny Pipit, another common Cuckoo and a pair of Grey partridge that were heard by most but seen by one member of the group. The remainder of the afternoon was spent trying to find raptors in what were poor conditions and consequently this was not particularly successful with just a Common Kestrel and a Common Buzzard noted.
There were however large numbers of Collared Doves around Vulkanesti and even more Eurasian Turtle Doves on the road back through Slobozia mare; perhaps fifty birds in total. We arrived back in the early evening at the end of a successful but occasionally trying day.

30th June 2018

We spent the whole day around the huge Lake Beleu and this provided us with some fantastic birding and some very interesting experiences. The day began with a new trip bird outside the guesthouse in the form of a very vocal Green Woodpecker that flew over the road and out of sight. While waiting for the border police to issue permits, we stopped at the side of the road and saw a few European Bee-eaters, several Little Egrets, a couple of Lesser Grey Shrikes, Black-crowned Night Herons, Golden Orioles, a Lesser Whitethroat and a Common Hoopoe as well as a fly over European Roller. Once we had our permits, we headed down the track towards the lake, but it was immediately apparent that this was not going to be an easy journey as thick mud hampered our progress and we got pretty stuck at one point before managing to get the bus moving again. We decided we could go no further and were faced with the prospect of a long walk in hot conditions, but thankfully, an ancient Russian Zil lorry, looking for all the part like something to transport prisoners to Siberia happened to come along and we managed to hitch a lift in this extraordinary vehicle which made light work of the conditions and we were soon at the “oilfield” complete with a nodding donkey from where it was just a short walk to our boats where we met a rather large Grass Snake en route. This was to be an extraordinary experience as we were punted around a certain section of the very shallow water, enjoying the absolute silence as well as a fine selection of birds. Shorebirds were much in evidence and we were able to approach reasonably closely before the birds took flight with counts of three hundred Black-tailed Godwits, sixty two Black-winged Stilts, forty three Spotted Redshanks, thirteen Ruff, two Pied Avocets, seven Wood Sandpipers, fifty Northern Lapwings, and single Common Greenshank, Common Redshank and Greylag Goose. Hundreds of Sand Martins were roosting in the reeds, perhaps already with migration in their thoughts, while a few Whiskered Terns, three Common Terns, small numbers of Black-headed Gulls and approximately two hundred Great White Pelicans soared overhead. Several flocks of Garganey flushed from within the reeds as a Marsh Harrier went over and we estimated at least fifty birds were present, along with six Northern Shoveler, seven Common Teal and a few Mallards. Two Mute Swans were on the lake, as were a few Common Coots, while a few Yellow Wagtails perched on the reed heads, a family party of three Penduline Tits gave brief but acceptable views with another seen when we arrived back on dry land, and a Bluethroat sang unseen form deep in the reeds. Two male Little Bitterns skimmed the top of the reeds, forty three Glossy Ibis dropped in including a flock of thirty six together, a Common Kingfisher zoomed by and a couple of unidentified Terrapins were seen. Two hours flew by and we timed it to perfection as once back on dry land, the inevitable lunch time rain arrived. Thankfully, we were back in the Zil for the return journey and we made the short drive to the largest part of the lake, which was absolutely teeming with birds. Up to eight hundred Whiskered Terns were estimated to be present which was quite some spectacle and a single White-winged Black Tern was among them. A small marshy area held twelve Eurasian Spoonbills, twenty eight Great White Egrets, fifty six Greylag Geese and what was assumed to be the same Black-tailed Godwit flock as earlier. Careful scanning of the water lilies produced at least twelve Ferruginous Ducks, a few Gadwall and Garganey, a further eight Northern Shoveler and the first of four Pygmy Cormorants. Following another excellent picnic lunch, we set off to explore the shoreline further and added single Black-necked Grebe, at least twenty nine Squacco Herons, a further twenty four Glossy Ibis and a few Purple, Grey and Black-crowned Night Herons; one of which was seen to catch two rather sizeable frogs. Two Black Storks drifted overhead, but didn’t stop, a White-tailed Eagle was sat distantly on the opposite shore, a Eurasian Hobby, and a Black Kite were seen at close quarters and three Sedge Warblers were perched up in the reeds. We were a bit disappointed to find that high water levels prevented us searching any further, so we headed back the other way and had great views of Common Hoopoe, a soaring Eurasian Honey Buzzard and Grey-headed and Syrian Woodpeckers. A Hawfinch, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker and a couple of Greenfinches showed briefly, as did a Bluethroat butterfly to round off a memorable day.
1ST JULY 2018
We spent our final morning driving back through Slobozia Mare were we picked up the by usual
now roadside species such as European Bee-eater, European Roller, Lesser Grey Shrike, Eurasian
Turtle Dove, Common Buzzard, Golden Oriole, Common hoopoe and Crested Lark, but we had
bigger fish to fry and after stopping for supplies at Vulkanesti, we drove to an area of steppe and
grassland which was superb for raptors. First up was a Long-legged Buzzard that flushed from a corn
field, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk that dashed low across the road in front of us and a monster of a
female Northern Goshawk that flew the other way and gave prolonged views as it circled overhead.
Our good fortune continued as a male Levant Sparrowhawk appeared close overhead and we then hit
the jackpot as we first found one, then two and then three Saker Falcons circling overhead. The birds
were never close but remained in the scopes for some time allowing us to pick out the salient features
despite the heat haze. Eventually a bird landed on an electricity pylon and we decided to try and find
the area by driving the back roads. Luckily for us, we found the right pylon and there weren’t three,
but four birds present; two adults and two well grown juveniles and we managed to get close range
scope views of this most wanted of raptors. What a superb way to end our stay in the south of
Moldova. Tearing ourselves away, we headed back to Lake Kongaz, where we saw many of the
familiar reed bed species such as Little Bittern, Black-crowned Night Heron, Purple Heron and Great
Reed Warblers, while Caspian Gulls, Great White Egrets and Red-footed Falcons were seen
overhead. A final scan of the lake provided us with a new bird in the form of two drake Common
Pochards. The drive to Chisinau was then uneventful, and upon arrival, we enjoyed a walk around a
city that definitely grows on you. The ant government protests were in full swing, which was
interesting to see, but we were there to get a farewell meal, which was extremely nice and where we
swapped out favourite memories of the tour. Finally, we dropped off Juliet and Anne at their hotel as
they were going on into Romania and made our way to the airport for our late evening flight at the
end of a really enjoyable holiday.

SYSTEMATIC LIST
1/Mute Swan
2/Greylag Goose
3/Ruddy Shelduck
4/Common Shelduck
5/Gadwall
6/Mallard
7/Northern Shoveler
8/Garganey
9/Common Teal
10/Common Pochard
11/Ferruginous Duck
12/Ring-necked Pheasant
13/Grey Partridge
14/Little Grebe
15/Great Crested Grebe
16/Black-necked Grebe
17/Great White Pelican
18/Great Cormorant
19/Pygmy Cormorant
20/Black Stork
21/White Stork
22/Great Bittern
23/Little Bittern
24/Grey Heron
25/Purple Heron
26/Great White Egret
27/Little Egret
28/Squacco Heron
29/Black-crowned Night Heron
30/Glossy Ibis
31/Eurasian Spoonbill
32/White-tailed Eagle
33/Lesser Spotted Eagle
34/Short-toed Eagle
35/Booted Eagle
36/Black Kite
37/Marsh Harrier
38/Long-legged Buzzard
39/Steppe Buzzard
40/Eurasian Honey Buzzard
41/Eurasian Sparrowhawk
42/Northern Goshawk
43/Levant Sparrowhawk
44/Common Kestrel
45/Red-footed Falcon
46/Eurasian Hobby
47/Saker
48/Common Moorhen
49/Common Coot
50/Black-winged Stilt
51/Pied Avocet
52/Northern Lapwing
53/Common Sandpiper
54/Green Sandpiper
55/Wood Sandpiper
56/Spotted Redshank
57/Common Redshank
58/Common Greenshank
59/Black-tailed Godwit
60/Ruff
61/Eurasian Woodcock
62/Black-headed Gull
63/Caspian Gull
64/White-winged Black Tern
65/Whiskered Tern
66/Common Tern
67/Feral Pigeon
68/Wood Pigeon
69/Eurasian Turtle Dove
70/Eurasian Collared Dove
71/Common Cuckoo
72/Little Owl
73/Common Swift
74/Common Hoopoe
75/Common Kingfisher
76/European Bee-eater
77/European Roller
78/Eurasian Jay
79/Eurasian Magpie
80/Western Jackdaw
81/Rook
82/Common Raven
83/Hooded Crow
BUTTERFLIES
1/Scarce Swallowtail
2/Eastern Dappled White
3/Meadow Brown
4/Silver-studded Blue
5/Short-tailed Blue
6/Marbled White
7/Silver-washed Fritillary
8/Marbled Fritillary
9/Weaver's Fritillary
10/Red Admiral
11/White Admiral
12/Speckled Wood
13/Common Blue
14/Comma
15/Map
16/Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow
17/Clouded Yellow
18/Large Skipper
19/Heath Fritillary
20/Large White
21/Brown Argus
22/Chestnut Heath

OTHER WILDLIFE
Red Fox
Grass Snake
Marsh Frog
Banded Demoiselle