

Birdwatching in the Saxon villages of southern Transylvania, Romania, 1-10 July 2007

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The countryside of the Saxon villages in southern Transylvania, one of the better preserved agricultural landscapes in Europe, holds remarkably high species richness and specific densities. Particularly, the density of passerine birds and raptors vividly suggests the situation of Western Europe before the intensification of farming. The old-growth large woodlands, which are non-intensively managed, and the numerous tree stands of various kinds (orchards, wooded riverside, planted poplar rows) are place for numerous woodpeckers and other tree dwellers. The opportunity is given for excellent, easy, prolonged views of many sought-after species such as Lesser Spotted Eagle, Grey-headed and Syrian Woodpeckers, Collared Flycatcher, Golden Oriole or Lesser Grey Shrike, while a little search can lead to more elusive birds such as White-backed Woodpecker, Thrush Nightingale or Barred Warbler, or even Olivaceous Warbler which was an unexpected find north of its mapped range. Looking for birds gives the opportunity of nice encounters with large mammals (roe deer, fox and hare being common), and one can dream of seeing either a red deer, a bear or a wolf, although the later two species usually spend the spring and summer months deep into the forest. Not forgetting the impressive diversity of flowers and invertebrates particularly butterflies.

Here we give a commented list of the 81 bird species we met during our 10 day visit to the area. We stayed in Viscri for 7 nights and in Crit for 3 nights, and visited the areas surrounding the villages of Viscri (roads from the village to Dacia and to Bunesti), Roades, Crit, Mesendorf and Cloasterf in the eastern part of the Natura 2000 site ‘Sighisoara – Târnava Mare’. We also made brief excursions to Fiser (small artificial lake) and Homorod more to the east, and to the Apold – Daia – Vulcan area south of Sighisoara. Although we spent some hours in the forest we never went into it very deeply, and most of the time devoted to birdwatching was spent in more open habitats, particularly meadows, orchards and riversides. We did not look for nocturnal species (hence no record of either Nightjar or owls in our list), and most contacts were made by sight (as PY, the main observer within the pair, is deaf). No doubt that a birdwatching tour covering more habitats (e.g., the lakes and marshes near Bradeni, or the Breite forested plateau near Sighisoara) and not devoting all its evening hours to the excellent local food, schnapps and wines, will score more species, including local specialities we missed such as Red-necked Grebe, Ferruginous Duck, or Ural Owl.

Recommended reading – *The Historic countryside of the Saxon villages of southern Transylvania* by John Akeroyd (2006) gives a lot of information on the history of these particular villages and the local way of life, while describing its flora and fauna in detail. Available through www.amazon.co.uk

Recommended contact – The *ADEPT Foundation* (Fundatia ADEPT) operates an information centre in the village of Saschiz. It specializes in sustainable development and the conservation of biodiversity and can help in both tour planning and accommodation. Contact info@fundatia-adept.org or through their website www.fundatia-adept.org. Calls are welcome in English, German and French (at least) if you are not fluent in either Saxon or Romanian.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* – Occasionally seen, one or two along water streams and ponds, mostly birds of the year indicative of post-breeding dispersal.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* – A breeding pair in most villages, either on the church (e.g. Roades), the school (Viscri) or an electric pole (Mesendorf). The 2007 breeding season was obviously a good one with 3-5 almost fledged young in each nest we saw. Up to 12 birds gathered on a freshly harvested meadow south of Viscri.

Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* – Only two sightings near Viscri.

Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* – Again, two sightings near Viscri.

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* – One subadult male between Crit and Mesendorf was the only contact with the species.

Buzzard *Buteo buteo* – A common species, family groups with recently fledged juveniles encountered every day.

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina* – Seen daily in the Viscri – Dacia area, up to c. 10 birds a day, also one near Mesendorf, two near Apold and one near Cloasterf. Not seen in Roades area. All were adult birds, often observed in very good conditions when hunting rodents. The one near Cloasterf was carrying a garter snake.

Kestrel *Falco tinninculus* – A subadult male in the Viscri area was seen twice.

Hobby *Falco subbuteo* – A few sightings of adult birds in the Viscri area, including one pair chasing insects over the reedbed along the road to Bunesti, and one bird catching a Swallow over Viscri main street.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* – One breeding pair (two downy young) at the small artificial lake south of Fiser, outside the limits of Natura 2000 area.

Common Sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos* – One bird at the small artificial lake south of Fiser, no indication of breeding.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas* – Observed almost daily, usually by pair. One young seen between Viscri and Crit.

Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* – Uncommon. Seen only in the Viscri area where it should breed (song heard), up to three birds together, all adult.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* – Breeding at Sighisoara (and possibly in some of the larger villages along the main road ?) but absent from the secluded villages. One singing at Crit remained unmated.

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* – A handful of contacts with single birds.

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* – Regularly seen along the roads from Viscri to Bunesti (rows of poplar trees, up to three birds together) and to Dacia (on disused structures of previous hop field), adult birds only.

Swift *Apus apus* – Breeding at Sighisoara but not in the old villages where birds on feeding trip can be seen occasionally.

Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* – One colony of 12-15 pairs one kilometre south of Bunesti.

Hoopoe *Upupa epops* – Not encountered within the limits of Natura 2000 area, but one between Homorod and Mercheasa, east of Rupea.

Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus* – A rather common species in semi-open habitats (wooded riversides, orchards, poplar rows).

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* – Only two contacts, near Apold and near Roades.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* – Seen twice in the forest, near Viscri (young bird) and near Cloasterf (adult).

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* – Common. The commonest woodpecker within the area, found in any habitat with trees, from deep forest to village main street.

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus* – Far less common than Great Spotted (possibly by 1:10), found near villages (including the garden of Viscri fortified church) and in woods along rivers.

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos* – Very good prolonged sightings of two confiding birds in the forest above Cloasterf.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor* – Decidedly a scarce species, since only one bird was seen, flying above the village of Crit, despite long searches in theoretically favourable habitats such as old orchards.

Woodlark *Lullula arborea* – Common breeder in dry meadow habitat with bushes, often seen in family parties with recently fledged young.

Skylark *Alauda arvensis* – Much scarcer than the previous species.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica* – Very common breeder in villages.

House Martin *Delichon urbica* – Common breeder in villages, locally very common on modern buildings along the main road.

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* – Scarce. One seen between Viscri and Dacia. Breeding (young seen) in dry meadow above Cloasterf.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* – Rather common both on forest edge and along wooded streams.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* – Very scarce breeder, seen only near the recently dammed ponds between Crit and Mesendorf, where a colony of less than 10 pairs had fledged youngs. The males showed a variable plumage pattern intermediate between that of the Italian subspecies *cinereocapilla* and that of the Balkan subspecies *feldegg*, as reputedly usual in Romania. One was very like *feldegg* but for a dark grey (not black) nape and rear crown, another showed the so-called ‘*dowbrowskii*’ pattern with an incomplete white supercilium and a thin white gular stripe.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* – Common breeder in villages and along water streams, also commonly found in woody areas such as dense orchards.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula* – Uncommon breeder seen in various cool and often wet woody habitats from forest to densely vegetated riverside, also in Sighisoara old cemetery.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* – One adult seen near Roades in favourable breeding habitat.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* – Very common breeder in villages, one pair in almost every farmyard.

Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* – Uncommon breeder in Viscri area.

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* – Breeding in low density in meadow landscapes, also exploiting reedbeds.

Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* – Status similar to Whinchat; the two species occasionally occur side by side.

Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* – Very scarce breeder: one pair with three young at the roadside farm midway from Viscri to Dacia was the only record.

Blackbird *Turdus merulus* – Widespread breeder in low density, very shy.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* – One bird in juvenile plumage one kilometre north of Dacia was an unexpected sighting and may be indicative of breeding in the area, although post-fledging dispersal from the Carpathian mountains cannot be dismissed.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* – Widespread breeder in rather low density (seems to be more frequent than Blackbird), very shy.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* – Less abundant breeder than Song Thrush although widespread.

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* – Probably very localised, as one pair feeding young at nest between Crit and Mesendorf was the only contact with the species despite the fact that suitable habitat is common and has been well surveyed.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* – Seen (possibly breeds) in reedbed at the recently dammed ponds between Crit and Mesendorf.

Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida elaeica* – A total of c. 10 birds, both adult and recently fledged young, were well watched south of Roades and south of Crit in dense osier-like willow stands near small rivers, a typical habitat for the species. The surprise was to see that *The EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds* (1997) does not mention the species north of the Carpathian mountains: recent range expansion?

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* – This elusive species was seen twice, one adult south of Bunesti and one juvenile south of Roades.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* – Another elusive species, seen less than ten times.

Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* – Widespread breeder.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* – Uncommon breeder, only a handful seen.

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* – One bird south of Roades was the only contact.

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* – Uncommon. Seen at riverside near Crit and Viscri, no indication of breeding.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* – Three birds together near Crit may have been indicative of post-breeding dispersal better than local breeders.

Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis* – Adults and young birds seen near Crit and Roades, and (outside Natura 2000 boundaries) near Homorod.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* – Two seen near Roades, no indication of breeding.

Marsh Tit *Parus palustris* – Widespread breeder in various habitats from forest to riverside.

Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus* – Uncommon breeder, greatly outnumbered by Great Tit (possibly 1:100 ratio).

Great Tit *Parus major* – Very common breeder.

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* – Common breeder.

Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* – Only one seen, in forest above Cloasterf.

Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* – Breeds in poplar rows near Viscri and in riverside vegetation between Viscri and Dacia.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* – Very common breeder.

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* – Breeds locally, e.g. in Viscri area.

Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* – A more widespread breeder than the Lesser Grey Shrike, although at low density. The two species can easily be seen perched on the same bush or telephone line, allowing interesting comparison in size, structure, and plumage.

Jay *Garrulus glandarius* – Widespread and common, often in groups of 3-5 individuals.

Magpie *Pica pica* – Widespread in low density.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* – A common breeder at low density, gathering by 10-15 at rich feeding places such as village dump (e.g. Viscri) or freshly cut meadow.

Raven *Corvus corax* – Not a rare breeder.

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* – Common breeder in villages and in the countryside. Mobile groups of juveniles gathering by the hundreds.

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* – Abundant breeder, particularly in villages. A gathering of over 140 individuals was observed midway from Viscri to Dacia.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* – Abundant breeder, particularly in villages.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* – Widespread and abundant breeder.

Serín *Serinus serinus* – Only one seen, at Daia.

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* – Localised breeder (e.g., Apold area), far less common than Chaffinch and even than Goldfinch and Linnet.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* – Widespread at low density.

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* – Localised breeder. A few groups of 10-20 individuals were indicative of post-breeding gathering.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* – Common, mostly along streams bordered with high willow or poplar trees. Post-breeding gathering of at least 50 near Crit.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* – Common breeder.

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* – One seen between Viscri and Dacia in suitable breeding habitat was the only contact with the species.