

Redbreasts in Rumania

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On 15th November 1969 I flew from London via Beirut to Qatar. I spent four days in and around Doha, the capital, and in discussions with Sheikh Qassim bin Hamad al Thani, the Minister of Education, who is also Chairman of the Oryx group of my Survival Service Commission of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (I.U.C.N.). Then I flew to Abudhabi to see the ruler, His Highness Sheikh Zaid bin Sultan al Nahayyan, on behalf of the World Wildlife Fund. I continued my journey to Delhi for the ten-day General Assembly of the I.U.C.N. Then on to Nagpur to visit Kanha National Park. From there to Bombay en route for the Gir Forest reserve.

These exotic wanderings were exciting enough but the real high spot of my trip turned out to be an interlude in Rumania on my way home. I landed in Bucharest on 8th December and was met by Professor Valerius Puscariu of the Rumanian Academy of Sciences who keeps Rumania in touch with the International Wildfowl Research Bureau (I.W.R.B.). Also there was my old friend Tom Leuret from the Netherlands with whom I was to spend some of the most exciting days geosuing that I have known. We motored, not without some tribulations, to the Marine Research Station at Agigea, 8 km. south of Constanta on the Black Sea coast. There we were well received by Dr. Tonel Andriescu, the Station Director. Eventually, on the 10th December we met up with two other Dutch ornithologists, Rens Visser and Adriaan Dyksen, who had been carrying out observations since 28th November in the rota arranged by the Goose Research Group of the I.W.R.B. In 14 days they had counted 38,000 geese, mostly White-fronted, and estimated the total population to be about 50,000, from five roosts. They had only seen some hundreds of Red-breasted Geese, but Eckhart Kuyken of Belgium, who had been in the rota from 3rd to 13th November, had seen 3-4,000. So our appetites were well whetted.

We stayed in the cottage of an archaeologist in the Histria ruins, a pleasant, wild place among the excavations of the ancient citadel. On 11th December we saw little because of fog, but the next three days were quite fantastic and I quote directly from my diary:

Friday, 12th December. What a day of days! Tom and I were up at 5.0 a.m. Rens and Adriaan were starting later for Turkey and we had said goodbye to them the night before. We motored to Sinoie, meeting a torrential rainstorm so that the turning down from the main road was a raging milky river. The middle of the road was still mostly above water but the ditches on either hand were rising. About two kilometres before Sinoie we stopped and made ourselves a breakfast of bread and cheese. At 7.15 the flight began. The geese came in great masses about 1½-2 km. to the north of the road and went down in two principal places, one just over the hill and the other just below a communal tractor and farm machinery station (apparently with no road access) on the hill beyond. The geese made a dark patch on the green of the sprouting wheat in the middle of a field of perhaps 500 acres. Could Whitefronts sit so thick? Such sounds as we could hear gave no conclusive indication of the species though we felt that some at least must be *Branta ruficollis*. The weather seemed to be improving with the light. By the end of the flight we thought that between 6,000 and 7,000 geese had settled in about three places. None was less than half a mile from us. To give the weather time to improve we moved, when the flight was over, down into the village of Sinoie, where we met the young man with whom Prof. Puscariu had left a note asking for accommodation in the former Mairie should it be required. We bought a water bottle to supply the little squeegee which cleaned our car windows—the most essential feature for goose-watching and goose-finding in these parts. Then we returned to the geese, and parked the car beside a Communal Farm. There was nothing for it but a long, muddy walk. We started walking across plough and quickly discovered that it was simply not on. Fortunately I spotted a road over to the east which would take us north towards the geese. We plodded up this road in the mud, slipping backwards half a pace at every step. The geese were mostly out on the young wheat on our left, but some were going in to some maize 'stubble' from which the main stalks had been cut and stooked. Our objective was a walnut tree standing by

the road. If we could reach it and use Tom's two telescopes, one of which I carried, we should know whether these geese that we had watched flighting in were in fact in significant quantity Red-breasted.

So we came to the walnut tree and looked out over the young wheat and the nearer maize 'stubble'. The telescope could just be rested in the lowest fork of the tree, and through it I could see that the main flocks on the green wheat field were Red-breasted Geese. There were at least thousands of them. Perhaps three thousand. In total there were certainly more Redbreasts than Whitefronts. Many Whitefronts and perhaps some Redbreasts were flitting into the maize field where they were very hard to see. In front of us on our right was a field in which the maize stems still stood, affording us cover for a potential approach to the geese in the 'stubble' ahead, where the stalks had been cut and stooked. So, as we walked up the hill, we bore right through the standing maize stalks, into dead ground. Heavy rain was approaching, and we sat on some stooks for a while to let it pass. Then we plodded on through the maize. We came upon the fresh tracks of a wild boar which had run out of the maize ahead of us. Presently we swung left towards the ridge and towards the geese, and came almost at once to the edge of a sand quarry. We jumped down into it and walked across. It offered shelter from the now continuous rain under its upwind overhanging cliff. We moved to the edge overlooking the geese, and it was from this point that our most valuable observations were made. Already there were Whitefronts within 100 yards of us in the maize stubble. These were constantly being joined by Redbreasts. They were often below us so that we could see the tops of their wings as they flitted in and landed in the thick cover and this demonstrated what was something of a surprise to me—the conspicuousness of the white edges to the secondary and primary coverts making a great hoary bar along the top of the wing. This paleness was especially noticeable in the young birds, of which there were a great many. The next surprise was the fact that they were prepared to drop into the relatively thick cover of the maize field among the Whitefronts. To be sure, they were never at ease there and parties kept flushing and flying out to the green wheat beyond. But large numbers in thick clusters could be seen from our sand pit vantage point from which we looked slightly down on

them. Only their backs showed above the maize stalks and among the stooks. Then came the business of assessing their numbers which was difficult as many were far out on the lower end of the wheatfield. It was now drizzling steadily and using Tom's two telescopes was quite difficult—added to which I found I had dropped one of my gloves somewhere in the tall maize on the way up the hill. But in spite of these handicaps the same total was reached three times over. It was between 3,800 and 4,000 Red-breasted Geese.

By this time the geese had fed up the hill towards our sand pit, and there were Redbreasts and Whitefronts within 60 yards of us as we peered through the grass. There was much coming and going of Redbreasts and one bird with the first five primaries of its left wing pure white was seen twice. There seemed to be a high proportion of young birds with their conspicuously pale cheek pattern. The total experience of all this was so absorbingly exciting that we scarcely noticed the continuous rain. For looking at the geese I had to take off my tall fur *caciula* (hat) so as to show as little as possible against the sky. From time to time low flying Whitefronts would detect us and squeak. After one such there was a flush from our corner of the field. A final estimate of numbers confirmed almost 4,000 Redbreasts and 3,000 Whitefronts mostly now down in the green wheat below us, though some were still hidden among the maize stubble and stocks.

During the final approach and discovery of the strategically placed sand pit I had lost a Constanta-bought glove. By dint of tracking ourselves in reverse we came upon the glove. It was now 1.0 p.m. and we had been with the Redbreasts since dawn—a magical morning, especially when I recall my Redbreast hunts to Hungary, Rumania, Iraq and Persia in the 1930's.

After bread and ham and bread and jam in the car, and a final overall count from the road angle which confirmed the earlier figures we headed N. to look for more geese. Just east of a village called Lunca we saw geese flying low over a sprouting wheatfield between the road and Lacul Golovita. They were Whitefronts and they landed at the far corner of the field among 30 other Whitefronts and 197 Redbreasts which were milling around in the corner of the field almost like Lesser Flamingos. They were 300 yards away, but we had a quite good view of them with seven roe deer in the same field. Beyond the ruined hilltop fortress

of Enisala (Heraklia) we crossed a beautiful marsh in the failing light and saw about 20 Red-breasted Geese rounding up into the wind and heading back towards a green wheatfield, while several Whitefront skeins went out to roost.

It was in every way a superbly eventful day.



Saturday, 13th December. Our second marvellous day among the Redbreasts. We spent the night at the modern tourist Hotel Delta at Tulcea—vast and imposing with quite interesting decor. We had about 35 km. to motor back to the marsh between Enisala and Sarichariol for the morning flight. There was a fresh N. wind and about 2,000 geese came, very late, having plugged upwind from a fairly distant roost. We watched them coming past the ruined fortress on the hilltop at Enisala. There was a group of 20 Greylags and another of four. Redbreasts were scattered through the skeins and there were two or three groups of 20—but no great mass of them. From the hillside at Enisala we saw a Peregrine and far out over Lacul Babadag was an adult White-tailed Sea Eagle. We drank coffee, restocked with food and refuelled the Volkswagen at Babadag and then headed south for Sinoie, calling at Lunca on the way. The field to the east of the village between the road and the lake now held more Redbreasts—352 instead of 197 but fewer Roe (five instead of seven). After doing a juvenile ratio count (84 ad. 60 juv. = 41%) with the telescope, and watching them for a while, we set off for Sinoie. Up by the tractor station on the hill were about 2,800 Redbreasts. Some were flying half a mile to a green field on the skyline. There were virtually no Whitefronts with them. One flock of nearly 1,000 had one Whitefront—the opposite of what can be seen at Slimbridge when we have a stray Redbreast.

We noticed a man walking down from the tractor station (where farm machinery in vast quantity is stored) and

it soon became evident that he was chasing the geese off the land. They rose and settled about three times—losing a few each time, and finally split into two flocks of 1,200-1,400. One went off to the south and could be seen breaking formation about three km. away. The others disappeared to the W. and NW. inland. We sought in vain for the southern group when all had gone, and it seemed unlikely that the geese would go back to that complex of fields. We finally went rather late to a point on the road half way between Sinoie and Histria and walked down towards the lake past a group of tumuli. This we believe to be the area where Hafner and Hoekstra saw the half-million Whitefronts and the 25,000 Redbreasts just a year ago. This year it is straight plough. We walked about two miles down (almost to the lake edge) and the evening flight came out over us, including odd Redbreasts among many hundreds of very high Whitefronts and one bunched, low rushing group of about 60 Redbreasts tearing the air with their wings. We walked home in the dark. It took 1 hr. 20 mins. to drive back to our huge hotel.

I forgot to record a snowfall as we drove to Tulcea after dark on Friday. By Saturday the hills were snow covered and there was snow on the northern side of the trees in Babadag Forest. In the morning on our way to Lunca we had skidded on a bend and done a 180-degree ground loop, ending up facing the lorry that was following us. There was still some snow causing caution as we motored back. We had seen one fox, running for a mile across country past nine roe deer, in daylight and four more in the headlights on the return drive.



Sunday, 14th December. We returned to our old spot on the road between Mihail Viteazu and Sinoie, as about the best vantage point—and the geese predictably overflowed it and went into the great hinterland beyond the main road. We did not see more than a few hundred Redbreasts though about 3,000 Whitefronts. After

the rain of our first days, we had regarded the farm roads as impassable, but now we decided to risk it and headed inland from a farm just south of Mihai Viteazu. We had seen some geese milling in there but it was a long way in, on a mud track. Eventually we saw the geese far ahead, and now came another big surprise. On a patch of maize stubble between two very narrow strips of plough were about 400 Redbreasts. We had seen them in the maize up near the sand pit, but that was next door to a sprouting wheatfield. Here they were in the middle of a great sea of maize stems and stubbles. They were almost directly ahead of us and clustering on the farm road where perhaps a maize cart had been loaded. We approached by stages but the weather was dull and the birds were always on the crest ahead of us. Eventually they flushed out, on the arrival of a farm cart with two horses. They all landed on an open plough—3,000 Whitefronts and 400 Redbreasts. We motored past them but the light was poor and soon they were flying even further inland. So we turned and retraced our tracks back to the main road without mishap. So northward to Baia, turning down to Lunca. The lakeside field was empty. No Redbreasts, no Roe, but a little further on a man with a gun, two dogs and three children. We turned sadly but after passing back through Lunca we stopped and spotted some geese on the landward side of the road. We tried a side turning, but after 200 yards the road between two ploughed fields was totally blocked by a puddle of soft mud. We walked on down to an electric supply pole which made a good rest for the telescope and watched 360 Redbreasts, 250 Whitefronts and four very large, very pale Greylags. These must surely include the 352 Redbreasts and 150 Whitefronts of the day before. After watching them for half an hour we withdrew and went back to Sinoie to walk out to the NE. down to the lake's edge. From the furthest we could get the car it was about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles by the route we took to the water's edge. We saw a young White-tailed Sea Eagle go over just as we started. Later new birds were Jack Snipe, Snipe, Grey Heron, Gadwall and about 50 Shelduck. There were hundreds of Shoveler and Mallard. One lot of 20 Whitefronts from the nearby fields landed at the water's edge, there were two Whoopers and a Mute flew by. As we walked out the earliest skeins of very high Whitefronts began to come out and tumbled into monumental whiffles. Even

then we could not see them landing, and many flew on to the north without losing height. We had reached a small point below the main cliffs of the shore line when the main skeins of Redbreasts appeared from directly inland. Hitherto there had been odd birds scattered along the Whitefront skeins. What came into sight now was something entirely different. The first skein had 600 birds, flying in closely spaced lines at half the height of the Whitefronts. I noticed that they were not calling very much. The second skein was 200 yards behind the first—450 birds—then a little group of 80 and then 850 stretched across the sky. The whole lot passed directly over us. It was one of the most stirring sights that an anserophile could imagine. The Redbreasts did not whiffle, but planed down to land on Insula Lupilor about half a mile from us. Another long but happy walk back in the dark—but only 1,980 Redbreasts. We seem to have lost 2,000 and the total number of Whitefronts was only about 2-3,000. One fox on the homeward drive to Tulcea.



Monday, 15th December. Morning flight beside a high survey pylon about a mile west of the main road and a mile north of Mihai Viteazu. This necessitated tackling one of the now reasonably dry mud roads which had had no traffic on it since before the rains of the previous weekend. Near the pylon the road had some puddles and in one of these we stuck. It was still only 7.0 a.m. and the geese do not start to come much before 7.15. The objective was to get unstuck and to turn the car where there was no turning place but the plough which is incredibly soft. However, with the aid of Tom's little collapsible spade, and with me pushing, the little Volkswagen came out and we got it turned. The flight was very disappointing. By my calculations we should be overlooking the area where the 1,980 Redbreasts had spent yesterday. It was an

overcast morning with visibility rapidly falling as it became light. No great waves of geese came in—only about 1,700 Whitefronts in skeins up to 100. Two lots of Redbreasts came—one of 80 and one of 70 flying tightly bunched again at less than half the height of the Whitefronts. Where had the rest of the Redbreasts gone?

We went down into Sinoie for breakfast of bread and jam and apples. One of the farmers produced the bread and refused payment for it. We made an unsuccessful search of an area where Kuyken had seen geese five or six miles S. of Histria with a roost at the S. end of L. Sinoe.

So back we went to Lunca. The weather had cleared a lot and the sun was trying to shine thinly. The geese were again in the inland field and again the approach by car was precluded by the puddle. But as we decided to walk down we came to a cross road which promised an alternative approach. So back we went to the car and came down another side road through the farm. Thus we could approach to within about 300 yards. We sat watching the geese through telescopes. Yesterday there had been 360 Redbreasts and 250 Whitefronts (the former counted, as on the two previous days, bird by bird—though with the tight walking formations it is quite difficult and some error must creep in). Today there were 371 Redbreasts and 255 Whitefronts. For some of the time they walked towards us, and we had a bread, jam, apple and chocolate lunch in their company. Then the Whitefronts began to flight away. The only improvement they seemed able to find—after a fairly wide circuit—was the far end of the same vast field. After a while the Redbreasts also flitted along the field. Along the road ahead was evidently a puddle round which the geese clustered in an incredibly thick mass—two-thirds Whitefronts, one-third Redbreasts. We moved up in the car to within about 200 yards. The sun was now out. Immediately beyond the geese were two Roe does—directly behind them. Through the 60× Japanese telescope one seemed to be wandering among the geese. It was superb—light behind us, a good rest and adequate height in the car—the geese and the deer against the green of the field with the snow dappled hills of Babadag forest

beyond.

Except for the rain-soaked view from the sandpit this was the closest we had been to Redbreasts on the ground. Their chestnut breasts shone in the sun. It was an exquisite finale for my wild goose chase for the time soon came for the return journey to Constanta to put me on the train for Bucharest.

As we drove south we passed a road I had seen on the way up which promised a view, from the opposite side, of the slopes to the north of the tractor station. We tried it and it did just that. As we watched a small party of a dozen extremely distant Red-breasted Geese came in from the lake flying bunched and low. They flew along the belt of trees beside the railway, and then went down most purposefully below the tree line. At that range there was no way of knowing which side of the trees they had landed. They were at least a mile away. So the Redbreasts kept their secret. They had beaten us on the whereabouts of their biggest flocks on the last three days of our visit and more than ever we valued our good luck of Friday, even though once more today had been a golden day.

In four days with the Redbreasts I shall never forget the unparalleled thrill of discovering that we had thousands of them in front of us on Friday, I shall never forget their closeness to us from the sand pit. Nor shall I forget the skeins of them high overhead on Sunday night. The tight bunch of them in the maize on Sunday morning was memorable too, but the Lunca flock were perhaps the most beautiful of all in the sunlight this afternoon.

This wonderful interlude owed much to the pleasant and undemanding companionship of Tom Lebrét whose enthusiasm for *Branta ruficollis* matched my own. We were, of course, dependent on the arrangements and facilities made available by the Romanian authorities and scientists and would like to express our thanks and hopes that it will be possible to safeguard for the future the international treasure that winters in their country, the geese they know as Gîska gît rosu.

The cover painting for this volume of WILDFOWL attempts to recapture something of the splendour of the spectacle that we were privileged to share.