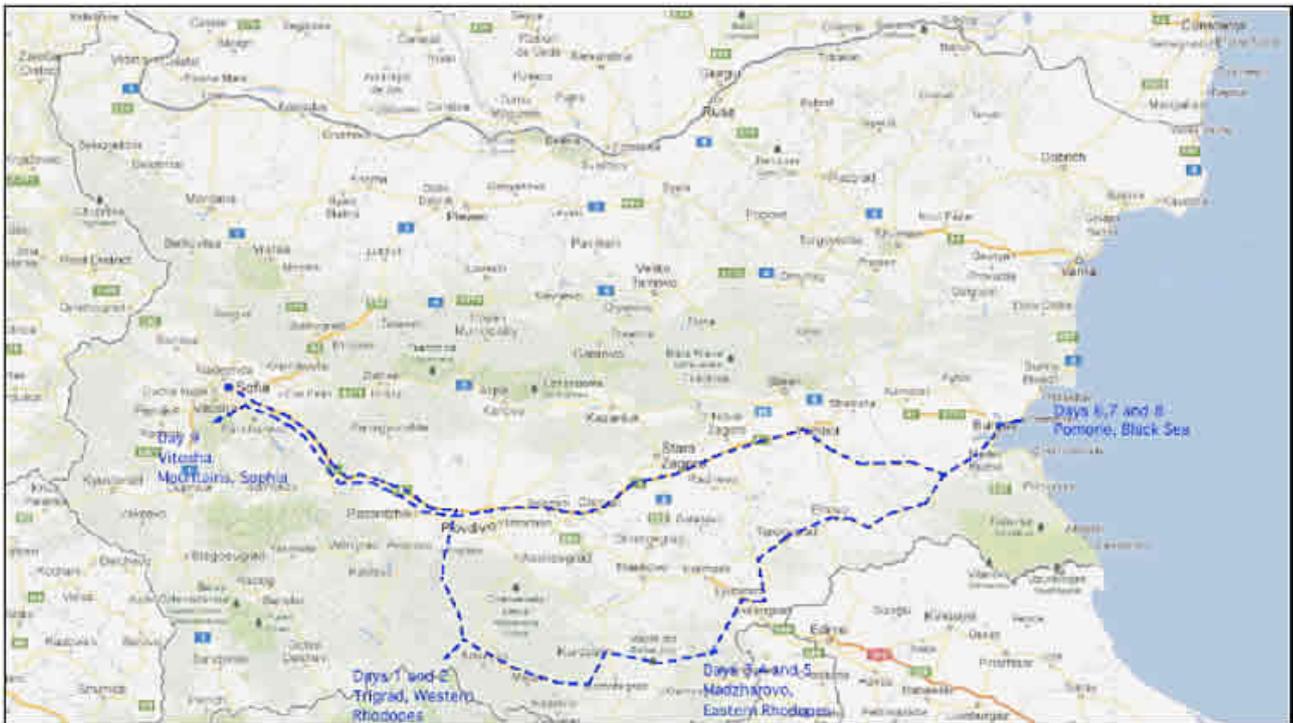


Waveney Bird Club ~ The Rhodope Mountains and the Black Sea, Bulgaria May 2013

Introduction



Bulgaria was a new destination for many on the trip. The country has Greece and Turkey to the south and the Black Sea to the east. The climate is extremely cold in winter with deep snowfall for months on end in mountainous districts. Spring is pretty swiftly dispatched and replaced with blazing summers. Grass was already yellowing in some areas while we were there. The central Thracian Plain on which we travelled back to Sofia from Burgas is flat farmland but very different from the prairies of East Anglia. Small tractors or horse-drawn vehicles were in evidence and newly ploughed fields already had a variety of wild plants growing through because of lack of sprays. Small rice paddy fields were flooded and 'field margins' were often very large with many trees and bushes giving the impression farming was still being carved from the countryside. As we began our journey traveling south-east then south and through the Rhodope Mountains, tobacco growing became very evident. Seedlings were being raised in gardens and transplanted to fields by hand by crouching women while their menfolk gently walked along holding the hose to water in the little plants. Self-sufficiency was evident in all the splendid vegetable gardens with goats and beehives, but so too was the evidence of poverty. The burgeoning wildlife,

wonderful wild flowers, woodland and forest we saw was a direct result of the continuation of a simple way of life (obviously very hard) and no use of pesticides. It was a demonstration of just how much has been lost in Britain in the last sixty years.

Day 1: Monday 13 May 2013 ~ Roger Buxton

With a departure from Gatwick of 06.00 an early start to the day was necessary, with the bulk of the group staying in the airport Premier Inn overnight, nevertheless this still required a 4.00 a.m. start to the day! Thankfully, all group members whether they traveled down on the morning or day before were found at varying positions in the extremely congested and crowded queue waiting to book in. Due to the large numbers of passengers for Easyjet early-morning flights, the chaos caused some members a little consternation and we only just made it in time through passport control, etc.

Take-off was on time at 6.00 a.m. with no delays en route with an arrival in Sofia of 11.10 a.m. where the party was met by our delightful guide Minko and we transferred to a bus. Weather on arrival in Bulgaria was cloudy with spells of sunshine, considerably warmer than back home in England.



We left Sofia on the E80 dual carriage way travelling firstly in an easterly direction towards our first scheduled stop of two nights in the Trigrad region in the Western Rhodopes a journey of approximately 300 km. Initially, bird observation from the bus was very limited; however the high numbers of Red-backed Shrike observed on roadside fence posts and bushes was very noticeable. At Galapica, we turned off the E80 and

headed in a southerly direction taking the 868 onto Stambolijski where we noted a massive White Stork nest sitting atop of the church roof. This huge mass of twigs and grasses was also home to many Spanish Sparrows and looked as though it was as ancient as the church itself. From Stombol we followed the Valley Vacha road to Devin and onto the village of Buynovo and Hotel Popini, situated in the Trigrad zone of the Western Rhodope Mountains just seven kilometres, as the Raven flies, from the Bulgarian/Greek border, where we would be staying for two nights. The Valley Vacha road took us through deep gorges, spectacular mountain scenery and alpine meadows high up into the Western Rhodopes. Always below was the turbulent Vacha River dammed in three places for hydro-electric and water reserves. The weather changed in late afternoon with a fine drizzle and by the evening we had heavy rain.

Two finds of the day other than birds were Lady Orchid and Fire Salamander. Sadly, the salamander was accidentally stood on when it was being viewed and photographed. With a medical inspection and assessment by our first aider, Marky P., it was declared fit and well enough to be released with no obvious injuries except for a tremendous headache. To save any further embarrassment and humiliation, the heavy-footed person concerned will remain completely anonymous in this article, but was given the nickname of 'Crusher'. Further discussions continued afterwards theorizing about Darwin's theory of natural evolution and the possibility that all future generations of salamander could possibly develop crash helmets.

With Montagu's Harrier, Pallid and Alpine Swift, both Black and White Stork, Crag Martin and Black-headed Bunting plus 42 other different species observed on Day One with limited opportunities for bird observation due to travel and rain, nevertheless it was already evident at this early stage that this was going to be one of those very special trips.

Day 2: Tuesday 14 May 2013 ~ Paddy Shaw

Western Rhodope – 'Deliberates and Accidentals'

For many, the pursuit of the 'Gorge Bird of the Trigrad' would be top billing of the whole trip and – for me at least – a close encounter with the wild mountain music of the Western Rhodope and the fabled, 'range-restricted' Kaba Gaida a 'life tick.' Journeys in this region of torrents, conifers and crags can be tortuous, with twisting, pot-holed roads, steep gorges, sliced overhangs pitifully contained by what looked like chicken wire, all accompanied by rushing water, Dippers and Wagtails.



Trigrad Gorge - Wallcreeper site

Trigrad Gorge is an immense piece of geology, with the Trigradska River disappearing into the Devil's Throat cave system, only to emerge 300 metres further down the valley. However, it had been noticed that no detritus from the rushing water emerged with it, leading to suspicions that the lower watercourse wasn't the same river. Tests with dye revealed that it was though, even though the dye took 2.5 hours to re-appear. To try and solve this mystery, two divers entered the cave system to explore the labyrinth – never to surface again: their bodies were never found. This fuelled local superstitions that the Devil's Throat was actually the portal used by Orpheus in his descent to the underworld and led to the plethora of restaurants and hotels in the area called 'The Orpheus.'

Hunkering down in a perilous lay-by at the end of a tunnel cut through the sheer edge of the gorge, we waited below what was believed to be the nest site: a T-shaped slash in the rocks with the two entrances required by our quarry, the elusive and downright weird Wallcreeper.

And we waited...and waited. Minko's face was beginning to look serious, like it did when his target didn't appear at other times on the trip. Ravens and Peregrines provided warm-up entertainment – but where was Elvis? Had the nest site been rejected as too close to the parties of Euro eco-tourists, which must continually stop here?

Then a shout – 'up there!' Bins shot up to the peak of the opposite rock face, with trees somehow finding a foothold in the sheer rock. Some saw it, some didn't! But perhaps this bird knew the ropes – keep them waiting, build the tension, then – with flits of moth-like wings – give them a glimpse, before bouncing from face to face, finally to step into the spotlight, right opposite our viewpoint. More Alice Cooper than Elvis really. Scopes, bins and cameras – just what he wanted! Flashes of crimson wings, a curved beak – across he came, before rounding an edge. Priceless views of the top bird of the trip.

We played it for as long as possible, before it was suggested the nest site was his target and we were starting to overstay our welcome, and his potentially-brooding mate would be giving him a right-old whistling. Minko was smiling now – he told us later of the pleasure he gets from seeing others' pleasure in the target bird. The pressures of being a guide..... We walked through the tunnel to the bus, with the feeling of a football crowd leaving a stadium, their team having stuffed the opposition 6-0.

So, off to lunch at the – yup – Orpheus Restaurant in nearby Teshel, briefly jumping off the bus for a glimpse of three Serin in a field and then re-mounting only to find the restaurant to be only 100 metres further on! The oily chicken soup (previously experienced in Turkey) was accompanied by encounters with iridescent and very large beetles, an overflying Black Stork, Red-rumped Swallows and butterflies, including a 'snouty skipper' (thanks Eric!). Another bonus was the damp shade-loving *Haberlea Rodopensis*, which apparently occurs only in Bulgaria. Back on the bus, for more low-gear, pot-hole avoiding adventures, until a roadside stop to pick up water (and beer!) brought Goshawk, Pallid Swift, Honey Buzzard, Red-rumped Swallow. You daren't take your bins off for a second in this place! I won't mention who nearly jammed an ice cream in their eye in the adrenalin bins-rush to catch sight of the Goshawk, but they know who they are.....

And so to an almost alpine meadow site, catching Whinchat and Ortolan Bunting (the Beethoven bird as far as I'm concerned, as I'm sure it gave him the opening to the 5th Symphony, him being a keen bird watcher an' all), before going on to a two-hour uphill stroll through mixed woodland

in search of Firecrest, Crested Tit and Black Woodpecker – two out of three ain't bad, as the pecker never appeared! The Crested Tit however was delightful – like a Coal Tit on a 1960s day-trip to Brighton – all quiff and attitude. If the trip was a month long, it would have been too short at this rate – I could have spent 30 minutes at least absorbing each new find, not having earned any bars on international birding, but...onwards and back to the hotel.

If you're expecting bird talk now, skip the rest of this section.

This hotel, set in an isolated meadow deep in a Rhodopian valley at the end of 30 minutes of little more than dirt track, was the right location for the next bit.

The Western Rhodope is home to a music as revered and rare and unusual as the Wallcreeper, and particularly, a giant bagpipe, only found in these mountains – the Kaba Gaida.

'Gaida' is a generic word for bagpipe throughout Eastern Europe, and variations on the name are found closer to home, in the 'Gaita' of Spain (particularly Asturias and Galicia). 'Kaba,' however, means 'bass,' and the music, with its complex time-signatures, requirement for virtuosity in the player and almost martial arts-like traditions of 'aural learning' from a master is respected enough to have been represented on the disc accompanying the Voyager spacecraft, (the piece 'Izleial e Delio Haidutin', translated as 'Delyo became a Gypsy') containing selected examples of human achievement.

Thanks to the folks from Neophron and the hotel owner, we were visited by Emil Todorov Cholakov (Kaba) and Nadezhda Dimitrova (vocals) from Devin. The Kaba Gaida sobs in a minor key, and the complex, 'free-time' songs require visual cues for unison, heavily-ornamented verses, interspersed with semi-improvised bagpipe phrases: the open-throated style of singing acting as a foil for the sonorous, deep tones of the Gaida.

With its bag made from an entire goatskin, the long drone pipe draped below the player's right arm and the heavily-ornamented chanter (including its secret 'flea hole' – a small hole placed at the top of the chanter, responsible for much of the 'pip-pop' inflexions in the music), it is a mighty instrument, and Emil was a master of it. He leads a band of 33 Gaidas, the players including his 77-year-old master, and 7-year-old children, reflecting the passing of tradition from one generation to another so vital to national culture (and so casually dispensed with in our own country, with traditional musicians having to act as museum curators). The first half ended with an enthusiastic Hora (circle dance).

fter the log (our own tradition) and Eric's comment that it was amazing what you could do with a goat (further questioning on this didn't seem appropriate at the time), there was a second set, ending with a superb virtuoso performance from Emil (who let me have a go on it!). I was amazed that – after inflating a whole goat – it took very gentle pressure to keep the instrument regulated (you found that as well, didn't you Steve?).

Well, no apologies, but after that, I needed beer... and rakia..... and another beer!

Wallcreepers and Gaidas – not a bad day really?

Day 3: Wednesday 15 May 2013 ~ Carol Elliott and John Garbutt

As we opened our curtains and looked out over the steep-sided, tree-lined valley, with an unusually large area of meadow flanking the fast flowing river, we looked forward to the day ahead. Some (Eurasian) Crag and (Common) House Martins were nesting on the hotel and demonstrated their acrobatic feeding flights – or were they just having fun? The Red-backed Shrikes were again visible close to the hotel. After breakfast, we checked out and our coach returned down the 15 km cul-de-sac, a largely un-surfaced road in the bottom of steep-sided gorges beside fast-flowing, rocky rivers – ideal for the (White-throated) Dippers and Grey Wagtails that were frequently seen there and also for the occasional small hydro-electric power plant. Although it was a bright sunny day, our coach was usually shaded by the steep sides of the gorges, but occasionally we were in the sun as the road meandered along the valley floor. Eventually, the gorge widened and there were signs of small-scale, non-invasive agriculture – hand tools, horse power and certainly no shooting estates or farming monocultures, fertilizers and insecticides that have done so much harm to our Suffolk bird populations.

Continuing on the way to our first stop, we saw a Red Squirrel, and some Alpine Swifts wheeling high above were identified when their white undersides became visible as they banked in the sun. We passed through some small towns and at 9:00 parked outside a derelict former ski-centre hotel in Rozhen. The location enabled our first distant view for some days and we were now 75 km from Greece. The main reason for the stop was to view Pallid Swifts, but we also saw a Lesser Grey Shrike plus Sombre and Coal Tits that were nesting in holes in the concrete electricity pylons. We also noted Yellowhammer, Chaffinch, Honey Buzzard, Whinchat, Black Redstart, (Common) Starling, Hooded Crow, a

singing Mistle Thrush, and a shepherd with his flock and two bear-like Bulgarian sheep dogs that probably wanted to round us up with their sheep.

On the way to our lunch venue, the coach stopped suddenly to enable the rescue of a tortoise that was crossing the road. The coach emptied to look at it and another was found nearby. Although similar in appearance, they were of different species – Hermann's and Spur-thighed.

At 13:30, we arrived in the town of Ardino to buy our lunches in a small supermarket. Numerous Marsh Frogs were calling loudly from the River Arda and we also saw various damselflies and butterflies plus Feral Pigeons and House Sparrows in the town centre.

On our way to the next stop, we noted Jackdaws, a Black Kite and White Storks on their massive nests of twigs that provide high-rise accommodation for various sparrow species. Our next stop was at Dolna Kula above the River Krumovitz where a (Western) Rock Nuthatch had nested. This species builds a nest entrance of mud and, in this case, it was sited below an overhang on a cliff face. Although only visible from a narrow viewpoint some distance away, we saw the bird appear but it seemed nervous of our presence so we soon left. We also saw Black-headed Bunting, Black-eared Wheatear, (European) Bee-eater, Grey Heron, Little Ringed Plover, Common Buzzard, Woodchat Shrike and heard (Common) Nightingales.

A second stop nearby produced (Eurasian) Crag Martin, Black-headed and Corn Buntings, (European) Roller, (Common) Cuckoo and more singing (Common) Nightingales.

At 18:00, we stopped in Rabovo village where there were (Eurasian) Hoopoe, (Common) Blackbird, (Eurasian) Collared Dove, Grey Heron, (Common) House Martin, a light morph Booted Eagle, a White Stork's nest with Spanish Sparrows lodging below, a (European) Turtle Dove and some of us saw a Little Owl before it nervously disappeared.

Our next stop at Sarukaya (meaning Yellow Rock in Turkish) produced Golden Eagle, (Eurasian) Crag Martin, (Common) Kestrel, (Eurasian) Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Cirl Bunting, Sombre Tit and Subalpine Warbler.

Next, we made a brief stop so that our guide Minko could arrange food for the following day. Across a long high bridge, the arrival of a goat-herder was announced by the neck bells of his animals.

At 19:45, we arrived at The Hotel Ray (meaning Paradise in Bulgarian) in the town of Madzharovo situated in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains

just 20 km from the border with Greece. The hotel was well-equipped, but the bathroom was of the wet-room type. This would be alright except that the toilet was fitted exactly where you would stand under the powerful shower and everything in the room, including the towels and toilet rolls were soaked when the shower was used. No doubt, numerous replacements are provided every time the occupancy changes.

The town of Madzharovo has suffered “boom and bust” in recent years. Copper, minerals and a small quantity of gold ore had been discovered nearby and the development of the mines led to a population of 7,000 people. To provide housing, numerous blocks of flats were built to a very poor structural standard so that many now have collapsed roofs and chimneys. The mines have now closed and these buildings are not needed as the population has dropped to just 500. However, one consequence of this dereliction is that it provides plenty of usable wildlife habitats. Thus, after dinner, our tireless guide was able to find us Tawny, Barn, Little and (Eurasian) Scops Owls.

After a long, but very varied and enjoyable day – it was easy to sleep well.



Day 4: Thursday 16 May 2013 ~ Ivan Levitt

Although I couldn't remember ordering a five o'clock wake-up call on our first morning in the Hotel Pau, I certainly got one as two cockerels next to the hotel competed with the local dogs! From my window, a glimmer of light was just showing over the mountains and, sticking my head out, I soon became aware of the dawn chorus. Nightingale was at the forefront as it was just across the road from the hotel. As it got lighter, more birds joined in the cacophony with Cuckoo, Golden Oriole, Blackbird and Starling being prominent. A Little Owl was on the roof of a derelict building whilst a Tawny called in the distance. When the sun came up over the mountain everything was bathed in a red-yellow glow, a magical moment.

There was no time for reflection though as a six o'clock rendezvous with the coach was next on the agenda. Most of the group, well 16, climbed aboard and headed out, over the bridge and onto a stretch of road that we would get to know well during our stay in this area. We were dropped

near a viewpoint above the River Arda at the foot of towering cliffs that overlooked Madzharovo. This area is known as Kovan Kaya, a protected reserve. An exhaustive search for Chukar began but, after scanning countless rocky outcrops and gulleys above us, there was no sign. We did however, locate some pretty good birds: Ortolan Bunting, Rock Bunting, Black-eared Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Peregrine, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Woodchat Shrike and Black Stork to name a few. Whilst watching the cliffs a lot of shouting and bells clanging was coming from the river meadows below. Soon we were in the middle of a cattle drive as the local cowman moved them to higher pastures. The cows were very skittish and did not like all the tripods and people on their mountain, some almost coming to grief on the tarmac surface – and all this before breakfast?

Suitably refreshed we set out again with almost a full compliment over the bridge, but instead of driving up the road we got out and walked through meadows alongside the river and up to the viewpoint where we were earlier that morning. These meadows and hedgerows were alive with birds, butterflies and insects. Eastern Olivaceous Warblers were proving to be elusive as usual, whilst Black-headed Buntings were singing from the treetops. Part of the group took the riverside path and the rest the meadow. Griffon and Egyptian Vultures were spiraling overhead and a Long-legged Buzzard drifted lazily over us quite low. The sun was getting warm and the walk was accompanied by the buzz of insects and the song of Nightingale, Golden Oriole and Woodlark. Reaching the road we started to gain height and walking between two hedgerows made the sun seem hotter. Marky P was catching a lot with his net amongst the vegetation, but a large lizard scurrying across the road was too quick even for him! Coming out of the trees and onto the rocks the temperature rose, so an old mineshaft entrance in the side of the mountain that was expelling cold air from within was a welcome relief. More searching of the rock buttresses and cliff faces produced much the same as earlier as well as Honey Buzzard, Booted Eagle, Alpine Swift and Sombre Tit. A Spoonwing Lacewing *Nemoptera sinuata* sunning itself further along the road from the viewpoint caused everybody to abandon tripods and 'scopes and go off to see this insect. I decided to stay and guard the equipment. In a moment a Southern White Admiral descended on the tripod of Steve's scope and began feeding on the salts left by sweat. It then moved to the 'scope itself and went over every surface that had been touched. It moved around the gathered tripods but only went on 'scopes with no covers. I took quite a

few pictures! I did get to see the lacewing when everybody had come back.

Walking back down the road and across the bridge the group was very spread out, therefore many sightings were missed by all. Converging on the Vulture Centre a very nice lunch, in shady trees, was taken at a leisurely pace. A walk up the hill behind the centre produced Short-toed Treecreeper, but there was very little bird life noted in the heat of this very hot day. There were some impressive information panels beside the trail, the text in Bulgarian that Minko interpreted.

Our afternoon destination was a little village named Borislavsti, but not before a stop for jars of local honey. Leaving the coach, we walked a track heading towards the Arda River, turning alongside fields and areas of scrub that gave up Nightingale, Barred Warbler, Red-backed Shrike, Golden Oriole, Turtle Dove and Cuckoo. Further along the scrub, overlooking another turn of the river, held several singing Olive-tree Warblers. Most of the group stayed around this scrub with some venturing deep into the thickets for views of the birds. Olive-tree, like Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, was very elusive! A couple of Black Kites came up from the water's edge and started circling over the river and were joined by a White-tailed Sea Eagle, a stunning sight. A small group started back, but loitered in area where a Barred Warbler had been spotted earlier. The bird could be heard singing but few had obtained tickable views! I stood some way away photographing a Red-backed Shrike when I became aware of a movement in the bush alongside of me. The Barred Warbler then began to sing, very loudly but it was too close for a picture. The rest of the group caught up and returned to the coach gaining good views of a White Stork flying over the field on the way. Back at the coach a stork's nest nearby was also home to a colony of Spanish Sparrow. The village buildings, just like most encountered on the trip, seemed to be half finished. Windows were missing and bricks seemed to be laid without mortar. Only one thickness of bricks was apparent that, given the bad winters, seems odd?

Heading back towards Madzharovo we took a detour to look for Yellow-bellied Toads. Parking up and walking down a track some people came across a vision out of a Chelsea Flower Show garden. A series of rock pools trickled water ever lower to the path and in the bottom pool were Mark, Minko and Eric chasing around catching these amphibians.

Several smooth newts were also found. We returned to our hotel with just enough time for a shower before dinner. As with all meals encountered on this trip there was little difference. The food was good,

wholesome fare, but had little variety. The evening ended with the usual Log exchange, much hilarity and frivolity, just another day with the Bird Club?

Day 5: Friday 17 May 2013 ~ Chris McIntyre

This morning we remained in the Eastern Rhodopes and ventured off to the main vulture feeding location in the area. Birds encountered en-route were Hoopoe, Cuckoo, White Stork (three) and a Roller.

We arrived at Studen Kladenets Reservoir, the second largest in Bulgaria. It is situated on the River Arda and created behind the Studen Kladenets dam. The dam is part of the Arda energy cascade and was first put into operation in 1957. All the rivers in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains in South Bulgaria currently have a critically high water level after heavy rains in the region.



Studen Kladenets Reservoir



Studen Kladenets Dam

The temperature had already reached 28 Celsius as we arrived at the village of Potochnitsa where we collected snacks for lunch. We left the coach to see Whitethroat, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Woodchat Shrike, Woodlark and a White Stork's nest with two chicks and heard the usual songs of Nightingales and Golden Orioles. After a short walk, we arrived at the vulture viewing area. Being so close to the Greek border, a target bird for the day was Black Vulture, which we were told often ventures over from Greece, but unfortunately on this occasion it failed to show. However, we witnessed the spectacle of 85 Griffon and four Egyptian vultures diligently preying on entrails. Also playing their part were three Black Kites and eight Hooded Crows. A local dog was also chancing his luck. Other birds seen at this location were; Short-toed and Booted Eagles, four Long-legged, Common and single Honey Buzzards, Peregrine Falcon, Hobby and two Levant Sparrowhawks, 32 Bee-eaters, Cuckoo, Red-rumped Swallow, Alpine Swift, two Ravens, Black-eared Wheatear, Red-backed Shrike, Ortolan and Cirl Buntings, Sombre tit, four Hawfinches and two Linnets. After lunch, we stayed in the area of

Potochnitsa to find a new location where we had a tremendous birding feast. Whilst looking at Eastern Olivaceous Warbler someone cried out “Sardinian” and we were all treated to tremendous views of a very obliging Sardinian Warbler as well as Olive Tree Warbler and two Eastern Orphean Warblers. A Barred Warbler was not so obliging as it went from bush to bush. Corn and Black-headed Buntings and Lesser Whitethroat were also in the proximity.



Olive tree warbler



Eastern Orphean Warbler

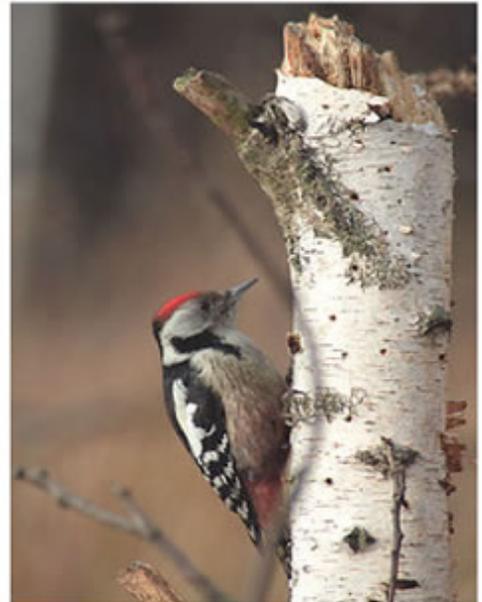
We then moved on to the Krumovitsa River that flows through deep canyons and open valleys, with the vegetation along the riverbanks dominated by *Alnus*, *Salix*, *Populus*, *Rubus*, *Rosa* and *Tamarix*. Dry grassland, scrub and broad-leaved forests cover the neighbouring hills. Land uses are extensive rearing of sheep and cattle, hunting and forestry, but the area is becoming progressively depopulated due to local emigration to the cities. The Krumovitsa River valley is one of the most important areas in Bulgaria for breeding Black Storks, Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Eagle, Eurasian Eagle Owl and Olive Tree Warbler. From the bridge we saw three Little-ringed Plovers, a Turtle Dove, two Rollers, two Black Storks, three Yellow-legged Gulls and a Black-headed Wagtail. Whilst the main party scanned for birds from the bridge, Marky P thrashed around adjacent scrub area for insects. He located two special dragonflies for the trip: Southern Skimmer and Small Pincertail, the latter subsequently admired by most of our party.



Studen Kladenets Protected Area was our last location of the day where we had fabulous views of Subalpine Warbler, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Black-eared Wheatear, Raven, Green Woodpecker, Middle-spotted Woodpecker and two Syrian Woodpeckers.



Syrian woodpecker



Middle-spotted woodpecker

Bulgaria, what a wonderful country, nice people, great birding and bloody good company - wow! Thanks Waveney Bird Club.

Day 6: Saturday 18 May 2013 ~ John Grant

There's a British bloke in Bourgas who'd better watch his back. And if you think that's a lot of alliteration here's another letter b – he's a b*****d.

He's been collared in Bulgaria on one of his illegal jaunts and found to be one of the worst egg-collectors ever apprehended. The Bulgarian and British authorities, including the RSPB, which sent an investigator out to

the Bourgas and Rhodope Mountains areas to gather evidence against him, are on his case. He's stuck in Bourgas with watchful eyes on his every movement and he knows that if he ever sets foot in Britain again he'll be hauled before the courts quicker than he could ever "rope" any nest tree to steal yet another clutch. The book will be thrown at him and he will pay the price for his vile kleptomania that has seen him deprive an astonishing 2,000-or-so species of eggs.

This chilling story was recounted by our guide Minko as we marvelled at an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle soaring high in the wide blue skies somewhere above the rolling Sakar Hills. I say somewhere for obvious security reasons. To give away the exact site would be to give a useful hint to any other egg-collector as to the whereabouts of what is one of the rarest, as well as one of the most impressive, of all Europe's raptors. We had made our way to this vast, sweltering, landscape of wide horizons, this noisy soundscape of black-headed buntings, corn buntings and turtle doves, from Madzhavoro – via one of the most magical stops of our entire time in this bird-filled country. After brief roadside looks at a pair of Stonechats we had spent a memorable hour or so beside the River Maritsa, between the seemingly impoverished border town of Svilengrad - which was nestling in a state of apparent suspended animation near the conjunction of Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey - and the village of Momkovo.

Here Minko's "possibility" of Masked Shrike was converted into a glorious reality, yet another contender for bird of the trip. A superb male was the black, white and subtle orange vision that rounded off a delightful stroll in which Spotted Flycatcher was added to the ever-growing trip list and we were accompanied along the way by such species as Roller, Bee-eater, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Turtle Dove, Black-headed Bunting, Nightingale, Hobby, Black Stork and Spanish Sparrow. Some of the party also saw a female Masked Shrike. All of us had a surprise. A Scops Owl called in the bright, burning, heat of broad daylight – a reminder of those cool strolls around Madzhavoro under cover of darkness.

The lure of the eagles proved irresistible and we were on the road again, with brief coach views of Calandra Lark, Crested Lark, Lesser Grey Shrike, our first of many Isabelline Wheatears and, for one observer, a Wryneck.

We were under the scorching Sakar Hills sun for an energy-sapping two hours before the eagle entertainment had us spellbound for a few magical minutes. Time to study the supporting cast. Actually, that does

not do justice – or anything like it - to the plentiful Isabelline Wheatears, for example. They were virtually everywhere and, without sounding too anorak, there was a fascinating new angle to take while watching them. Several appeared to be of a darker hue, a dusky “morph”, and we were left to wonder what sort of controversy would blow up if one of these strange-looking creatures ever made it to Britain.

When the raptors started appearing, at least three Booted Eagles and a few Common Buzzards were the forerunners. Then came the big one. A mighty Eastern Imperial, was etched against a wide, vivid blue, sky. For many a lifer, for all an absolute thrill and privilege.

As seems so often to be the case in Bulgaria, another bird thrill was waiting just a few miles down the road – our first Lesser Spotted Eagle lazily circled a roadside field en route to a Calandra Lark stake-out near the village of Topolovgrad. Alas, amid all the Short-toed Larks, Crested Larks and Skylarks, none of the big Calandras could be found. We were, however, treated to even better, more prolonged, views of a second Eastern Imperial Eagle and were transfixed by the endearing little Susliks that distracted us from the wealth of Isabelline Wheatears - with a few Northern Wheatears for good comparison - Woodchat and Red-backed Shrikes and a Hoopoe for good measure.

Minko was not to be defeated in his Calandra quest though. The dusky under wings with clean white trailing edges of a large lark seen from the coach a few miles down the road caused him to shout in triumph and after a quick decant we were all watching this bulky character carrying food for its nearby young.

The daylight was fading fast as we reached the Black Sea coast, heading for our hotel at Sarafovo, on the outskirts of the sprawling, less-than-attractive, port city of Bourgas. But as dusk gathered there were tantalising hints of what was to come....wetland species abounded. Our first White Pelicans gleamed in the gloaming, night herons were silhouetted against the darkening skies. Gulls, Great Cormorants, Great Crested Grebes, Little Egrets – what else was lurking in these water lands that we were to explore tomorrow?

We knew one human who was lurking nearby, however – although to describe him as human is stretching the definition rather too far. The egger. Somewhere in the back streets of Bourgas this fugitive was furtively hiding out, playing a futile waiting game. This British b*****d. When he finally faces justice back in Britain I know what sentence he should be given. He should be strung up by his b*****s.

Day 7: Sunday 19 May 2013 ~Tony Butler

Sunday 19 May saw us staying on the south-east Black Sea coast in Sarafovo our intention being to spend Days Seven and Eight of the trip exploring some of the major wetlands and coastal sites around Bourgas. Before breakfast, some members of the group took a stroll along the seafront and this proved quite productive, furnishing ten Avocet, Little, Common and Sandwich Terns (first of the trip), Yellow-legged Gull, Little Ringed Plover, three Shelduck, Mallard, Jay, Cetti's and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Lesser Grey Shrike, Syrian Woodpecker, Northern Wheatear and Marsh Harrier. A pair of Common Dolphins was also seen.

After breakfast, we headed for Vaya Lake (seeing a Spoonbill en-route) in the hope of seeing the fabled pelicans and we were not to be disappointed, being greeted by 300+ White Pelicans and around 30 Dalmatian Pelicans. What an extraordinary sight. Many of the group had never laid eyes on either species before. Other species enjoyed included two species of marsh tern - Whiskered and Black – Common Tern, Squacco and Grey Heron, Night Heron, Little Bittern, Little Egrets, Moorhen and Coot, large numbers of Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Gadwall and Pochard, Great Reed Warbler and Bearded Tit. Marsh Frogs provided the vocal backing to this superb birding extravaganza.



Izvorska lagoons

After Vaya, we then made our way to the Izvorska river mouth with Black-winged Stilt and Glossy Ibis being seen en-route. Izvorska proved to be a beautiful lagoon surrounded by woodland and reedbed widening out into the mouth of the river. The highlights here included four Purple Heron, three Squacco Heron, Night Heron, two Grey Heron, Little Bittern, male Marsh Harrier, two Ferruginous Duck, two Lapwing, at least two Cuckoos, Lesser-spotted Eagle, Yellow-legged Gulls, Lesser Grey Shrike, several singing Great Reed Warblers, Black Headed Bunting. Two Penduline Tits, including one at the nest, were also seen, as was a single Pygmy Cormorant, which was a life tick for some. Finally, masses and masses of House Martins, viewed from the road bridge, made an amazing spectacle as they dived and weaved for insects (being copied by Bee-eaters overhead). Four Pond Terrapins were also seen. After Izvorska, we then travelled to the Poda Lagoon reserve for a well earned lunch in the shade of a wooden pagoda. By now it was early afternoon and very hot. The reserve also boasted a visitor centre where it was possible to bird from the roof and two hides. The reserve also adjoined the Black Sea coast thus giving us the opportunity to look for shore and sea birds. Heading into the reserve after lunch, a most surreal

sight greeted us - hundred upon hundreds of Great Cormorants nesting on redundant electricity pylons which appeared to stretch for miles.

Apparently, this surreal sight is unique to Bulgaria. The other main bird species encountered here were a colony of Common Terns nesting on purpose-made platforms, breeding Black-winged Stilts, Oystercatchers, two Common Sandpipers, ten Collared Pratincoles, three Purple Herons, a Squacco Heron, four Spoonbills, at least three Marsh Harriers, our second White-tailed Eagle of the trip, two further Pygmy Cormorants, single Mediterranean Gull, Yellow-legged gulls, two Ferruginous Ducks, five Black-necked Grebes on the sea and 15 Sand Martins. Some of ur group also watched two Otters fishing near the tern platforms. On the way back to the hotel, our final stop was the Bourgas Salt Pans mainly in the hope of connecting with further waders.

Highlights here were several roosting Mediterranean Gulls and single Little and Black-headed Gulls (the latter quite scarce in Bulgaria), Black-winged Stilts, Avocets, 50 Curlew Sandpipers, two Kentish Plovers, a Little Ringed Plover, six Little Stints, several Ruffs, five Turnstones, 20+ Spoonbills, a Ruddy Shelduck, two Marsh Harriers, a Penduline Tit and a Black-headed Wagtail. All in all, another superb day, with a good number of new species added to the growing list.

Day 8: Monday 20 May 2013 ~ Andrew Green

Our second morning on the Black Sea coast dawned under blue skies and the promise of another hot day ahead, as we prepared to continue our exploration of the Burgas Lakes. Birding got off to a promising start before we'd even boarded the coach, when a male Golden Oriole showed well in a small area of scrubby woodland between the hotel patio and the beach.

A tip-off from a colleague of Minko determined our first port of call, and we headed off to some salt pans on the north-west side of Lake Pomorie. Resident Avocets and Black-winged Stilts were soon noted and, thanks to Minko's sharpness in the strong heat haze, it wasn't too long before our quarry, a Broad-billed Sandpiper, was located amongst a flock of some 100 Curlew Sandpipers, 85 Little Stints, two Ringed Plovers and a single Dunlin. This rare wader was a good addition to our trip list, as clearly by the third week of May most of the northern-breeding waders had already passed through the Black Sea.

Our next destination was the southern shore of Lake Pomorie by the salt museum. We were now in the town and seaside resort of Pomorie itself and construction work was much in evidence. The lake is a Ramsar site,

but in reality how much protection this offers from development in the European Union's poorest member country is of concern. Birding interest here was unfortunately limited, but the patio outside the visitor centre did provide some welcome shade from the midday sun, and those of a certain persuasion had ample opportunity to study the finer points of structure and plumage of a local Yellow-legged Gull. Further stops a short distance further west did yield good views of Whiskered Terns and, more distantly, White-winged Black Terns, as well as views of one of the largest Sandwich Tern colonies in Europe, numbering some 1,500 pairs breeding on artificial islands.

With such a wealth of natural history experience, knowledge and interest within the party, eyes were constantly on the lookout for animals and plants besides birds. Today these eyes were well rewarded when at least four snakes were spotted on the bed of a freshwater stream near the shore of Lake Pomorie. Mark 'Deadly 60' Piotrowski wasted no time in removing boots, socks and trousers and wading into the water. One of the snakes was soon netted and its identity confirmed as a Dice Snake, which, luckily for Marky P, is not venomous.

Following further local information, Minko next took us to a spot at the western end of Lake Vaya, west of the village of Dolno Ezerovo. Here, an area of shallow and well-vegetated freshwater pools was simply alive with birds. The most obvious were stunning summer-plumaged Squacco Herons and Glossy Ibises (some 50 of each), but Great White Egrets, Purple Herons, a Pygmy Cormorant, Ruff, a Wood Sandpiper, Garganey, Penduline Tits and a fly-over Honey Buzzard provided an excellent support cast.

To end our two-day tour of the Burgas Lakes we decided to attempt one final look at the roosting pelicans. However, numbers at the eastern end of Lake Vaya, where we had been so successful the previous morning, were much-reduced and distant, and a final stop at the south-western shore of Lake Atanasovo did produce 200 Mediterranean Gulls, but unfortunately no pelicans.

There was however one final treat in store, especially for the entomologists in the party, when Paddy Shaw found a mole cricket on the pavement outside our hotel.

Day 9: Tuesday 21 May 2013 ~ Ali Riseborough

The last of a three-night stay at the family-run hotel Lazuran Briag at Sarafovo, a neighbourhood of Burgas across the road from the Black sea coast. Pre-breakfast, several of us watched Syrian Woodpecker,

Lesser Grey and Red-backed Shrike, Olivaceous Warbler and Spanish Sparrow from the outside dining area, while a Golden Oriole called continuously before perching on a dead snag for all to enjoy. Louis was particularly pleased as it was her first – a stunning male.

Breakfast was at 7.00 am then our excellent driver Nikolia loaded our cases on the bus before the long drive back to Sofia. Leaving Sarafovo it was noticeable there were thousands upon thousands of Common Swifts hawking around the many high-rise flats. We did take a short stop at the excellent Lake Vaya where we took our last look at Dalmatian and White Pelicans. Minko told us that the White Pelicans are migrants on their way to breeding grounds on the Danube Delta, while Dalmatian Pelicans are resident but no longer breed. However, breeding platforms are being built on Mandra Lake to encourage them. We also logged Night Heron, Little Bittern, 400 Great Crested Grebes, 1,000 Common Cormorants and the usual calling Great Reed Warblers and Marsh Frogs.

We then crossed the central Thracian Plain on our return journey to Sofia. Many birds were seen from the coach including White and Black Storks, Hoopoe, Bee-Eaters, Roller, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Black-headed Bunting, Montagu's Harrier, Long-legged Buzzard to name but a few. After a five-hour drive stopping once for a leg stretch and the usual ice creams we arrived on the outskirts of Sofia. We then took the long climb to the ski resort of Vitosha National Park at 1,680m. Our target birds were: Spotted Nutcracker and Ring Ouzel. We found the Ring Ouzel relatively easily with male and female seen plus several Black Redstarts. Two Golden Eagles gave prolonged views. However, Nutcracker was proving quite difficult with most people catching only brief flight views. We had returned to the car park with everyone tired after a long day and ready to leave for our hotel, when Eric announced that he found a Nutcracker nearby. After a long wait the bird was found perched on the top of a pine. It sat there for ten minutes allowing everyone scope views.

After our evening meal and log call, Chris thanked Nikolia for his excellent driving and Minko for showing us some wonderful birds in Bulgaria and presented them both with a collection on behalf of Waveney Bird Club. Steve also presented Minko with a polo shirt as he was now an honorary member of WBC. Minko replied that leading our group was great fun and not like work. We retired with the task of choosing our top ten birds of the trip with the results to be announced in the morning.

Day 10: Wednesday 22 May 2013 ~ Steve Piotrowski

This was to be our final morning in Bulgaria and the pitter-patter on the windows, the first sign of rain since our first day, wasn't going to dampen our enthusiasm! The early birders had been out for their pre-breakfast stroll and had seen Syrian Woodpecker whilst others had watched a Red Squirrel from their windows.

The bags were loaded onto our coach soon after breakfast and traffic had to be halted in the middle of town whilst our driver (Nicolia) prepared us all for the group photo.

Whilst we were waiting for our flight, each of us prepared our personal "Top 10" birds to contribute to the Group's "Top 20". The lists consisted of the ten birds that gave each individual the most enjoyment, so not necessary the rarest. Some may have chosen the rarest, but others those that gave the best views or the splendid iridescence of say Rollers and Bee-eaters. Ten points were awarded to the number one bird and so on! The lists were gathered and collated and no fewer than 55 species contributed to the final list. The Top 20 was as follows (no of votes in brackets):

- Wallcreeper (189)
- Masked Shrike (113)
- Rock Nuthatch (68)
- Little Bittern (54)
- Nutcracker (54)
- Squacco Heron (52)
- Eastern Imperial Eagle (47)
- Griffin Vulture (43)
- Dalmatian Pelican (41)
- Roller (36)
- Golden Oriole (33)
- Golden Eagle (24)
- Sardinian Warbler (22)
- Blue Rock Thrush (20)
- White-winged Black Tern (20)
- Black-headed Bunting (19)
- Broad-billed Sandpiper (18)
- Black-winged Stilt (17)
- Long-legged Buzzard (17)
- White Pelican (17)

Our flight home was uneventful, although there were a couple snags as we battled through airport security. Firstly, an over-zealous Bulgarian Customs Officer confiscated Louise's special Bulgarian honey from her hand luggage – well I suppose honey can loosely be described as a liquid and, once we reached Gatwick Airport, Ali's baggage failed to arrive! The latter was much to the relief of Ali's wife Pam, although she was only temporarily spared the task of sorting through his smalls when he was reunited with his baggage some 48 hours later!

All-in-all, it was a fantastic trip, undoubtedly one of the best that WBC has run. It was superbly organised (thanks Kathy), our guide Minko superb and our driver as safe as houses. Looking forward to the next one!



Summary:

What more can be said? Neophron provided a well-planned itinerary and Minko and the driver received top accolades. Kathy as usual was kind and thoughtful and provided us with drinks and snacks on our English legs of the coach journey besides having planned all else perfectly. Steve didn't lose his vital folder and the travelers bonded. There were bagpipes and beer, village shops and cafes greatly depleted of snacks and ice creams, 'scopes and expertise freely shared and I'm sure some almost shed a few tears at the end because it was all over. We can only hope that the Bulgarians can look wisely at what other countries have lost as they have increased in wealth, and make provision as they develop, to protect the wonderful resources they possess. We wish Minko and other conservationists well in successfully enthusing their own people. We were told that Bulgarians were mystified

as to why we would wish to visit their country when we have London. Yes, we do have London, but cities are just not enough to satisfy the soul!