

Waveney Bird Club trip to Bulgaria

May 9th to 16th 2017

Introduction – Steve P

This was to be the club's second expedition to Bulgaria following Waveney Bird Club's tour in 2013. It was perhaps to be a little overshadowed by the club's forthcoming, more eye-catching and exotic trip to Kazakhstan, but it nevertheless proved memorable and very successful for a variety of reasons.

Neophron Tours looked after us extremely well in 2013, providing an exceptionally sharp and knowledgeable bird guide in the shape of Minko Madzharov, so we had no hesitation of booking with them again.

In 2013, our tour went without a hitch and our route took us to the Western Rhodopes, then on through Eastern Rhodopes, Sakar Hills to Burgas, followed by a return drive to Sofia via the Vitosha National Park. This meant that we had missed out on the spectacular migration spots along the north-eastern Black Sea coast and the lakes close to the Romanian border, so this tour was to be much more ambitious. We discussed the options with Neophron's boss, Dimiter Georgiev, at last year's Rutland BirdFair. Dimiter suggested that we fly to Varna to explore birding sites on Bulgaria's north-eastern border, and then drive to the Eastern Rhodopes and on to Sofia from where we would fly back. Our intelligence revealed that the Wallcreepers, the main target in the Trigrad Gorge in the Western Rhodopes, had failed to put in an appearance after April 2016, so this site was deleted from our plans (it was related by Minko that the female was thought to have died, and the male had moved to another area to seek a new mate).

To follow this itinerary meant that we had to fly out from Luton and return to Stansted which was a logistical nightmare for Kathy who organised the whole trip on behalf of the club.

There were eight in our party: John Garbutt, Carol Elliott, Paddy Shaw, Stevie Howell, Keith Watkins, Steve Piotrowski, Richard Knightbridge and Paul Jespersen. Keith and Paul had done very little birding abroad and so were going to see a host of new birds.

We had no designated 'trip photographer' with us this time, but all those who took pictures have pitched in with bird shots and others that will give you a flavour of the environments we encountered.



Above Madzharavo - E Rhodopes



Asphodel-steppes-endless windfarms at Kaliakra

9 May – Paul

Varna to coastal Dobroudzha

Summary

Kravevo – Lesser Spotted Eagle

Balchik (White Cliffs) – Eagle Owl

Bolgarevo – Tree and Tawny Pipits, Whinchat, Stone-Curlews, Spotted Flycatcher, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks

Kaliakra – Black-throated Diver, Hobby, Mediterranean

Gulls, European Shag (Mediterranean ssp. *desmarestii*), Yelkouan Shearwater, Savi's Warbler, Squacco Heron, Pied

Wheatear, Common Reed Bunting (thick-billed race *reiseri*) and Black-necked Grebe

Kavarna – Arctic Skua and Black Tern

Following the precedent of the first trip, the flight was once again an early one; 6am from Luton, requiring a local overnight stay the previous night, in a charming, if eccentric, inn. The more cultured members of the group, on requesting red wine with their supper, were surprised to be presented with a bottle of wine and a corkscrew, as the waitress was "frightened of opening wine in case it went off".

Notwithstanding some hi-jinks at Luton Airport as we searched with increasing anxiety for the drop-off point for our hired minibus, our group of eight enjoyed an uneventful flight to Varna, on the Black Sea coast of Eastern Bulgaria, and a happy reunion with Minko (our 2013 guide) and his taciturn but endlessly obliging minibus driver Stan. Needless to say, birding began as soon as we touched down at Varna at 11.25am local time, with early sightings of Hooded Crows and Yellow-legged Gulls.

The itinerary for the rest of the day comprised a number of stops en route to our hotel in Kavarna. The bus screeched to a halt as a soaring Lesser Spotted Eagle was seen but our first "official" stop, in the vicinity of Balchik, revealed an absolute corker. The bus pulled up and we were confronted on the left-hand side of the road with a high craggy bluff and, in very short time, Minko had located an Eagle Owl – a "life tick" for many of the group. The bird was magnificent, perched high up in the rocky cliff face, preening, while overhead, Alpine Swifts and Red-rumped Swallows made their first appearances of the trip.

Another impromptu stop was brought about by the sight of twelve White Pelicans flying in formation overhead, low enough for close observation. This turned out to be a great vantage point to add more sightings, overhead and across the fields, to the list, including Turtle Doves and a flock of maybe 20 Bee-eaters.

This was followed by a stop in rural Balgarevo, on some scrubby grazing land bisected by a stony path, where birds were in abundance, including Red-backed Shrike, Isabelline Wheatear, Tawny and Tree Pipits, Whinchat, Stone-curlew, Spotted Flycatcher, Cuckoo, Marsh Harrier and Greater Short-toed Lark. We also heard Calandra Lark but the views were very distant. As with many of our stops throughout the week, time was all too short – we would have been happy to stay here all afternoon. However, we moved on, and came to the Kaliakra Reserve. The habitat here is really interesting and varied; rocky coast, reedy marshland, high cliffs, lanes lined with bushes and undergrowth, providing for a good variety of birds: Black-throated Diver, Hobby, Tree Sparrow, Mediterranean Gull, European Shag (Mediterranean ssp. *desmarestii*), Yelkouan Shearwater, Savi's Warbler, Great Reed Warbler, Squacco Heron, Pied Wheatear, Common Reed Bunting (thick-billed *racereiseri*) and Black-necked Grebe.

Once again it was tough to leave such a great spot, but it was time to head for our hotel at Kavarna, which turned out to be very pleasant; fairly modern, with all rooms having sea-facing balconies overlooking trees and bushes, irresistible for a brief seawatch while others wasted time on such trivia as phoning home, having a shower etc., and being rewarded with sightings of Arctic Skua and Black Tern. Kamenitsas all round!



The Steppe joins the sea



Paul



Scanning the steppe at Sveti Nikoli



Alpine Swift at Cape Kaliakra



Black-necked Grebes at Kaliakra



Bulgaria's finest..Kamenitza

10 May – Paddy

Coastal Dobroudzha

Summary

Kavarna – Little and Mediterranean Gulls and Harbour Porpoise

Durankulak Lake – Dalmatian Pelican, Little Ringed Plover, Curlew, Sanderling, Turnstone, Wood and Green Sandpipers, White-winged Black and Whiskered Terns, Squacco and Purple

Herons, Paddyfield Warbler, Pygmy Cormorant, Red-footed Falcon, Ferruginous Duck, Garganey, Marsh Harrier, Black-headed Wagtail (subspecies *feldegg*), Tawny Pipit, Bearded Reedling, Savi's Warbler and Fire-bellied Toad

Shabla Lake – Citrine Wagtail, Syrian Woodpecker, Quail, Pied Flycatcher, Greater White-fronted Goose, Ferruginous Duck, Gadwall, Garganey, Glossy Ibis and Little Bittern, Wood Sandpipers, Avocet, Ruff, European Souslik and Red Squirrel

The hotel at Kavarna was delightful, made even more so by our second-floor, sea-facing room with a spacious balcony, allowing sea-watching straight from bed – what a way to start the day!

There had been substantial overnight rain and it was cloudy and cool, which of course would suit us completely, being right under the Via Pontica migration flyway in the middle of migration season.

As our eyes slowly began to focus after the tiredness of the previous long day's traveling, the Black Sea presented us with Little, Mediterranean and Yellow-legged Gulls and glimpses of a breaching Harbour Porpoise, while in the gardens below us, we were visited by a flock of Bee-eaters, accompanied by the songs of Nightingale and Golden Oriole. Thousands of House and Sand Martins and Swallows were passing below balcony level. We had to drag ourselves away from what for us was the world's finest sea-watching shelter (although Stevie Howell was still dressed like it was Southwold!) to get breakfast at 7am before the minibus journey to the area on the seaward side of Durankulak Lake, also known as Eagle Marsh – the northernmost point of the trip, and only a few miles from the Romanian border.

This was quite familiar terrain to Norfolk and Suffolk birders – a long beach and dunes with reedbeds behind. The weather was fairly East Anglian too, with still a threat of rain and a nip to the wind.

Before descending the steps down to the beach, we'd picked up a small flock of Curlew Sandpipers, accompanied by Sanderlings, Little Stints and Little Ringed Plovers, feeding by the shore line, and it just went up from there. After only about 300 metres walk between the dunes and the

reeds, the list included Hoopoe, Hobby, Black Tern, Whiskered Tern, Ferruginous Duck, Squacco Heron, White-winged Black Tern, Black-headed Wagtail, Pygmy Cormorant, Purple Heron, Red-footed Falcon and a “hepatic” Cuckoo, with Yelkouan Shearwater over the sea. This was getting ridiculous, but completely justified the decision to fly out from Luton to Varna, to get at this fantastic area of lakes, reedbeds and steppes.

Savi’s Warblers round here don’t care what time of day it is to start reeling away, sitting three-quarters up a reed in full view, about 50 feet away, and a Tawny Pipit bounced down into the dunes a similar distance off.

There had been some doubt as to whether Paddyfield Warblers would have arrived by now, as many migrants this year had been late. Minko however was determined, as he had been on our previous Bulgarian expedition in 2013, and eventually we had it, hopping around a very nearby reedbed, and giving everyone a good view of what (it has to be said) is quite a plain-looking bird. It is more the context – this is the extreme western edge of its range, so you’ve got to come this far to see it, and it’s still only a ‘maybe’. Timing is everything, as the depressed drummer said as he threw himself behind a train.....

Job done, we drifted back to the car park, but stopped for a brew in celebration small beach-side coffee shop – even here, the surprises continued, with a fly-past solitary Dalmatian Pelican, while Nightingale sang and Turtle Dove purred.

Next stop was Durankulak Lake itself, driving past arable fields that were bigger, richer and obviously farmed with heavy machinery than anything we’d seen on the 2013 trip. This is Bulgaria’s bread-basket, with agriculture and slightly battered beach resorts side by side. Rather like Norfolk I guess. The other obvious feature was the massive wind-farms, which seemed to stretch all up the Dobroudzha coastline and particularly around Cape Kaliakra. Anyway, this is another lovely spot and a contrast to the coast itself. The lakeside path passed below sloping scrub and grassland, low bushes and small trees, with reedbeds full of Great Reed Warblers; their deep, scratchy songs led to a discussion with Paul as to whether they were singing the intro to ‘Right Place, Wrong Time’ by Dr. John or the guitar part to ‘The Distance’ by Cake – maybe both, at the same time....

It was here we picked up on the first Barred Warbler of the trip – fantastic birds, with a sharp contrast between the liquid, Garden Warbler-like song and the harsh alarm, like a Whitethroat going through

puberty. Angry, bar-chested and yellow-eyed, giving rise to its German name of Sparrowhawk Warbler. I quite like psycho-cuckoo as an alternative.

The short walk – which included a boardwalk and slope leading up to an archaeological site – kicked off another full page-worth of birds in the notebook, including Lesser Spotted Eagle, Savi's Warbler, Common and Whiskered Terns, Black-winged Stilts and a host of others, slowly becoming the 'standards' of a Bulgarian day out; Cuckoo, Nightingale, Corn Bunting accompany nearly every foray outdoors round here.

So, into Shabla town to pick up some lunch. This is slightly inland, and seemingly untouched by the tourism and agricultural economic benefits of the coast. Grabbing edibles from small shops and a hotdog kiosk is a bit of a lottery – sort-of pastry things, slightly greasy and filled with cheese and spinach, a bit of fruit and a bottle of drink is the standard approach. There's also plenty of bags of toasted seeds and garish sacks of snack items, full of salt, potato starch and chemicals you can't pronounce. I'd noticed in 2013 that you could tell the economic fortune of an area by the gardens – more well-off belts had decorative gardens; in poorer areas, they were mini-allotments, and I suspect most veg is grown at home; there's little in the shops.

But fuelled up on our diesel diet, we headed for Shabla Lake – or rather, a track alongside it, as the lake itself was obscured by more reedbeds as the gentle walk meandered between them and trees and shrubs before bending round across grassland and up to the road we'd parked on, making this one of the rare circular walks.

I just checked my notebook for this walk and the last site of the day, and my species list alone numbered 75 (in about 3.5 hours) – and I probably missed some! Highlight however was probably a Citrine Wagtail, which we surprised on a small water-body, surrounded by marshy ground. This I think was Minko's bird of the trip, even better than.....nope, you're gonna have to read May 11th for that one.....

A great, slow walk, picking up all the regulars, plus another Lesser Spotted Eagle, Red-footed Falcon, Short-toed Lark, Syrian Woodpecker, Tree Pipit, Savi's, Squacco Heron, Roller, Hawfinch and another star bird – Little Bittern. Steve P made a persistent effort to locate a calling Penduline Tit, which remained elusive, (translated as 'impossible to find') before we moved onto the cattle-cropped grassland, inhabited by Souslik, the cute little marmot-like mammals that the Bulgarians have a very impolite nickname for, which I can't tell you. There are no rabbits in Bulgaria, so these chaps make fine raptor-tucker. Isabelline Wheatears

use their burrows for nest-sites too – sometimes sharing an active one with Sousliks – ‘excuse me...sorry...coming through...how’re the kids?’ etc.

A last bonus of the grassland track was a Quail, with its distinctive ‘Wet m’ Lips’ call. Needless to say, we didn’t see it.

We made our way back to the bus along a deserted, straight road, surrounded on both sides by full-flowering lilacs, filling the air with perfume, before the short drive to the final site, around a section of the Shabla Lake complex itself. A short walk through a small wood revealed a coastal, reed-fringed, shallow lake, which wouldn’t have looked out of place on the North Norfolk coast.

(A later conversation with Dimiter revealed he had been responsible for its creation, in his pre-Neophron days in conservation)

The weather and light was much improved now as we scanned the open water, small islands and reedbeds, finding Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper, Glossy Ibis, Dunlin and Little Ringed Plover amongst the waders. Birds were dropping in and out of the picture constantly – few terns, then a sudden selection of marsh species and Common Tern, then they were gone again.

In the distance, a cloud of hirundines, too distant to identify, numbering several hundred were equally there, then gone. This was obviously an important staging post on migration, as we were to find on a subsequent visit the next day.

So that was it for the first full day birding, and it was time for the trip back to Kavarna, dinner and several bottles of Kamenitsa. Can you have too much of a good thing?



Spanish Sparrow



The Birdtrack Brothers at Shabla Lake



Glossy Ibis - Shabla Lake



Lunch break at Shabla



Scanning for Barred Warbler at Durankulak Lake



Dalmatian Pelicans



Early seawatch at hotel



View from balcony at Kavarna



Paddyfield Warbler at Eagle Marsh



Paddyfield ticked and back for coffee...



Savi's Warbler



The optically-disguised Minko



Red-breasted Flycatcher at Kaliakra



Peony Pereegrina in full bloom



Pied Wheatear



Corn Bunting, mid key-rattle

11 May – Keith

Coastal Dobroudzha

Summary

Kavarna – Baltic, Little and Mediterranean Gulls and Scops Owl

Cape Kaliakra – Alpine Swift, Thrush Nightingale, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Redstart, Yelkouan Shearwater, Black-necked Grebe, Slender-billed Gulls and Common Dolphin

Sveti Nikola – Long-legged Buzzard, Montagu's Harrier, Stone-Curlew, Red-rumped Swallow, Calandra Lark, Greater and Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit, Isabelline and Pied Wheatears and Black-headed Bunting

Shabla Lake – Demoiselle Crane, Glossy Ibis, Baltic Gull, Avocet and Garganey

Today we were to visit Cape Kaliakra, a spectacular peninsula with towering cliffs jutting out into the Black Sea. This is a hotspot for migrant birds. The first birds to greet us on our arrival were many Alpine Swifts. These large swifts put on a fantastic aerial display for us, zipping around at head height. They came so close you could feel the wind from their wings. I could have stood and watched them all day. Fantastic!

We hadn't moved far from the bus when Minko pointed to a bush and said "Thrush Nightingale singing". This would have been a lifer for me, but despite our best efforts the little blighter remained hidden in the dense foliage singing its heart out.

Steve P. then found the first of the many Red-breasted Flycatchers we were to see that morning, they seemed to be everywhere on the Cape. A little sea-watching was called for and to our surprise there seemed to be Black-throated Divers and Black-necked Grebes everywhere you looked. There were at least 40 of the latter, with many in summer plumage. Great views were had by all.

After a short break for coffee (and very nice it was too), we headed back when the shout went up "Slender-billed Gulls!" Another lifer for me and a magic sight as 18 of the beauties flew past in formation just above the sea.

Not a bad day's birding so far but I was still hoping to see a Thrush Nightingale to add to my list. Our luck was in as one could be heard singing from a nearby bush. I think it was sharp-eyed Steve H who first got onto the bird; he's definitely so sharp he's dangerous. Anyway, we all had good views in the end and I was one happy bunny!

Our next stop was an area of steppe at Sveti Nikola (St. Nicholas); this was quite a windy site so we stood behind the van and scoped the area. Lots of Calandra Larks were seen – a large lark recognised in flight by its dark underwing with white trailing edge. Short-toed Lark, Tawny Pipit, Isabelline and Pied Wheatears were also noted along with Black-headed Bunting.

We had an hour or two to spare so it was suggested that we go back to the fabulous Shabla Lake. This would prove to be a wise decision, especially for Steve P. I was one of the first out of the van and set my scope up next to Minko. After a few seconds scoping, Minko leapt up into the air, arms and legs waving like a madman. “What’s up Minko?” I asked. “DEMOISELLE, DEMOISELLE, DEMOISELLE!” he shouted at the top of his voice then proceeded to run around flapping his arms like a headless chicken.

The others were soon on the scene and Steve P was overwhelmed with excitement – he was actually speechless for once! What a moment, a lifer for all of us and especially for Steve P as this completed the set of all 15 cranes for his world life list. Indeed, THE MOMENT of the trip. The drinks were on Steve P that night for sure.

There were still a number of good birds on or over the lake, including both an adult and immature Baltic Gull, but most of us were still mesmerised by the crane! Minko had been on his phone and we were soon joined by Dimiter and a party that had been attending a conference locally. Unfortunately, all the birds on the lake had been spooked and the crane had taken flight and was lost from view just before the arrival of Dimiter’s party. However, they did manage to locate the bird in a field some distance away.

As we returned to our hotel, Minko spotted a Little Owl perched on a chimney and there was a little time for a final seawatch of the day. Another Baltic Gull was seen but little else – but what a day!



Coffee break at Kaliaikra



Black-headed Wagtail at Shabla



Record shot - but it IS Demoiselle Crane!



Keith

12 May – John and Carol

Kamchia riverine forests and Eastern Balkan Mountains

Summary

Kavarna – Little and Mediterranean Gulls

Albene and Batova Forests – Semi-collared Flycatcher, Eurasian Nuthatch, Middle Spotted and Black Woodpeckers

Kamakja Forest – Hawfinch, Lesser Grey Shrike and Little Ringed Plover

Garika Forest – Black Stork, Honey Buzzard, Lesser Spotted and Short-toed Eagles, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Semi-collared Flycatcher, Tree Pipit and Eastern Green Lizard

Diulino Pass nr Danitsovo village – Barred Warbler, Sombre Tit (heard), Wryneck, Woodchat Shrike, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Cirl Bunting and Large Whip Snake

Piroy Reservoir – Crested Lark, Ruddy Shelduck, Squacco and Purple Herons, Ruff, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Montagu's Harrier

On a sunny morning, we looked out from our balcony at the Hotel Venera across the harbour to the Black Sea. A nearby Common Nightingale was still singing as it had in the previous evening. There was some excitement about some Black-headed Gulls – common in the UK but these were the first for the trip and, unlike their UK cousins, were generally still not in full summer plumage. Also seen were the more common Yellow-legged Gulls along with Mediterranean and Little Gulls. We checked out from the hotel and started to drive south.

After a short drive, we arrived at the Albene and Batova Forest – the party quickly fell out of the coach as a Black Woodpecker was heard calling nearby and was seen very well by most. We then saw Eurasian Golden Oriole, Song Thrush, Semi-collared Flycatcher, Eurasian Nuthatch, Middle-spotted Woodpecker and there was constant sound from singing birds including European Robin and Common Starling. We then set off south again through traffic jams in the large town of Varna and joined the road towards Burgas.

We arrived at Kamakja Forest – a pine plantation beside a large sandy Black Sea beach where Little Ringed Plover and Common Skylark were found. The forest is close to a large formerly marshy area that was

drained during the communist era and produced Common Nightingale, Lesser Grey Shrike and Hawfinch.

We then travelled to the Garika Forest, which is used as a research area for the study of Semi-collared Flycatchers. Numerous nest boxes were visible and we were able to get very close views of the birds as they returned to feed their young. Tree Pipits were easy to see as were Eastern Green Lizards – vivid green with sky blue heads, they seemed quite common and stayed still until the cameras got too close!

We then travelled through the Diulino Pass near Danitsovo village and parked beside an open grassy area with woodland on the other side of the road. We found more Eastern Green Lizards, Eurasian Nuthatch, some hirundines, Common Nightingale, Barred Warbler, three Eurasian Wryneck were calling and seen, plus Woodchat Shrike and Hawfinch. A Sombre Tit was calling but could not be found. Black Stork, European Honey Buzzard, Lesser Spotted and Short-toed Eagles, were seen, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was heard and Minko located Large Whip Snakes under a discarded car bonnet. Eastern Bonelli's Warblers were heard by some of the party as were Cirl Buntings.

On the road to Orizare we saw White Storks on their large nests that provide important nesting opportunities for Spanish and Tree Sparrows. Passing through the edge of The Balkans, and extra to the itinerary, we travelled to Pirov Reservoir to locate Ruddy Shelduck. We had some amazing views of Crested Lark as we parked the bus and then were able to view a huge flock of Bee-eaters as they hawked insects around the trees along with Green Woodpecker, Woodchat Shrike and Barred Warbler. About 20 Ruddy Shelducks were feeding in the shallows close to the reservoir shore and other species noted included: Common Shelduck, four Eurasian Spoonbill, Squacco and Purple and Grey Herons, three Great Egret, Great Crested Grebe, White-winged, Black and Little Terns, Ruff, Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint. Overhead, Lesser Spotted Eagle, European Honey Buzzard, Western Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, Common or Steppe Buzzard of the ssp. *B B vulpinus* and many hirundines were noted. It was perhaps surprising to find a large colony of Spanish Sparrows nesting in bushes beside the footpath. En route to the reservoir, a few of the party became distracted by the presence of a very confiding Lesser Spotted Eagle that was most obviously nesting nearby. Minko returned red-faced as he was anxious that we had taken the wrong fork in the track.

After the unplanned but very worthwhile trip to Piroy Reservoir, we arrived late at the Hotel Mirana in Sarafovo (north of Burgas) for two nights' accommodation.



John



Large Whip Snake



Carol



Weather warming up at Piroy Reservoir



Hotel at Kavarna



Lesser Grey Shrike



Green Lizard



Semi-collared Flycatcher on approach run.....



First week of life for Semi-collared Flycatcher chicks

13 May – Richard

Wetlands around Burgas

Summary

Lake Vaya (also known as Lake Burgas) – White and Dalmatian Pelicans,

Mandra Dam (or Lake Mandra or Mandrensko) – Pygmy Cormorant, Squacco Heron, Black-crowned Night and Purple Herons, White-tailed, Booted, Lesser Spotted and Short-toed Eagles, Savi's and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Ortolan Bunting and Penduline Tit

Pomorie Lake and nearby wetlands – Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Kentish Plover, Little Tern, Collared Pratincole, Gull-billed

Tern, Curlew, Black Stork, Honey Buzzard (passage of 200+) and **Black Kite**

Severno Atanasovsko Lake – Broad-billed and Curlew Sandpipers

We had a slightly delayed start this morning, reflecting an improvement in the weather that prompted everyone to look for shops selling water. As a result, we left the hotel car park at 8 am, rather than our normal departure time of 7 45 am.

From the hotel, we headed south towards Burgas, where we had our first stop of the day at Izvorska on the eastern shore of Lake Vaya (also known as Lake Burgas), which, according to Wikipedia, is the largest natural lake in Bulgaria. Along this shoreline, there are opportunities to pull off the dual carriageway which runs parallel to the shore. We stopped at one of these locations, flushing a Black-crowned Night Heron as we walked to the edge of the lake, from where we had good views of both species of pelican that occur in Bulgaria. Most of these birds were loafing on large floating rafts. White Pelican was more numerous of the two, with most being tightly packed on just one of the rafts with small numbers of Dalmatian Pelicans spread over a number of other rafts. Also on the lake were Great Crested Grebe, Coot, Common Tern, Great Cormorant, Pygmy Cormorant and the first Pochard of the trip. From patches of reeds along the shoreline the harsh, grating song of Great Reed Warblers announced their presence.

From Lake Vaya, we drove on to the eastern end of Lake Mandra (also known as Mandra Dam or Lake Mandrensko). Whilst Minko attended to running repairs to his telescope, which had a broken eyepiece, we scoured a shallow lagoon and surrounding habitats below where we were parked. Here there were about 10 Squacco Herons together with three Glossy Ibis; the latter flock had increased to 12 by the time that we drove past this end of the lake again later in the morning. Also notable at this location were the many House Martins that were nesting under the bridge over part of the lake.

Our next stop was along the southern shore of Lake Mandra near the Fakiiska river. Here we had much closer views of pelicans than we had had earlier in the morning, providing good opportunities to hone our skills in differentiating the two species before the flock took off and disappeared – only to reappear later flying in spectacular formation above the hills that surround the lake. A walk along the quiet road that runs parallel to the southern shore yielded overflying Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Lesser Spotted Eagle (including a flock of five) and several Honey Buzzard. Meanwhile, on the lake itself, we had fantastic

views of a Pygmy Cormorant perched on a dead branch alongside a Great Cormorant, and of an adult Black-crowned Night Heron perched in the open; nearby, we watched another adult Black-crowned Night Heron, in the margins of the lake, wrestling to swallow a large fish. A few Purple Herons were flushed as we walked along the shoreline.

The next stopping point at Lake Mandra provided long-distance views from high ground. Notable species at this location were a distant White-tailed Sea Eagle, Rollers, our first Ortolan Buntings of the trip and numerous Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes. Also notable was our first Eastern Olivaceous Warbler of the trip; Minko pointed out that they were late arriving this year.

The grassland in the vicinity of the viewpoint was alive with fritillary butterflies, which were reluctant to reveal their underwings, making identification very difficult. A Brown Hare was also seen and was the only record of the trip.

We left Lake Mandra and stopped at a supermarket to buy lunch, from where we drove on to Pomorie Lake located to the north-east of Burgas. Here we found shelter from the sun at the Salt Museum Visitor Centre, from where we saw large numbers of Black-winged Stilt and Pied Avocet together with Sandwich Terns, and smaller numbers of Common and Little Terns. As we settled down to eat our packed lunches, we were puzzled as to where Minko had gone! We were soon to find out as he approached with a face like thunder, upset that we had left him alone with the bus and he, as the guide, hadn't a clue where we had all gone. Those in the 2013 party knew where it was and had just headed off....

Stevie Howell attempted to explain in Cockney rhyme (that even his fellow travellers couldn't understand) which made things a whole lot worse. Minko was bemused by his reference to eating our grub, which he probably thought was some sort of caterpillar!

After lunch, we drove on to several viewpoints around the edges of the lake where we had good views of Kentish Plover and distant views of Grey Plover. We also saw a pale morph Booted Eagle and a European Pond Terrapin. A stop at a nearby saltpan yielded a Broad-billed Sandpiper together with Little Stint and Pied Avocet.

Driving into the hills above Pomorie, we stopped at a water-filled quarry, which supported few waterbirds, but was an excellent site for raptors, which included up to 200 Honey Buzzard and a Black Kite. Also overhead were seven Collared Pratincoles and a Black Stork. A short drive took us to another lake which was accessed through damp willow

scrub where we saw Penduline Tit. The lake supported Curlew, Ruff, Little Stint and Curlew Sandpipers, whilst overhead we saw Peregrine, Gull-billed Tern and Collared Pratincole.

Our final stop of the day was Lake Atanasovsko on the northern edge of Burgas. Here the highlight was up to nine Broad-billed Sandpiper together with a large number of other wader species, including Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, Dunlin, Temmink's and Little Stints.

On our return to our hotel, it was time to say goodbye to Minko and meet Dimiter who would take over as our guide for the remainder of the trip. He was replacing Minko who was needed to meet a group of German-speaking Swiss travellers.



Richard



White Pelicans on the move.....



Black Stork



Raft of White Pelicans at Vaya



Pygmy Cormorants at Mandra



White Pelican - Lake Mandra



Night Heron versus Rudd....



Black-crowned Night Heron - Mandra Lake



Kentish Plover at Pomorie



Female Red-backed Shrike



Translucent hands of Honey Buzzard

14 May – John and Carol

Eastern Rhodopes

Summary

West Stranja – Grey-headed Woodpecker, Masked Shrike, Wood Warbler and Roe Deer

Sakar Hills – Eastern Imperial Eagle (stronghold of the Bulgarian population), Lesser Spotted Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Montagu's Harrier, European Roller, European Bee-eater, Calandra Lark, Lesser Grey Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Isabelline Wheatear, Ortolan Bunting, Black-headed Bunting, European Sousek and Golden Jackal
Lesser Kestrel

Madzharo – Eurasian Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Black Kite, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Long-legged Buzzard, Black Stork, Chukar, Scops Owl, Black-eared Wheatear (the eastern race ssp. *melanoleuca*), Isabelline Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Eastern Bonelli's, Eastern Orphean, Eastern Subalpine and Eastern Olivaceous warblers, Lesser Grey Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, Western Rock Nuthatch, Ortolan Bunting, Black-headed Bunting, etc.

Krumovgrad – Scops Owl

We took our luggage to the Hotel Mirana's entrance lobby to assist with achieving an early departure from Burgas towards the Eastern Rhodope Mountains that form Bulgaria's southern boundary with Greece and Turkey – this was confirmed by a road sign to Istanbul. The first 1¼ hour drive was through intensively farmed land – perhaps the reason why fewer birds were seen. However, while driving towards Elhovo, a Grey-headed Woodpecker was clearly visible on a bare branch and the woods hosted Masked Shrike, Ortolan Bunting and European Green Woodpecker. Another feature of this area (around Topolovgrad for example) are the numerous derelict factories and houses from the Communist era. The quality of domestic buildings is noticeably poor with the unstable mortar used in brick walls and chimneys often leading to the collapse of those structures. We were told that there had been a majority of Turkish people living here and that many had returned to their homeland.

Throughout Bulgaria, many of the electricity and telegraph poles are made of cast concrete. Holes are moulded into them to enable such things as insulator brackets to be easily fitted. The open post tops are

frequently used by nesting Common Starlings and the empty holes allow access to the cavities for nesting birds such as Sombre Tits.

In the West Stranja Mountains we found Common Cuckoo, Hawfinch, Red-backed Shrike, European Robin, Great-spotted Woodpecker, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, purring European Turtle Dove, Masked Shrike, Black Stork, Wood Warbler and Roe Deer.

From the coach we saw Common Raven, Long-legged and Common Buzzard (Steppe ssp. *B B vulpinus*), White Stork, and Lesser Spotted Eagle before arriving at the *Sakar Hills*. Here we had distant views of several raptors including Eastern Imperial Eagle (the Sakar Hills are a stronghold of the Bulgarian population), Lesser Spotted Eagle again, Long-legged Buzzard, Montagu's Harrier and Common Kestrel, a very close Northern Goshawk, Isabelline Wheatear, Eurasian Hoopoe, European Bee-eater and Roller, Common House Martin, and Common Nightingale, Calandra Lark, Lesser Grey and Woodchat Shrike, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Spanish Sparrow, Ortolan and Black-headed Bunting, European Souslik and a Golden Jackal.

Lunch was bought from a small supermarket and a grocer in Topolovgrad where Red-rumped Swallows flew from the edge of a puddle that they were using either for bathing or collecting mud for nesting.

Our next stop was at the Lesser Kestrel Recovery Project situated in the Sakar Hills, where three areas have been given Natura 2000 designation within the borders of the European Green Belt – an international ecological network of regions on either side of the former Iron Curtain. Lesser Kestrels became extinct as breeders in Bulgaria due the use of certain insecticides that had decimated their food source. Captive birds were brought from Spain and continue to be bred in captivity before release. It is clear that the project has been successful because free-flying Lesser Kestrels are visible in the open countryside near the project's buildings. Many have returned from migration and now breed with "non-project" birds and their successors, in the artificial nest boxes provided by the project. The project also breeds and releases Little Owls.

Beside the road we saw a refugee camp and a road sign informed us that we were only eight kilometres (5 miles) from Bulgaria's border with Greece.

We stopped near Georgi Dobrovo to locate a Levant Sparrowhawk but were unsuccessful. We could not find an Olive-tree Warbler that was calling but had better luck with European Bee-eater, Corn and Black-

headed Bunting and a singing Common Nightingale which stayed in view for several minutes. While we were waiting a shepherd appeared with his flock accompanied by a donkey with a neck bell that sounded to help keep the animals together.

Still in the Eastern Rhodopes, we stopped on a road with cliffs above and below over a wide river near Madzharavo where Eurasian Griffon and Egyptian Vultures were circling and perching close overhead. We also found Ortolan Bunting, Blue Rock Thrush, Peregrine Falcon, hawking Eurasian Crag Martin (the first of the trip) and European Turtle Dove. Further along the same road a Western Rock Nuthatch was found beside its nest on the cliff above us. We also noted Eastern Subalpine Warbler, more Eurasian Griffon Vultures, Black-eared Wheatear (the eastern race ssp. *Melanoleuca*), and surely one of the most elegant and beautiful evolutions of nature – a Spoonwing Lacewing.

Other birds seen from the coach and elsewhere were Black Kite, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Long-legged Buzzard, Black Stork, Chukar, Isabelline Wheatear, Eastern Bonelli's and Eastern Orphean and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Lesser Grey Shrike and Woodchat Shrike.

Lastly, we drove over a reservoir dam to enter the Kardzali Region of Bulgaria. We were staying in Krumovgrad and, after dinner, walked a short distance to the town's park where Eurasian Scops Owl were calling and therefore proved easy to locate.



Griffon showing flight feathers



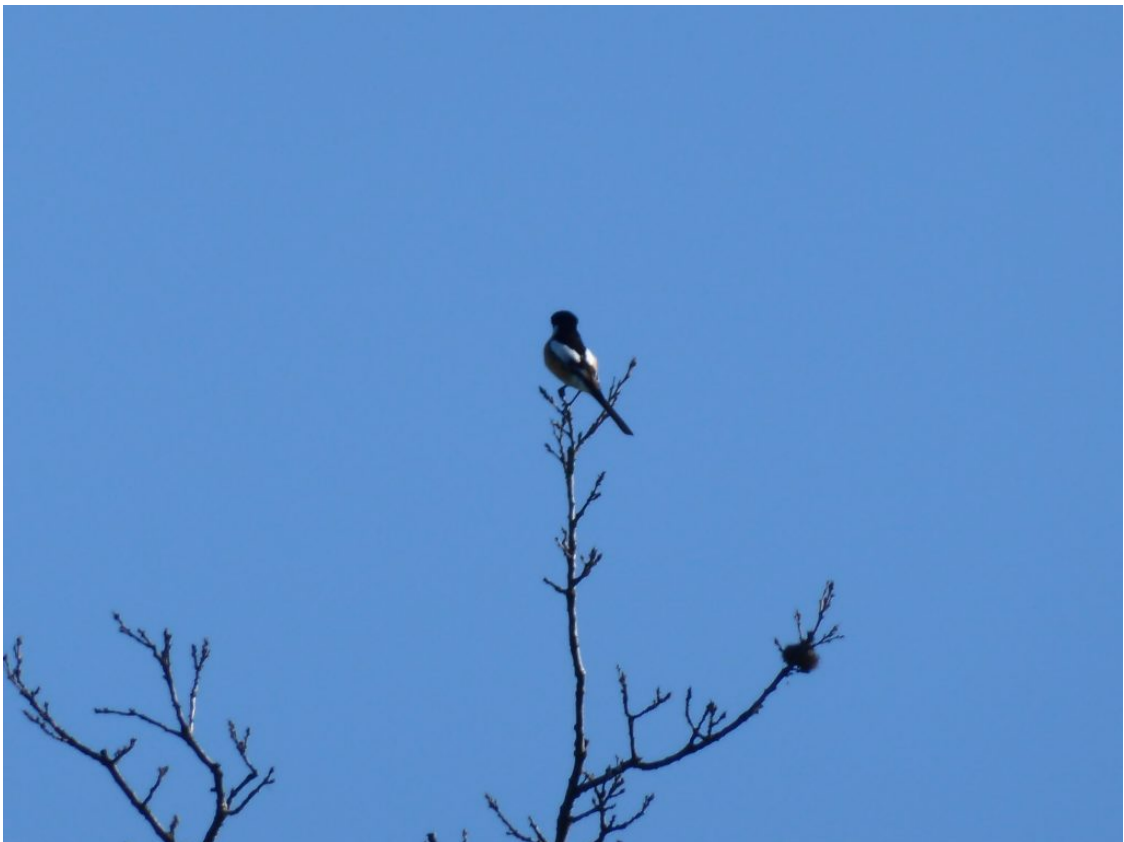
Sub-alpine Warbler



Spoon (Thread) Lacewing, or Kite Bug



Above Madzharovo



Masked Shrike at Stranja



Masked Shrike



Lesser-spotted Eagle



Spanish Sparrow using old House Martin nest



Lesser Kestrel



Black-headed Bunting



Crags above Madzharavo

15 May – Steve Howell

Eastern Rhodopes

Summary

At Potochnitsa (raptor feeding station) – **Eurasian Griffon** and **Egyptian Vultures**, **Booted** and **Short-toed Eagles**, **Long-legged Buzzard**, **Black Stork**, **Olive-tree Warbler**, **Sombre Tit**, **Isabelline Wheatear**, **Sardinian**, **Eastern Orphean** and **Eastern Olivaceous warblers**, **Woodchat Shrike** and **Roe Deer**

Krumonsta Valley – **Black-eared Wheatear** (the eastern race *ssp. melanoleuca*), **Lesser Grey Shrike**, **Kingfisher**, **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**, **Chukar**, **Black-headed** and **Cirl Buntings**

Our 7th and penultimate day of the trip started a short distance from the hotel at the Vulture Feeding Station at Potochnitsa where we were treated to a sight of up to 35 Griffon and two Egyptian vultures feeding on a carcass provided by the conservation project that manages the site.

Watching these birds feeding and squabbling up on top of the high ridge surrounded by several old dried out skeletons and carcasses of cattle, sheep and donkeys was something akin to being on some far-flung African plain and was one of the many highlights of the holiday.

We spent most of the morning in this area and among the more regular birds (Nightingale, Corn Bunting and Red-backed Shrike) we also obtained two more trip ticks – the first being a cracking little male Sardinian Warbler flitting around us in a rather large arc for such a small bird.

Although elusive at first it eventually gave itself up for everyone in the group. The second bird noted was the large and chunky Olive Tree Warbler, first picked up by its song which was similar to Great Reed Warbler, but with a slightly more ambitious repertoire of calls and phrases than that species. It also showed well, with tail-dipping at times, although my favourite moment with it was when one flew behind us being chased by a Red-backed Shrike. It uttered a twangy call, not dissimilar to a low guitar strum – but don't ask me what chord! (*E minor* – Ed.)

A late bonus when scanning a nearby row of small trees was an Eastern Orphean Warbler – again, elusive at first, but eventually sitting up well and giving good views. It was shortly after this when I had to endure a real crushing blow on the trip. I hung back from the rest of the group to

answer a call of nature and this 30-40 second convenience stop ended up being a very inconvenient stop, as the group had just clapped eyes onto our only viewable Sombre Tit of the holiday, and my much-needed pit stop cost me a very sought-after life tick – one of my target birds of the trip. Although I heard the call, the bird itself had disappeared back into the dense undergrowth and never re-appeared.

Unfortunately I had to carry this disappointment onwards to our next destination at the Krumonsta Valley, where the temperature rose to become the hottest afternoon of the trip (around 29-30 degrees) and the only afternoon when I had to dispense with the trousers and put on some shorts. This coincided with a down-turn in fortunes for the group on this particular afternoon regarding finding new species and we were unable to find birds like Chukar and Cirl Bunting, although I had been the only member of the group to see a Chukar in flight the day before. However, in a country like Bulgaria, there is always something to keep you interested, including a couple of Honey Buzzards, Lesser Grey Shrike, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and a superb Black-eared Wheatear in truly black-and-white splendour – *this* species should have been named the Pied Wheatear!!

As often happened, by late afternoon the burning sun had receded and levels of energy peaked again, helped along by seeing my only Cirl Bunting of the trip, with a lovely singing male found by Richard, and the third Booted Eagle (dark morph) identified by our guide Dimeter.

Unfortunately I missed Paddy's fly-through Kingfisher – the only one seen on the holiday.

By now it was early evening and the "last chance saloon" for Chukar. It took a while but eventually we heard one and sharp-eyed Paddy saw one not too far up the slope – then one became two and they both showed well.

I was still somewhat disappointed about missing the Sombre Tit earlier, but with such a good variety of birds seen throughout the day I realised that enjoyable birding (and it doesn't get any more enjoyable than birding in Bulgaria) is about enjoying the experience as a whole and appreciating what you *can* see, and not what you miss and even then – there's always next time!



Black-eared Wheatear



Girl Bunting at Krumonsta



Thunder skies at the Sub-alpine Warbler site



Chukar



A summit on insect-spearing....



Nightingale



Wildflowers at Potonitza



Warbler heaven at Potochnitza



Steve H

16 May – Steve P

Eastern Rhodopes and Vitosha Mountains

Summary

Krumovgrad – Syrian Woodpecker and Crag Martin

Road stop between Krumovgrad and Momchilgrad –

Zvezlel – Pallid Swift

Vitosha Nature Park – **Spotted Nutcracker, Ring Ouzel** (the SE ssp *alpinus*), **Willow Tit, Firecrest, European Siskin, Crossbill, Dunnock, Tree Pipit and Red Squirrel**

Sofia (for departure at 22.00 hrs) – **Rook and Alpine Swift**

It was another early start in preparation for our long journey across Bulgaria from Eastern Rhodopes to Sofia. Our final stop would be the Vitosha Mountains just south of Sofia, but our first port of call was the grounds of a nearby riverside hotel in which Minko and his new Swiss birdwatching group were residing. Our quest was for Syrian Woodpecker that some of the group missed early on during our tour. One was soon heard but, with trees now in full leaf, our bird was not giving itself up easily! Eventually, we got flight views and then we were able to scope a male as it climbed up a bare patch of tree trunk. He was soon joined by his partner enabling the group to get good views of both a male and a female.

We had a short roadside stop for a last gasp grasp at Sombre Tit for Steve Howell (he missed the pair the rest of saw near the raptor feeding station), but it was to no avail and then we stopped at a small town called Zvezdel to view a Pallid Swift colony. There were no real surprises on our journey that crossed the central Thracian Plain back to Sofia, no doubt due to most on the bus snoozing. The highlights were a Black Kite and three Black-winged Stilts and an Avocet on rice paddyfields beside the motorway.

Following a quick lunch stop at a service station, we made our way up the Vitosha Mountain, a National Park which is very popular with skiers during winter. We stopped short of the car park to look for Black Woodpeckers in thick conifer forest and, although we failed to see this bird, we did manage superb views of Spotted Nutcracker and Firecrest. On reaching our parking spot, we set off to climb higher up the mountain. It started to rain but this didn't dampen our enthusiasm and we were quickly rewarded with views of European Siskin, Willow Tit (or was it Alpine Tit?) and a fly-over Red Crossbill. On reaching the snowline, we were treated to exceptional views of Ring Ouzel of the south-eastern subspecies *alpinus* and noted our first Dunnocks of the tour – they occur only at high altitudes in Bulgaria.

However, we failed to locate an Alpine Accentor which had been seen at this site only four days previous to our visit.

Time was running out fast, so it was back down the mountain for our last meal with Dimiter, to say our final goodbyes and then onto the airport. Our Ryan Air plane took off on time and we normally report an

uneventful flight home! However, this was certainly not to be the case on this flight as about an hour into our journey a fight broke out at the rear of the plane! Thankfully, our group occupied the front seats, but we all turned round to see what was going on! There was a massive brute of a man throwing punches at other passengers and, try as they might, two stewards and two stewardesses were unable to restrain him. He appeared to be completely out of control and there was blood everywhere, so much on the steward's shirts that they looked like they had been working in a butcher's shop! We noticed a sudden change in engine speed and the plane began to descend, but still the fight went on with other passengers attempting to aid the crew. Eventually, the man was calmed and led to the rear of the plane with injured passengers taken to the front. The plane made an emergency landing at Linz in Austria where police and paramedics boarded to remove the main protagonist and treat injured passengers. He surprisingly went quietly, which was a pity as we were all hoping that he would be tasered – none of us had seen such a weapon being used before! We lost over an hour of flight time and the crew had to continue the journey serving passengers in their bloodstained shirts, obviously, no money for Ryan Air to have spares onboard? The rest of the journey was really uneventful, but there were more complications with our car hire resulting in our arrival back to Suffolk being delayed to well into the early hours. After a couple of days at home, we found the eventful flight had made national news, via the Daily Mail.

Interesting that the only real complications on the trip were around getting to Luton Airport, getting back to Stansted and picking up the minibus we'd hired at this end – all the Bulgarian aspects went brilliantly – birds, guides, hotels, beer, food...what could be better?

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Dimiter and Minko of Neophron Tours for looking after us all so well and to Kathy for her hard work in organizing the tour.



Sofia from Mt Vitosha



Nutcracker



Willow Tit



Salad and Kamenitza - the perfect health food.



Dimiter and Steve discuss the partridge family....



Griffon exaggerating about the last fish he ate....



Heads down for the log - put that phone away, Keith!



Keith proposes a toast....



Ring Ouzel, Mt Vitosha



Wildflowers and de-population - the story of the Eastern Rhodopes