

Bulgaria: The Secret Flyway

Tue 21st-Tue 28th September 2010



*Our autumn visits to Bulgaria are timed to coincide with the peak movement of birds of prey, pelicans and passerines migrating along Bulgaria's busy 'Black Sea corridor'. There are waders in abundance too, with no fewer than 26 species being recorded on this September week - including **Broad-billed Sandpiper** at Pomorie © kind permission János Oláh.*

**report compiled by tour leader:
Robin Chittenden**

Trip Diary

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Thanks to airline schedule changes, our autumn tours to Bulgaria switched days of operation from Monday-Monday to Tuesday-Tuesday. But the new timings had the benefit of an earlier arrival time on day one, and also allowed more time in the field on the final day. We began our week by exploring the lakes, marshes and steppe habitats south of the Romanian border, including some key migration watchpoints. We then headed south to the marshes, lakes and salt pans around the Black Sea port of Burgas, stopping off at some fabulous Oak woodland.

We visited the lakes of Durankulak, Tuzla and Sablensko Lake in the north. By far the busiest was Tuzla, which will be remembered for its vast numbers of Mediterranean Gulls and assorted wildfowl. Highly popular was the spinning Red-necked Phalarope, a large gathering of forty or so Ferruginous Ducks, and a fly past Little Bittern. A spot of seawatching also produced several Yelkouan Shearwater, Arctic Skua and Black-throated Diver. In the late afternoon, a Honey Buzzard pitched in looking for somewhere to roost.

Durankulak Lake held a very confiding Squacco Heron that flew backwards and forwards just by us several times. A few juvenile Purple Herons sprang out of the reeds, Great Reed Warbler and Red-backed Shrike perched side by side, and a Red-necked Grebe was swimming just offshore. Perhaps most dramatic was a Grass Snake with a Marsh Frog in its mouth, which later managed to wriggle free!

Sablensko Lake produced our first perched Pygmy Cormorant. Several Squacco Herons erupted from the marsh vegetation, and one of the Red-breasted Flycatchers seen there even sported a red throat. While we observed swarms of hirundines refueling on insects, that were either disturbed or attracted by a flock of sheep and goats, a flock of 23 Grey Heron headed south, followed later by 21 Spoonbills.

The early morning walks and scanning from our hotel over the wooded valley produced best of all an enormous adult female Goshawk, soaking up the early morning rays and perched for as long as you wanted to watch it! Many Hawfinches, Syrian Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Flycatchers and Alpine Swifts zipped about. Not far away, the steppe area was swarming with juvenile Red-backed Shrikes; it was possible to have four or so in one binocular view at a time. Only one late adult male was seen. A distant, dark-looking thrush perched on a bush flew to reveal itself as a migrating Ring Ouzel. A Wryneck proved harder to pin down, and a giant wheeling flock of three hundred or so Calandra Larks kept their distance but were an impressive sight *en masse*. Also seen were the odd Hoopoe and a few Woodlark as well as migrating Marsh Harriers, Alpine Swifts and Sparrowhawks high overhead.

At Cape Kaliakra it almost seemed that all the breeding Pied Wheatears had departed, but as luck would have it, a single male was located near our lunchtime restaurant. Also there was a very close Red-breasted Flycatcher for all to enjoy. More evidence of migration came in the form of European Bee-eater and Golden Oriole that flew over, and a couple of Black-throated Diver that passed by heading south. A flock of twenty or so Red-necked Grebes was present offshore. Perhaps causing most gasps was the pod of five Bottlenosed Dolphins directly below the cliffs. You could actually see them chasing fish through the clear water! A White-faced Bush Cricket was watched gnawing a fly. Nearby, at Bolada valley gorge, a juvenile Purple Heron flew in and perched on the parched side of the gorge, craning its long neck. A most bizarre sight.

Heading south for our second hotel, we stopped off at Toledo but unfortunately no Eagle Owls were seen. However, some compensation was provided in the form of a flock of European Bee-eaters and three Red-rumped Swallows. The Oak woodland at Goritza was overflowing with woodpeckers that were unusually easy to see. Best of the bunch were at least four Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and a single Lesser Spotted. Also found were a couple of Short-toed Treecreepers, a Wood Warbler and a few Red-breasted Flycatchers. Looking up through the canopy we caught the sight of a steady stream of raptors going overhead: two Lesser Spotted Eagles, two Short-toed Eagles as well as a Booted Eagle and a Honey Buzzard.

The salt pans north of Pomorie allowed us to compare various groups of wader. Kentish, Little Ringed and Ringed Plover, Ruff and Wood Sandpiper, Dunlin and, as if on cue, a Little Stint too. By our hotel were rows of roosting Sandwich Terns. Two Arctic Skua in attendance were a more surprising find. Also there were several Little Gulls and Slender-billed Gulls.

Scanning drying mud by the Atanasovsko Lake revealed a few Marsh Sandpipers and six Temminck's Stints. Most intimate of all was a Penduline Tit, just feet away. More European Bee-eaters and a Wryneck were admired. While searching for Stone-curlews (which were never located), we spotted a squadron of White Pelicans and three Lesser Spotted Eagles drifting south. We headed for the specially designed reclined 'sky-watching' benches. While munching our picnic here we spied two Short-toed Eagles, sixteen Black Storks and eight Hobbies. We tried again the next day, when the highlights were a couple of kettles of Lesser Spotted Eagles, plus a couple of Booted Eagles. Most dramatic was a flock of three hundred or so Great White Pelicans that drifted low overhead, and with a few rarer Dalmatians mixed in for comparison.

At Burgasko Lake, a juvenile Little Bittern just managed to dodge over a fisherman's rod before perching and fishing in full view. It stayed so long it was still in exactly the same place later in the afternoon - and was even there the next day! Up to 60 Dalmatian Pelicans drifted serenely on the lake, including some just offshore. With a casual glance they could easily be overlooked as Mute Swans! White Pelicans were watched cooperatively hunting with many Great Cormorants in attendance. Further around the lake a couple of Pygmy Cormorants were found roosting just offshore, side by side, with Great Cormorants. The dramatic size difference was clear for all to see.

Back at Pomorie Lake, we visited one drying lagoon that was covered in waders. Some were just over the bank, only a few feet away. The most exciting birds were a Broad-billed Sandpiper, six Red-necked Phalaropes, 150+ Spotted Redshank, two raucous calling Caspian Terns and ten delicate Marsh Sandpipers. Several White-winged Black Terns lined up with Whiskered Terns giving a chance for direct comparison.

Exploring Mandra Lake it soon became apparent that most of the action was in the sky, with several large flocks of Lesser Spotted Eagle passing over, as well as four Goshawks.

Heading back to Varna at the end of our stay, we took a route inland and passed over a low mountain range. Leaving the coast road, we immediately came across a late juvenile Roller. But this sighting was somewhat eclipsed by a ghostly adult male Pallid Harrier, soaring not that high off the ground. A Long-legged Buzzard circled over too, and although most Lesser Spotted Eagles were distant one circled over almost at touching distance.

Continuing on over the mountains we came across a flock of 189 Black Storks that streamed low over the pass. Other flocks followed, making a total of about four hundred birds. Also moving were a Short-toed Eagle and four Dalmatian Pelicans. Near Varna Lake, we encountered a huge kettle of about 600 or so very high White Pelicans, presumably from the Danube Delta in neighbouring Romania. And just around the corner we bumped into another, really close, Long-legged Buzzard. Not a bad way to finish the trip!

Robin Chittenden

ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED

(Total 163 species recorded by the group)

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

One Bolada valley gorge

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Common wetland bird

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Common in the south

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Four Pomorie salt pans and many Poda

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

A few up north but more common in the south.

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Seen at Tuzla Lake and Lake Atanasovsko

Pintail *Anas acuta*

Two Lake Durankulak and six Atanasovsko Lake

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

Several Tuzla Lake and up to two Pomorie Lake

Common Teal *Anas crecca*

Lived up to its name... common

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Common and masses Lake Burgasko.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

Forty Tuzla Lake and one Poda

Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica*

A few past Tuzla Lake and a couple Cape Kaliakra

Yelkouan Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan*

At least twelve off Tuzla Lake

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Common.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Common

Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*

One off Tuzla Lake

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

Seen most days.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*

Sixteen over Lake Atanasovsko and at least four hundred Djulinski pass

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Seven from Poda and three over by Pomorie Lake

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

A flock of twenty-one over Tuzla Lake, twenty-five Atanasovsko and fourteen over Lake Pomorie

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*

One Tuzla Lake and another Burgasko Lake

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*

One Lake Durankulak, ten Sablensko Lake and one Poda

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Common including twenty-three seen migrating over Sablensko Lake

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

Most seen in the north.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

A few here and there, and a flock of nine flew south Pomorie Lake.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Most in the south

White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*

Large flocks over Atanasovsko Lake, Burgasko Lake and Yatata

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*

Sixty or more Atanasovsko Lake and Burgasko Lake and four over Djulinski pass

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*

Seen most days best views at Burgasko Lake and Poda

(Great) Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Very common

Shag *Leucocarbo aristotelis*

Many seen in the north

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Ones and twos here and there

Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Seen most days.

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*

Seen on two days

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

One Lake Durankulak and Poda

Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*

One Tuzla Lake, one Goritza and eight Kableschkovo

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

Three Goritza, two over Atanasovsko Lake watchpoint

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Common

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*

One Kableschkovo

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Several seen every day

Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

One from the hotel at Kavarna and four Lake Burgasko Lake

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Common.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

One Kableschkovo and two Yatata.

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*

Two Goritza, four near Atanasovsko Lake, 150+ on migration over Lake Mandra and ten Kableschkovo.

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

One Goritza and two Atanasovsko Lake

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

Several heard in the north and one seen Pomorie Lake

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

A few in the south

Coot *Fulica atra*

Very common

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Three Pomorie Lake.

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Common in the south

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Several in the south

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Up to eight Pomorie Lake

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticul*

Common.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

A few in the south

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Ten Pomorie Lake

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Just a couple up north and many Pomorie Lake

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

One up north and four down south

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

Three Pomorie Lake

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

One Lake Durankulak.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

One hundred and fifty plus Pomorie Lake

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Several in the south

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*

Ten Pomorie Lake

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Up to thirty Pomorie Lake

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Two Atanasovsko Lake

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

More common in the south

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Two Pomorie Lake

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Two Lake Durankulak

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

Most Pomorie Lake

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*

Six Atanasovsko Lake

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

Two Pomorie Lake

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

Fairly common

Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*

One Pomorie Lake

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Many in the south

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*

One Lake Tuzla and six Pomorie Lake

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

Common.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

One of the Scandinavian race Tuzla Lake

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

Common

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*

Up to eighteen Pomorie Lake

Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus*

Incredibly common in the north, less so in the south

Little Gull *Larus minutus*

Several seen most days

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*

Two Pomorie Lake

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*

Common

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Seen most days.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*

A few seen 'up north' but more in the south

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

Up to seven Pomorie Lake

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*

One Lake Burgas and one Pomorie Lake

Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Common.

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

Several in the north

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Common.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

Two Pomorie Lake

Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba*

Twenty Kavarna and ten over steppe

Common Swift *Apus apus*

A few Kavarna with more in the south

Roller *Coracias garrulus*

One Kableschkovo

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Common.

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*

One Cape Kaliakra, twenty Topola and twenty or so Atanasovsko Lake

Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Three seen

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*

Two Goritza Forest

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*

Four Goritza Forest

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*

Common Kavarna

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

One Kavarna and two Goritza

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Singles Kavarna and Goritsa Forest

Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*

An elusive one in the steppe and one Pomorie Lake

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

Abundant in the north and several seen most days in the south, mostly juveniles

Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*

One Cape Kaliakra

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Quite common

Magpie *Pica pica*

Common.

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

A few daily; some in a flock in Burgas showed the white shoulder marks of the eastern race *soemmeringii*

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

Seen here and there

Raven *Corvus corax*

One Djulinski pass

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Several Lake Durankulak

Great Tit *Parus major*

Not many seen

Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Not that many seen either.

Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

One Atanasovsko Lake and one heard Pomorie Lake

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Several on four days

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Common to abundant, with large flocks migrating flocks

House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Several seen but none second half of the tour

Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica*

Three Toplola

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

Three hundred plus Balgarevo steppe

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

A few seen or heard most days

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

Five in the steppe

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Seen here and there

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Just heard a couple of times in the south

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

One Lake Durankulak Lake and one Tuzla Lake

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

One Tuzla Lake

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

One Atanasovsko Lake and another Pomorie Lake

Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*

One near Pomorie Lake

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Seen every day

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Recorded on three days

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*

One Goritza

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

A few seen

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

A few seen

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

A couple here and there

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Just one bird seen

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

One in the steppe

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

A couple in the Goritza Forest

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

A couple in Gortisa Forest

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Actually this probably the most common migrant

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

A couple here and there

Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus*

One in the steppe

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

A couple Kavarna and singles at three localities

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Only heard.

Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

More seen in the north

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*

More seen in the north

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

A few birds in the steppe

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*

A male Cape Kaliakra.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

Several in the north, and ones and twos in the south

Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*

Several in the north, and ones and twos in the south

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Abundant

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

One Pomorie Lake

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Common

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

Several most days

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

A few in the north

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Probably the most common migrant

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

A few in the north

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*

Small numbers noted on three days

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*

Four in the steppe near Tyuleovo and a couple of other 'flyovers'

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

A few here and there

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

A small party Kavarna

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

A few here and there

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Common

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

A few in a couple of localities

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

Up to fourteen in Kavarna and two Goritza

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

Very common in the north, less so in the south

MAMMALS

Brown Hare *Lepus europaeus*

Bottle-nosed Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*

Harbour Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena* (dead)

REPTILES

Grass Snake *Natrix natrix*

Eastern Green Lizard *Lacerta viridis* or Balkan Green Lizard *Lacerta trilineata*

AMPHIBIANS

Common Tree Frog *Hyla arborea* (heard only)

Marsh Frog *Rana ridibunda*

European Green Toad *Bufo viridis* (dead)

FISH

Crucian Carp *Carassius carassius*

Silver Bream *Abramis bjoerkna* or *Blicca bjoerkna*

BUTTERFLIES & MOTHS

Swallowtail *Papilio machaon*
Scarce Swallowtail *Iphiclides podalirius*
Large White *Pieris brassicae*
Small White *Artogeia rapae*
Eastern Bath White *Pontia edusa*
Clouded Yellow *Colias crocea*
Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow *Colias erate*
Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas*
Lesser Fiery Copper *Lycaena thersamon*
Lang's Short-tailed Blue *Leptotes pirithous*
Adonis Blue *Lysandra bellargus*
Common Blue *Polyommatus icarus*
Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*
Painted Lady *Vanessa cardui*
Cardinal *Argynnis pandora*
Queen of Spain Fritillary *Issoria lathonia*
Knapweed Fritillary *Melitaea phoebe*
Woodland Grayling *Hipparchia fagi*
Grayling *Hipparchia semele*
Great Banded Grayling *Kanetisa circe*
Meadow Brown *Maniola jurtina*
Small Heath *Coenonympha pamphilus*
Mallow Skipper *Carcharodus alceae*
Comma *Polygonia c-album*
Peacock *Inachis io*

Hummingbird Hawkmoth *Macroglossum stellatarum*

DRAGONFLIES

Small Bluetail/Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly *Ischnura pumilio* or Common Bluetail/Blue-tailed Damselfly
Ischnura heterosticta
Eastern Willow Spreadwing *Lestes parvidens*
Migrant Spreadwing/Southern Emerald Damselfly *Lestes Barbarus*
Migrant Hawker *Aeshna mixta*
Southern Darter *Sympetrum meridionale*
Red-veined Darter *Sympetrum fonscolombii*
Broad Scarlet/Scarlet Darter *Crocothemis erythraea*
Emperor Dragonfly/Blue Emperor *Anax imperator*

GRASSHOPPERS

Acrida ungarica
White-faced Bush Cricket *Decticus albifrons*

OTHER TAXA

European Hornet *Vespa crabro*
Praying Mantis or European Mantis *Mantis religiosa*
Wasp Spider *Argiope bruennichi*