

## Bulgaria: The Secret Flyway

Fri 16th-Fri 23rd September 2011

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*Our autumn tours to Bulgaria are timed to coincide with the peak movement of migrant birds of prey, pelicans and passerines along the busy 'Black Sea corridor'. Highlights this year included almost daily sightings of **Levant Sparrowhawk** (top) • **Watching for raptors...** participants on our September 2011 tour © Robin Chittenden/www.robinchittenden.co.uk*

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

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## Trip Diary

**Tour Leaders: Robin Chittenden & Mladen Vasilev**  
*with Tony & Judith Adolphus, Ron & Sue Bedford, Jim Bennett, Simon Linington,*  
**Brian Martin, John & Lucy Roots, and Sally Wearing**

We began our week by exploring the lakes, marshes and steppes south of the Romanian border. We then headed south to the marshes, lakes and salt pans around the Black Sea port of Burgas, stopping off at some open Oak woodland on the way.

In the north, we visited the lakes of Durankulak, Shabla Tuzla and Shabla. Durankulak Lake held a handful of Pygmy Cormorants that commuted between the marsh and the Black Sea, some flying low over our heads. A juvenile Purple Heron sprang out of the reeds close by and in perfect light. While we were there, twenty-two Purple Herons headed south, including one flock of eighteen birds. Also on the move was a flock of nineteen Spoonbills, beautifully illuminated in the sunlight. Around the edge of the marsh and in the overgrown 'communist era' Holiday Park were up to ten Red-breasted Flycatchers, a migrating Golden Oriole was drawn to the poplars and a single Levant Sparrowhawk circled over.

Shabla Tuzla Lake will be remembered for the variety of waders all laid out before us in glorious late afternoon light. Highly popular were the Broad-billed and Marsh Sandpipers as well as the many fresh juvenile Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers. An adult Caspian Tern with a juvenile were the only ones seen on this tour.

Shabla Lake produced our first Squacco Heron, a low flying Goshawk, Bee-eaters and several Cardinal butterflies.

Travelling between the sites resulted in some great roadside birding, with a perched male Red-footed Falcon in perfect soft light, four Honey Buzzards, three distant Levant Sparrowhawks, more Bee-eaters and a late juvenile Roller. A Black Kite surrounded by a swarm of mobbing Starlings was a magical sight.

Cape Kaliakra is well known for its breeding Pied Wheatears, but these often depart quite early so we were lucky to find a juvenile perched alongside a Northern Wheatear for comparison. Other highlights were a single Icterine Warbler, several Red-breasted Flycatchers and six Levant Sparrowhawk, most of which glided low overhead and out to sea. The most surprising sight were four Black-throated Divers that flew to the north of us, taking a short cut over the isthmus of the point rather than going round. The only other migrants were a high party of screaming Alpine Swifts, a Redstart, a few Red-backed Shrikes, a Lesser Whitethroat and a few Willow Warblers.

We then headed into the Bolata gorge, just north of the Cape. We spotted two female Red-footed Falcons gliding over and up to two juvenile Goshawks, including a female perched on the side of the gorge. How often do you see a perched Goshawk? Two Long-legged Buzzards caused a stir as they passed over, a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker perched right out in the open and several Bee-eaters passed overhead. We watched a warbler feeding frenzy, with up to two Garden Warblers, several Blackcaps and a Lesser Whitethroat all gorging themselves on the elder berries... until the birds of prey appeared, that is!

Early morning scanning from our hotel that overlooked a wooded valley produced, best of all, a juvenile female Goshawk seen on two out of the three mornings. It looked monstrously huge and out of place as it pursued hapless feral pigeons around houses and gardens. It even alighted

on a chimney pot briefly! Other highlights were many Hawfinches, Syrian Woodpeckers, Red-rumped Swallow and Alpine Swifts.

Not far away, the steppe was swarming with juvenile Red-backed Shrikes and Bee-eaters; it was possible to have four or so of the former in one binocular view at a time. Suddenly, with a characteristic call, a Calandra Lark broke cover right by us and did a fabulous flypast in perfect light. The first of about three Quail zipped low fast over the vegetation and three Tawny Pipits were seen in flight. Fascinating animals in this area were a Praying Mantis, Wasp Spider, Orbweb Spider, Red-veined Darters, many White-faced Bush Crickets, a couple of Common Wall Lizards and an Eastern Green Lizard.

In a nearby village, a water main was leaking and provided a temptation for several small birds to come and drink and bathe. We got beautiful close views of Lesser Whitethroats, Willow Warblers, Linnets and Goldfinch. Spectacularly eye-catching was a stunning summer plumaged male Red-breasted Flycatcher, but a Wryneck proved more elusive.

Seawatching off Shabla Lighthouse produced distant Black-throated Divers, several Little Gulls, an Arctic Skua and a handful of Black Terns.

Heading south to our second hotel, we stopped off at Topola; unfortunately, no Eagle Owls could be found in their favoured roost spots. In the Oak woodland at Goritsa, we eventually found a couple of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and Short-toed Treecreepers. But rather more potentially exciting was a Black Woodpecker that disappeared all too quickly, like a shadow passing through the trees.

Heading to Djulinski pass, we found a Roller, a much more relaxed Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Short-toed Treecreeper, as well as a couple of Cirl Buntings and Woodlarks. Eight Lesser Spotted Eagles glided over, as did a male Goshawk and an immature Booted Eagle. These were followed by the dramatic sight of two hundred White Pelicans, in two groups, wheeling in a thermal before gliding off.

By our hotel were rows of roosting Sandwich Terns and a few Little Gulls, Black-necked Grebes, Slender-billed Gulls and Kentish Plovers. Early morning walks also produced a Red-necked Grebe, fly over Red-footed Falcons, Pallid Swift, Penduline Tit, two Tawny Pipits and a Short-eared Owl flapping over the town centre.

The Atanasovsko Lake was overflowing with a couple of hundred Little Gulls, as well as a tight feeding flock of about fifteen Slender-billed Gulls. Overhead, a squadron of White Pelicans drifted south as did one distant Dalmatian Pelican. A pale morph Booted Eagle also steamed over.

At Burgas Lake, several Dalmatian Pelicans drifted serenely over the calm waters. Also there were Whiskered and Common Terns, a Spoonbill, a couple of Squacco Herons and two distant Black Storks heading south. While munching our picnic at Poda, two Collared Pratincoles zipped by.

Exploring the south shore of Mandra Lake, we saw a ring-tail Montagu's or Pallid Harrier that flew south but too distant to be positive about the identification. A fine drake Ferruginous Duck posed closely and another was spotted among a vast flock of Pochard. In a marshy area, we discovered a juvenile Little Bittern furtively feeding by the reed edge. An immature White-tailed Eagle glided about, dwarfing a harrying Common Buzzard. A kettle of nine Lesser Spotted Eagles drifted over, and Kingfishers were all over the place.

In the mountains nearby we spent a day sky-watching. It was breathtaking. In the morning, the passage was virtually continuous, with a steady movement of Lesser Spotted Eagles. Some were at the same level as us, so we could see the distinctive upperwing markings. Also spotted heading south were Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, Red-footed Falcons, Sparrowhawks, Hobby and an Osprey. In the afternoon, while exploring a nearby valley, it was quickly apparent there was more of a rush on with three large flocks of White Pelicans all in tight formation, estimated to be about fifteen hundred birds in total. There were also five flocks of Black Storks, totaling over three hundred birds. One flock even had a trailing White Stork for comparison.

Lesser Spotted Eagles numbers built up, with birds gliding into the bottom of kettles that resulted in three particularly large flocks of one hundred, eighty, and forty-seven birds in each. We were also treated to the migration of eight Short-toed Eagles and thirteen Red-footed Falcons, plus an immature Golden Eagle soared over. We stopped on a small hillock distantly overlooking Pomorie and we treated to yet more Short-toed and Lesser Spotted Eagles, and Honey Buzzard, while a small gathering of Whinchats was much admired. Who could ask for more, as we gazed fondly at our shimmering radiant hotel in Pomorie!?

The migration continued the next day, when we witnessed another kettle of about one hundred Lesser Spotted Eagles and one Black Stork from a watchpoint on the way back to Varna. Not only that, we saw our lowest flyover Lesser Spotted Eagles, Short-toed Eagle and Honey Buzzard - and if you were quick a Red-throated Pipit zipped by!

With special thanks to Simon Linington for spotting so many birds, for the group to enjoy. Thanks also to Mladen for his excellent local knowledge and identification skills, and to Nikolai for his very careful driving. Do take a look at some of the photographs that our guide Mladen Vasilev took of birds, coming to drink and bathe at the puddle in the steppe village at <http://www.mladvaswildlife.com>. Click on 'autumn' under 'Recent Pics', then click on 'September'

*Robin Chittenden*

### SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES

*(A total of 163 species recorded by the group)*

**Quail *Coturnix coturnix***

Three on the steppe north of Kavarna

**Mute Swan *Cygnus olor***

Six up north and many in the south

**Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna***

Common Atanasovsko Lake

**Gadwall *Anas strepera***

One Atanasovsko Lake

**Wigeon *Anas penelope***

One Shabla Tuzla Lake

**Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos***

A few up north but more common in the south

**Shoveler *Anas clypeata***

Many at Lake Atanasovsko

**Pintail *Anas acuta***

About twenty Atanasovsko Lake and two Burgas Lake

**Teal *Anas crecca***

Only two up north, but common in south

**Common Pochard** *Aythya ferina*

Many on Burgas and Atanasovsko Lakes

**Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca*

Two Mandra Lake

**Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula*

Eight Mandra Lake

**Black-throated Diver** *Gavia arctica*

Four over Cape Kaliakra and six past Shabla

**Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Two in the north and common in the south

**Red-necked Grebe** *Podiceps grisegena*

One off Pomorie

**Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus*

Common

**Black-necked Grebe** *Podiceps nigricollis*

Seen most days. The highest count was thirty plus at Pomorie

**Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra*

Two distantly over Lake Atanasovsko, three hundred and eighteen Djulinski pass and one Banya

**White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia*

One Shabla Lake and three Djulinski pass

**Spoonbill** *Platalea leucorodia*

Nineteen south Durankulak Lake and one Burgas Lake

**Little Bittern** *Ixobrychus minutus*

One Mandra Lake

**Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides*

One Shabla Lake, two Lake Burgas Lake and two Mandra Lake

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea*

Common, including a couple of migrating flocks

**Purple Heron** *Ardea purpurea*

Twenty-two south Durankulak Lake and another in the reedbed there, one Shabla Lake and one Shabla Tuzla Lake

**Great White Egret** *Ardea alba*

Two Pomorie Lake, a couple at Pods and several Mandra Lake

**Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta*

Three Shabla Tuzla Lake but more common in the south

**White Pelican** *Pelecanus onocrotalus*

Several hundred over Atanasovsko Lake and several hundred more on Burgas Lake. About two hundred on our first visit to Djulinski pass and a further fifteen hundred over on our second visit

**Dalmatian Pelican** *Pelecanus crispus*

One from Atanasovsko Lake and eleven Burgas Lake

**Pygmy Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*

Seen most days

**(Great) Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Very common

**Shag** *Leucocarbo aristotelis*

Many along the coast in the north

**Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus*

Common throughout

**Red-footed Falcon** *Falco vespertinus*

Three in the north, one over Atanasovsko Lake, one over Burgas Lake, seven in off the sea at Pomorie and sixteen migrating over Djulinski

**Hobby *Falco subbuteo***

A few most days including a perched juvenile northwest Pomorie

**Osprey *Pandion haliaetus***

Six in the north and two Djulinski pass

**Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus***

Up to six over in the north, two Djulinski pass, two north-west Pomorie and two Banya

**Black Kite *Milvus migrans***

Two in the Kavarna area and one Djulinski pass

**White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla***

One Mandra Lake

**Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus***

One near Goiritsa, sixteen Djulinski pass and one Banya

**Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos***

One second year, Djulinski pass

**Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus***

Common

**Montagu's/Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus/pygargus***

Unidentified birds were one Mandra Lake and one Djulinski pass

**Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes***

Seen nearly every day including seven migrating over Cape Kaliakra

**Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus***

Several seen every day

**Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis***

One from the hotel at Kavarna, one or two Bolata Valley, one Shabla Lake and a couple Djulinski pass

**Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo***

Common

**Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus***

Two Bolata Valley and one near Atanasovsko Lake

**Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina***

A gradual build up in the number of sightings to a maximum of 426 birds that headed south, the majority of which were over Djulinski pass

**Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus***

A few Djulinski pass, one Atanasovsko Lake and one Banya

**Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus***

Heard in the north

**Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus***

Small numbers

**Coot *Fulica atra***

Very common in the south, the only large flock in the north was at Balcik

**Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus***

One Pomorie Lake and one Mandra Lake

**Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta***

Eight Shabla Tulza Lake, but more common in the south

**Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus***

Four Shabla Tulza Lake and a few in the south

**Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola***

Two Shabla Tulza Lake and one Pomorie Lake

**Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticul***

Common

**Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius***

Two Durankulak Lake, two Shabla Tulza Lake and four Pomorie Lake

**Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Twenty plus Pomorie Lake

**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*

Three up north and three Poda

**Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa*

One Mandra Lake

**Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica*

Up to three Pomorie Lake

**Spotted Redshank** *Tringa erythropus*

Up to three Shabla Tuzla Lake and eight Mandra Lake

**Redshank** *Tringa totanus*

Several in the south

**Marsh Sandpiper** *Tringa stagnatilis*

One Shabla Tulza Lake

**Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia*

One Shabla Tulza Lake and a few more in the south

**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus*

Two Shabla Tulza Lake

**Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola*

Up to six Shabla Tulza Lake and three in the south

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos*

One Burgas Lake

**Sanderling** *Calidris alba*

Up to twelve Shabla Tulza Lake

**Little Stint** *Calidris minuta*

Up to twenty Shabla Tuzla Lake and several Pomorie salt pans

**Curlew Sandpiper** *Calidris ferruginea*

Ten Shabla Tulza Lake

**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*

Fairly common

**Broad-billed Sandpiper** *Limicola falcinellus*

One Shabla Tulza Lake

**Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax*

About ten Shabla Tulza Lake and two Mandra Lake

**Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*

Up to two Pomorie Lake

**Yellow-legged Gull** *Larus michahellis*

Common

**Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus*

Several of the Scandinavian race

**Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*

Common

**Slender-billed Gull** *Larus genei*

Up to twenty-five in total at Pomorie and Atanasovsko Lakes

**Mediterranean Gull** *Larus melanocephalus*

Common

**Little Gull** *Larus minutus*

Several seen most days including a couple of hundred at Atanasovsko Lake

**Caspian Tern** *Sterna caspia*

Two Shabla Tulza Lake

**Sandwich Tern** *Sterna sandvicensis*

Common

**Common Tern *Sterna hirundo***

Seen most days.

**Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida***

Forty flew over Durankulak Lake and about twenty Burgas Lake

**Black Tern *Chlidonias niger***

About seven off Shabla lighthouse and three off shore Shabla Lake and one Lake Burgas

**Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus***

One Shabla lighthouse

**Feral Dove/Rock Dove *Columba livia***

Common

**Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus***

Two over steppe near Risalka and one Djulinski pass

**Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur***

Several in the north and one Pomorie

**Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto***

Common

**Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus***

One over the town in Pomorie

**Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba***

Twenty Kavarna and ten over Cape Kaliakra and three Burgas Lake

**Common Swift *Apus apus***

A few Kavarna with more in the south

**Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus***

One Pomorie

**Roller *Coracias garrulus***

One north of Kavarna and one Djulinski

**Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis***

Common

**European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster***

Many seen

**Hoopoe *Upupa epops***

A few seen in the north

**Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor***

One Bolata Valley and one Shabla Tulza Lake

**Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius***

Two Goritsa Forest and one Djulinski pass

**Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus***

Common Kavarna

**Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius***

One briefly, Goritsa

**Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major***

A few seen

**Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis***

A few seen

**Wryneck *Jynx torquilla***

One Kamen Bryag

**Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio***

Abundant in the north and several seen most days in the south, all bar one a juvenile

**Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus***

A few in the north

**Jay *Garrulus glandarius***

Quite common



**Magpie *Pica pica***

Common

**Jackdaw *Corvus monedula***

Common

**Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix***

Just a few seen

**Raven *Corvus corax***

Up to three Djulinski pass

**Great Tit *Parus major***

A few here and there

**Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus***

Just one, in the north

**Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus***

One juvenile Pomorie Lake

**Sand Martin *Riparia riparia***

Several

**Swallow *Hirundo rustica***

Common

**House Martin *Delichon urbicum***

Common

**Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica***

A couple Kavarna, one Kamen Bryag, one Shabla Tulza Lake and three Djulinski pass

**Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra***

A total of two in the steppe

**Crested Lark *Galerida cristata***

Just a few seen or heard most days

**Woodlark *Lullula arborea***

Two Djulinski pass

**Skylark *Alauda arvensis***

Seen here and there

**Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus***

Three Durankulak Lake and a couple Pomorie Lake

**Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina***

One Cape Kaliakra

**Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus***

Ones and twos here and there

**Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla***

A few seen

**Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin***

Two Bolata Valley and one Shabla Tulza Lake

**Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca***

A few seen

**Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis***

Three in the north

**Nuthatch *Sitta europaea***

A few in the Goritsa Forest and a couple Djulinski pass

**Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris***

A couple in Goritsa Forest and Djulinski pass

**Starling *Sturnus vulgaris***

Very common

**Blackbird *Turdus merula***

Several seen

**Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos***

A few Kavarna and four Pomorie

**Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus***

One near Gortisa

**Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros***

A couple Kavarna and heard Pomorie

**Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus***

A few seen in the north

**Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola***

One at Shabla Tuzla, four at Shabla Lake and two near Banya

**Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra***

Just a handful seen

**Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe***

A few birds in the steppe and about eight Cape Kaliakra

**Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka***

One juvenile Cape Kaliakra

**Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata***

Several in the north and ones and twos in the south

**Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva***

Up to 20 per day in the north, including a splendid adult male at Kamen Bryag, and ones and twos in the south

**House Sparrow *Passer domesticus***

Abundant

**Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis***

Many Shabla Tulza Lake

**Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus***

Common

**Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava***

A few most days

**Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea***

Just two seen

**White Wagtail *Motacilla alba***

Common

**Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris***

Two on the steppe near Rusalka and two on Pomorie beach

**Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis***

Six Djulinski pass

**Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus***

One 'flyovers' Banya

**Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs***

A few here and there

**Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris***

A few in the north

**Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis***

Common

**Linnet *Carduelis cannabina***

A few in three localities

**Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes***

Up to fifteen in Kavarna and six Djulinski pass

**Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra***

Very common in the north, less so in the south

**Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella***

One near Djulinski pass

**Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirius***

Two One near Djulinski pass

**REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS**

**Eastern Green Lizard *Lacerta viridis***

**Balkan Green Lizard *Lacerta trilineata***

**Common Wall Lizard *Podarcis muralis***

**European Pond Terrapin *Emys orbicularis***

**Common Tree Frog *Hyla arborea* (heard only)**

**Marsh Frog *Rana ridibunda***

**BUTTERFLIES & MOTHS**

**Large White *Pieris brassicae***

**Small *Artogeia rapae***

**Clouded Yellow *Colias crocea***

**Eastern Pale Clouded Yellow *Colias erate***

**Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas***

**Common Blue *Polyommatus icarus***

**Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta***

**Painted Lady *Vanessa cardui***

**Cardinal *Argynnis pandora***

**Woodland or Eastern Rock Grayling *Hipparchia fagi* or *syriaca***

**Great Banded Grayling *Kanetisa circe***

**Meadow Brown *Maniola jurtina***

**Small Heath *Coenonympha pamphilus***

**Mallow Skipper *Carcharodus alceae***

**Hummingbird Hawkmoth *Macroglossum stellatarum***

**DRAGONFLIES**

**Southern Darter *Sympetrum meridionale***

**Red-veined Darter *Sympetrum fonscolombii***

**Hawker species *Aeshna* species**

**GRASSHOPPERS**

**Mediterranean Slant-faced Grasshopper *Acrida ungarica***

**White-faced Bush Cricket *Decticus albifrons***

**Blue-winged Grasshopper *Oedipoda caerulescens***

**Red-winged Grasshopper *Oedipoda* species**

**OTHER TAXA**

**European Hornet *Vespa crabro***

**Praying Mantis (also known as European Mantis) *Mantis religiosa***

**Wasp Spider *Argiope bruennichi***

**Orbweb Spider *Argiope lobata***

**Soldierfly species *Stratiomys* sp.**