



ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Bulgaria Winter Birding

7th to 14th February 2013 (8 days)



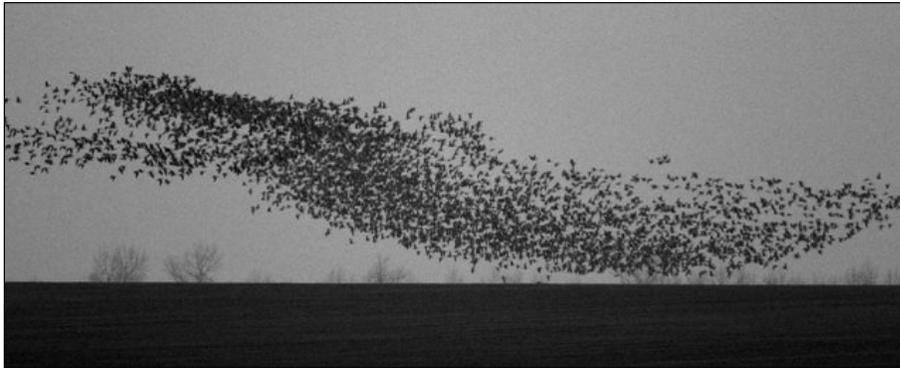
A mixed species flock of Red-breasted and Greater White-fronted Geese by Adam Riley

Trip Report compiled by: David Erterius

Tour Summary

Rockjumper's inaugural Bulgaria Winter Birding Tour kicked off in Varna, on Bulgaria's northern Black Sea coast. The early arrival crew headed to a nearby wetland soon after being met at the airport. Our first stop allowed a great overview of the area, and here we scoped a striking male Northern Pintail on the edge of a nearby reedbed, while a handsome male Ferruginous Duck was seen actively feeding. We then continued to a site for herons, pelicans and other wetland species and were treated with good views of our first Great Egrets, Pygmy Cormorants and Dalmatian Pelicans. A stake-out for Eurasian Eagle-Owl produced only rain so we returned to Varna to explore the harbour. A group of attractive Mediterranean Gulls were resting on the water, and our

first Eared (Black-necked) Grebes allowed excellent views. By now the light was fading so we called it a day and headed for dinner at a very nice and cosy local restaurant. Here we enjoyed a delicious dinner and met up with the later arriving participants. Thereafter we drove north along the Black Sea coast to our hotel in Kavarna, where we checked-in for the next three nights.



Red-breasted Goose flock at dawn by Adam Riley

After a rich and tasty breakfast buffet the following morning, we headed northwards to an area known as Coastal Dobrudzha right on the Romanian border. Our main goal here was to witness the amazing spectacle of thousands of wintering Red-breasted and Greater

White-fronted Geese in the surroundings of Lake Durankulak and Lake Shabla. These waterfowl roost in the lakes, taking off every morning to fly inland and feed in the surrounding winter crop fields. The numbers of Red-breasted Geese vary annually from between a few hundred to several tens of thousands, depending on the severity of the winter. Almost the entire world population of this endangered and enigmatic species migrate from their tundra breeding grounds on the coast of the Kara Sea in Arctic Siberia, across the West Siberian lowlands and along the Urals, finally crossing the steppe in Kazakhstan to winter in the Dobrudzha region on both sides of the border between Romania and Bulgaria. About a month before our arrival, teams from BSPB/BirdLife Bulgaria and WWT undertook an especially comprehensive count of the wintering Red-breasted Geese in the Bulgarian Dobrudzha. Approximately 54,000 birds were tallied, the highest winter count since the late 1990s, suggesting that practically the entire global population was in Bulgarian Dobrudzha at that time. As we approached Lake Durankulak, it didn't take long before we saw geese in the distance. (Interestingly, we soon learned that it was quite easy to pick out pure flocks of flying Red-breasted Geese with the naked eye, since they have a more erratic flight action similar to dense flocks of starlings, as compared to the more relaxed flight action of the more dispersed groups of flying Greater White-fronted Geese.)

We pulled over and set up our scopes to scan the vast winter crop fields. The geese flocks were rather wary due to the hunting season having just ended, but by carefully approaching them we eventually managed some truly amazing scope views of these fabulous birds. In amongst the brilliant adults, we could also pick out second year birds in their juvenile plumage, being more washed out and not showing the deep red of the adults, as well as having more faded as opposed to jet-black primaries and wing coverts. Everybody was in high spirits, and we were thrilled to have enjoyed such great experiences of the most sought-after bird of the tour.



Red-breasted and Greater White-fronted Geese feeding in a winter crop field by Adam Riley



We then continued our journey, finding a smart looking Great Grey Shrike perched in a line of thickets alongside one of the winter crop fields, and at a small beach we were rather surprised to find that Western Marsh Harriers were quite common in the area, with a dozen birds scattered around and hunting low over the reedbeds. This species is traditionally regarded as a long-distance migrant that winters in Africa. A bit of seawatching then produced 40 neat and elegant Little Gulls foraging just beyond the breakers. This, the smallest gull in the world, is adapted to a life out on the open sea during the winter months, and is normally seen further out from land. We next headed south for lunch, *en route* spotting a Common Reed Bunting sitting just next to the road and allowing great views and small groups of Corn Bunting.



Syrian Woodpecker by Adam Riley

Our lunch stop was in a small village named Kamen Brjag (which means “Stormy Coast” in Bulgarian) and after enjoying some local dishes, including a very tasty fish soup, we tried for Syrian Woodpecker, another lifer for the entire group. It didn’t take long before a male responded and he soon came flying in and landed on top of a nearby tree. We were all very delighted to obtain such good scope views of this, our first of eight potential Bulgarian woodpecker species for the trip. Our next scheduled birding site was Cape Kaliakra, a long and narrow headland with a spectacular point. This region protects some of the last

remnants of steppe, a habitat that once covered huge parts of the Dobrudzha plateau. The coast here is steep, with vertical cliffs plunging 70 metres (230 feet) to the broiling sea below. *En route* we found a stunning adult male Hen Harrier just next to the road, hunting low over the fallow fields, and we watched him for several minutes as he quartered in slow-motion, occasionally hovering and allowing great views. Eventually we reached the base of the point on the eastern side, and continued on a small and winding road all the way down to the sea until we reached a bay with a small beach and some abandoned houses. As we neared Cape Kaliakra, the coastline became more dramatic, consisting of eroded reddish cliffs descending abruptly into the water. Here we scanned carefully for Wallcreeper, but luck was not on our side and we instead enjoyed very good scope views of a handsome European Shag in breeding plumage, showing its spectacular crest.

Further scanning revealed the much wanted Eurasian Eagle-Owl on its day roost, and what a magnificent sight it was through the scope! Very satisfied with this, we then ascended the plateau and continued out to the actual point, where we stopped at the remains of an old fortress for an extended scan. European Shags were flying by and small groups of Eared Grebes could be seen out at sea, as well as our first Caspian Gulls in the form of two first winter birds. Here we were also entertained by Harbour Porpoises. Returning to our hotel, we decided to try for Little Owl in the village of Balgarevo, and it didn’t take long before we



Eurasian Eagle-Owl by Adam Riley



spotted an individual sitting on top of a small house. We enjoyed excellent views through the scope of this charismatic little fellow, before we decided to call it a day and head back to our hotel in Kavarna.

We started off early the next morning at the abandoned carp farm at Lake Durankulak, where we had planned to try for Moustached Warbler, Bearded Reedling and Penduline Tit, amongst others. However, the weather conditions were not optimal, with relatively strong wind making it difficult to locate any passerines, especially in the reeds. On the other hand, we were rewarded with good views of our first Long-legged Buzzard, a Eurasian Bittern that was seen flying a short distance low over the reeds, and a pretty little European Robin showing very well in some thickets just next to our vehicle. After that, we had another opportunity to enjoy the magnificent masses of the fabulous Red-breasted Geese. Dedicated scans for Lesser White-fronted Goose produced great views of Red-breasted, Greater White-fronted and a single Graylag but not the rare target. Here we also spotted our first Eurasian Jay sitting in shrub just next to the road and an uncommon Stock Dove gave us a superb fly-by. We then headed south along the coast, to Lake Shabla, where we were lucky to find a lovely flock of stunning Eurasian Siskins feeding right alongside the road.



Whooper Swans & Common Crane by Adam Riley

Our following stop produced one of the highlights of the whole trip, namely a flock of smart looking Long-eared Owls on a day roost. It wasn't long before we located them, and even though they were sitting quite elusively among the conifers, we nevertheless managed some fantastic views through our scopes. Continuing on, we later passed by some winter crop fields where we spotted a family flock of 2 adult and 3 juvenile Tundra Swans. Whilst enjoying these pristine birds, another group of swans started circling overhead and fortunately for us ended up alighting in the same field. This flock consisted of 35 Whooper Swans and a very unexpected juvenile Common Crane that should not have been in Bulgaria at this time of year. A nice flock of Brambling were another highlight for the area as were more than 30 beautiful Eurasian Goldfinch. At the nearby Cape Shabla, the easternmost point of Bulgaria, we were treated to some excellent comparative perched views of a few Caspian Gulls in amongst a small flock of Yellow-legged Gulls. Thereafter we headed inland to scan the vast ploughed fields for Calandra Lark, one of Europe's most attractive larks. After driving around for a while, we finally managed to find a nice flock feeding just next to the road. We enjoyed great views through the scopes, as well as obtaining some additional excellent views of the birds in flight.



Long-eared Owl by Adam Riley



The next morning we once again headed off to the reedbeds at the abandoned carp farm near Lake Durankulak, seeing our first of 5 Rough-legged Buzzards *en route*. The weather had thankfully improved so we felt that our chances of finding the passerines would be much better than the day before. After listening and scanning the reeds from various positions, all of a sudden we heard the typical prolonged, weak call of a Penduline Tit, and it wasn't long before we located a delightful pair in the reeds, finally managing excellent views as they fed at eye-level just a few meters away. We were able to separate the sexes, with the male having a broader and more blackish and prominent eye-mask. We then moved onto an embankment along one of the old and overgrown ponds, from where we could obtain a better overview of the reedbed. Within the next few minutes here we bagged our other two target species, namely Bearded Reedling and Moustached Warbler. The warbler obliged with superb views, even in the scope, but the reedling required fast binocular work! Scanning waterbirds in this area also produced the rare and sought-after White-headed Duck but sadly at a distance that had us all hoping for better views.

Next was our transfer along the coast down to Burgas. *En route*, we had our lunch break at a small, cosy restaurant just next to the road. After enjoying a scrumptious meal, we then continued to our next stop, a small village in a hilly landscape with adjacent vast deciduous forests, to search for another target species, namely Sombre Tit. Sure enough, it didn't take too long before an individual appeared, which was soon joined by another. We enjoyed excellent scope views of one bird in particular, as it perched just in front of us. Great and Blue Tits also showed well at this location.



Great Tit by Adam Riley

Thereafter, we journeyed southwards all the way to Sarafovo, just to the north of Burgas, where we would spend the following few nights. *En route* we picked up a nice flock of Eurasian Skylarks on a small football field just next to the road, and amongst them found our only Common Linnet of the trip. Reaching the coastal city of Burgas, we stopped at the vast salt pans at Atanasovsko Lake, where we appreciated some different scenery. Hundreds of striking Common Shelducks were scattered around out on the pans, as well as a total of 50 magnificent Dalmatian Pelicans with their curly hairdos. We also had our first encounter with the smart looking Pied Avocet, of which a flock of 40 were seen, plus a handful of the spectacular Eurasian Curlew.



Pygmy Cormorants by Adam Riley

The next day was entirely spent in the surroundings of Burgas. We started off early in the morning at Lake Atanasovsko, where we were particularly entertained by the masses of Greater White-fronted Geese out on the fields just next to the Burgas Airport. Amongst them we also managed to pick out our final three Red-breasted Geese, which is quite a rare species in this part of the country. Our next stop was at the eastern section of Lake Mandra, on the opposite side of the city of Burgas. As we



came driving in on the road embankment, a White-tailed Eagle flew into view, shortly followed by a second individual, and these two started to hunt amongst the massive flocks of Eurasian Coots on the open water – a very impressive sight indeed. We also enjoyed another perched individual later on. After that, we continued to a small wetland a bit further ahead, where we were very lucky to find a stunning Common Kingfisher that gave us excellent scope views. An obliging Black Redstart was enjoyed by all. Another great sight was of 140 Whooper Swans and 130 Tundra Swans on the vast winter crop fields, and we also managed to pick out 7 Graylag Geese amongst them. After lunch, we returned to Poda Lagoon. Here we added some great species to our list including Greater Scaup, Smew and an unexpected Common Eider, which is a very uncommon species in Bulgaria. Pygmy Cormorants were again common. After a productive couple of hours here, we headed back through the city of Burgas, stopping at a high-rise stake-out for a Peregrine Falcon which allowed superb scope views. Our final stop was back at the Atanasovsko salt pans, where we scored with a flock of 20 Slender-billed Gulls flying past. After that we called it a day and headed back to our hotel in Sarafovo.

The next day was our big day for woodpeckers. Starting off very early, we noticed that the weather was the best we had encountered for woodland birding, with clear skies and no wind. We drove all the way down to the Strandzha Nature Park, up in the hills, and very close to the Turkish border. We were out the entire day and managed to bag all of our targeted woodpeckers! Walking through a very pretty mixed deciduous forest, with beech, aspens and oaks, and an almost complete carpeting of matted amber leaves, we were quite surprised at how pristine and vast these woods actually



Birding in Strandzha Nature Park by David Erterius

were, and how peaceful it was in the area. It was also nice to see many brilliant Cyclamen and Yellow Crocus in full bloom, as well as some lovely yellow Mistletoe blooming high overhead. Among the woodpeckers, we were particularly entertained by three very showy Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, a couple of sought-after White-backed Woodpeckers, a pair over very impressive Black Woodpecker, one Middle Spotted Woodpecker and, last but not least, two Grey-headed Woodpeckers feeding just next to the road and giving superb views. Other highlights today included cute Long-tailed Tits, Song Thrush, Marsh Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreepers. Before returning, we also spent the last few hours of daylight trying to obtain views of one of two Tawny Owls, which were remarkably heard calling early in the day in full light! However, despite our efforts, including staying until sunset, we failed to see them in the steep and inaccessible valley in which they had roosted.

We started off the next day with another visit to the Poda Lagoon. It was however very misty, so we diverted to Burgas City Park. Here we managed to pick up several new birds, including great scope views a Eurasian Sparrowhawk that was sitting inside a conifer tearing up a small bird. We also picked up several attractive Redwings, feeding on the berries of a massive ivy, as well as Goldcrest. Later on, as we passed Lake Burgas, we saw large rafts of waterfowl and decided scan the lake's northeast shore. It was a good decision, with our best find being a handful of White-headed Ducks,



which gave much clearer scope views than we had achieved before. It was also fascinating to see huge numbers of Common Pochard out on the vast lake. We then headed to Poda Lagoon again, where we had our lunch break. Memorable sightings at the lagoon were great views of a number of Little Grebes as well as Great Crested Grebes. We also had excellent views of a small flock of Hawfinch, and managed some nice studies of their great big bill through the scope. We also finally all managed to obtain views of a skulking Cetti's Warbler. And then, before heading back to our hotel in Sarafovo for a final celebratory dinner, we spotted a smart, "shrimp-pinkish" Slender-billed Gull just next to the road at Atanasovsko salt pans and a lovely pair of Crested Lark at Lake Pomorie.

Our final day of the tour saw most of the group leaving for the airport in Varna early in the morning. After that, the five of us who remained, including the driver and Dimiter, our expert local guide, then went westwards towards a little wetland right alongside Lake Varna. *En route*, all of a sudden we witnessed a fantastic display as we spotted a young male Northern Goshawk chasing Rock Doves on the outskirts of a small village, just next to the road. Certainly a species we didn't expect at such a late stage, considering that all such *Accipiters* tend to require a good dose of luck! A little further ahead we reached the wetland, and scoped the surrounding area. Among the various waterfowl species, it didn't take long for us to find the "cherry on the top" in the form of a splendid



Hawfinch by Adam Riley

male Smew in all his sought-after and stylish adult plumage – what a bird! After regrouping on the other side of the wetland, we then walked all the way down to its swampy edge with scattered reeds to search for Water Rail. Soon an individual responded on our playback and amazingly came straight into sight, crossing a more sparsely vegetated area between the reeds and giving incredible views! In high spirits we left the wetland, and were then further rewarded with good views of a flock of beautiful Eurasian Goldfinch on the way back to the vehicle.

Since we still had a few hours remaining, we decided to make a last and final stop at the Varna beach to bird along the sandy shores. Here we saw several dozen Yellow-legged Gulls being fed by the locals, along with a few Mute Swans, all of which were very confiding. And then, just as we had climbed back into the mini-bus, a delightful little White Wagtail caught our eyes, walking just next to the road and giving excellent views. What a cracking way to end off this remarkable tour, before making our way to the airport in Varna for our return flights home!

Good transport and roads, fascinating scenery, comfortable accommodations, great food and a wonderful group of participants all combined to make this, our maiden Bulgaria in Winter birding adventure, a resounding success! A very special thank you to everyone, especially Dimiter, for ensuring that everything ran smoothly and as planned. We look forward to next year's tour!

Annotated List of Birds Recorded

Nomenclature and taxonomy follows the IOC List v3.3.

Total: 118 (including 1 heard only)



Pheasants, Fowl & Allies Phasianidae

Common Pheasant

Phasianus colchicus

We saw a total of four during our trip.

Ducks, Geese & Swans Anatidae

Graylag Goose

Anser anser

Two sightings: one individual amongst Greater White-fronted and Red-breasted Geese at Lake Durankulak, and seven at Lake Mandra.

Greater White-fronted Goose

Anser albifrons

Large numbers were seen on four consecutive days, in Coastal Dobrudzha and at Lake Atanasovsko, with the highest count being around 6,000 in the surroundings of Lake Durankulak.

Red-breasted Goose

Branta ruficollis

In Coastal Dobrudzha we spent three days enjoying several thousand of these stunning and highly sought-after endangered waterfowl on the winter crop fields, with an estimated 4,380 birds being the largest flock record during our tour. A further 3 individuals were a pleasant find days later among Greater White-fronted Geese at Lake Atanasovsko.

Mute Swan

Cygnus olor

Seen almost daily throughout the trip, with up to a hundred a day.

Tundra Swan

Cygnus columbianus

A family group consisting of 2 adults and 3 juveniles was seen on a winter crop field just next to the road, not far from Lake Tuzla; and an impressive flock of 130 was seen at the vast winter crop fields at Lake Mandra.

Whooper Swan

Cygnus cygnus

Seen on four consecutive days, with a day maximum of around 200.

Common Shelduck

Tadorna tadorna

This striking species was seen in the hundreds, with a daily maximum of 400 in the surrounding wetlands of Burgas.

Gadwall

Anas strepera

Seen during five days, with up to fifty in the surrounding wetlands of Burgas.

Eurasian Wigeon

Anas penelope

Seen on three days with a maximum of 50 at Lake Tuzla.

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

Small numbers were commonly encountered throughout Bulgaria.

Northern Shoveler

Anas clypeata

Small numbers were seen on several days, with a maximum of 30 at Poda Lagoon.

Northern Pintail

Anas acuta

We had good scope views of a handsome male at Lake Varna on the first day and an additional dozen of individuals at Poda Lagoon.

Eurasian Teal

Anas crecca

Seen in small numbers throughout the tour, with up to 30 on several days.

Red-crested Pochard

Netta rufina

A female was seen in flight at a coastal wetland near Lake Durankulak.

Common Pochard

Aythya farina

Seen at several fresh water sites on five separate days, with a maximum total of an impressive 3,500 out on the open waters of Lake Burgas and Lake Mandra. We had particularly good views when we followed the road embankment alongside the northeastern-most section of Lake Mandra.

Ferruginous Duck

Aythya nyroca



We enjoyed good scope views of a male at Lake Varna, not far from the village of Beloslav on the first day.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Seen in good numbers on several days, with up to 150 at Poda Lagoon and 200 at the Yatata wetland on the final day.

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*

We were quite surprised to find a female or young male at Poda Lagoon. This species is very uncommon in Bulgaria.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*

Our first sighting of this winter visitor from northernmost Europe was of a male, which gave good scope views at Lake Shabla. We also enjoyed even better views of a group of ten among Tufted Ducks at Poda Lagoon on two consecutive days.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

Seen at two occasions, with up to two females at Poda Lagoon.

Smew *Mergellus albellus*

This much wanted species, which breeds in small undisturbed lakes in the vast wilderness of northern Scandinavia and the Russian taiga, was seen at three occasions, with up to four females at Poda Lagoon. A few of us were also lucky to find a cracking adult male amongst other waterfowl at Yatata wetland, just hours before we headed for our return flight. What a bird!

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*

Seen in small numbers throughout the trip in saltwater lagoons and on different locations along the coast, with a maximum of 15 at Poda Lagoon.

White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*

This spectacular species, which has been red-listed by the IUCN due to a large reduction in populations during the last few decades, was first seen at Lake Durankulak, where a single individual gave very distant scope views. However, we were all far more satisfied when we were treated to much better views of five individuals at Lake Burgas.

Loons Gaviidae

Black-throated Loon (Diver) *Gavia arctica*

A single and quite distant individual was seen actively feeding on Lake Durankulak.

Grebes Podicipedidae

Little Grebe (Dabchick) *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Single individuals were seen on three different days, with a daily total of up to twenty at Lake Pomorie and Poda Lagoon.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

We had almost daily encounters of this species, with up to 60 at Poda Lagoon, where we also enjoyed great scope views.

Eared (Black-necked) Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

This species was commonly seen at several saltwater locations along the coast. We also had good views of small groups on the open sea and several close encounters in harbours and bays. Highest count was 80 at Poda Lagoon.

Hérons, Egrets & Bitterns Ardeidae

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

We were fortunate to see this elusive and striking species, flying short distances low over the reedbeds on a total of three occasions: at Lake Durankulak, Pomorie wetland and near Poda Lagoon.



Grey Heron*Ardea cinerea*

Single individuals were seen on four days, with up to ten on the final day.

Great Egret*Egretta garzetta*

We had small groups and singles at different fresh water sites throughout the trip. On the best day, we enjoyed a daily total of 50 individuals.

Pelicans Pelecanidae**Great White Pelican***Pelecanus onocrotalus*

This species is uncommon during the winter in Bulgaria, as most of the birds from the European population migrate to Africa, but we nevertheless found seven immature birds amongst a group of Dalmatian Pelicans out on a submerged farmland in the surroundings of Lake Mandra. We also had one immature on the following day at Yatata wetland.

Dalmatian Pelican*Pelecanus crispus*

This magnificent species has an impressive wingspan up to 3.2 metres and breeds from southeastern Europe eastwards through Central Asia. Our initial sighting was at Lake Varna on the first day, and later on we enjoyed fantastic views at Atanasovsko salt pans, of birds both roosting and flying by. Several were in their stunning breeding plumage. We also located a large group comprising 66 individuals out on a submerged farmland, in the surroundings of Lake Mandra. This was Michael's final pelican species, congratulations!

Cormorants & Shags Phalacrocoracidae**Pygmy Cormorant***Microcarbo pygmeus*

Seen commonly throughout Bulgaria at most fresh water sites, especially channels, marshes and lakes. Our highest daily total was an estimated 300 individuals.

European Shag*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*

Seen on two days along the coast in the northeast, best daily total was a dozen at Cape Kaliakra, where we had particularly good views of one perched on the sea-cliffs.

Great Cormorant*Phalacrocorax carbo*

The *sinensis* subspecies, which is the one that occurs in Bulgaria as well as the rest of southeastern Europe, was commonly encountered throughout the tour. We were particularly entertained by the ritualised wing-flapping display of breeding birds at Poda Lagoon, sitting atop their nests on pylons. We decided this was as close as we would get to watching displaying birds-of-paradise in Bulgaria!

Hawks, Kites, Eagles & Vultures Accipitridae**White-tailed Eagle***Haliaeetus albicilla*

We enjoyed fantastic views at Lake Mandra, where we had a total of 2 adults and 1 sub-adult. The first eagle crossed the road embankment just in front of our vehicle, and shortly after that began to hunt for Eurasian Coots out on the open waters, where it was joined by a second individual. A truly impressive sight! We also had good scope views of an adult at a nearby small wetland, where we watched it perched high in a hilly beech wood.

Western Marsh Harrier*Circus aeruginosus*

Seen in good numbers throughout the tour, quartering over reedbeds.

Hen Harrier*Circus cyaneus*

We saw about a dozen in total on five out of eight days. Several very smart adult males were thoroughly enjoyed.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk*Accipiter nisus*

Seen on eight occasions, most memorable of which was a stunning adult male, perched at close range and tearing at prey in Burgas City Park.



Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

A few of us were lucky to witness a fantastic show of a young male hunting Feral Pigeons at the small village of Konstantinovo, some 8 kilometres to the southwest of Varna Airport, just a few hours before the end of the tour.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Small numbers were seen on most days, with a maximum day count of 20. Excellent views were enjoyed.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

One adult was seen in the surroundings of Lake Durankulak, and three birds were seen in the surroundings of Burgas (two at Lake Mandra and a juvenile at Lake Atanasovsko).

Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*

We had a total of half a dozen of these charismatic raptors, which are winter visitors from northern Scandinavia and Russia, of which several were seen hovering next to the road.

Falcons & Caracaras Falconidae**Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus*

Up to five birds (15 in total) were seen on six dates at various locations.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

We had a total of four birds, most notably an adult perched high up on a building in central Burgas, allowing excellent scope views.

Rails, Gallinules & Coots Rallidae**Water Rail** *Rallus aquaticus*

Heard in the reeds at the abandoned carp farm at Lake Durankulak, and then a few of us had the good fortune to enjoy cracking views of an adult at Yatata wetland, just hours before we headed for our return flight.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

Commonly encountered throughout the tour, at both freshwater and saltwater locations.

Cranes Gruidae**Common Crane** *Grus grus*

We had excellent views of an immature bird out on a winter crop field, among Whooper and a few Tundra Swans, not far from Lake Tuzla.

Stilts & Avocets Recurvirostridae**Pied Avocet** *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Flocks were seen on two consecutive days at Atanasovsko salt pans, with a maximum count of 150.

Plovers & Lapwings Charadriidae**Black-bellied (Gray) Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*

We had good views of one at Lake Pomorie.

Sandpipers & Allies Scolopacidae**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*

We flushed one at the edge of the reeds at Poda Lagoon.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Seen on two consecutive days, with up to 10 at Atanasovsko salt pans, Burgas.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*

We had good views of three birds at Lake Pomorie.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

We had good views of one bird in a small marsh, down in an old quarry not far from Poda Lagoon.

Gulls Laridae

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Seen commonly throughout the tour, with a daily total of around 400 at various wetlands around Burgas.

Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei*

Some 20 adults in their smart pinkish breeding plumage gave good scope views when flying by at Atanasovsko salt pans, and we enjoyed even better views of a swimming adult in its typical long-necked feeding posture at the same location.

Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*

Small numbers were seen on several days, with up to 40 feeding along the shore at Lake Durankulak and a total of 50 in the same area on the following day.

Mediterranean Gull *Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus*

Seen at one occasion, in the basin of Varna Harbour on the first day, where we had good scope views of a flock of 30 out on the open water in the late afternoon.

Mew (Common) Gull *Larus canus*

Recorded on three dates during the tour, with the highest count coming from Lake Mandra where we saw about 10 individuals.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*

Recorded on four dates during the tour, with most birds (about 10) in the Burgas area. We were treated to some excellent comparative views of this and the following closely related species.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

Commonly encountered throughout the tour, along the coast as well as in fresh water habitats. The vast majority of adults were in breeding plumage, and territorial pairs were regularly on rooftops along the coast.

Doves & Pigeons Columbidae

Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon) *Columba livia*

Seen daily throughout the tour, in various types of urban environments.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

We had excellent views of a single bird seen flying by in good light and at close range, when we watched the Red-breasted Geese at Lake Durankulak.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

A flock of 30 was seen right next to the road at Atanasovsko salt pans, and 8 birds were flying over at Silkosia Nature Reserve.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

We encountered small groups on several days, in gardens and other types of urban environments.

Typical Owls Strigidae

Eurasian Eagle-Owl *Bubo bubo*

We had superb scope views of one at a day roost on Cape Kaliakra, perched high up on the cliffs on the opposite side of a small canyon.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

We had excellent views of one on the rooftop of an old house, in the village of Balgarevo.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*



We were fortunate to find 10 individuals of this striking species at a day roost in a clump of conifers in the village of Ezerets.

Tawny Owl*Strix aluco*

Two males were heard calling in complete daylight (!), in the vast deciduous forest of Silkosia Nature Reserve. However, despite extreme efforts including staying until sunset, we failed to see them in the steep and inaccessible valley in which they were calling.

Kingfishers Alcedinidae**Common Kingfisher***Alcedo atthis*

We enjoyed cracking scope views of a bird perched on top of cattails at a small wetland at the southeastern shore of Lake Mandra, just between the villages of Dimchevo and Tvarditsa.

Woodpeckers & Allies Picidae**Lesser Spotted Woodpecker***Dendrocopus minor*

We enjoyed excellent views of an excited pair plus a lone female in Silkosia Nature Reserve, in the Strandzha Mountains, and a single individual was also seen briefly in Burgas City Park the following day.

Middle Spotted Woodpecker*Dendrocopus medius*

We had a total of three individuals in Silkosia Nature Reserve in the Strandzha Mountains. One showed particularly well and was very vocal with its typical mewling call.

White-backed Woodpecker*Dendrocopus leucotos*

A pair of the race *lifordii*, occurring in the Balkans and Turkey, was found late in the afternoon in the vast deciduous forest of Silkosia Nature Reserve. We enjoyed superb scope views as they were feeding and calling actively among the aspens and oaks just next to the road.

Syrian Woodpecker*Dendrocopus syriacus*

This species was recorded on four out of eight days, and we had particularly good views of a territorial and very cooperative male in the village of Kamen Brjag, perched on top of nearby trees and telephone poles.

Great Spotted Woodpecker*Dendrocopus major*

One was seen perched on top of a big spruce tree at Lake Shabla, and we also heard the species in Silkosia Nature Reserve.

Black Woodpecker*Dryocopus martius*

We had good views of this impressive species in Silkosia Nature Reserve, with a very vocal bird flying by as well as seen perched in the beech wood, and another one heard with its typical “machine gun-drumming”.

Grey-headed Woodpecker*Picus canus*

Two foraging individuals were found late in the afternoon in the vast deciduous forest of Silkosia Nature Reserve. We enjoyed superb scope views as they were feeding actively among the aspens and oaks just next to the road.

Shrikes Laniidae**Great Grey Shrike***Lanius excubitor*

A total of 9 individuals were seen of this smart-looking species, with 5 being the highest daily count in Coastal Dobrudzha.

Crows, Jays & Magpies Corvidae**Eurasian Jay***Garrulus glandarius*

Our first encounter was just next to the road in the coastal Dobrudzha area, and we also enjoyed about half a dozen in the Strandzha Nature Park.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica mauratanica*

Seen commonly throughout the tour.

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Two individuals gave excellent views just next to the road in a small village in the Coastal Dobrudzha area.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Seen commonly throughout the tour, with up to a hundred on one of the days.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

Single individuals were seen over five days. This is the same species that occurs in the northern parts of Europe, while the closely related Carrion Crow being the one that is found in the western parts of Europe.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*

A few were seen over three days.

Tits Paridae

Marsh Tit *Pariparus ater*

We were treated to excellent views of up to four individuals in the Strandzha Nature Park.

Sombre Tit *Poecile lugubris*

Two individuals of this sought-after species, which is confined to the open deciduous forest on mountain slopes in southeastern-most Europe and the Middle East, offered us some excellent scope views in the village of Banya.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Seen over most days, with up to 30 being the highest daily record.

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Small numbers were seen over four days, with several coming into close views.

Penduline Tits Remizidae

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

This distinctive little bird was seen at the abandoned carp farm at Lake Durankulak, where we were treated to some excellent views of a smart pair feeding low in the reeds at very close range.

Bearded Reedling Panuridae

Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus*

We eventually had good views of a pair at the abandoned carp farm at Lake Durankulak.

Larks Alaudidae

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

After scanning the ploughed fields in the surroundings of the village of Gorun, we finally managed to find a flock of about 35 individuals out on an open field. We were treated to some really good views of the birds, both perched and in flight.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

One individual was seen at Lake Mandra and we got even better views of two individuals at very close range at Lake Pomorie.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

We enjoyed nice scope views of a flock of 17 in Sarafovo, and managed some additional good views of another flock at Atanasovsko Lake the following day.



Cettia Bush Warblers and allies Cettidae

Cetti's Warbler

Cettia cetti

Single individuals of this skulker were heard singing throughout the trip from various types of dense vegetation, and we were also lucky to get a glimpse of one at Poda Lagoon.

Bushtits Aegithalidae

Long-tailed Tit

Aegithalos caudatus

About ten of this very attractive little species were seen in the Strandzha Nature Park, where we had close encounters. A few of us had another four individuals at Yatata wetland just hours before heading back to the airport.

Reed Warblers & Allies Acrocephalidae

Moustached Warbler

Acrocephalus melanopogon

At least two of this attractive little warbler gave us excellent scope views in the reeds at the abandoned carp farm at Lake Durankulak.

Goldcrests, Kinglets Regulidae

Goldcrest

Regulus ignicapillus

Our first encounter was of one individual in Sarafovo, in a clump of conifers just next to the road, and later on we had even better views of two individuals in Burgas City Park.

Wrens Troglodytidae

Eurasian (Winter) Wren

Troglodytes troglodytes

Single individuals of this distinctive little species were seen over five days, with up to 5 being the highest daily record. We had particularly memorable views of one at Lake Mandra, showing very well in some copses at close range.

Nuthatches Sittidae

Eurasian Nuthatch

Sitta europaea

This acrobatic little fellow showed very well in the Strandzha Nature Park, where several individuals came into close view just above our heads.

Treecreepers Certhiidae

Short-toed Treecreeper

Certhia brachydactyla

Our first encounter with this species was in the Strandzha Nature Park, where we had particularly good views of a territorial male coming down the trees just above us. We also had one individual in Burgas City Park.

Starlings Sturnidae

Common Starling

Sturnus vulgaris

We had small flocks, consisting of a few hundred individuals, in the Coastal Dobrudzha area and much higher numbers in the Burgas area, with the maximum record being a single flock of about 1500 individuals – a truly impressive sight!

Thrushes Turdidae

Common (Eurasian) Blackbird

Turdus merula



Seven birds were noted over five days, most of them seen flying by from our vehicle. An additional few were also heard.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Four were seen in the Strandzha Nature Park and we had even better views of another two in Burgas City Park.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

One individual was seen briefly along the road, and another was heard singing in the Strandzha Nature Park.

Chats, Old World Flycatchers Muscicapidae

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

About half a dozen were encountered throughout the trip, with one individual giving good views at the abandoned carp farm at Lake Durankulak.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

We managed to spot a single individual from our minibus, in a small village in the surroundings of Lake Mandra. Seen by the whole group for several minutes, perched at close range.

Old World Sparrows Passeridae

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Seen at several occasions in urban environments, with 100 individuals being the single highest record.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Seen in urban environments at Lake Mandra, with up to 30 individuals.

Wagtails & Pipits Motacillidae

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

We had three individuals flying by, possibly early migrants, in the area of coastal Dobrudzha, and a few of us enjoyed a single individual perched at close range at Varna beach on the final day, just hours before our departure.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Up to ten individuals were seen at the abandoned Carp Farm at Lake Durankulak.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

We had good but brief scope views of one bird at Atanasovsko salt pans and an additional two individuals seen briefly flying by at Poda Lagoon.

Siskins, Crossbills & Allies Fringillidae

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Single individuals and small flocks were seen throughout.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

A common breeder in the vast expanses of forests and mountains in central and northern Scandinavia, and further east all across the Russian taiga belt. We were treated to good scope views of about 20 individuals, associating with other finches in the surroundings of Lake Tuzla.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

We enjoyed good views of this brightly coloured species at several occasions.

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis carduelis*

Seen over three days, the most memorable views were at Lake Shabla where a flock of 60 were seen feeding at close range on the ground, just at the roadside.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*



We enjoyed good views of this brightly coloured species at several sites.

Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

A single individual was seen amongst a flock of Eurasian Skylarks just to the north of Burgas.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

This striking species was seen in several locations in the south. A small flock at Poda Lagoon was seen perched at close range, and giving particularly enjoyable scope views.

Buntings Emberizidae

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

This stout bunting was seen in small numbers over several days, with up to twenty on two consecutive days.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Single individuals and small flocks were seen over several days, with up to 40 at Poda Lagoon, giving excellent scope views perched in the reeds.

Annotated List of Mammals Recorded

Harbour Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena*

A pod of at least three individuals were regularly surfacing off Cape Kaliakra. It took a while before everyone got onto them but we finally all succeeded.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

A single fox was seen crossing the road in the Dobrudzha area.

Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Two of these attractive squirrels were seen in Strandzha Nature Park.

Eurasian (Brown) Hare *Lepus europaeus*

A single was seen in the vicinity of Bourgas.

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