

TRIP REPORT - BULGARIA: 17th APRIL 2011 – 23rd APRIL 2011

Group Members: Kenny Musgrove, Wayne Geater, Steve Abbott

Tour Guide: Simeon Gigov – Neophron Bird Tours

Itinerary Arranged by Dimiter Georgiev – Neophron Bird Tours

DAY 1 – SUNDAY: 17th APRIL (the longest day!)

Following our highly successful trip to Bulgaria in May 2010, I had organised with Dimiter Georgiev a return visit, but this time in mid-April to take in a number of different locations and the chance of mass migration. We caught the late evening Wizz Air flight from Luton at 22.15 (Saturday) and landed at Sofia airport at 03.30 local time. We were met at the airport by our guide Simeon Gigov, with whom we had enjoyed a successful trip last May.

Following a quick stop for coffee at Simeon's home, we set off at first light for Ponor Mountain in the Western Balkans, about an hour drive north of Sofia in search of our first target bird of the trip. We parked the car and made our way up a mountain track and Steve immediately spotted a **Rock Thrush** singing on the top the high rock face. A **Sombre Tit** was spotted in a nearby bush and then our target – Rock Partridge was heard calling just over the top of a ridge a little higher up. We clambered higher in an attempt to get a view and a second bird was heard, but all we could get a sight of was a **Black Redstart**. As we waited for a bird to show, a party of 28 **Alpine Chough** flew overhead and landed on the rock face. After about 20 minutes Wayne spotted a male **Rock Partridge** calling from the top of the rock face – a third bird and we all enjoyed good but distant views. One of the singing birds was heard a little nearer and we made our way back down the track in an attempt to get a close view. However to Simeon's surprise a fourth bird appeared singing behind us and gave good views. Satisfied at our early success we made our way back to the car. Other birds seen in this area were **Tree and House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Hawfinch, Greenfinch, Bullfinch, Linnet, Meadow Pipit, Robin, Black Redstart, Wren, Kestrel, Common Buzzard, 2 more Sombre Tit, Grey and White Wagtails, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Corn Bunting, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Mistle Thrush, Jay, Magpie and a calling Cuckoo and Green Woodpecker.**



We set off driving further north to Petrohan Forest in search of target bird number two – White-backed Woodpecker, at around 9 o'clock in the morning and on the journey had a number of **Common Buzzards, Raven, Sparrowhawk, and a Short-toed Eagle**. However when we reached the forest area higher up in the mountain range there was several inches of snow and fog had descended making very unfavourable conditions. A quick attempt to lure out the woodpecker was greeted only by a **Nuthatch**, so we decided to abort our attempt and made our way back towards Sofia stopping for lunch on route.

Before setting off south for the Western Rhodopes, Simeon made a short detour to take us to his "local patch" – a small lake and marsh area at Aldomiorts not far from Sofia which produced some excellent birds. On route we had a flock of 50 migrating **White Storks** and a number of **Common Buzzards, Ravens and Hooded Crow**. At the lake there were two **Great White Egrets** in an adjacent field plus three **Purple Heron and a Little Egret**. **Great Crested and Little Grebe** were present on the lake and **Swallows, House Martins** and a single **Sand Martin** all hawked for insects. Several **Black-headed and Grey-headed Wagtails** were flitting among the reeds, **Coot and Moorhen** frequented the margins, **Water Rail** could be heard calling and up to seven **Ferruginous Ducks** were spotted among the reeds. Two **Marsh Harriers** were almost constantly in view hunting over the reed-bed. Simeon had told us there were up to six **Bitterns** in the vicinity and sure enough it wasn't long before we heard the familiar booming and a single bird was seen in flight. Small numbers of **Sedge Warblers** sang from the reed bed and I spotted a small crane emerging from the reeds which Steve quickly identified as a **Little Crane**. As we drove from the site a **Cuckoo** was seen sitting on telegraph wires.



We set off on the long journey south without a great deal of bird activity to report en route until Simeon turned towards the Besaparski Hills. On an approach road we had good views of a ring-tail **Hen Harrier** and on exiting from the car a **Corncrake and Quail** could be heard calling from an adjacent field. I spent half an hour attempting to call out both species but sadly no joy, although the quail came very close without showing itself. However two **Grey Partridges** did show themselves and a **White Stork** searched for food in the opposite field and both **Common and Long-legged Buzzard** passed overhead. Wayne spent his time photographing **Tree and Spanish Sparrows** and Simeon pointed out **Isabelline Wheatear** which apparently breeds in the area. I spotted an incoming **Stone Curlew** flying towards us which landed close by giving Wayne further photographic opportunities

and Steve found two pairs of **Northern Wheatears**. A number of **Calandra and Crested Larks** were seen along with a single **Short-toed Lark**. Other common birds in the area included **Greenfinch and Goldfinch, Linnet and House Sparrow**.



We continued on our journey and entering the valley at Kritchin we soon exited the car to observe large numbers of **Common and Alpine Swifts** screaming overhead and also good numbers of **Crag Martin**. We were looking at these birds when a large raptor drifted into view – a **Lesser-spotted Eagle** and **Raven, Kestrel and Common Buzzard** were also observed. An hour or so later we reached our destination - the hotel Teshel and a good meal and a few drinks ended a very successful day with 80 different species seen.

DAY 2 - MONDAY: 18th APRIL (the end of my search!)

Our plan was to get up at 7 a.m. and go for a walk in the vicinity of the hotel before breakfast. We aborted this plan when we woke up to snow – it was snowing and a couple of centimetres had fallen overnight. We all went back to bed for another hour or so, except for Steve who had a short walk and saw **Dipper** and **Grey Wagtail** on the stream that flowed past the hotel, **Wren, Marsh Tit, Coal and Great Tit, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Firecrest and Chiffchaff** in the nearby woods, 20 plus flyover **Crossbills**, and a calling **Black Woodpecker**. During breakfast we all observed two **Firecrests** and a **Chiffchaff** through the window.

We set off at about 9 o'clock for the Trigrad Gorge and target bird 3. It was still snowing heavily and a stop further upstream produced a pair of **Dipper**. As it was cold and wet Simeon was not hopeful of seeing Wallcreeper at the gorge and he was proved correct. Disappointed we travelled a little further on to Trigrad village where we again had **Dipper** on the river and a pair of **Black Redstarts** and a few **Chaffinches** flitting among the houses. In heavy snow we parked and made our way up the wooded hillside, but birds were thin on the ground and apart from the odd **Hooded Crow** and a **Kestrel** nothing was to be seen. We made our way down a different track and our luck changed. Among a small flock of tits, Simeon and Steve found a **Dunnock** an obliging female **Rock Bunting** and little further on a **Wryneck** was sat in a lone bush. On the way back to the car we found another

Firecrest, Tree and House Sparrow and a **Yellowhammer** sang from a tree by the parked car.

We decided to head back to the hotel for lunch and try the gorge again on the way, but still no luck. It was snowing heavier than ever and as the other three purchased jars of honey, I had a pair of **Ravens** in the gorge and a **Peregrine** fly over. In the little village just before the hotel there was considerable bird activity, with **5 Ring Ouzels (alpestris), Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Blackbird, Grey and White Wagtail, numerous Chaffinch and Greenfinch, a male Rock Bunting and Black Redstart** all feeding, allowing Wayne a photograph opportunity.

After lunch we drove and walked the forest roads just east of Dospat in search of woodpeckers, but with little success only adding **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. There was considerable thrush activity in a number of areas and we saw 20 plus **Ring Ouzels**.

Despite the difficulty of the day, Simeon saved his trump card until last. He drove up a narrow winding road at around seven in the evening to the village of Yapodina. Three **Woodlarks** fed on the approach road and the ubiquitous **Black Redstart** was present. On parking the car and to our amazement as it was cold and now gloomy, he managed to callout a magnificent male **Grey-headed Woodpecker** which perched on a nearby tree and gave quality views until it was disturbed by **Magpies** and flew off. A pair of **Bullfinch** also sat in the same tree. The woodpecker was a lifer for me (having chased the species across half of Europe) and it meant a second bottle of wine with the evening meal back at the hotel.



DAY 3 – 19th APRIL (stuck in the snow!)

Our original plan was to get up early and do the local walk but this time heavy rain put paid to that idea. After breakfast we set off around 9 o'clock for the Trigad Gorge yet again hoping it would be third time lucky. Simeon was again not very hopeful due to the weather. On arrival we were greeted again by a pair of **Ravens** and Simeon made an attempt to call out the bird. After 10 minutes or so Steve thought he heard a reply and sure enough there on the opposite cliff wall was a

magnificent male **Wallcreepeer** in full breeding plumage. It performed in front of us for 10 minutes and even flew across the gorge and perched just above our heads before flying off and disappearing out of sight further up the gorge. Extremely pleased with ourselves we set off on our revised plan to go to the vulture centre in the Eastern Rhodopes. However this plan was soon aborted as higher up in the mountains, the snow had been a lot heavier and we were unable to make it over the high pass due to about 8 inches of snow. We tried another route but the weather and road conditions defeated us, and we had to return back down the valley and make our way out the same way as we came in.

We had to make around 100km with this detour and Simeon decided to change the plan we had formulated the previous evening and head for Bourgas on the main highway. Birding was uneventful but we did manage to spot a pair of **Montagu's Harriers** in a field just off the motorway as we drove along with farmlands either side of the road. **Great White Egrets, Common Buzzard and Marsh Harrier** were also prominent along this stretch of road, as were numerous parties of **Common Swift**.



We had turned off the motorway and headed for the Sliven Plains when a large raptor was spotted circling overhead. This turned out to be a **Short-toed Eagle**. Just a few miles further up the road Simeon turned down a farm track after telling us this was a good area for susliks. The next hour or so produced what I must consider the best birdwatching experience of my life. As well as susliks, which Wayne happily photographed, the area had **Calandra and Short-toed Lark** and breeding **Isabelline Wheatear**. The sight of a **Common Buzzard and a Long-legged Buzzard** above us was just the pre-cursor of what was to come! Within the next half hour we had outstanding views of a further 11 species of raptor, all giving outstanding views. In no particular order we had **Eastern Imperial Eagle, Goshawk, Peregrine Falcon, Short-toed Eagle, Kestrel, Booted Eagle, Black Kite, Hen Harrier, Sparrow Hawk** and half a mile up the road by a small fishpond, **Osprey and Lesser-spotted Eagle**. In addition we also had two large groups of migrating **White Storks**, and a single **Black Stork**. **Alpine and Common Swift** also passed overhead. It was not the numbers and variety of these magnificent birds of prey but the ability to observe them at close quarters as they flew overhead and the comparisons we were able to make as different birds were visible in the same scope view – absolutely brilliant!

It had been a long days driving so in late afternoon we set off on the last 100km to Bourgas with our enthusiasm renewed.

An hour or so later Simeon pulled into the car park near Atansovsko Lake in Bourgas and we spent half an hour or so observing some species that were completely new for the trip – waterbirds. The salt pans produced **Shelduck, Garganey, Mallard, Teal, Shoveler, Pintail, and Gadwall**; waders in the form of **Avocet, Whimbrel, Marsh Sandpiper, Ruff, Kentish Plover, Spotted Redshank, Black-winged Stilt and Black-tailed Godwit**; a party of five **Spoonbills, the odd Pygmy Cormorant and Little Egret, a single Common Tern**; and raptors in the form of **Marsh Harrier**, and a single **Hobby**. The nearby bushes and reeds held **Cetti's Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Reed Warbler and a single Great Reed Warbler** and Wayne found a lone **Tree Pipit**.

As it was getting late we drove the 20 minutes or so to our hotel in the town of Sozopol, south of Bourgas and over our evening meal reflected on a very diverse day. However, it did not end there. As we left the restaurant a **Scop's Owl** was singing in the town square, but try as we might we could not get a sighting.

DAY 4 – 20th April (Steve's big woodpecker morning!)

We set off around eight after breakfast for the Stranja Forest near the Turkish border. En route we had several **Common Buzzards and Great White Egrets**. We parked the car and walked down the road through the forest and had only walked about 400m when it all happened. First of all a pair of **White-backed Woodpeckers** giving short but scopeable views, then a little further on a female **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** flew into the top of a nearby tree. In the same spot we heard a male **Black Woodpecker** calling and we soon called it out with both it and its mate son coming into view. We were even able to watch them in the act of copulating. A little way further down the road it was the turn of a male **Middle-spotted Woodpecker** to show, and then a singing male **Grey-headed Woodpecker**. In the space of about a kilometre we had seen five different species of woodpecker, two of which were lifers for Steve.



Other forest birds seen were **Robin, Redstart, Blackbird, Mistle Thrush, Chiffchaff, Marsh, Great and Blue Tit, Nuthatch, Jay, Chaffinch, Hawfinch, and both Common and Short-toed Treecreeper**. On walking back to the car a **Black Kite** flew overhead and we disturbed a pair of **Woodpigeons**.

We drove north back to Bourgas and stopped at Alepu Marsh which gave us an exciting half an hours birding. Wayne found a **Little Bittern** scrambling in a bush just off the road and flying around the marsh were **Little Egrets, Grey and Purple Herons and Marsh Harrier**. A **Kingfisher** was seen on the edge of the marsh and **Cetti's Warbler** sang from nearby bushes. Over the adjacent fields and hills we experienced a small raptor passage. **Common Buzzard, 5 Lesser Spotted Eagles, Black Kite, Kestrel, 5 Hobbies**, and a **Levant's Sparrowhawk** passed by or overhead. We also had our first **Turtle Doves**.

We had lunch just outside of Bourgas and then made our way to the Poda Reserve. The first bird we saw on getting out of the car was a **Honey Buzzard** passing by at close quarters. From the roof of the observation building we saw **Mute Swan, Shelduck, Gadwall, Teal, Garganey, Mallard, 50+ Black-necked Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Cormorant and Pygmy Cormorant** on the sea or various lakes. On a lake on the opposite side there were **15 immature Dalmatian Pelicans and 3 adult White Pelicans**. **Grey and Purple Heron, Little Egret and Marsh Harrier** were constantly in view flying around the area. Another four **Honey Buzzards** drifted passed as well as a single **Hobby** and several **Lesser-Spotted Eagles**. **Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gull** were seen and from the reeds **Cetti's, Reed and Savi's Warbler** all sang. Two **Red-rumped Swallows** were among the hirundines hawking above us.



As the wind direction had changed Simeon suggested that we move inland in order to observe migrating raptors. On-route we called in at Vaya Lake where there was an obvious marsh tern passage. **Black Terns** were by far the most numerous with well over a hundred present, but there were also good numbers of **Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns plus 20 Common Terns**. Other birds present included **Pygmy Cormorant, Green Sandpiper, Spoonbill, Coot, Little Egret, Night Heron, Little Gull and Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls**.

We moved on to the Izvorsia river mouth where initially there was good raptor passage. 10 plus **Honey Buzzards** passed overhead along with **Short-toed Eagle, Black Kite, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harrier and Hobby**. The breeding adult **White-tailed Eagle** made a couple of appearances along with a juvenile bird. However passage seemed to dry up after an hour or so and we were left to observe the water birds which included **Great-crested and Little Grebe, Garganey, Purple and Grey Heron, Cormorant and Pygmy Cormorant and Mute Swan**.

We moved on again, this time exploring the western shore and marshes of Vaya Lake. Among the numbers of **Hobby** hawking over the reeds a female **Red-footed Falcon** was spotted. Other raptors took the form of **Marsh Harrier and Common Buzzard**. On the marshes there was well over a hundred plus **Garganey** and a good spot by Steve was a single **Squacco Heron** hiding in the reeds, as was a lone **Cattle Egret** – not a common bird for the area. Waders were present in the form of **Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Wood Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff and a single Snipe**. The usual water birds, egrets and herons were present but a flock of over one hundred **Glossy Ibis** was a new attraction. There were also over 50 plus **Pygmy Cormorants** sat on the marsh.



We observed the Atanasovsko Lake again but the birds present were similar to the previous evening and to conclude the day Simeon took us to some small pools just south of the lake. Four **Night Herons** were sat in trees by the side of the largest pool, a **White Stork** sat on a nest behind us and **Cuckoo, Purple Heron and Marsh Harrier** flew over the reeds. A number of **Moorhens** were seen in the reeds and four **Teal** flew in. Soon afterwards, Simeon managed to pick out a male **Little Crake** feeding on the edge of the pool.

Another successful day ended with a splendid meal in a large hotel in Sozopol and another unsuccessful attempt to get a sighting of the singing **Scop's Owl**.

DAY 5 – 21st April (From south to north!)

We left the Bourgas area heading north for the Danube and Romanian border. Before leaving the area we stopped at the northern corner of Atanasovsko Lake when driving past we noticed a number of waders. This proved to be quite productive as we picked out **7 Curlew Sandpiper, 20 plus Ruff, Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, Dunlin and a Kentish Plover. A Blackcap and Nightingale** sang from a nearby bush. The next stop was at Pomorie and on the lake were good numbers of **Sandwich Terns, Common Terns, 3 Mediterranean Gulls, a single Slender-billed Gull, Yellow-legged Gull, Black-headed Gull, Cormorant and Pygmy Cormorant, and a Whimbrel, 2 Marsh Sandpipers,**

and 2 **Black-winged Stilt**. In the area where we parked were good numbers of **White, Grey-headed, Blue-headed, and Black-headed Wagtails, Short-toed and Crested Lark** and on the salt pans behind us **Little Ringed Plover**. On the northern salt pans we added two **Collard Pratincoles** to our trip list. Other birds seen there were **Mute Swan, Pintail, Gadwall, Garganey, Shoveler, Mallard, Great Crested and Little Grebe, Coot, Marsh Harrier, Buzzard, Purple and Grey Heron, Avocet Kentish Plover, Spotted Redshank, 400 plus Ruff, and 200 plus Black-tailed Godwit**. From the reed-bed we heard a **Water Rail** calling, and spotted several **Sedge and Reed Warblers**.



We continued heading north but turned off the main road to take in the Gynlyovtsa forest area. Two **Lesser-spotted Eagles** were seen just after the turn off and when we stopped to explore a scrubby area by the river we soon managed to pick up our two target birds – a single **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler** singing from the top of a bush and up to five **Cirl Bunting**. Other birds seen on this brief half-hour stop were a single **Icterine Warbler, Chiffchaff, a male Pied Flycatcher, Sombre Tit, numerous Hawfinch, 2 Rock Bunting, 2 Ortolan Bunting, Kestrel, Swallow, Red-rumped Swallow, Hoopoe, Blackbird and Song Thrush**. Just after setting off again we had to stop quickly as a **Goshawk and Sparrowhawk** circled overhead. All week Steve had rigorously checked the many Common Buzzards we had seen in the hope one turned out to be a Steppe Buzzard, but had been knocked back by Simeon who had seen many over the years. A single **Buzzard** circling overhead made us stop and raised his hopes, but again no joy. Back on the main road again we stopped at the Goritsa Forest and were treated to two male **Semi-collard Flycatchers** having a dispute above our heads over territory. We also saw **Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Nuthatch and a Short-toed Treecreeper** in our brief stop. After a quick stop to exchange currency in Varna we were soon heading north towards the Romanian Border. The only birding highlight was three **Lesser-spotted Eagles** fighting in a cereal field giving really close views both in flight and on the ground.

It was late in the afternoon when we arrived in the Srebarna area and Simeon had decided to visit some smaller sites within close proximity. The first area was a small

marsh at Garvan which unfortunately had dried up. We did have two **Savi's Warbler** singing from the reeds, two flyaway **Pygmy Cormorants** and a nearby **Cuckoo**. The next stop – Kolarovo reservoir was more productive. Five **Black Storks** took off and circled around as we pulled up, and on the partly dried up reservoir were **Grey Heron, Little Egret, Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Yellow-legged Gull, and 2 flyover Turtle Doves**. A little further up the road from the car I spotted a light grey harrier, causing a quick pull in. Despite an initial call of Pallid, it turned out to be a male **Hen Harrier**. Our last stop was Malak Preslavets where on the lake and small marsh we had **13 Ferruginous Ducks, a single Night Heron, 3 Pygmy Cormorant, Coot, Mute Swan, Kingfisher, Shelduck, Common Sandpiper, Little and Great Crested Grebe** and from the nearby woods a male and female **Pheasant**. In the car park area by the Danube we had **Green and Great-spotted Woodpecker, Tree Sparrow, Blackcap, a male Redstart** and a number of **Hawfinch**. This brought an end to yet another good day and Simeon drove to our hotel in the village of Srebarna and we all enjoyed a beer and an excellent home cooked meal.



DAY 6 – 22nd April (At long last!)

We woke to find that our hotel was right on the southern edge of Lake Srebarna and from the viewing platform on the roof we could observe the marsh terns – **Black, White-winged and Whiskered** at close quarters as well as **Mute Swan, Black-necked Grebe, Great-crested Grebe, Garganey, Gadwall, Ferruginous Duck, Pochard, Teal, Mallard, Moorhen, Coot, and Greylag Geese** on the lake and the **Dalmatian Pelican** colony on the distant northern shore. We set off after breakfast and as we were about to get into the vehicle Simeon heard a **Penduline Tit** call nearby. A quick exploration produced a splendid male gathering nesting material. Just up the road from the hotel we stopped to watch both male and female **Syrian Woodpecker** in a garden, before parking and walking to the nearest observation site. Then it happened! A **Kestrel** appeared over the top of the hills, followed by three Buzzards in a line. Steve discounted the first two as **Common Buzzards** before exclaiming the third was a strong candidate for **Steppe Buzzard**, a call with which Simeon agreed. We were all able to observe the bird which resembled a compact Long-legged Buzzard rather than common Buzzard. We continued on our walk and in a small dip with trees either side of the path we saw

another **Syrian woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker and a pair of Green woodpeckers** feeding chicks. A pair of Red Squirrels came into view and Wayne was quite happy to stay and photograph them as we walked further around the lake. A pale phase **Booted Eagle** gave good views just above our heads and **Marsh Harriers** hunted over the reeds and 5 plus **Hobbies** hawked for insects. We walked on to the pelican observation point and got superb views of the **Dalmatian Pelicans** flying overhead to and from the Danube. We were also able to observe the colonies of nesting **Cormorants, Pygmy Cormorants, Spoonbills, Purple, Grey and Night Herons** and **Great White and Little Egrets** in the shallows behind the pelican colony. Further along the path we picked out a number of smaller birds singing in the bushes and reeds. These included **3 Great Reed Warblers, Savi's Warbler, Reed Warbler, Wood Warbler, Nightingale, Wren, and Penduline Tit**. We also had another **Pheasant**. Our main target on this long walk was River Warbler but this time we were unsuccessful.



We returned to the car park and with Wayne back with us we headed back to the hotel for a drink before leaving. From the hotel viewing platform we observed **Starling, Tree, House and Spanish Sparrow, Hooded Crow, Magpie, Jay, Goldfinch, Greenfinch and Chaffinch** in the gardens nearby.

We set off around lunchtime for our final destination - the north east corner of Bulgaria and en route we stopped at Kozloduitsi reservoir which held **Mallard, Garganey, Coot, Greenshank, Syrian Woodpecker, Swift, Rook and Hooded Crow**.

We arrived at Cape Kaliakra around mid-afternoon and spent a couple of hours of productive sea watching. Just after our arrival Wayne picked out two dark and white birds fly behind us, which turned out to be **Arctic Skuas**, and from our first vantage point **5 Black-throated Diver**, several **Shag** and 20 plus **Black-necked Grebe** were on the sea. **Alpine Swifts** were flying around us and the three of us left Wayne to photograph them in flight and headed to the end of the cape. From this point we observed some excellent sea passage over the next hour, which included **60+ Mediterrean Gulls, 10+ Little Gulls, 4 Baltic Gulls, 4 Common Terns, 10 Black Tern, Black-headed Gull, a single Common Gull, 10+ Yelkouan**

Shearwaters and an unidentified raptor. Around the headland we had **2 Calandra Larks, White Wagtail, Jackdaw and Corn Bunting** but sadly the pied wheatears had not arrived yet.

We moved to the Bolata gorge area and on parking had **Black-throated Diver, Black-necked Grebe and Shag** on the sea. Above us were good numbers of **Alpine Swift** and **Purple and Grey Herons** drifted over. Then it happened again – I picked out a buzzard which on observation turned out to be our second **Steppe Buzzard** of the day.



In front of us a male **Pied Flycatcher** flitted between the reeds of a small pool and the hillside and a **Hoopoe** was seen flying along the ridge, along with **2 Red-rumped Swallows** and a **Cuckoo**. We moved further into the gorge and a very obliging **Savi's Warbler** meant we left Wayne once again as we went in search of the breeding eagle owls. On some small pools we picked out **Coot and Moorhen, a Night Heron and a Squacco Heron** in the reeds and a **Kingfisher** flying over. From the surrounding trees and bushes we had **Lesser Whitethroat, Blackcap, Chiffchaff** and a splendid male **Collard Flycatcher** and from the reeds **Great Reed and Reed Warbler**. On reaching a spot at the far end of the gorge Simeon tried calling out the eagle owls as the light was just starting to fade and within a few minutes I spotted movement on the far side of the cliffs. The female **Eagle Owl** had wandered out from its resting place in response to the call. It did not stay out in the open but through scopes we could observe it even when it retreated back into the small cave. Extremely satisfied we returned to the car, picked up Wayne and drove the short distance to our final hotel seeing another ring-tailed **Hen Harrier** on the way.

DAY 7 – 23rd April (Back home!)

After our final breakfast of the trip we headed for Durankulak Lake on the shores of the Black Sea. On the short journey we had a **Hobby** sat on a telegraph post, an adult **Gull-billed Tern** hawkling over the fields and a pair of **Stonechat**. As last May when we visited the lake in search of paddyfield warbler, the area was alive with birds. In the colony behind the lake 50 plus **Pygmy Cormorants** were evident

among the hundreds of **Cormorant**. On the sea were a number of **Cormorants and 10+ Black-necked Grebe**, along with **Yellow-legged Gull** and **Black-headed Gull**. On the beach several **Sanderling** darted in and out of the tide and single **Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls** stood by the tide line. **2 Baltic Gulls** flew by along the beach along with **Sandwich and Common Terns**. A single **Caspian Tern** flying out to sea caused great excitement and this was soon followed by a second bird. Over the lake **Little Gull** and large numbers of **Black, White-winged and Whiskered Terns** were always evident and among these were **2 Gull-billed Terns**. Wayne had stayed behind to photograph **Reed Warblers** and I was taking a toilet break when Steve and Simeon flushed a **Quail** from the dunes. Four **Turtle Doves** flew overhead and **Swallows, House Martins and Common Swifts** hawked over the lake. From the reeds we had **Cetti's Savi's, Sedge, Reed and Great Reed Warbler** along with **Reed Bunting** and on the lake were **Great Crested and Little Grebe, Shoveler, Garganey, Ferruginous Duck, and Mute Swan. Great White and Little Egret, Grey, Purple** were always evident, along with hunting **Marsh Harrier**, and a single **Night Heron** flew over the lake. Small parties of waders in the form of **Black-winged Stilt, Ruff and Wood Sandpiper** often came into view flying from the marsh and Simeon picked out **2 Little Ringed Plover** on the beach when we walked back to the car park. A pair of **Hoopoe** flew from the dunes and a party of 30 plus **Tawny Pipit** flew north. In the trees around the car park we had **2 male Pied Flycatchers** a male **Collared Flycatcher, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler** and a single **Siskin**. Simeon drove us to the landward side of the lake in an attempt to see moustached warbler, and as we walked along the track he was extremely pleased with the high water level. **Garganey and Ferruginous Duck** were present in extremely high numbers and parties of **Ruff and Wood Sandpipers** were everywhere. Two **Lapwing** flew from the field and 3 pairs of **White Pelicans** also flew overhead heading north. A single wagtail flew passed calling and we were extremely pleased when Simeon identified it as a male **Citrine Wagtail**. This was soon followed by another three birds, one male and two females. Again we had **Cetti's Savi's, Sedge, Reed and Great Reed Warbler** but sadly no moustached. We made one more attempt at a different area of the lake but again with no success, but as we were driving off, four **Caspian Terns** flew overhead.



Following lunch in the town of Shabla we made the short journey to the marsh area just south of the lake. This site had produced some excellent bird-watching last May and Simeon was hopeful of some migrants. There was a lot more water on the marsh than last May and the large pool was full of birds. All **three marsh terns** were evident as were parties of **Garganey, Shelduck, Ferruginous Duck, Black-tailed Godwits, Ruff** and **Wood Sandpiper**. At least three **Hobbies** and a number of **Alpine Swift** flew over the trees and on the marsh were two each of **Common Snipe, Black-winged Stilt and Greenshank**. There were 20 plus **Gloss Ibis** scattered around the marsh and single **Grey Heron, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, Great White Egret, Little Egret and White Stork**. The surrounding steppe area produced **Hoopoe, Crested Lark, Short-toed Lark, Tawny Pipit, Woodlark and Corn Bunting**. Wayne was busy photographing birds when he flushed a **Jack Snipe** and Steve flushed two **Grey Partridge** near to the car. We drove to the main lake where it was evident in the small wooded area by the car park there had been a fall of passerines. Good numbers of **Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff** flitted around the trees, and we also picked out **Tree Pipit, Redstart, Lesser Whitethroat, Blackcap and Robin**. Over the lake were three **Little Gulls, 50 plus Black and Whiskered Terns** and a single **White-winged Black Tern** and on the lake were **Mute Swan Moorhen, Coot, Wigeon, Gadwall, Shelduck, Pintail, Ferruginous Duck, Little Grebe and over 100 Garganey**. The dunes held **Tawny Pipit** and **Northern Wheatear**, while **Marsh Harriers** flew over the reedbed. Along the beach amongst the **Yellow-legged Gulls** were **9 Oystercatchers and 10 Sanderling**. A quick look on the sea produced **Cormorant, Shag and Black-necked Grebe**. As we walked back from the beach two **Gull-billed Terns** flew past heading north and a **Kingfisher** flew from a bush near the lake viewing platform. We returned to the car and observed our last **Common Buzzard and Marsh Harrier** before driving to Varna airport.

CONCLUSION

We had had such a good trip last May to observe the wonderful Bulgarian birdlife at the height of the breeding season, but this trip even surpassed that. Exceptional numbers of raptors - 23 different species, 9 different species of woodpecker, Wallcreeper in all its splendour, plus that magical hour in the Sliven Plains being just some of the highlights. Steve improved his list of European woodpeckers with three new birds, and Wayne and I finally laid Grey-headed woodpecker to rest. In all 208 different species were seen compared to 185 in May 2010.

My thanks go to Steve and Wayne, my two colleagues, Simeon for his outstanding bird-watching skill and knowledge and being an exceptional guide and person, and to Dimiter Georgiev of Neophron Bird Tours (www.neophron.com) for organising the week's itinerary. I do not know if we will visit Bulgaria again in the near future (perhaps a September visit?) but it is an exceptional place for birds and I would recommend it to anyone.

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Bulgaria Bird species list: 17.04 to 23.04.2011

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Gadwall
Teal
Mallard
Pintail
Garganey
Shoveler
Pochard
Ferruginous Duck
Rock Partridge
Grey Partridge
Quail
Pheasant
Black-throated Diver
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Black-necked Grebe
Yelkouan Shearwater
Cormorant
Shag
Pygmy Cormorant
White Pelican
Dalmatian Pelican
Bittern
Little Bittern
Night Heron
Squacco Heron
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great White Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Black Stork
White Stork
Glossy Ibis
Spoonbill
Honey Buzzard
Black Kite
White-tailed Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier

Montagu's Harrier
Goshawk
Sparrowhawk
Lavant Sparrowhawk
Buzzard
Steppe Buzzard
Long-legged Buzzard
Lesser Spotted Eagle
Eastern Imperial Eagle
Booted Eagle
Osprey
Kestrel
Red-footed Falcon
Hobby
Peregrine
Water Rail
Little Crake
Corncrake
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Black-winged Stilt
Avocet
Stone Curlew
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Lapwing
Sanderling
Curlew Sandpiper
Dunlin
Ruff
Jack Snipe
Snipe
Black-tailed Godwit
Whimbrel
Spotted Redshank
Marsh Sandpiper
Greenshank
Green Sandpiper
Wood Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Arctic Skua
Mediterranean Gull
Little Gull
Black-headed Gull
Slender-billed Gull
Common Gull

Baltic Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Whiskered Tern
Black Tern
White-winged Black Tern
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Cuckoo
Scops Owl
Eagle Owl
Swift
Alpine Swift
Kingfisher
Hoopoe
Wryneck
Grey-headed Woodpecker
Green Woodpecker
Black Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Syrian Woodpecker
Middle Spotted Woodpecker
White-backed Woodpecker (*lilfordi*)
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
Calandra Lark
Short-toed Lark
Crested Lark
Woodlark
Skylark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Tree Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Yellow Wagtail (*flava, thunbergi and feldegg*)
Citrine Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Dipper
Wren

Dunnock
Robin
Nightingale
Black Redstart
Redstart
Stonechat
Isabelline Wheatear
Wheatear
Rock Thrush
Ring Ouzel (*alpestris*)
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Savi's Warbler
Sedge Warbler
Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Icterine Warbler
Lesser Whitethroat
Blackcap
Eastern Bonelli's Warbler
Wood Warbler
Chiffchaff
Willow Warbler
Goldcrest
Firecrest
Semi-collared Flycatcher
Collared Flycatcher
Pied Flycatcher
Long-tailed Tit
Marsh Tit
Sombre Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Nuthatch
Wallcreeper
Trecreeper
Short-toed Trecreeper
Penduline Tit
Jay
Magpie
Alpine Chough
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Raven

Starling
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Crossbill
Bullfinch
Hawfinch
Yellowhammer
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Ortolan Bunting
Reed Bunting (*caspia*)
Corn Bunting