

TRIP REPORT - BULGARIA: 30th MAY 2010 – 5th June 2010

Group Members: Kenny Musgrove, Wayne Geater and Steven Abbott

Tour Guide: Simeon Gigov – Neophron Bird Tours

Itinerary Arranged by Dimiter Georgiev – Neophron Bird Tours

DAY1: SUNDAY 30th MAY

Caught the early morning Easyjet flight from Gatwick at 06.30 and landed at Sofia airport at 11.30 local time. We were met at the airport by our guide Simeon Gigov.

We had specifically asked to see Nutcracker so our first day would be in the Sofia area, and following a brief stop at our hotel to unload our luggage we headed up to the Ski lodge at Aleko in the Vitoshia mountains south of the city, where Simeon claimed Nutcracker would be "easy". We parked at the ski centre, where **House Martins** nested in the various buildings and headed east from the car park where we encountered singing **Cuckoo, Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Coal Tit and Chaffinch**. Within a few hundred yards we heard a Nutcracker calling. Clambering behind the first row of trees we were unable to locate the bird, but a pair of **Bullfinches** flew overhead and a number of **Firecrest** were seen. A **Kestrel, Raven and a Common Buzzard** were seen higher up the slopes. We searched farther along the track and climbed higher to get behind the area of trees where the bird had been calling but only seeing Blackbird, Wren with no success. Parties of **Common Swifts** and a few **Alpine Swifts** continually flew overhead and a cuckoo was heard calling not far off. A second bird was heard calling from below and we descended just as it began to rain. Simeon picked out a **Nutcracker** sitting at the top of a tree calling and we enjoyed good views until the heavens opened and we sheltered in a small hut. It thundered and hailed for about twenty minutes before we decided during a break in the weather to head back to the car park for a coffee break. As we came back to the car park area a male **Ring Ouzel** of the was sat giving good views on the top of a tree and a pair of **Black Redstarts** were also showing well.

Following a prolonged coffee break due to rain we set off on a track west of the centre. A **Grey Wagtail** flew in front of us as we crossed a small stream and **Chiffchaff, Lesser Whitethroat** and **Goldcrest** were seen nearby. We started to climb and within minutes we were treated to the sight of a second **Nutcracker** sat on the top of a tree, this time much closer. Wayne attempted to photograph it but the light was wrong and when he attempted to get the other side of the bird it flew off. A little higher up the path a second **Ring Ouzel** was seen and Steve picked out a **Water Pipit** feeding on the snowline. We descended back to the centre and found surprisingly, a **Guinea Fowl** sitting on a window of one of the buildings. We tried the eastern path again for Nutcracker but the only new birds we added were a **Cuckoo, Song Thrush, Jay, and a Great Spotted Woodpecker**.

Simeon drove us down the mountain to lower levels and parked near a bridge that crossed a rapidly flowing stream. A juvenile **Dipper** was being fed by an adult close to the bridge but they flew downstream when Wayne approached with his camera. Other birds seen here were **Grey Wagtail, Blackbird and Robin**. We drove further down and checked some meadows but the only birds present were **Magpie, Collard Dove, and two Tree Sparrows**. We returned to our hotel and as we were eating our evening meal a pair of **Syrian Woodpeckers** fed young in a tree opposite and lower down a couple of **Starling** nests were observed. This was a good way to end a successful day with our first target bird – Nutcracker in the bag.

DAY 2 – MONDAY 31st MAY

We set out after breakfast on the long journey from Sofia to Varna on the Black Sea coast, but first observing the **Syrian Woodpeckers, Starlings, Blue Tits and House Sparrow** outside the front of the hotel. This took about 6 hours and was pretty uneventful from a birding point of view. **Common Buzzard Jackdaw, and White Stork** were evident for most of the trip and the only highlights were a single **Honey Buzzard** over, a **Black Stork** by a river and a **Roller** sat on telegraph wires. We took a minor detour to drop off a friend of Simeon's at a town about 50 km west of Varna and spotted a small group of **Rooks**, which according to Simeon are not common in Bulgaria. About 20 km further east Simeon turned off the main highway and took a minor road across vast agricultural land. A **Long-legged Buzzard** caused us to stop and view and Steve spotted a distant large raptor on the other side of the road – a **Lesser Spotted Eagle**. This made him extremely happy as it was a first for him. I told him we were likely to get better views during the trip but did not realise the importance of this statement as within a kilometre or so, we stopped again for **4 Lesser Spotted Eagles** – one right over our heads. This was the first of a number of magic birding moments. For good value a **Yellow Wagtail (Black-headed)** brought food continually to a nest sight just in front of us as we viewed and **Crested and Skylark** were also evident. In a happy frame of mind we continued the last 20 km or so to Varna and stopped in the centre for lunch at about three o'clock. Following our coffee break we headed north to Lake Sabla. Turning down the approach road we stopped for a photo opportunity of a **Roller** on the telegraph wires, (which flew off!), we parked in a field further down the track. The next half hour produced some outstanding birdwatching. Several **Rollers** were prominent on wires, as were **Lesser-grey Shrikes** and **Turtle Doves**. **Bee-eaters** hawked overhead and a **White Stork** flew in the distance. At the bottom of the field was a marsh area which held **Lapwing, 4 Ferruginous Ducks, a drake Garganey and a Green Sandpiper**. **Golden Orioles** flew among the trees behind the marsh, **Red-rumped and Barn Swallow, Common Swifts and House Martins** hawked overhead, and then to everyone surprise (including Simeon) a small falcon flew from the wood and over our heads – a female **Red-footed Falcon**. This was soon joined by a second bird – a male and Simeon made a note for the wood to be checked for a nest sight. As we walked further around the edge of the marsh doing a circuit of the field, we flushed 3 **Stone Curlews** and a pair of **Tawny Pipits** landed just in front of us. Commoner birds such as **Hooded Crow, Magpie, Corn Bunting, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Linnet and Wood Pigeon** were in evidence and a single **Hoopoe** was seen in flight. From the reeds on the edge of the lake itself **Grey and Purple Heron** were seen flying and a number of **Cormorants** were seen sitting on dead trees. Black clouds had been building all around and lightening was seen in the distance and fortunately the rain held off until we had completed our walk. The storm hit just as we got back to the van and Simeon drove to a gap from which we could observe the lake itself. More **Ferruginous Ducks** were seen, plus **Mallard, Shelduck, Gadwall, Mute Swan and Coot**. A pair of **Great Reed Warblers** showed in the reeds in front of us. We decided to take a break until the storm passed and Simeon drove to a nearby break where we found a bar for refreshments. After 45 minutes or so the storm passed and we drove back to the lake, but this time to the seaward side. **Yellow-legged Gulls** were prominent on the beach, **Tawny Pipit** was found among the dunes and **Spanish Sparrows** were evident among the buildings. **Golden Orioles** were seen or heard all around and Steve found a **Little Grebe** on the lake itself. As we walked back to the van a **Red-backed Shrike** and **Spotted Flycatcher** were sat in nearby bushes.



We left the lake and drove south among the huge wind-turbine fields towards Cape Kaliakra. The light was just beginning to fade a little as we drove down the approach road but Simeon soon picked out **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Whitethroat, Red-backed Shrike, Woodlark, Corn Bunting and Black-headed Bunting** in the scrub and on the wires. We were all out of the van when suddenly Simeon got a little excited. He scoped a huge flock of **Starlings** on distance pylons and had picked out a single **Rose-coloured Starling** amongst them – quality birding. When we all scoped the flock we found a second bird amongst them. This was the first Rose-coloured Starling that Simeon had seen this year, but I was so impressed with his ability to spot the first bird without his scope. We drove to the end of the road by the beach adding **Hawfinch** to our list, and the first bird we saw was one of Steve's target birds – a male **Pied Wheatear** sitting on the roof of a derelict house by the cliffs. We parked and walked down the track on the left of the quarry, with Great Reed Warbler calling from the reeds, and by this time it was dusk and

hundreds of **Starlings** were coming in to roost in the reed-bed. We spotted the odd **Rose-coloured starling** among them on the far side and when we scanned the group there was over twenty birds. Then just in front of us a large group of birds alighted on a dead tree and these turned out to be all Rose-coloured starlings – and a count produced over 200 birds. This according to Simeon was the first noted eruption in Bulgaria in 2010. We walked further along the track and attempted to call out **Eagle Owl** and within seconds got a response from the male above and behind us. Unfortunately despite this quick response, it, or the female failed to show and despite getting “feeding calls” from the young on the opposite cliffs, we were unable to get a sighting. However we did get a single **Nightjar** hunting for insects over the reed bed. We returned in the almost dark to the van and drove further north to our hotel, where after an excellent late meal we retired for the night to the sounds of a singing **Nightingale and Scop’s Owl** behind our rooms.

DAY 3 – TUESDAY 1st JUNE

Up for a 6 o’clock start and it would have made a good photograph to notice the look on my face, as I drew back the curtains to find our balcony overlooked the Black Sea. Steve, in the next room, had been up half an hour earlier and his mini sea watch had produced **Shag, Yellow-legged Gull, Mediterranean Gull and 2 Black Terns**. He also had a Wild Cat come into the front of the hotel in search of prey. The **Nightingale** was still singing (I presume it had all night), **Bee-eaters** called from overhead, **Golden Orioles** flitted in the gardens behind the hotel and **Swallows and House Martins** hawked over the swimming pool. We drove to Durankulak Lake for target bird number 2 – Paddyfield Warbler. Driving down the approach road, Simeon produced his second amazing piece of birdwatching skill. He screeched to a halt and reversed up the road 20 metres or so.

Marsh Warbler, he said in deep grass near the roadside, and sure enough a pair was soon evident. He said, he had heard a snatch of the song – not bad when driving fairly fast down a country lane with the window open!!

In the parking area near the lake **Golden Orioles** were very evident and as we walked towards the lake a **Little Ringed Plover** was on the beach. **Lesser-grey Shrike** was observed sat on a nearby bush and a scan of the distant dead trees only produced nesting **Common Cormorant**. A quick scan of the sea produced unexpectedly **3 Black-throated Divers, several Great-crested Grebes and a Black-necked Grebe**. The first bird heard from the reeds was a singing **Savi’s Warbler**, which was soon spotted and then a number of **Great Reed Warblers** were seen or heard. An eastern form of **Reed Bunting** was evident singing from the top of the reeds but despite several stops still no sight or sound of Paddyfields. **Common and Whiskered Tern** flew overhead and **Grey and Purple Heron** were seen in flight. A party of **5 Night Heron** dropped in and these were soon followed by **3 Squacco Heron. Little Bittern** in pairs or threes continually flew along the edge of the reeds, a female **Marsh Harrier** hunted at the back of the lake, **Cuckoo** were everywhere, and on the lake itself, **Ferruginous Duck, Mallard, Coot, Pochard and Mute Swan** were seen. and several **Hooded Crow** were in the area. We walked further along the edge of the reeds but still no Paddyfields. A second **Savi’s Warbler, several Bearded Tits and a number of Reed Warblers** were seen and **Great Reed Warblers** were everywhere. Wayne stopped to photograph one showing really well and we walked on ahead of him. A few minutes later he called us back – a **Paddyfield Warbler** was showing just in front of him. In fact when we were all present, a second bird appeared. With target bird number two in the bag we walked slowly back to the car park. A scan of the beach produced a **Mediterranean Gull** among the **Yellow-legs**, two **Kentish Plover** were seen on the shore line and a small group of **Sandwich Tern** flew north. **Tawny Pipits** were in the dunes and **House Martins and**

Barn Swallow were everywhere. A pair of **Little Egret** also flew north and when we stopped to photograph a singing **Savi's Warbler** another pair of **Paddyfield Warblers** showed really well nearby for several minutes giving excellent views and good photography opportunities. We returned to the hotel extremely satisfied and enjoyed a late breakfast.



Late morning we set off for the Steppe area at Rusalka. **Crested Lark, Calandra Lark, Skylark, Corn Bunting and Tawny Pipit** were common and a number of **Rollers** were sat on telegraph wires. Wayne spotted **Collard Pratincole** from the van and when we stopped to observe, five birds were seen hawking over the fields. We drove further along the road and just passed a small plantation a **Long-legged Buzzard** took flight in front of us. We stopped and scanned around for half an hour or so picking up all the aforementioned species and in addition **Short-toed Lark, Hoopoe, Northern Wheatear and Bea-eater**. Steve picked out a small falcon over the plantation which turned out to be a **Hobby**. **Swifts both Common and Alpine** passed overhead and both **Lesser-grey and Red-backed Shrikes** were common. A single **Stone Curlew** was seen from the van and a second **Long-legged Buzzard** took flight to our right.

In the afternoon we set off back to Cape Kaliakra in an effort to see the Eagle Owl. Birds seen on the approach and in the quarry area itself were similar to the previous evening. There were still small parties of **Rose-coloured Starlings** in the area and good numbers of **Golden Oriole** was seen, frequently chasing **Cuckoo**. **Red-rumped Swallows and Alpine Swift** were seen amongst the numerous groups of herundines hunting over the cliffs and **10 Shag** was seen on the sea. Wayne took time off the search to photograph the **Pied Wheatear** on show, but despite giving the cliffs a thorough scan for any owls sitting in the open, we were unsuccessful.

Simeon suggested an alternative site a little further south for Eagle Owl, and after filling up with petrol, we set off for the White Lagoon cliffs. The first cliff area where we stopped was covered with trees and the only bird seen was a **Great-spotted Woodpecker**. We drove further down the road, and stopped to scan the clear white cliffs to our right. Within a minute or so Steve produced the most excitable moment of the trip when he picked out an adult **Eagle Owl**. This magnificent bird was sitting out in the open about 200m away just watching us and giving excellent views. Wayne attempted to climb to the top of the nearest bank to get closer for a photographic opportunity. Whilst he did so we spent the time observing the bird, and added a displaying **Barred Warbler** to our list along with **Blackbird, Song Thrush, Whitethroat and Goldfinch**. A **Sparrowhawk** flew over our heads carrying a large lizard and **Alpine Swifts** were evident above the cliffs. Wayne clambered back down after an hour or so but the owl had moved and was now partially hidden behind vegetation. Extremely pleased with ourselves we headed to Varna in search of my "bogey" bird. We stopped at a riverine forest at Balteata just outside of Varna and attempted to park in a compound near to a recently fledged a grey-headed woodpecker nest site. However two workers would not allow us to park. Nevertheless we parked outside and attempted to call out the birds. Instantly a very obliging **Semi-collared Flycatcher** showed on a tree, which obviously the woodpeckers used. Other birds we had nearby were **Spotted Flycatcher, Robin, Chaffinch and Green Woodpecker**, but sadly no show for the grey-headed woodpecker. We gave up after half an hour and drove to Varna for a coffee stop and then onto our next hotel.

DAY 4 – WEDNESDAY 2nd JUNE

We had gone to bed with a thunderstorm raging and the next morning there was still a few flashes and rumblings. It was raining quite heavily when we set off at 6 o'clock for another riverine forest, this time south of Varna. It was still raining when we arrived at Dabravina and that meant we had to take an early breakfast. It gradually began to brighten and rather than walk in the wood with wet underfoot conditions we walked down the road that split the wood. A **Nightingale** was singing just in front of the van and **Red-rumped and Barn Swallows and House Martins** hawked the grass verge, and I presume the Red-rumps were breeding under small culverts that crossed under the road. An early attempt to call out **Grey-headed woodpecker** produced an almost instant reply, with a single bird responding, but alas it did not show itself. At least I can claim I have now heard one. However, a rather wet looking **Middle-spotted Woodpecker** did show much to Steve's delight. A family party of **Nuthatch** flew across from one side of the wood to the other, and several family groups of both **Blue and Great Tits** were continually in evidence. **Blackcap** were seen and heard, and a single **Hawfinch** was seen on the opposite side of the road. A **Wryneck** calling close by has heard and a brief sighting was made, and then a surprising song was heard in the near trees. A **Garden Warbler** was singing, much to Simeon's surprise and was soon spotted. On the walk back a second **Middle-spotted Woodpecker** was seen flying back and forth across the road and a second Wryneck was heard but not seen. A possible **Black Woodpecker** was seen

flying away through the forest but Wayne was the only one to see it and could not be certain. Several **Cuckoos** were seen flying and just before we reached the van a **Nightingale** was singing in plain view from the telegraph wires.

We returned to the main E87 road and headed south for Burgas but Simeon turned off and took a detour over the area known as the Dyulinski Pass or as he called it the scenic route. This turned out to be an excellent decision as over the next 90 minutes or so we picked up some quality birds. One of our first sightings was of a large raptor sat on a tree as we drove through a wooded area. It flew to the other side of the road and sat in another tree – a male **Honey Buzzard** sat some 20 metres or so from us. For me this sighting was one of the top highlights of the trip. It sat there for a minute or so before flying deeper into the wood. **Hawfinches, Whitethroat Red –backed Shrike and Corn Bunting** were common all along the road, before the shout of woodpecker brought us to a halt. It turned out to be a **Green Woodpecker**, but a **Woodchat Shrike** – our first of the trip was spotted sitting low down on a nearby bush, a **Mistle Thrush** was sat on telegraph wires and a **Quail** was heard nearby but not seen. A little further along the road Simeon stopped to check for **Ortolan Bunting**, and sure enough within minutes both a male and female were seen. The road transversed across the top flat part of the hills and a family party of **Isabelline** Wheatear were by the roadside. The road dropped down and crossed a river at Gynlyovdsa and Simeon pulled in again just as it started to rain again. We checked for Sombre Tit without success, but 2 male **Cirl Bunting** provided some consolation. **Golden Orioles and Jay** were present in the trees and 2 **Common Buzzards** were seen soaring over the woods. Simeon had found a nest site for **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler** a little further up the road and although the young had fledged, the family party of five birds was still in the area.

We drove on to the E87 again and on towards Burgas. Our first stopping point was the salt pans and lake at Pomorie. Lots of birds were present but very distant and a heat haze now made scoping difficult. Several **Little Terns** as well as **Sandwich and Common Terns** were seen fishing and a good variety of duck, including **Pochard, Gadwall, Shelduck, Garganey, Mallard and Ferruginous** were present. I picked out in the distance haze a single **Red-crested Pochard**, which Simeon said was unusual for the time of year. **Great Reed and Reed Warblers** were abundant and a **Water Rail** was heard in a nearby ditch. A female **Marsh Harrier** hunted over a wide area and **Little Egret, Purple Heron, Night Heron** were evident. Waders present were **Avocet, Black-winged Stilt and a single Kentish Plover, Coot** were numerous and a colony of 100 plus **Cormorant** were seen in the distance.

We stopped for lunch at a local garage in Burgas and as we ate **4 Honey Buzzard** and **2 White Pelicans** passed over. After lunch we headed for Burgas Lake. From the first pull-in we picked out both good numbers of **White** and a few **Dalmatian Pelican**, although both species were distant. **Little Bittern** displayed over our heads and **2 Night and 3 Squacco Herons** and several **Little Egrets** flew by. **A Penduline Tit** was heard calling nearby and **Great Reed Warblers** were common in the reed bed. On the lake itself **Great Crested Grebe** were in evidence, **Coot, Mallard, Mute Swans and Common Cormorants** were present in good numbers, and a new bird – a single **Moorhen** was seen. We drove to a second pull-in a little further down the road in an effort to get closer views of the pelicans. Our luck was in as **4 White and a single Dalmatian Pelican** were either swimming close to or sitting on the shoreline. This gave Wayne a good opportunity for taking photographs. **20 plus Common Tern** were sat on a metal fence protruding into the lake and **2 Whiskered Terns** flew passed. Just as we were about to leave Steve picked out a single **Pygmy Cormorant** fly in and start to fish. This was a new bird for him and minutes later Simeon picked out a much closer second bird.



We spent the rest of the afternoon and evening touring around the lakes that surround Burgas. At Mandra Lake we had a single **Dalmatian Pelican**, **2 Purple Herons**, and flyover **Lesser Spotted and Booted Eagle**. In the bushes by the side of the lake we had a singing **Marsh Warbler**, **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** and **several Black-headed Buntings**. The next stop at the floodplain at Dimchevo produced an hour or so of some excellent birdwatching. Numerous **White Stork** nest were present in the nearby village, accompanied by their lodging **Spanish Sparrows**. The village overlooked a flooded field which produced **10 Glossy Ibis**, **5 Spoonbills**, **20+ Little Egrets**, **Black Stork**, **Black-winged Stilts**, **Avocets**, **20 Black-headed Gulls**, and **Sandwich and Common Terns**. We also had a distant **Lesser-spotted Eagle**, **Honey Buzzard** and **Hobby**, and **Common Swifts** and **Hirundines** were abundant. The highlight came in the form of **70+ White Pelicans** that spiralled overhead for 10 minutes or so before drifting off. Further down the road we stopped again at a viewpoint for the lake opposite and had one of the surprises of the trip – a single **White-fronted Goose**, which must have been injured and unable to fly off with his “friends” after the winter. Here we also had **Golden Oriole**, **Black-headed Bunting** and **Black-headed Wagtail**, **Little Grebe**, **Great Crested Grebe**, **Shelduck**, **Shoveler**, **Ferruginous Duck**, **Pochard** and **Gadwell** and well as a fly-in flock of **30+ Whiskered Tern**. The next stop was the Poda Visitors Centre where we picked out **2 Pygmy Cormorant** sitting on a nearby raft among the **Common Cormorants**. The final stop of the day was at Atamasovsko Lake where Simeon showed us a **Penduline Tit** nest site by the car park area. The male was continually visiting the nest and Wayne and Steve attempted to get the perfect photograph, while Simeon and myself observed the lake. **Cetti’s** and **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** were in the nearby scrub, whilst on the lake a single **Dalmatian Pelican** was present along with **40+ Spoonbill**, a flock of **40+ Black-tailed Godwits**, **Avocet**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Garganey**, **Shoveler**, **Shelduck**, **Kentish Plover**, a single

Oystercatcher, Little Egret and 6 Mediterranean Gulls. We headed to our hotel after a brilliant days birding, where after dark a **Scops Owl** called from nearby.

DAY 5 – THURSDAY 3RD JUNE

Simeon decided to take a slight detour and change the original plan, in an effort to get woodpeckers. We travelled 50 km or so south of Burgas to the Silkosia Forest Reserve near the Turkish border. All eight species of woodpecker are reputed to breed in this reserve but sadly our visit only yielded **Great-spotted and Middle Spotted**. Other birds seen here were **Marsh Tit, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Mistle Thrush, Chiffchaff, Spotted Flycatcher and Redstart**.

We travelled back to Burgas and headed for the Eastern Rhodopes via the Saker Hills. Our first major sighting was just outside of Burgas when we had a **Lesser-spotted Eagle** hunting just off the roadside, and giving excellent views. We stopped at a viewing point in the Saker Hills and had an excellent 15 minutes of scanning the sky. At this sight we had **Black Kite, 2 Black Storks, Long-legged Buzzard, Common Buzzard and Eastern Imperial Eagle**. In the nearby area were **Black-headed Wagtails, Stonechat, Whitethroat and a Calandra Lark** singing from the top of a bush. Further along the road towards Tobolovgrad we stopped and checked some derelict buildings for **Little Owl**, and pulled off the road again a little further on at a second **Imperial Eagle** site, where we had the male and female in the air above us. On the opposite side of the road we checked a small orchard where we had **Ortolan Bunting, Bee-eater, Black-headed Bunting, and a flythrough Montagu's Harrier** – our only one of the trip. We then drove through the town of Tobolovgrad where both **Common and Pallid Swifts** breed, and stopped for refreshment at the Saker Hills Hotel.

After lunch we drove further along the road and met Dimiter Giorgiov who was guiding for another British birder and coming in the opposite direction, and stopped at a site overlooking the river Maritsa at Lyubimets. This is a know site for breeding Levant's Sparrowhawk, but sadly not on this day, but we did have **Booted Eagle, Black Stork, Bee-eater, and Common and Long-legged Buzzard**. Undeterred, Simeon took us to a second known site by the same river at Svilengrad. Walking along a track by the river we had **Bee-eater, 4 Black Storks, White Stork, Kingfisher, Cuckoo and Roller**, when Simeon spotted a **Levant's Sparrowhawk** (target bird number 4) flying away from us. He then produced another of his magic moments stating the male normally sits on the trees behind us, and sure enough when we turned around there it was – some 30m away, giving quality views. Unfortunately for Wayne who had been lagging behind and taking photographs of insects, he caught us up but had his "wrong" camera. He dashed back to the van and returned but just as he was setting up the bird flew off. We returned to the van adding **Green Woodpecker** – I got excited as it could have been Grey-headed, and travelled on to the Eastern Rhodopes.

We stopped at a scrub area with spaced out bushes at Borislavalsi where target bird number 3 – **Olive-tree Warbler** showed really well. We had a bonus of **Booted Warbler** at the same site also giving excellent views, and both **Red-back and Woodchat Shrike** were also in the area. Extremely satisfied we drove the short distance to the Vulture Centre at Madjarvo, where we were spending the next two nights. An excellent meal, accompanied by a singing **Scop's Owl** ended another magic day!!

DAY 6 – FRIDAY 4th JUNE

Wayne had to be up at 4 o'clock as he had hired the "vulture" hide for photography. One of the workers from the centre took him and his van load of offal to the hide before daylight. Steve and myself set out at 6.30 with Simeon and our first stop known as the

Yellow Rock. This produced target bird number 4, as a **Sombre Tit** sitting on the top of a bush greeted us as we got out of the van. This is a nesting site for Rock Nuthatch and although Simeon showed us the nest hole on the rock face no birds were present as the young had fledged. Other birds seen here were **Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting**, and in the gully below, **Sub-alpine Warbler and more Sombre Tits**. A second stop at Studen Kladenets produced a pair of a very obliging **Black-eared Wheatear, 2 Ravens, Long-legged Buzzard (sat on a rock), calling Chukkar, and 7 Griffon Vultures** perched on the top of a rock across the valley. WE drove on to the vulture hide passing through pasture and scrub at Potocharoka, where we saw a pair of **Isabelline Wheatear, Northern Wheatear, Roller, Cuckoo and a male Eastern Orphean Warbler**. We parked down the track to the vulture centre and walked to the top of the hill opposite and spent the next couple of hours raptor watching. From this site we had **50+ Griffon Vultures, 5 Egyptian Vultures, 5 Long-legged Buzzard, common Buzzard, Kestrel, Raven, Hooded Crow**, and in the bushes around us, **Subalpine Warbler, Ortolan Bunting, Blackbird and Woodlark**. At around 12 O'clock Wayne phoned and asked us to pick him up as by this time most of the vultures (and food – eaten by dogs) had disappeared, and after picking him up, we drove back to the vulture centre for lunch.



While we were eating a **Short-toed Treecreeper** called from the trees behind us, and Simeon attempted to call it out. It responded immediately and showed in the tree right behind us. A **Middle-spotted Woodpecker** also made an appearance and from nearby a **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker** called.

After lunch we tried the Arva river valley near Madjarvo as Simeon told us a pair of Golden Eagles was nesting in the crags. **Crag Martins, Alpine Swift** and **Bee-eater** were overhead, and another **Middle-spotted Woodpecker** showed in the trees between the road and the river. Simeon had mentioned to me about the "flying tortoise" but had not elaborated any further. Driving further down the valley I shouted that there was a big raptor overhead, and stopping suddenly and getting it in our binoculars, it was a male **Golden Eagle**. When Simeon got it in his scope he said that it was carrying something – a tortoise. At that moment it dropped the tortoise and dived after it, disappearing from sight. A few minutes later it reappeared carrying the tortoise and the female also appeared. The male came over our heads carrying the now shell-less tortoise to the nest site, while the female continued to soar above us. This was the last of many magical moments on this trip. Other birds seen down the valley were **Common and Long-legged Buzzard, Griffon Vulture and Kestrel**.

We tried the Yellow Rock site again for Rock Nuthatch but with no success and also the Kovan Kaya Cliffs for the same species but again with no success. At the latter site we had **Blue Rock Thrush, Rock, Cirl and Ortolan Bunting, Raven, Kestrel, Griffon and Egyptian Vulture, and a Long-legged Buzzard** nest with at least one chick.

It was early evening when Simeon played his last card – White-tailed Eagle, which was breeding nearby in woods around Ivailovgrad Reservoir. He reckoned one of the birds came regularly to fish in the evening. However despite an hour or so of intense scanning we had no joy, but we did have **2 Black Kite, White Stork, Corn Bunting, Little Owl and Common Buzzard** in that period. We returned to the Vulture Centre for our evening meal and retired to bed just as the **Scops Owl** started singing.

DAY 7 – SATURDAY 5th JUNE

We were up at six for our long journey back to Sofia which took over 4 hours. We did break the journey for Masked Shrike at Shtit but with no success, although we did see **Red-backed and Woodchat Shrike, Golden Oriole and Cuckoo** in the oak wood. We arrived at Sofia Airport for our 11.40 flight back to Gatwick.

CONCLUSIONS

Bulgaria is brilliant for birdwatching and in fact all other aspects of nature, as it has a diversity of physical geography and unspoilt natural habitats ranging from lakes to mountains, forests to plains and the Black Sea coastline. The range of bird species seen at the time of year we visited was outstanding. Wayne and myself have been to several different European countries over the last few years but this was the first time we have used the services of a guide for the whole trip, and what a guide he was – Simeon was outstanding. It was also the first time we have had our itinerary planned, (arranged through Neophron Bird Tours and my thanks go to Dimiter Georgiov), although we did make several minor detours during the course of the week in an effort to get woodpeckers. All of this resulted in us seeing virtually all the species we expected and no time being wasted in trying to find our own way using site guide books.

We enjoyed it so much and had so many memorable moments, that we are planning to go back next year in either April or August and hopefully recruit the services of Simeon again. My thanks then go to my two companions – Wayne Geater and Steve Abbott, Simeon Gigov – our excellent guide and Dimiter Georgiov of Neophron Bird Tours (highly recommendable) in making this a highly enjoyable and rewarding birdwatching experience.



Ken Musgrove (e-mail: mussies@supanet.com)

Wayne Geater (web site: www.wondersofwildlife.co.uk)

BULGARIA BIRD LIST 30.05.10 – 05.06.10

Mute Swan
White-fronted Goose
Shelduck
Gadwall
Mallard
Garganey
Shoveler
Red-crested Pochard
Pochard
Ferruginous Duck
Grey Partridge
Quail
Black-throated Diver
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Black-necked Grebe
Cormorant
Shag
Pygmy Cormorant
Great White Pelican
Dalmatian Pelican
Little Bittern
Night Heron
Squacco Heron
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Black Stork
White Stork
Glossy Ibis
Spoonbill
Honey Buzzard
Black Kite
Egyptian Vulture
Griffon Vulture
Short-toed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Levant Sparrowhawk
Buzzard
Long-legged Buzzard
Lesser Spotted Eagle
Eastern Imperial Eagle
Golden Eagle
Booted Eagle
Kestrel

Red-footed Falcon
Hobby
Water Rail
Moorhen
Coot
Oystercatcher
Black-winged Stilt
Avocet
Stone Curlew
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Lapwing
Black-tailed Godwit
Green Sandpiper
Mediterranean Gull
Black-headed Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Little Tern
Whiskered Turn
Black Tern
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Cuckoo
Scops Owl
Eagle Owl
Little Owl
Nightjar
Swift
Pallid Swift
Alpine Swift
Kingfisher
Bee-eater
Roller
Hoopoe
Wryneck
Grey-headed Woodpecker
Green Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Syrian Woodpecker
Middle Spotted Woodpecker
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
Calandra Lark
Short-toed Lark
Crested Lark
Woodlark

Skylark
Crag Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Tree Pipit
Water Pipit
Black-headed Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Nightingale
Black Redstart
Redstart
Stonechat
Isabelline Wheatear
Wheatear
Pied Wheatear
Eastern Black-eared Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Ring Ouzel (*alpestris*)
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Savi's Warbler
Paddyfield Warbler
Marsh Warbler
Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Eastern Olivaceous Warbler
Olive-tree Warbler
Eastern Sub-alpine Warbler
Eastern Orphean Warbler
Barred Warbler
Lesser Whitethroat
Whitethroat
Garden Warbler
Blackcap
Eastern Bonelli's Warbler
Chiffchaff
Goldcrest
Firecrest
Spotted Flycatcher
Semi-collared Flycatcher
Bearded Tit

Marsh Tit
Sombre Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Nuthatch
Trecreeper
Short-toed Trecreeper
Penduline Tit
Golden Oriole
Red-backed Shrike
Lesser Grey Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Jay
Magpie
Nutcracker
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
Rose-coloured Starling
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Bullfinch
Hawfinch
Yellowhammer
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Ortolan Bunting
Reed Bunting (*caspia*)
Black-headed Bunting
Corn Bunting

185 species recorded - seen and/or heard