

Bulgaria Birding Tour in October, 2023

By Yordan Hristov

Day 1 – Sofia, Vitosha Mountains and Travel to Burgas

Today I start a new birding tour in Bulgaria. It will be five days long and will cover a great range of habitats between Sofia and the Black sea coast at Burgas.

The route for the day is Sofia – Burgas with stops along the way.

I collected Geoff from his hotel in Sofia early in the morning and we headed to Vitosha mountains where we were going to spend the first half of the day. I wanted us to devote some time to the birds from the pine forest, namely: Spotted Nutcracker, Goldcrest, Crossbill, Ring Ouzel, Willow Tit and others.

Pine forest at Vitosha mountains.

We arrived at our first stop in good time for the morning bird activity. Once we got out of the car we started logging bird after bird: Bullfinches were calling actively from the nearby scrub, dozens of Crossbills kept flying over, Ring Ouzel, Nutcracker and Willow Tit were all calling just around the car park. Well, that was hard work! What a great morning!

After this first impression, we decided to take a walk in the area and get better views of the mentioned birds. They did perform quite well and we managed to get fantastic views of the Ring Ouzel, Dunnock and Nutcracker just a few meters away from us. We saw about 10 different Nutcrackers that were actively collecting and storing food for the coming winter. We spent a good couple of hours of relaxed birding seeing some very good birds. In this first place alone, Geoff had about 10 new birds. That has got to be a good start to the trip.

Further down the road, we stopped again to look for Crested Tit. Shortly after stopping, I heard Black Woodpecker flying past and a Crested Tit calling. All of a sudden a juvenile Golden Eagle appeared out of nowhere mobbed by two ravens and then a Goshawk dashed down the hill and a Common Buzzard started calling from the air. I am not exaggerating! They all appeared after each other.

We added a few new birds to the trip list and it suddenly was midday. We had to make our way to the coast as I had planned some good places to stop. The trip to the next place took about 3 hours because of some diversion on the road.

The Raptor hills

The Raptor Hills was one of the two sites I had planned before arriving at Burgas. It is a grassland area on an elevated hill where birds of prey often gather to feed or just fly over. As it was fairly late in the day there weren't many birds flying around but we still managed to see a couple of Long-legged and Common Buzzards, Marsh Harrier, Kestrels, Rook, Jackdaws, Northern Wheatear, Red-

throated Pipit, and Corn Bunting. As we have been scanning around I spotted two distant but very large birds. These have to be the Imperial Eagles. We drove around the hill and stopped the car about 200 m right next to them. Wow, What a great view! They were so impressive! Such a great bird! Having in mind that there are only about 30 pairs left of the country, it is a real privilege to be able to see one of these birds.

After this very strong emotional moment, we decided to go as the sun was setting. Our next target bird was Eagle Owl which lives in an abandoned quarry not far from where we were. Unfortunately, we couldn't get it and we headed to our hotel. It's been a very long day and we needed some rest.

Well, we logged over 40 birds today which is not too bad for a traveling day. A bird of the trip so far was the Imperial Eagle, although the Nutcracker and Ring Ouzel are also quite high on the list.

Day 2 – Burgas Wetlands

The second day of my current birding tour in Bulgaria was going to be around Burgas wetlands. We started with a prebreakfast birding at the nearby salt pans which resulted in a few good birds. Immediately upon arrival as we got out of the car I heard a Syrian Woodpecker. It took me a minute to locate it and we enjoyed it for a while before it disappeared. Shortly after that, I heard a Red-breasted Flycatcher. Another minute and it was "in the bag". There were quite a few flamingos, distant Ruff, a single Dalmatian Pelican, Avocets, and Black-tail Godwits. Well, for this one-hour birding before breakfast we had seen 39 species. Not a bad start, is it?

Burgas lake

After breakfast, two American birders joined us. Sandra and James are going to be with us only for the day. Our first stop was at Vaya Lake where I was hoping to see the first arriving White-headed Ducks but we were not lucky. We continued searching on the eastern side of the lake but the birds had just not arrived yet. Anyway, we had good groups of White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Little Grebes, Pygmy Cormorants, Common Kingfisher and a few Whiskered Terns.

Mandra lake

We continued south to Mandra Lake where we stopped at the dam and at one of the river estuaries. At the dam, we had a well posing Red-backed Shrike and I heard a Penduline Tit but it did not show itself. The river estuary was more exciting. Shortly after one of the villages I saw a small group of falcons and had to jump on the breaks. Pull out, got out of the car and there they were. Three juvenile Red-footed Falcons were circling right above us. Then, just as we turned around two Turtle Doves flew away. Wow, this was quite a late observation! From a nearby hill, we scanned the lake but there wasn't much to note on the water. Instead, we logged our first Lesser-spotted Eagle and a few Eurasian Sparrowhawks.

Migration watchpoint

It was already midday and I wanted us to spend some time at the local migration watchpoint. I had some preliminary information that the pool by the watchpoint holds a good number of Slender-

billed Gulls. We collected some snacks and drinks on the way and arrived at the watchpoint to see other birders doing migration counts. How nice was that? The pool was indeed full of Slender-billed Gulls and quite a few Little Gulls in a whole variety of plumages. I love Little Gulls, they are really smart-looking birds with their short bills.

Looking at the sky for an hour we managed to see an Osprey, a few Lesser-spotted Eagles, Short-toed Eagle, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, several Common, and a few Steppe Buzzards. What a great experience! Birds were flying very high but even though it was great to see them.

Our next stop was in the fields by the lake where I was hoping to see a group of Ruddy Shelducks but we could not find them although we spent quite some time there. Thus we headed North to Pomorie to visit yet another habitat.

Pomorie

First, we stopped by the sea. People in the car had been talking about it all the time so I had to stop. Anyway, I wanted us to look for birds on the sea. I was hoping to see Black-throated Diver, Red-necked Grebe, and Yelkouan Shearwater but none of these was there. We only got a few sandwich terns. Even though, people were still happy to see the Black Sea. Coming from far, it was important to them.

We then moved to the lake itself where we noted Grey Plover, Common Redshank, Red-rumped Swallow, Black Redstart, a single Little Stint, and a Dunlin. Around the western end of the lake we had a huge flock of Common Starlings which had covered the wires. Over 5000 birds were chirping and ready for their superb flights. We could not see these flights but winter is just coming so will need to come back again for the starling murmurations.

A great surprise here was a late Hoopoe which posed nicely. We did a long walk along the dike of the lake to look for waterbirds under the beautiful evening light. It was really beautiful. A flock of about 100 flamingos stole the show. Their pink colour was really shining. Half a dozen Caspian Terns were the other good birds here as well as several Wood Sandpipers.

Well, it's been a long day and we decided to head back to our hotel. We ended up with nearly 100 birds for the day. The Flamingos from the last place were voted for birds of the day followed by the Red-footed Falcons. Stay tuned for my next story tomorrow!

Day 3 – From Burgas to the Eastern Rhodope Mountains

The day started early in the morning. We were to go owling and my alarm went on at 6.00. Some nearby barns hold a pair of Barn Owls and two pairs of Little Owl. We met at 6.30 and drove for a few minutes to arrive before the first light. Immediately upon arrival, we saw our first Little Owl sitting on an anthera. It was right there silhouetted on the pinkish sky painted by the rising sun. What a view! Geoff really wanted to see one and here it was.

We continued further down the track. I approached slowly some derelict buildings which are ideal for Barn Owls and there it was. A Barn owl had just caught something and was slowly trying to get around it and eat it. How lucky was that? Wow! Another stunning bird! After enjoying it for a while we continued our way to look for more birds. Another Little Owl turned up just a few metres

further down the track. Then a Water Rail called from the reeds and Marsh Harriers started flying. Birds were waking up.

Ruddy Shelduck quest

After this brilliant session, we decided to try again for the Ruddy Shelducks which we couldn't see yesterday. I got off the main road and headed toward the field where the birds were supposed to be. Everything seemed really quiet. There were no birds at all. We approached the particular field and there was still nothing. Then a few Curlews took off. From my information source, I knew that the Ruddy Shelducks are together with a few Curlews so this made me alert. Continued driving carefully when I spotted them! There they were! Five Ruddy Shelducks were flying above the fields and a few more were still sitting in the fields with their heads sticking up. They were really invisible. How cool was that! We took a moment and approached them a bit more then scoped from a safe distance. It was an absolutely beautiful morning with mist over the nearby fields. What a great start!

On the way out of the fields, we stopped again a couple of times. This time it was for a flock of Wagtails which I wanted to check for something different. It took me a few minutes to locate a Yellow Wagtail and a Red-throated Pipit. Well, two more new ones in the bag. This made a total of 5 new birds for Geoff before breakfast! What can I say! It was time for coffee!

After breakfast

We headed back to our hotel for a quick breakfast before we headed south to the Eastern Rhodope mountains where more adventures are to come! A quick stop in town produced a few Alpine Swifts which were really expected. Our first stop after breakfast was by the local landfill where I was hoping to see some remaining White Storks. There they were. Just as we approached the place, at least a dozen birds were just sitting and resting. We spent a few minutes with them and then pulled by a nearby forest where we logged a Green Woodpecker and a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker. Unfortunately, they never showed up to see them.

Further along the road, we stopped incidentally to see Spanish Sparrows and Barn Swallows but not much to add. We continued our drive through the hot hours of the day to arrive at a picturesque crater of the volcano. We arrived late in the afternoon and were welcomed by a group of 7 Griffon Vultures right over our head. It was a marvelous welcome at a very dramatic landscape. "This first meeting with the vultures will be something to remember and appreciate.", said Geoff.

Day 4 – Around Madzharovo

We woke up in the caldera of the volcano well on time for a pre-breakfast walk. It was a beautiful morning and birds started moving about as the sun hit the grounds. We drove to a nearby park where birds started to appear one after the other. Sombre Tit was one of the first, then Cirl Bunting, Green Woodpecker, Middle spotted Woodpecker, Lesser spotted Woodpecker and a distant Little Owl was trying to collect some sunlight on the top of a chimney of a local building.

Today we will stay locally. The plan is to visit a vulture restaurant and look for vultures and beautiful landscapes along the way. The place where vultures are fed is on the top of a picturesque hill overlooking two river valleys with signs of major volcanic activity.

We left our lodge shortly after breakfast to drive up to the top of the caldera and stop at some picturesque meadows. The main reason were several Mistle Thrushes feeding there. Then we saw a Sparrowhawk, Hawfinch flew over, Woodlark and a couple of Green Woodpeckers.

Further along the road, we stopped to enjoy the views of Arda River valley where the river has made its way through the volcanic rocks in the area. It was absolutely stunning.

The Vulture Restaurant

We arrived in the area of the Vulture Restaurant at noon. There were no vultures at the feeding site itself but there were a few in the sky. They were just gathering to head somewhere where there was available food. Thus we saw them only for a few minutes before they disappeared. Just as we arrived though, a Golden Jackal came right out in the open to show himself. What a great view! It was difficult to judge on the size of this animal until a Raven flew over it. Then it was obvious how small the animal is. The wingspan of the Raven was just about as long as the body of the Jackal. Real Nature experience!

Further down the road we stopped again to enjoy the area and catch up with small birds. Several Woodlarks were singing actively showing really beautifully out in the open. We also saw Sombre Tit, and the star bird Sardinian Warbler. The little skulker took us half an hour to see but we did at the end. It kept calling from the middle of the bush but never show himself. It was towards the end when we nearly gave up when it just went to a small bush where we could see it. Job done!

Arda River

We continued our way back to the lodge but not before stopping by the river to look for Dipper. They do occur here although not regularly. As we stopped we saw a Common Sandpiper and Grey Wagtail which were still missing from our list. Then I spotted on Dipper going under a bush at the river. Once it came out it started hunting and diving in the river, walking on the bottom and collecting small crustaceans. Another great experience! Another bird joined it and both of them were feeding actively diving right into the rapids of the river. We could see the birds closing their first eyelid when diving. The Sun was really shining on them and they looked very rufous. What a beautiful bird and a truly spectacular experience to peak into the intimate life of these little creatures.

Further along the river we stopped at several places to look for Black Vulture but in vain. I got information from colleagues working on the species that the birds are not in the area. Thus we decided to grab a drink and head to my favourite place in the area. A small table made of stone right by the cliffs with the vultures overlooking the river. It is a really majestic and very, very picturesque and calming place. We enjoyed a Black Stork in the River, a Peregrine Falcon stopped right above our heads and stayed there all the time as we were having our drinks. This relaxing time and watching birds without rushing is a very important part of some of my tours. Most people appreciate it very much.

The sky darkened and the forecasted rain was here. We called it a day and retreated for a proper rest before dinner when the real rain came to cool down and water the grounds. It's been yet another fantastic day!

Day 5

Our last day of the trip started very early in the morning with a session for landscape photography. The forecast for the morning was suggesting mist after the rain and I knew the perfect place to witness this superb phenomenon and see the rising sun above the valley. The colour of the trees had already started turning so it was promising to be a fantastic experience.

The Sunrise

Boy, this was an absolutely amazing experience! We got to the place in the blue hour right on time to see the first light in the sky. It was still fairly dark but we could see well enough to find our way and choose our position for landscape photography. Just as forecasted, the valley was full of mist, trees were coloured in beautiful red which would really shine when the Sun came up. Oh, my I was really missing this experience. I just kept clicking! Went back to spots from previous times and compositions I have done before. Coincidence or not, this was exactly the same place where I took a picture for an American journal on birding in Bulgaria published yesterday.

Birds were also pretty active. While photographing I heard a Chukkar calling, many Sombre Tits were calling and a Lesser spotted Woodpecker kept feeding actively. What a beautiful morning! In the village nearby we added three different Syrian Woodpeckers which were also very active.

After a beautiful breakfast with local doughnuts, cheese and honey, we had to pack and go. I had a few sites planned for the road before arriving in Sofia. On the way, we stopped for a Little Owl which was at its usual place.

Waterfowl

In the afternoon we stopped at a wetland which was on our way to Sofia. The site is usually very rich and we had time only for one place so this was the ideal choice. The wetland is in the middle of some farmland and has some canals and forests on the edge. This combination of habitats gives a great range of species that can be seen here.

Shortly after arrival, we started noting new birds. A family of 9 Grey Partridges walked across the road right in front of our car! Horray! I was really hoping we could see these birds here as I know they are in the area. We saw several Whinchats and once we got the water we saw over 80 Lapwings, a couple of Snipes, over 200 Little Grebes, a single Pochard, several Dunlins and Ruff. For the two hours around the lake, we saw nearly 50 different species! What a great end of this fantastic trip!

We arrived in Sofia in the late afternoon just in time for Geoff to check in his hotel and relax. It's been a superb trip around the country and its backside roads to some of the best sites for birds in the country. Our total number of birds is just over 150 species for these 5 days and about 90% of these will be totally new birds to Geoff! What a great experience!

“I really enjoyed your company, the birds, the food, the hotels.”, said Geoff. “It was really well organised, and I am happy to recommend you to anybody for birding tours in Bulgaria”. Well, Thank you for coming Geoff!

Some of the highlights of the trips were the Imperial Eagle flying a few metres away from us, hundreds of Flamingos illuminated by the setting sun, the welcoming Griffon Vultures at the bottom of the caldera... It's been a really great trip!