

## Birdwatching in Bulgaria, Autumn 2010

### Day1 (Wed 22nd Sept)

After landing at Sofia, we sped eastwards on the first leg of our journey. This did not go unnoticed by the traffic police, but our guide Balazs soon managed to smooth-talk his way out of that little difficulty. We arrived after dark at the quaint old world town of Tryavna, having seen a Levant Sparrowhawk en route.

### Day 2 (Thurs 23rd Sept)

Strolling round the town after breakfast next morning, before resuming our journey was very productive with a Kingfisher perched on a rock and Crossbills feeding on the cones of a Spruce tree in the centre of town. Pallid Swifts seemed to have extended their range Northwards, possible due to climate change.

We then set out for Durankulak on the Black Sea coast, where we were to spend the next three nights: the highlight of the journey was seeing Alpine Swifts skimming the rooftops of blocks of flats in a town we passed through. We arrived eventually at Branta Lodge.



### Day 3 (Fri 24th Sept)

We visited a nearby stand of trees next to a reed bed by the shore. The trees were alive with Red-breasted Flycatchers and other passerines, while Little Crake called from the reeds and Gull-billed and Caspian Terns flew overhead as we walked along the beach.

The shore of Lake Durankulak was enlivened by a Hobby repeatedly mobbing a Marsh Harrier. We enjoyed an extended lunch break while we waited to be towed out of deep sand in which the wheels had become embedded. The enforced wait was alleviated by the beautiful mellow tones of Woodlarks singing and watching several huge hairy caterpillars.

The evening entertainment was provided by an Eagle Owl and another Little Crake calling.



#### **Day 4 (Sat 25th Sept)**

The day began well as a Goshawk flew past while we boarded the minibus. This was shortly followed by 2 Steppe Buzzards.

Lunch at Cape Kaliakra on the Black Sea coast provided a side show of 3 Bottle-nosed Dolphins; then a brief trip over the border into Romania, where Mangalia Lake gave us Caspian and Whiskered Terns, Spotted Redshanks, many Little Gulls and Spoonbills, several Great White Egrets and a Muskrat.

#### **Day 5 (Sun 26th Sept)**

We travelled all morning towards Burgas, finally lunching by a river at the Kamchia Reserve. A few Red-footed Falcons and Hobbies passed overhead while we listened to Handel and Mozart on the laptop, from whence came the idea of running a 'Birds and Music' holiday in future.

Next stop was at Pomorie Lagoon where motor bike scrambling was in progress. An Osprey perched on a rock in the lake, several Ruffs and Marsh Sandpipers were unruffled by the disturbance. Our next hotel was in the town of Sarafovo.

#### **Day 6 (Monday 27th Sept)**

We pulled in at a roadside lay-by to watch both species of Pelican, then proceeded to 'The Piggery', where we found a Broad-billed Sandpiper. Moving on to Mandra Lake, only 2 of us managed to see the Moustached Warbler, which was calling. Pressing onwards we saw the only Black Kite of the trip from the roadside.

After lunch we called at the saltpans, where there was as much rubbish lying about as a corporation rubbish tip, but it was very productive for birdlife. A Little Crake was heard but only 2 managed to see it, before it vanished into the reeds. 3 Red-necked Phalaropes were close by, already winter plumage, and a Peregrine flew past while we watched them.

**Day 7 (Tuesday 28th Sept)**

We watched a flock of Starlings flying above a Sparrowhawk, while defecating on it to encourage it to move on. (This evasion strategy has been increasingly observed in recent years).

At Atanasovsko Lake, Little and Temminck's Stints next to each other provided a useful comparison, but the 'piece de resistance' was a steady stream of Lesser Spotted Eagles (150+) overhead.

A leisurely lunch at Hanska Shatra Khan's Restaurant on the hillside terrace was enlivened by several Sparrowhawks and a Goshawk plus 2 Rollers on a telegraph wire.

**Day 8 (Wednesday 29th Sept)**

This was our travelling day to Madjarovo in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, but first we had a quick look at the roadside lay-by of Burgas Lake, where Penduline Tits were flitting through the bushes, as Whiskered Terns hunted over several Black-necked Grebes.

We planned to have lunch at the Imperial Restaurant in the village of Topolovgrad, which turned out a lucky choice because we had excellent views of the elusive Lesser Spotted Woodpecker as we left the minibus.

Resuming the journey, we reached the Sakar Hills, where the star of the show was an Eastern Imperial Eagle. Some friendly grape pickers insisted we had a carrier bag full of grapes, but would not accept any payment. A peasant woman on donkey cart passed by smiling her toothy grin



### **Day 9 (Thursday 30th Sept)**

We passed Thracian tombs in the cliff face on our way to the vulture feeding station, where the local conservation warden had put out a dead cow. Over 90 Griffon Vultures eventually arrived to feast on the carcass, climbing over each other to get at the carrion, while Ravens waited their turn. All the birds retreated to a safe distance when 2 wild dogs arrived on the scene.



A visit to watch Jackals the following night was not so successful, as they were barely discernable as vague shapes in the darkness (night sights or infra-red lighting would have been a help).

After that fascinating spectacle, we paused for morning coffee on the bridge at Madjarovo, while watching a Black Stork fly in and land on the shingle bed. After visiting the display at the local conservation centre, we lunched at a suitable vantage point, where we saw another Black Stork and more foraging Sombre Tits.

Then on to a spectacular viewing place known as the 'stone table' where an unseen Rock Nuthatch was calling, but we did see Peregrine and Blue Rock Thrush. Afterwards we went for a scenic riverside walk to see another Peregrine, Lesser Spotted Eagle, and again mocked by an unseen Green Woodpecker.

Going back to the 'stone table', then further along the road we had another Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

### **Day 10 (Fri 1st Oct)**

A little Owl perched on a chimney near the hotel and a couple of red Rumped Swallows started the day nicely. We watched a family party of Sparrowhawks and another Sparrowhawk mobbing a Buzzard. Our morning coffee stop gave us excellent views of a Woodlark, Syrian Woodpecker, Red-backed Shrike, Hawfinch, many butterflies and wild Cyclamen growing among the Gorse bushes where the cattle could not graze them.

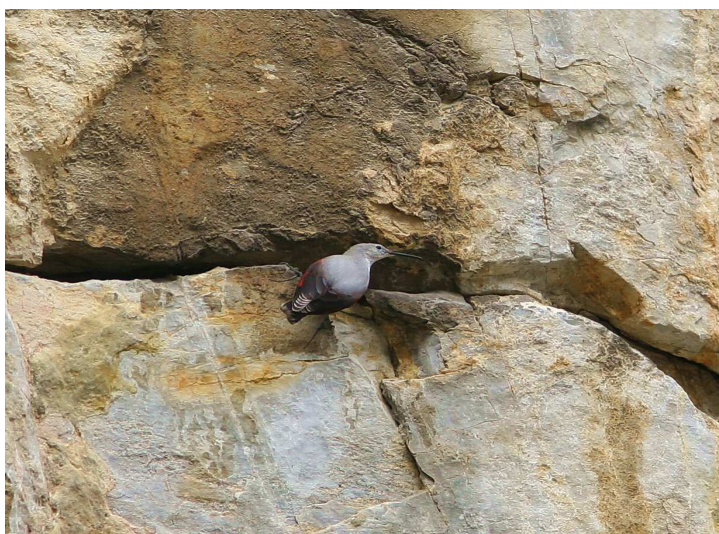
After a picnic outside the conservation headquarters, we visited a reservoir where we saw a Long-legged Buzzard, another Red-backed Shrike, more Sombre Tits and a tree in beautiful Autumn colouration



### **Day 11 (Sat 2nd Oct )**

A last stop at the 'stone table', before setting out for our final destination, several Griffon Vultures were perched waiting for the thermals to fly, and a Peregrine passed by. We were able to look down on a Dipper swimming on the surface of the river far below, while the unseen Rock Nuthatch again mocked us. Moving along the road a few hundred yards, we at last saw a Green Woodpecker, having heard them every day of the trip.

Just after moving off on the final leg of our journey to the Western Rhodope Mountains, our sharp eyed leader spotted a Golden Eagle perched on a crag. We quickly pulled up and scoped it, giving everyone marvellous views, until a few minutes later it flew and we could see it to be an immature bird.



At our mid morning coffee stop 2 Honey Buzzards flew over, and in the village where we stopped for lunch, a cat pounced on a feral pigeon and carried it off. At last we arrived at the magnificent Trigrad Gorge, and after quarter of an hour searching we

found a pair of Wallcreepers and were able to watch them searching the rock face for insects, occasionally flitting to show their red wing patches.

Afterwards a drive up a forestry track, with precipitous drops down the side took us to an alpine meadow, where the cowbells made a musical background noise to the unseen Black Woodpecker's mocking call. Only 2 in the party managed to see the Nutcracker and 3 of us decided to walk back down the track where we watched Tree Sparrow, Spotted Flycatcher and a group of Serins. We paused to identify some Autumn Gentian still in flower but may not have walked so casually if we had known there were Bears in the woods.

### **Day 12 (Sat 3rd Oct )**

In the morning we set off in the dark for Sofia airport after another fantastic wildlife holiday with Ecotours Wildlife Holidays.