

BULGARIA

13th to 16th May 2009

Mike Cram, Emma Cram and Neville Davies

Introduction

This was a short break for us, mainly aimed at visiting a new country and seeing, if possible, some new life species of moths, butterflies and mammals, but mainly birds.

We booked our scheduled flights through British Airways last autumn, the same time our ground arrangements were finalised with Dimiter Georgiev at www.neophron.com. He organised our car hire, guiding and hotel bookings. He was able to recommend a good itinerary giving us the best chance of our target species. The entire trip including all spending cost just under £500 each.

We were most fortunate as our guide and driver **Simeon Gigov** proved to be an excellent birder and an invaluable translator, especially of menus in Cyrillic! He had a vast knowledge of all the sites we visited from the Romanian border in the north, to the Turkish border to the south. He had a great sense of humour and spoke excellent English and always seemed to be able to find a nice place to eat in the shade!

Itinerary

DAY 1 (Wed 13May09)

Our scheduled flight from Gatwick landed on time in Varna just after 2000h local time. We were greeted by Simeon at the airport after smooth transit through security. We drove the half hour to [Hotel Briz 2](#). Our first birds of the trip were singing **Nightingale** and calling **Scops Owl** as we unloaded the car. We took a late evening meal and a couple of drinks, and then retired.

DAY 2 (Thu 14May09)

It was damp to start, but warm and sunny by late morning and for the rest of the day. We decided to skip breakfast and use the snacks we had brought, supplemented by a short pit stop en route, so we could make a 0500h start and maximise daylight birding. Our first stop at dawn for Eagle Owl was unsuccessful, but we enjoyed the [White Lagoon](#) area very much as our first real birding got under way well with a **Long-legged Buzzard** and 2 **Pied Wheatear** and the first of many **Hobby**, **Turtle Dove**, **Bee-eater**, **Hoopoe**, **Nightingale**, **Red-backed Shrike**, **Lesser Grey Shrike**, **Golden Oriole** and **Black-headed Bunting**.



Roller



Red-backed Shrike



Pallid Harrier



Paddyfield Warbler

Outside [Durankulak](#) we encountered 3 **Red-footed Falcon** on roadside wires, together with a **Roller** and several **Corn Bunting**. In the crop fields nearby we saw the first of many **Calandra Lark**. We arrived at [Durankulak Lake](#) early morning to the unusual site of about 40 **White Pelican** sitting in the middle of a ploughed field! It took quite a while to pin down our first target, **Paddyfield Warbler**. One singing bird was elusive, but after an hour's patient perseverance, we enjoyed excellent close scope views.

The reed beds also held plenty of **Great Cormorant**, **Pygmy Cormorant**, **Ferruginous Duck** and **Great Reed Warbler**. We also noted **Purple Heron**, **Great White Egret**, and **Squacco Heron** whilst Mike found a fly-through female **Pallid Harrier** which was an unexpected bonus Western Palaearctic tick! The copses and scrub near the car park held a walkabout **White Stork** and several **Common Cuckoo**, **Yellow Wagtail (flava)**, **Whinchat** and a **Wood Warbler**. Wader migration was in full swing and an ever growing number of birds were dropping in to feed on the nearby beach before moving through as we added **Grey Plover**, **Little Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Turnstone**, **Ruff**, many stunning summer plumaged **Curlew Sandpiper** and 3 **Mediterranean Gull** to the growing trip list.

We moved south to work our way along to [Kaliakra](#). By 1200h we were still a few km from Cape Kaliakra itself as we stopped to bird what seemed to be a busy scrubby area. A few Nightingale sp were engaging in territorial activity and one was singing nearby. It was not too long before we realised we were watching at least **6 Thrush Nightingale!** It became clear a fall of migrants had occurred this morning and the birds were working their way back up the peninsula. In addition, in the hour we spent at that spot, the highlights were numerous **Turtle Dove, Barn Swallow and Sand Martin, 2 Northern Wheatear, 1 Common Redstart, 1 Barred Warbler, 1 Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, 3 Icterine Warbler, 1 Greenish Warbler, 1 Willow Warbler, 12+ Spotted Flycatcher, 2 Pied Flycatcher** and a male **Red-breasted Flycatcher**.

Simeon took us nearer the Cape to an area where he knew **Eagle Owl** was nesting. Whilst he and Neville managed to scope 2 young at the nest in a distant cave, by the time Emma and I were alerted, they had moved out of site. We consoled ourselves with stunning views of a **Red-rumped Swallow** gathering mud at a puddle. Emma could not resist the photo opportunity!



Red-rumped Swallow



Thrush Nightingale



Icterine Warbler

By 1445h we travelled about 100km south of Varna, via a lunch stop for some excellent fish soup and an egg, cheese and pepper dish which challenged Neville's taste buds to the extreme! We arrived late afternoon at the riverine habitat of the [Goritsa forest](#). Our first site did not yield any Flycatchers, but we did see **Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, 2 Short-toed Treecreeper** and **2 Hawfinch**. Simeon decided to visit an area that he had surveyed earlier in the spring. Soon we were watching 2 male **Semi-collared Flycatcher** acting out a territorial dispute. This was another target bird seen well and a nice end to a very full birding day which had yielded over 100 species. By 1800h, we began the further journey of about 100km south to the [Hotel Merana](#) on the Black Sea coast in [Bourgas](#), our base for the next 2 nights.

We had a nice evening meal and bottle of wine in the bistro which made up for the emerging head colds that Emma and I had been incubating in the UK.

DAY 3 (Fri 15May09)

A misty start pre-breakfast at 0600h, but we tried [Atanovsko Lake](#) in Bourgas until 0700h. On arrival Mike found a pair of **Penduline Tit** giving wonderful close views at their immaculate nest. Despite the mist we scoped from the visitor centre and were able to see many waders and terns including **Black-winged Stilt, Avocet, Kentish Plover, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, 2 Broad-billed Sandpiper, Turnstone** and **Little Tern**.

We headed off at 0900h after taking breakfast, south-west for [Strandja Mountain](#). En-route we added **Squacco Heron** and **Black Kite** to the trip list. Basically we were stopping for every raptor! Our first stop on the beautiful gently rolling hills of the region yielded a **Lesser Spotted Eagle**, one of our main target species. Also noted were **Woodlark** and **Sombre Tit**. A short distance away, we checked out some scrub for warblers and soon came across **2 Olive Tree Warbler**, singing and showing particularly well, together with **Stonechat, Sombre Tit, Woodchat Shrike**, singing **Ortolan** and some particularly nice **Marsh Fritillary** and **Scarce Swallow-tail** butterflies.



Lesser Spotted Eagle



Olive-tree Warbler



Montagu's Harrier

At 1045h we decided to push on to the [Sakar Hills](#) for other eagle species and further chances of our main target species Levant Sparrowhawk, which had thus far eluded us. Another stop found a pair of **Montagu's Harrier** chasing a **Black Kite**, nearby an **Isabelline Wheatear** sat on a road sign, a **Black Stork** soared overhead and a **Roller** sat on wires near where a pair of **White Stork** was nesting. Simply brilliant birding in nice warm weather too! The beautiful rolling hills and fields of [Sakar](#) were littered with hundreds of feeding migrant **White Storks**. As we set up to scope the terrain, we picked up a distant **Eastern Imperial Eagle** and were soon joined by a curious nest guardian. After chatting with Simeon, he invited us to his position in the hills nearby overlooking a nest. He needed our telescopes to confirm that there were indeed two healthy looking small downy eaglets in residence!

We took lunch in a café in [Topolovgrad](#) only a handful of kilometres from Turkey. A **Syrian Woodpecker** flew into a tree opposite the café as we ate. On our way back just west of Strandja in the [Dervensky Highlands](#), we found 2 **Short-toed Eagle**. A short visit to a hotel to borrow a torch off a friend of Simeon's allowed us to see an eastern race **Common Redstart**. By 1630, we had returned to the [Bourgas Wetland PODA reserve](#). We enjoyed a cool beer from the elevated viewing areas whilst watching **White Pelican**, **Common Shelduck**, **Ruddy Shelduck**, **Garganey**, **Marsh Harrier** and a flyover **Collared Pratincole**. We then returned to [Atanovsko Lake](#) early evening 1815 to 1915h and enjoyed watching 2 **Spoonbill**, several **Black-winged Stilt**, 1 **White Pelican**, 3 **Mediterranean Gull**, 1 **Little Gull**, 1 **White-winged Black Tern**, a wide selection of other common waders and an [Eastern Dappled White](#) butterfly.

Another nice meal at [Hotel Merana](#) was followed by a night time visit to [Bourgas Park](#) 2200 to 2300h. Armed with our torches and the ability to whistle, we soon located up to a dozen **Eurasian Scops Owl** about the park and enjoyed excellent views of at least two individuals.

DAY 4 (Sat 16May09)

After the busy schedule of the previous 2 days and with a long day ahead, we opted for a lie in and leisurely breakfast. Suitably refreshed, we checked out and were at [Atanovsko Lake](#) again. This time our luck was in and we were soon watching at least 5 **Dalmatian Pelican** amongst the several hundred **White Pelican**. Invigorated by another target species in the bag, we continued to rack up more trip ticks with excellent views of **Little Bittern**, **Night Heron**, **Squacco Heron**, **Garganey** and a Water Snake.



Eastern Dotted White

Little Bittern

White and Dalmatian Pelicans

As we reached [Mandra Lake](#) just outside [Bourgas](#), it became clear by 0945h that classic migration was in full swing on a very hot day. **White Storks** in their thousands (approx. 10,000) were dropping in from the east and many were thermalling over the city to continue their journey.

There was also a steady trickle of raptors and we noted **2 Black Stork, 2 Osprey, 6 Lesser Spotted Eagle, 1 Booted Eagle**, numerous **Marsh Harrier** and **Black Kite**, 10+ **Common Buzzard**, 10+ **Honey Buzzard**, 1 **Goshawk**, 2 **Sparrowhawk** as well as 6 **Yellow Wagtail** and 2 **Penduline Tit**.

A brief stop at [Pomorya Lake](#) and Salt Pans yielded much the same as before, mainly **Kestrel, Avocet, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint** and a **Little Tern**. Near the village of [Gyulyovtsa](#) in the [Eastern Balkan Mountains](#) we stopped at about 1215h to watch 2 **Lesser Spotted Eagle** and then obtained fine views of a calling **Wryneck** and a singing **Yellowhammer**. We parked a little further on and Simeon took us up a pretty river valley, with meadows and scattered deciduous trees. There seemed to be **Hawfinches** and **Golden Orioles** everywhere we went, perhaps as many as a dozen of each. Excellent views were soon enjoyed of another trip target species, **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler** as 2 different birds sang close by. We also saw 2 **Grey Wagtail**, 2 **Eastern Orphean Warbler**, and a brief male **Cirl Bunting**.

Some pretty **Eastern Dotted White** butterflies brightened up the lunch break, which was interrupted by 2 coach loads of geriatric Russian tourists trooping in to the latrine to the rear of the café. The mind boggles as to what use the several borrowed dinner napkins from our table were put to!!

We travelled onwards at 1400h along the several kilometres of bumpy track that led to [Cape Emine](#), a quite picturesque site of mixed woodland and scrubland that gently sloped down to the coast. It was a baking hot afternoon even at 1530h and we were glad of the occasional shade offered. We did not manage to see **Masked Shrike** here, but the mix of species was fantastic: 2 **Isabelline Wheatear, Woodlark, Olive-tree Warbler, Barred Warbler, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Red-backed Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, Golden Oriole** and **Hawfinch**. As we left the site at 1700h and left the bumpy trail behind us I heard a **Corncrake** calling. We stopped and reversed back to listen for a few minutes, but we did not really have the time to wait for a sighting, so we headed for our last site in the [Goritsa forest](#) for another look at some flycatchers and woodpeckers.



Marsh Fritillary

Semi-collared Flycatcher

Woodchat Shrikes

As we entered the forest, we unwittingly flushed a herd of semi-wild pigs. It was otherwise quiet though with brief views of **Green** and **Middle-spotted Woodpeckers**, **Short-toed Treecreeper** and **Hawfinch**, but we signed off in style with nice views of a male **Semi-collared Flycatcher**.

Simeon got us safely to **Varna airport** at 1930h in good time for our 2100h flight which was slightly behind schedule, but back on the stand at Gatwick at 2300h. We did not get out of Gatwick until 0000h and finally got back home at 0400h after a short diversion up the valleys to drop Nev off. We were all exhausted but very satisfied with our trip list of **160 species**.

Our thanks go to Dimiter Georgiev and Simeon Gigov of Neophron tours for a brilliantly organised and very enjoyable trip. All we needed to take was our wits and The Collins Bird Guide (Britain & Europe) for reference! Thanks also go to Dave Slade and Richard Smith for their help in pinpointing the identities of a few of the moths and butterflies.

My thanks also go to Emma for her ever improving skills with the camera without which we wouldn't have got the great photos! Her kit is Canon Eos 400D with 400mm f5.6 lens and our Nikon Coolpix P5100.

Mike Cram

30th May 2009

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List of species (160 recorded)

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*
Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*
Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*
Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*
Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*
Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*
Great White Egret *Egretta alba*
Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*
Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*
Gadwall *Anas strepera*
Garganey *Anas querquedula*
Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*
Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*
Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*
Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*
Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*
Eurasian Spoonbill *Platulea leucorodia*
Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*
Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*
Short-toed Eagle *Circus gallicus*
Black Kite *Milvus migrans*
Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*
Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*
Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*
Hobby *Falco subbuteo*
Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*
Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*
Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*
Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*
Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*
Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*
Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus*
Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*
Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*
Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*
Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*
Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon *Columbia livia*
Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*
Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*
Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops*
European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*
Hoopoe *Upupa epops*
Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*
Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*
Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*
Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
House Martin *Delichon urbica*
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba alba*
Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*
Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*
Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*
Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*
Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*
Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*
Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*
Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*
Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*
Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*
Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*
Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*
Eastern Bonelli's Warbler *Phylloscopus orientalis*
Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*
Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*
Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*
Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*
Great Tit *Parus major*
Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*
Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*
Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*
Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*
Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*
Black-billed Magpie *Pica pica*
Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*
Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*
Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*
Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*
Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*
Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*
Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*
Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*
Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*
Corncrake *Crex crex*
Common Coot *Fulica atra*
Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*
Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*
Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
Little Stint *Calidris minuta*
Dunlin *Calidris alpina*
Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*
Little Gull *Larus minutus*
Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*
Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*
White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*
Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
Wood Pigeon *Columbia palumbus*
Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*
Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*
Common Swift *Apus apus*
European Roller *Coracias garrulus*
Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*
Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*
Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*
Sky Lark *Alauada arvensis*
Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*
Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*
Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava flava*
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*
Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*
Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*
Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*
Common Stonechat *Saxicola saxicola*
Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*
Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*
Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*
Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*
Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais elaeica*
Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*
Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*
Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*
Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*
Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*
Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*
Semi-collared flycatcher *Ficedula semitorquata*
Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus*
Sombre Tit *Parus lugubris*
Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*
Wood Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*
Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*
Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*
Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*
Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*
Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*
Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*
Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*
Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*
Yellowhammer *Emberiza citronella*
Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*
Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*
Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*
Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus*
Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*
Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*

Lepidoptera

Butterflies (22 species recorded)

Swallowtail, Southern Festoon, Scarce Swallowtail, Large White, Small White, Eastern Dappled White, Clouded Yellow, Orange Tip, Eastern Wood White, Green Hairstreak, Small Copper, Holly Blue, Silver-studded Blue, Brown Argus, Common Blue, Painted Lady, Marsh Fritillary, Meadow Brown, Small Heath, Speckled Wood, Wall Brown, Hungarian Skipper,



Hungarian Skipper



Brown Argus



Least Carpet

Moths (7 species noted)

Garden Pebble, Least Carpet, Yellow Shell, Black-veined Moth, Lackey (caterpillar), The Delicate, Silver Y. We saw a few micro moth species which we did not manage to identify.

Mike Cram

30th May 2009

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