

Butterflies of Western Bulgaria. (Birds and Dragonflies too)



Introduction

Despite having been interested in all wildlife since a young child it was birds and mammals that took the forefront. I have only recently been “into” butterflies and started targeting them in 2015. In July 2016 I decided to take my first trip abroad where butterflies were to be the main focus and purpose and birds and other wildlife were an added bonus. This interest ties in well being a teacher as those long Summer Holidays are not the best time for birding abroad. Having had a look around I decided on Bulgaria as it is relatively cheap to stay there, you can travel from Stansted and it is hot and generally sunny. It is also a country that I had not been to and had heard great things of regarding birds, butterflies and scenery.

I contacted Simeon Gigov of Neophron Tours who put together an 8 day itinerary for me and my Dad that focussed on butterflies but also gave thought to 3 target species of bird.

During our trip we saw 117 species of butterfly and 148 birds, 13 Dragonflies and a few mammals, reptiles and amphibians. We stayed at 4 comfortable sites and saw a lot of the country. Simeon was great company and by the end of the trip I like to think we became good friends. His expertise was invaluable and I learnt an incredible amount. Having just started with butterflies the wealth of species in Bulgaria was at times over-whelming but Simeon tirelessly went over identification features and I feel that I came away with mountains of new knowledge.

Day 1 (22nd July): Pirin Mountains.

Dawn broke brightly on our first day in Bulgaria. I was out by 0630 and we had agreed to go on a pre-breakfast walk at 0700. A boisterous Red-backed shrike being fed by its parents was the first bird I noticed; Tree sparrow, Pallid swift and hundreds of House Martins were quickly added.

Whilst we waited for Simeon we picked up several more Shrikes, a pair of Barred Warblers and a single female Golden Oriole. The walk proper added: Common Sandpiper, Common



Buzzard, Hobby and a selection of tits. Our first butterflies came in the forms of: Marbled White, Common Blue, Lang's Short-Tailed Blue and Meadow Brown.

After breakfast we headed off to the Pirin mountains (Pirin National Park) - a beautifully sunny and clear morning illuminated them in the distance and after picking up some supplies we began our climb.

Crossbills and Coal Tit were immediate as we reached the parking spot just under 2000m jamming a rock under the tyres



to hold the van in place.

There were quite a few people enjoying the cooler air as we began our ascent. Almost immediately we noticed several Painted Lady moving up to higher grounds, they were evident throughout the day and we must have seen a good 50+. (This continued throughout

the holiday and was the commonest butterfly seen. One day we saw a good hundred or so in a small patch of thistles, quite amazing!)

Turquoise Blue was one of the first butterflies we encountered along with some Clouded Yellows.

The Climb was quite steep in places and quite difficult when juggling a camera, bins and a bag, especially coinciding with travel tiredness. We soon started picking up a few more birds; Ring Ouzels, a juvenile Cuckoo and a major target of Rock Partridge with a chick were all seen.

As we climbed we picked up more butterfly species: Balkan Copper, Brown Argus a single Mountain Argus, Little and Mazarine Blue as well as our first Balkan Fritillaries, Eastern Large Heath, Ottoman and Common Brassy Ringlets with yet more Painted Lady racing through and feeding on various plants.



We climbed higher and higher throughout the day to about 2550m in order to see and hopefully photograph a real target specie: Cynthia's Fritillary.



We had fleeting glimpses of a couple but managed to net and get really good views of this beautiful and hard to see butterfly. It was perhaps my most sought after species - they really are spectacular. We spent a couple of hours near the summit watching this species along with Nicholl's, Large, Bulgarian and an all too brief Bright-eyed Ringlet with Alpine Chough, Water Pipit and Northern Wheatear for company. Other species included a single Small Tortoiseshell and on the descent Small Heath, Queen of Spain Fritillary and both Small and Large White. Descending was hard work with bags, binoculars a camera and tiredness but we managed it arriving back at the start in one piece and gaining good views of several juvenile Ring Ouzel and a couple of Bullfinch as we did.

Arriving back at base we had a quick walk picking up some Clouded Yellow, Marbled White and Small Heaths as well as lots of Red-backed Shrike and Tree Sparrow. A Hobby raced through and dived into the grass on something.

We had a top meal that night, home cooked chips, burgers and sausages, aubergines and salads. A lot of really delicious food washed down with a couple of beers. Much needed!

Day 2 (23rd July): Kresna Gorge.

Day 2 and we opted not having an early morning walk, we were packed and ready by about half 7 having a large breakfast with lots of coffee. We managed to pick up a Rosefinch in the garden (heard only) quite a scarce breeder in Bulgaria. Saying goodbye to this excellent

accommodation and the Pallid Swifts that call it their summer home we headed out onto the road.

Today was going to be spent around the Struma river valley checking various sites for both butterflies and birds. We picked up few birds as we left the area: Honey Buzzard, Golden Oriole and our first Lesser Grey Shrike (a bird I had only seen once previously). It was getting very hot by about 9am as we pulled into our first stop in the valley. Common Blue, Wall Brown and Small Whites were the only butterflies on show but we did see Peregrine, Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Middle Spotted Woodpecker a few groups of Cormorant (quite an odd sight) and a little further on a single Griffon Vulture, we were also lucky to see a couple of Sombre Tit (Target 2/3). Flocks of House Martin hunted nearby using an abandoned petrol station as their choice of nest site.



A walk near the river gave us a few butterfly species: Swallowtail, Large White, Small White, Wood White, Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, Small Heath, Holly Blue, Marbled White our only Freya's Grayling and Eastern Baton Blue. We also managed some excellent views of Small Pincertail, Southern Skimmer and a battalion of Beautiful Demoiselles sitting together above the river. Mooching back to the car in the now sweltering heat we picked up an Accipiter and quickly ID'd it as my first ever Levant Sparrowhawk - a cracking male and the 3rd target bagged!

It sat in a popular for about 5 minutes and gave great views before powering off downstream. As we got in the van a couple of dung beetles rolling around were a nice finishing touch to a great stop.

We drove for a good hour or so towards a shaded water trough on a dry scrubby hillside that Simeon knew. On route we picked up 2 more Honey Buzzard, Cirl Bunting and a whopping great female Goshawk (being mobbed by a kestrel) that looked a bit out of place in this habitat. A couple of Chaffinches, more Cirl Bunting and a juvenile Eastern Black-eared Wheatear were the only birds in the heat.



Butterflies came thick and fast starting with a single cryptic Hermit keeping out of the heat. A Southern White Admiral and Lang's Short-tailed Blue. On the hillside we added Common Blue, Small Copper, Sooty Copper, Brown Argus and a few other species such as Mallow and Oriental Marbled Skipper.

The icing on the cake however was our only Little Tiger Blue that was resting by the car. What a cracking specie this is. Truly beautiful!



After lunch we continued to explore some spots on the Struma Valley. Pulling into a deserted field by a stagnant pool we picked up a few new birds such as Bee-eater, Tawny Pipit an insanely close Short-toed eagle which was hunting around us and Golden Oriole fledglings, Kingfisher and Little Ringed Plover. We also had a pond terrapin sp. Grass and Dice snakes and a large european green lizard and a pretty cool Antlion sp. Not many butterflies here but still a great spot for birds and other wildlife.

Our final stop was quite a drive to a lightly grazed scrubby area. Lots of Red-backed and Woodchat shrikes here but not many Butterflies in the heat. A Knapweed fritillary the only new specie.

We headed off to our second accommodation in Melnik and after arriving went for a quick walk. More Knapweeds, Clouded Yellow and common species. A walk towards the end of the day produced great views of Wood White, Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Comma lots of Gatekeeper and awesome views of Striped Hawkmoth. I also managed insane views of a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker sitting on a branch in Wryneck fashion.

A pair of Short-toed eagles called and sat in a tree outside of my window, not a bad "in bed" tick.

Another great meal followed and we were off to bed ready for a long day come morning.

Day 3 (24th July): Melnik area.

Another hot sunny morning, after feeling a bit ill and being made a soothing herbal drink by the owner of our guesthouse I was up and ready. It was birds that were to be the target of this morning. We started at an old Bee-eater colony - they had bred by now. No Rock Sparrow sadly but we did manage great views of Bee-eater and a single Western Rock Nuthatch - not a bird I have seen many of before!

A couple of Little Egret and Grey Heron hunted in the river as did White Stork.

We moved on past a Gypsy encampment full of scrap and rubbish and flies - the Northern Wheatears loved it!

Continuing along a dirt track dodging sheep, shepherds and their dogs and picking up RB and Woodchat Shrikes. We saw a distant Roller on a pylon but were afforded excellent views later of 2 birds. I love Rollers and sadly they are disappearing across a lot of their former European range, Bulgaria included. Other birds included several Lesser grey Shrikes, Cirl Bunting and a Syrian Woodpecker and two closer E Rock Nuthatch as well as a few Turtle Dove.

We obtained excellent views of Hermann's and Spur-thighed Tortoise here as well.

Our second stop was a bit more overgrown. A Short-toed Eagle was overhead along with White Storks. Butterflies along the "hedgerow" scrub included excellent views of Comma and a brief Common Glider. Knapweed Fritillary were present here too.

Moving on mid morning, the temperature now very high, we visited a small fishing lake which looked quite out of place in the agricultural landscape. A single male Marsh Harrier cruised over head and a couple of Black-headed bunting were seen in the shade of a tree.

An Eastern-Bath White (although there is some discussion whether a separate specie from Bath White) was the only new butterfly here. We did manage some great dragonfly action

with Red-veined Darter, Black pennant (1 of 2 sites in Bulgaria), Common Bluetail, White-legged Damsel, Southern Skipper, Small Red eyed Damsel, Broad Scarlet, Keeled Skimmer, Emperor, Goblet-marked Damsel and White-tailed Skimmer! A few supposedly Marsh Frogs kept us entertained as we waited for the Dragons to finish their circuits and land for photos!



The biggest surprise was a Common Snipe that flew in from up high and landed near us on the muddy bank.

After a great lunch of cold courgette soup (the perfect antidote to hot weather) and a few other things we carried on in search of more butterflies and birds. Driving very close to Greece we saw the old Communist watch towers across on the border. A walk along the river looked great for Semi-collared flycatcher but alas it was a bit too late in the year for them now.

We had some lovely species here although the heat was getting to us and my concentration was waning a bit at times. Great views of Knapweed and Silver-washed Fritillaries. Our first Nettle-tree butterfly and a few more blues and coppers that we had seen previously.

A family of young White storks made for a nice photo atop their nest and a close Short-toed eagle posed for us, one of my favourite birds of prey. We also had a Common Swift, the first of the trip.

The next hour or so was pretty magical, we went past some small villages following a smaller tributary of the main river and stopping at several sites. Our first stop gave us plenty of mud-puddling blues including: Silver-studded, Common, Anomalous, Chapman's, Meleager's and Adonis. Painted lady was also present at this site along with Silver-washed Fritillary and Common Glider. Not bad! We picked up a Goldenring dragonfly here which I believe was Balkan rather than Sombre...but I think we had both that day...I will blame my forgetfulness on the heat.

Moving further on we stopped again by the side of the road this time there was not only places for butterflies to take in minerals but lots of flowers too. We had many of the same species as before but gained better views of Common Glider. In addition we had both Wood and Eastern Wood White, Red Admiral, Knapweed and Lesser Spotted Fritillary, Marbled White, a tatty Scarce Swallowtail, Small and Sooty Copper and our only White-letter Hairstreak of the trip. There were few birds about but a couple of Spotted Flycatcher added themselves to our list.

Our final stop on the road was at a slightly higher altitude. Here amongst the mosquitos we added another patrolling Goldenring and a huge Pond Skater sp. Butterflies that were new included the mighty Cardinal, another Hermit a possible Dellatin's Grayling, Eastern Rock Grayling(prob), and lots of the blues from before such as Silver-studded.

A long, hot but excellent day with a good haul of both birds and butterflies. A similar meal washed down with a couple of beers and to bed.

Day 4 (25th July):: Transfer West to Mesta River Valley.

We set off at around 8 am from Melnik heading West to along the River Mesta. We climbed out of the plains to a higher altitude the scenery changing dramatically. Mixed forest

covered the hillsides and at our first stop we heard the harsh calls of a few Nutcracker, a single Willow tit and watched Common Buzzard and Raven jostled for airspace.

Going up a mountain track we added a couple of Serin to the list and pulling in by a watchpoint-cum-picnic area we started our climb.

The first point of interest was a group of flowering elder. Here we soon started adding species. Painted Lady, an immaculate Scarce Copper and the mighty Apollo all fed. The Apollo were sluggish in the cloud cover and afforded excellent photo opportunities. Other exciting species included Higgin's Anomalous Blue, a specie with a very small range and found only in parts of Bulgaria and Greece. Other "blues" included: Silver-studded, Adonis and Chalkhill as well as the usual Common Blue. A new specie for me and one that became a favourite of the trip was Meleager's Blue. The beautiful scalloping on the hind wing is really something special! Also here were Large Skipper and on the way down a single Sloe Hairstreak.

As the track continued, large thistles were an obvious attraction to more Apollo, Cardina, Silver-washed Fritillary and Queen of Spain Fritillaries, the aforementioned Blues, Marbled White, Eastern Rock Grayling and a few Great Sooty Satyrs. We managed good views of them with them wings open as a bonus!

As we walked up towards our c2000m destination we picked up Coal and Crested tit, Tree Pipit and Rock Bunting and were awarded amazing views of a family of three Short-toed Eagle. Great to see a juvenile with both parents and to hear the begging of the youngster.

Leaving the mountains we moved back down to the van. It had been a good walk, not too tiring and so with lots of energy we moved on towards our third base. A quick stop on route in a local pine wood and grassy clearings produced nothing new. We drove on following the main road out of the mountains towards Gotse Delchev.

Stopping on route at a seemingly nondescript turn off we followed a really rough track to a small village. A short walk past a man and his cows produced another a few species until we arrived at a water trough. Here apart from an obliging Serin we picked up: Wall Brown, Short-tailed Blue, Dingy Skipper, Common Glider and a few others. Nothing new but a good stop regardless.



It was time to push on and so we drove the rest of our way to our accommodation, we arrived and unpacked at this large and new looking hotel. Our rooms were large, with great showers and cool air con. My Balcony looked out onto fields and gave quite a few bird species in the short amount of time I spent there. A post dinner walk was fruitful and apart from the sad sight of a lost fledgling Red-backed Shrike (although the next morning a male was nearby) we had a good time adding our only Reverdin's Blue to the trip list and the subtly beautiful False Grayling too. Lots of other blues were having a quick "mud puddle" and then began to roost in the grass. A large Wasp Spider hung his nets nearby and a Nightingale "cronked" from some dense scrub.

A long day, some great new species ended with yet another superb meal and a couple of beers. We sorted through the lists and headed to bed.

Day 5 (26th July): Slavyanka Mountain.

Woken up to the sounds of Turtle Dove, Bee-eater and Red-Rumped Swallow is always pleasant. Red-backed Shrikes, Green woodpecker and Cirl Buntings also made themselves known around the hotel.

We had a short drive today in the local area to a mountain path that Simeon said was one of his favourite places to watch butterflies. It became one of ours too.

We had an incredible morning adding not only new species but enjoying scores of mud-puddling blues and feeding fritillaries.

On route we added an adult Black Stork and Grey Heron - the former flushed as we slowed down to gain a good look- Oops!

After negotiating some rough village tracks and squeezing through between houses, horse-sheds and walls we managed to pull the vehicle over and began what was to be an excellent walk.

As soon as we were out we picked up a Short-toed eagle, Honey Buzzards, Common Buzzard and a friendly Chaffinch. Syrian woodpecker and Hawfinch called and poor views were obtained of them in a Cherry tree.

Walking past the houses we followed the track up-hill picking up some nice species. Gatekeeper was very obvious from the start but our only Eastern Short-tailed Blue was also seen nectaring, a great species and a new one for me. Lang's Short-tailed Blue was seen as well as Holly Blue and coppers came in the forms of: Scarce, Sooty and Purple-shot.

We picked up a cute puppy that followed us for a while, incredibly friendly and for a while our spirits were down that he might be lost (luckily he had a family who he found later on). Queen of Spain was present here as were Comma.

As we continued we came across lots of flowering verges and with them lots of butterflies. Silver-washed, Dark Green and Knapweed Fritillaries all fed alongside a fantastic Brown Hairstreak, Marbled Whites, Ringlet and of course...Painted Lady.

Lots of Eastern Rock Grayling were on the stony road and a single Great-Banded Grayling joined them.

A White Admiral landed briefly and blues fluttered about...but more on them later.

We reached a drinking trough and small picnic site and then entered the woods proper. We walked through thick woodland stopping at glades of flowering plants. A deserted car had plenty of activity around it and as we searched through the species two Beech marten chased each other through the branches and we examined bear scratches on some older pine trees.

One clearing held a lot of nectar-filled plants. Plenty of species here including: Sloe and Blue-spot hairstreak that would just not face the angle I wanted for a photograph and I spent an age waiting for them to slowly rotate for a decent shot. Large Skipper fed happily in the sunshine and a beautiful Pearly Heath sat alongside them - what a cracking insect they are.



The return walk back down to car gave more excellent views of the same species, although Simeon managed a Purple Emperor we missed it as it contorted overhead.

As we made our way back to the care we came across large numbers of butterflies mud puddling. They were mostly blues and included: Higgin's and Ripart's Anomalous Blues, Small and Common, Meleager's, Adonis and False Eros! Wow, what an incredible site. There were tens of these fantastic insects together. They floated around like little sailing ships and were occasionally joined by bigger species such as Comma and the rock Graylings.



I lay next to them watching and taking images of this incredible scene - a fantastic end to the morning.

After a relaxed lunch we tried some very hot, scrubby hillsides for Dil's Grayling, a specie with a small localised range. Sadly we didn't see any, in fact there was very little of anything in this habitat so we opted for checking along a dried up river valley.

This proved much more fruitful with several species easy to see and photograph. There were few birds in the heat so all focus was on insects.

Lots more of the day's blues were seen and Clouded Yellow and Marbled White were spotted too. A single Berger's Clouded yellow was caught and examined, the only one of the trip.



Amongst the Knapweed we found a couple of Weaver's Fritillaries also - these were a nice new addition to the trip list.



After a good couple of hours which switched location to a cooler river which was heavily wooded. We didn't see much of note, but the walk was nice and the smell of the wild mint was intoxicating. A lone Sparrowhawk was of note and the first of our trip.

Day 6 (27th July): Western Rila Mountain.

After a good night's sleep and another morning that started with Red-rumped Swallow outside the balcony Simeon and I went for a quick walk. A few birds were about; Cirl bunting sang and Red-backed Shrikes scolded us, not much else stirred but hearing Turtle dove is now so rare in the UK it was very pleasant regardless.

As we left the hotel we emptied our bottles into the big and very smelly bins and picked up a small Fritillary. It happened to be a Lesser-Spotted Fritillary, our first of the trip and a great start.

We had a three hour trip ahead of us towards the Rila mountains via lake Belmeken.

On route to some fish ponds we picked up our first Hoopoe of the trip. Following this bird numbers: 2,3,4 and 5 were seen, a brief flurry of black, white and orange and our only birds of the trip.

The fish ponds were good for birds and we added a couple of Black stork, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and a single Eastern Bonelli's warbler - not a bad bird at all!

Yellow wagtail, Common and Green Sandpiper and Great Reed warbler were all seen well too.

Back on the road the time passed quickly, as it always does when travelling in a new country and the habitat changed with it. We were soon heading uphill into the mountains and before we knew it the great reservoir was in sight. It was truly huge as we pulled up and stretched our legs.

The wind was a lot stronger here and sadly cloud cover had set in. A souslik was seen from the car near where we had parked and it was nice to catch up with this endearing little mammal again - my first since 2012.

We began to walk into the mountains. They were very different from the Pirin mountains, much less rocky and greener but with no tree cover except for some stunted pines.

Birds were represented by White wagtail (a fledged juvenile), Crossbill, Whinchat and Red-backed Shrike that were breeding at around 2200m! Later a flock of Mistle Thrush added themselves as did a Ring Ouzel, sadly however, Golden Eagle still remained off my Bulgaria List.

We started to net a few Butterflies although the conditions were not optimal. However, carrying cameras and binoculars and food and water I was a little glad for the respite from the sun for a bit!

A confusing skipper turned out to be Large Grizzled Skipper (we had cracking views of a copulating pair later in the day) and the first ringlets were Ottoman Brassy.

Small, Eastern Large and finally a Chestnut Heath represented the Coenonympha family. We only had a single Chestnut Heath but what a beauty it was!



Other species included Large, Bright-eyed Ringlet, Nicholl's Ringlet and Water Ringlet - which I had appalling views of and won't count on my list.

The scenery was fantastic here, I really love being in the mountains and today was no exception. We skirted around a large Sheepdog that apparently was of ill-temper and followed a mountain stream in hope for new species. Sadly, it looked as if the weather was causing butterflies to lay low but Grey Wagtail and Bullfinch were some consolation as was plunging my sweaty head into the stream.

The walk back produced the same species. Good views were had of Bright-eyed Ringlet nectaring on thistles and of a large flock of Mistle Thrush - one the few species hardy enough to live at this altitude.

After we arrived back at the vehicle we moved on and began our descent stopping at a couple of sites. Near the dam thousands of House marten hunted for insects and a lone Peregrine flew overhead.

We tried a couple of sites for Pygmy owl, none responded sadly but we did pick up an Arran Brown, a Large Wall Brown and some of the commoner species of the trip despite the weather deteriorating further - a Willow Tit scolded us.

Going down through the pines we heard a Black Woodpecker that also refused to show itself. A couple of Wood Pigeon sat high in some distant pines and Simeon saw a Hazel Grouse by the side of the road. This is now my Euro "bogey" bird...

We drove to Samokov which was our final town for our last two nights. The meal was fine and we had a good chat and a couple of beers before bed.

The wifi was good here so I sent pictures back home to my friends of the wonders I had seen so far.

Day 7 (28th July): Mount Musala.

I will remember our day 7 for several reasons. Beautiful scenery, some great butterflies and birds and finally for two terrifying 20 minute cable car rides up to Mount Musala - the highest mountain in the Balkan Peninsula.

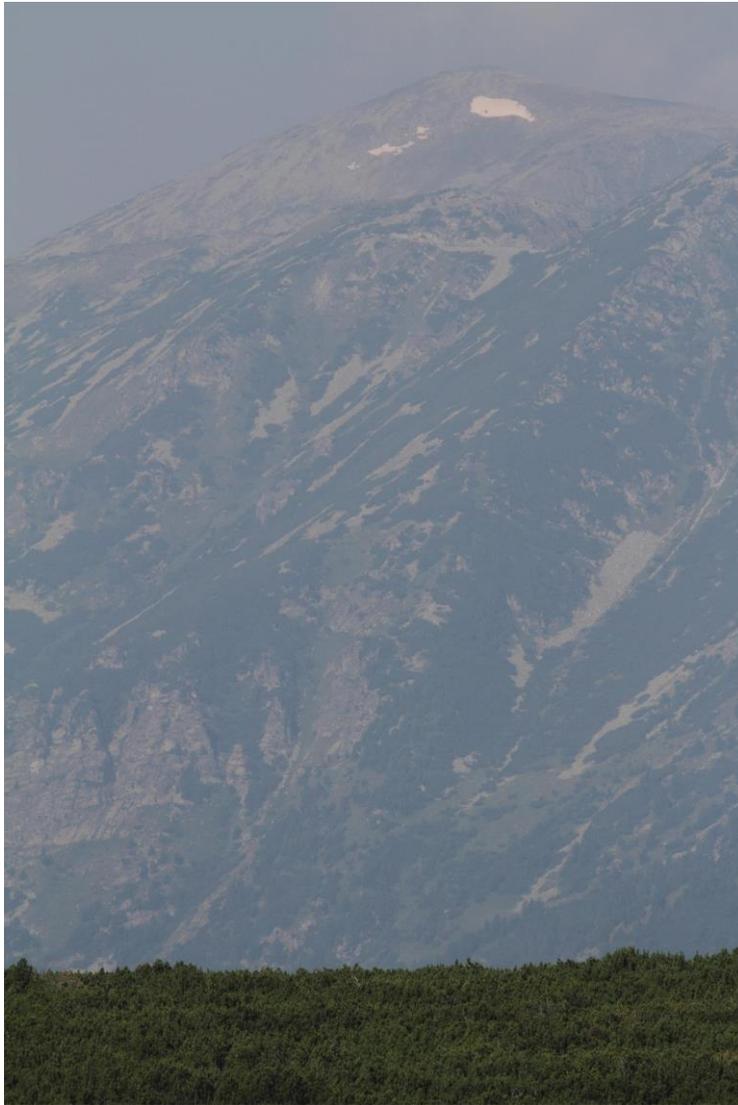
I hate certain heights and for 40 minutes I prayed, swore, hummed madly and tried to read anything on my phone to keep my mind occupied.

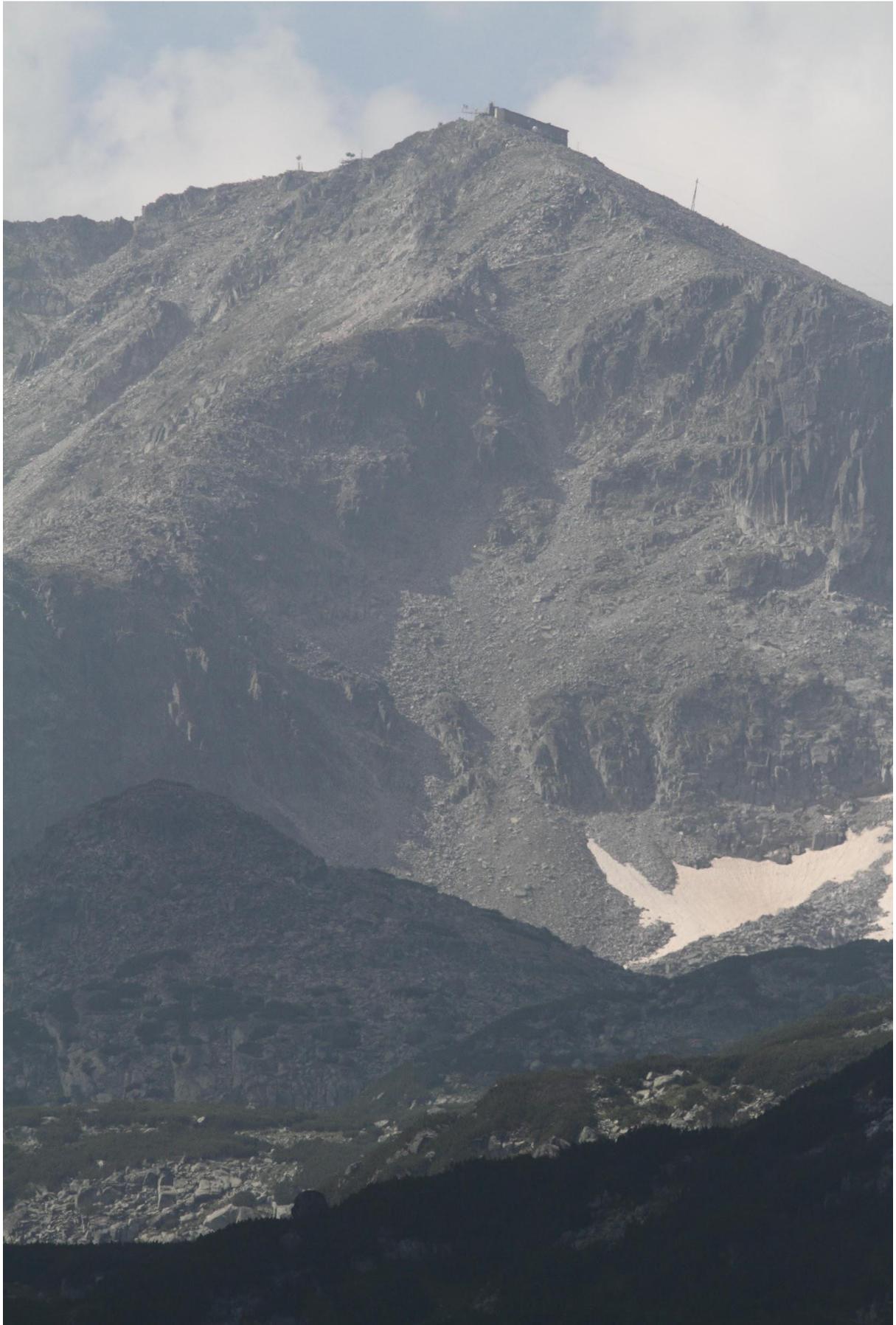
Simeon wasn't to know this beforehand of course...and when we had reached the top I forgot about the hell I had been through and had a great day (until the return trip).

Siskin, Kestrel and Crossbill were the main birds of this high altitude habitat and one of our first butterflies of the day was our second Peacock of the trip.

We traversed the mountainside looking for new species; ringlets being the most common. A Balkan Fritillary and a Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary were nice to see as was Water Ringlet.

The scenery was impressive but sadly the weather turned for the worse and after a few hours we cut our losses and headed back. A shame perhaps but we knew there was a better chance for some sunshine back down the mountain.





Back at “ground” level we set off to a few spots hoping to add to our already impressive list. We added a few more birds such as a distant but obliging Long-legged buzzard that sat in a distant pine tree for us and a few more Willow Tit in a mixed flock. The weather still not being as we had hoped allowed for only a few butterflies.

Turning back we headed for lower altitudes on the way back towards Sandanski. The Sun came out immediately and a Short-toed eagle cruised overhead looking for snakes as we pulled in for our last stop of the day by a river and fishing lake. We had a good walk seeing a few birds such as Great spotted Woodpecker, Blackcap and Red-backed Shrikes.

A very brief Ficedula flycatcher was most probably Semi-collared but in the shadow and staying for only a couple of seconds I couldn't clinch its identification - oh well!

We had a long and pleasant walk by the river adding Essex Skipper to our list and having good views of many species we had seen previously. I took to photographing Shrikes and tried to grab a few images of Blue-eyed Hawker of which an individual was patrolling a small



inlet from the lake.

We spent a good couple of hours here just enjoying the last of the sunshine and making the most of our last full day. Back at base we enjoyed our last dinner watching Alpine swifts wheeling overhead and hearing Lesser-spotted Woodpecker...a village, town and garden bird over here.

Day 8 (29th July): Journey back to Sofia

It was our last day and cloud loomed over Samokov. After a quick stop to send a postcard we were on our way to Sofia; a few drops of rain splattered the car. Our first stop was after about an hour at a local fishing pond and adjacent lake.

A small flock of ten Garganey floated about and Simeon quickly found a nice Little Bittern in the reeds. We stopped and watched a mixed flock of passerines bathing as well as a couple of Grey Heron, Mute Swan and Grey Wagtail. A sickly Yellow-legged Gull stood with many Hooded Crows in the carpark and Hawfinch called overhead, remaining unseen in the tree tops.

No butterflies were present here and hoping to find a couple more species and some sunshine we opted to move onwards. By the time we stopped at our second site the sun was coming out.

Another lake just outside of Sofia yielded Pygmy and Great cormorant, Little Bittern, Common tern and Black Headed gull. Lots of White stork circled over a dump in the distant and two Penduline tits finally showed themselves including a juvenile bird.



We made our way through Sofia's roadworks and came out on the other side. It was now pleasantly warm and our third stop of the day was in the low hills behind the city. This was a special site as it was the solely known location for Dusky Large Blue in Bulgaria.

Sadly a lot of the habitat had been cut and with new houses cropping up nearby it will only be a matter of time before this site is most likely destroyed. Hopefully a relocation will take place in the future to save this wonderful specie!



We managed a few individuals and looking back I would say this was a trip highlight!

There were lots of other species nearby including: Silver-washed Fritillaries, Large Skipper, Queen of Spain, Comma, Painted Lady, Ringlet, Gatekeeper and Meadow Brown. A single Heath Fritillary was a nice last minute addition as was a Niobe Fritillary.

We had lunch nearby but not before photographing another Queen of Spain and having tantalising glimpses of a Great Banded Grayling.

Lunch was nice, a refreshing homemade elderflower cordial was much needed and as we relaxed a couple of Raven came overhead along with a family of Buzzards.

Our penultimate stop was a small river in the agricultural part of the country towards Serbia. We had wonderful views of Honey Buzzard and a few other raptors as well as Stonechat here and picked up Large Copper, Orbed Red-underwing Skipper and Simeon had a Silver-



spotted Skipper.

Our last stops were around the area that Simeon called his "patch". There was a real mix of habitat here. A lake, ponds and stream, scrub, marshes, dry hillside - what a cracking area!

We had lots of Yellow wagtail here all Feldegg from what I can remember. Wood Sandpiper fed and a couple of Kingfisher perched up for us. A Lesser Whitethroat was picked out feeding near a family of Chiffchaff as was a single Icterine Warbler - sweet!

An obliging Red-backed Shrike practised piercing an item in the scrub and Tree and House Sparrows chirped merrily.

We had our final views of mud-puddling blues here with a good variety on the tracks. Chalk-hill, Adonis, Common, Silver-studded, Chapman's and Anomalous all side by side.

Several Turtle Dove were seen on the Sunflower heads along with the much more common Collard. A pair of Long-legged buzzards perched on hay bales and a couple of Crested lark flew ahead of the car.

Towards the marsh land a Purple Heron took flight and a female Montague's Harrier cruised overhead along with a few Marsh Harrier.

As the light slowly began to fade a Quail started calling and a few Ortolan Bunting called with a couple of juveniles showing well. A big flock of Corn Bunting and Sparrows fed on the road side - it was a magical place.

Sadly before too long it was time to head to the airport. I packed away my cameras and changed by the side of the car for the flight home.

It was a sad drive as it had been an incredible time and one of the most enjoyable wildlife trips I had undertaken. Bulgaria is a land that still has vast swathes of unspoilt habitat, rich in insect and birdlife and I cannot recommend going highly enough. Simeon's services were unbeatable. Patient and forever searching for new species, I learnt an incredible amount in the 8 days I was with him and hope to return next year.

