

Southern Bulgaria and Northern Greece, 20th-26th October 2017

Participants: Mike Chapman and Chris Hughes
Tour Leader: Simeon Gigov – Neophron Tours

With our focus currently remaining the Western Palearctic region, and with this in mind we were wondering where would be a good place to visit in a relatively quiet time of the year and in a window period that could be fitted into Chris's rather full diary and that had the opportunity to find key target birds that Chris had not seen in the WP. My "would like to see list" was much easier to compile.

At the Birdfair, we had spoken with Neophron Tours (www.neophrontours.bg) and after further correspondence and an assurance that our rather formidable target bird list for that time of year (Tengmalm's and Pygmy Owls, Hazel Grouse, Rock Partridge, Spotted Eagle, Three-toed Woodpecker, Spotted Nutcracker and both species of Pelicans - all lifers for me) was do-able, we signed up for a bespoke trip over the 6 nights / 7 days that had been expanded by a day as I cocked up the flight dates. As it transpired, the extra day was valuable. The report is focussed mainly on the target birds with Chris's bird list having more detail on sightings.

We arrived at Sofia airport around 1.30pm to be met by Simeon and walked out to the car park. From our correspondence, we had assumed we would be in a car and as we passed lines of parked cars more reminiscent of those befitting our scrappage scheme, we were amazed (and relieved) to find ourselves loading up into an 8 seater mini-bus – perfect.

We drove out of Sofia and within 2 hours we were abandoning our vehicle at the foothills of Rila Mountains and waited for our next vehicle, an ancient but very practical Land Rover Defender to take us up a tortuous track into the Rila Mountains and to a "mountain hut" where we were to spend the first two nights.

The hut was in fact a brick building that is used in the season to accommodate walkers who enjoy rambling the steep mountain paths within the huge Rila Mountain National Park. There is electricity to a certain voltage, although this being inadequate for a travelling kettle which blew the circuit and plunged the whole place into darkness the first morning I used it. However there was no running water but somehow the couple who look after the place produced very good meals from a small kitchen and a two-ringed gas hob, the water, food and gas bottles having to be brought up from their village at the foot of the mountain. More importantly, they were well stocked with beer which was most welcome at the end of each day.

Birding in earnest got started whilst waiting for the Defender and several Nutcrackers were heard and seen in flight. It transpired the Nutcracker was a very common bird and seen frequently during the stay in the mountains. After dropping our bags at the "mountain hut" in our 6 bed room with a central wood burning stove providing the much needed heat, we set off mid afternoon following a rough and hugely undulating track which lead through an initial open area before descending into conifer forests. Stopping at regular intervals (whilst I caught up) Simeon was taping Pygmy Owl, which certainly agitated the tit flocks and several Blue, Great and Coal tits were drawn in, together with Crested tit, plus Goldfinches, Hawfinches and Common Crossbills were showing in numbers.

Inside the conifer forest, we picked up a response from a Pygmy Owl but no sighting despite best efforts. The walk continued deeper into the forest with stops and taping at each open area which as dusk settled in, resulted in a strong reply and a calling Pygmy Owl showed itself very well, despite being mobbed by Tits and Goldfinches.

We pressed on along the track as Simeon wanted to get to a particular open area where he had high hopes of Tengmalm's Owl now that darkness had descended although unfortunately there was no moonlight.

There was no response so we began the hard graft of working our way back, again stopping at certain points but with no positive response although calls were heard but difficult to decipher with certainty.

We trudged back and settled in for a most welcome beer and hot meal.

21st October

Spent the morning walking the paths around the hut hoping for Hazel Grouse, but no sign although the birding was active with the above mentioned but we also added Greenfinch, Nuthatch, Treecreeper and Jay to the list.

We had lunch back at the hut before a short rest and a repeat trip out into the forest. As it was such a strenuous walk, even Chris left his scope behind to ease the workload. During the daylight periods we again tried Pygmy owl calling which resulted in further responses and another cracking sighting. We also triggered a Black Woodpecker into life and which gave good but brief views.

We reached the furthest point away in good time before dusk and waited until the light faded before tempting the Tengmalm's into action. But again no reaction so began the return journey which Simeon said was 3 kilometres, but felt nearer 10k. Stopping at the usual places drew no response and despite using a good torch, I still managed to trip over for a second time.

I think at this point, Simeon took pity and decided a rest was in order so stopped and said we could try again for the Tengmalm's even though there was limited viewing by the track.

Immediately we had a response very close and although we were unable to pick it out amongst the branches, it suddenly flew across the track just above our heads, and began calling again from its new location, although again not visible by our torchlights despite extensive searching.

The remainder of the SAS assault course was completed in better spirits after this and again the beer and hot meal were a welcome end to a long day.

22nd October

The early morning after breakfast was spent driving around the forest roads in the Defender looking to come across Hazel Grouse out on the tracks. Simeon was disappointed that this did not result in any successful sightings and assumed that as it had been a weekend of fine weather, the walkers had disturbed the birds and made them skittish.

We therefore said our farewells and jumped back in the mini-bus as we set off to our next destination, another area of the Rila Mountains but in mixed tree forests above the village of Batak.

The area is a managed forest but there are specific areas where tree management is not permitted and therefore has many old, dead and fallen trees, ideal for our next target, Three-toed Woodpecker. We had been advised that there would be the need to climb a steep slope, circa 50 yards.

So the second SAS assault course was started, even having to clamber over fallen tree trunks and it felt as if another 0 could have been added to the distance.

It was very quiet once we got up there as it was early afternoon, and despite waiting several hours, the only woodpeckers we had heard and had brief views were Great Spotted. With so little activity, we decided to give up and came off the hillside with the immortal words "I am not going up there again."

We checked into a lovely hotel in Batak and then immediately back into the mini-bus for a trip into the mountains for an evening session looking for Hazel Grouse. On the approach road to one of the local reservoirs, Chris called out "on the side of the road" and immediately a male Hazel Grouse took to flight across the front of the vehicle and into the conifers, a short but excellent view.

We returned to the hotel for a beer (a recurring theme) and a lovely meal and with spirits raised again the immortal words were rescinded and an early start agreed for a return to the assault course.

23rd October

An early start, mini bus loaded and with a packed breakfast we set off on the 45 minute drive up into the mountains. With the help of a branch used as a walking stick, the ascension was easier and soon we were in place and the tape playing. A few false alarms with Simeon unsure whether it was Great spotted or Three-toed, but he soon had us on a female Three-toed at the top of a bare trunk, which meant we had stunning views in the scope. As a bonus, a Black Woodpecker also joined the party and gave cracking views – what a beast of a bird.

We came off the hillside, enjoyed the packed breakfast and then set off to our next destination, a big travel day into northern Greece. The weather turned unpleasant although this did not matter too much as we were not actively birding.

En route we made a stop at a road side market stall where Simeon purchased 4 large bags of potatoes, apparently sweet potatoes adored by their 4 year old daughter. What made this anecdote interesting was that at the border with Greece, there was a large sign banning three items you could not bring into Greece – one of which was potatoes.

Once over the border, Simeon turned to us and said you are now official potato smugglers – although he did seem relaxed by the whole thing.

We pressed on with the view of going to the site where he hoped to find Rock Partridge. However the weather was not good and low cloud really ruled out any chance, so plan B were some salt pans and lakes near Kavala Airport where we would see waders and a good chance of Dalmatian Pelican on the lakes. This transpired to be the case although the time spent was curtailed as we were being eaten alive by mosquitoes now the rain had ceased.

We checked into a lovely hotel in a village close to Xanthi as our base to find the key bird, Rock Partridge and enjoyed a fantastic meal in the local restaurant.

24th October

The plan was an early start up into the mountains but the weather forecast was grim for first thing, so the decision was made to go after breakfast once it had cleared up.

However we woke up to glorious sunshine and despite a hurried breakfast we arrived on site some two hours later than ideal. After a further 2 hours, and despite a few return calls to tape, the only sighting was by Chris who saw three birds fly down off the slopes towards the valley below.

We decided to come down to the base of the mountains and walk the path along the valley floor where several new trip birds were recorded during the walk.

After lunch we went off to another area near Xanthi around Porto Lagos, Lake Vistonida and its pools where we had great views of our first Great White Pelican plus more Dalmatian Pelicans. Several species of ducks, waders, egrets and gulls were also present, some in good numbers drawn in by the fish farm tanks being cleaned.

It was now time to return to the Rock Partridge site for an evening trying to entice them to call and so pinpoint their location although the time was mostly spent scanning the slopes some 100 to 250 yards in front of us. Suddenly Simeon announced he had one in his scope and could see two others in close proximity. Cutting a long story short I failed to see them looking

through his scope on two occasions but Chris did have it in the scope just at the moment five birds broke cover and flew across the gorge , again not seen by me. So despite further scanning for another hour at the place they landed, I had drawn a blank.

Not sure whether dipping the bird or the consoling beers influenced my mood but a healthy albeit noisy political argument broke out that evening over another fine dinner .

25th October

It was an early start and an insistence on our part that we actually left in the dark so we were in place when the sun rose and hit the slopes where the calling birds would be visible

When we got out, the wind was blowing very hard, and that was in the bottom of the valley , what would it be like at the top. Concerned about the wind a subdued Simeon began the 30minute drive but as we got about halfway up, four Rock Partridge flew right across the front of the vehicle. Simeon pulled over, lowered the window ,played the tape and we waited. Suddenly Chris whispered , “it is walking at the side of the mini-bus”, so close even binoculars were not really needed. The salient feature of the black line at the side of the bill was obvious, together with the white cheeks. It perched up by the side of the road in full view for several minutes before flying off. Simeon paced out the distance we had seen it as 4yds- the closest he had ever been.

Back to the hotel, best breakfast ever, then back on the road for the long journey to Lake Kerkin.

Great Spotted Eagles over-winter in the area and we were soon scoping a perched bird that initially was distant and due to heat haze, not great view. Despite the presence of a huge herd of domesticated Buffalo and their inquisitive herdsman on a dirt bike, we set off across the extensive meadow for a closer view stopping at intervals for eventual great scope views. The bird allowed us to within 250yards before gliding off into the skies. Another perched bird and a further three in flight were our total for the species.

Lake Kerkin is just a magnet for water birds and in particular Great Flamingos and Great White and Dalmatian Pelicans in their ‘000s. A very distant flock of Lesser White-fronted Geese were scopeable but views of the yellow eye-ring will need to be for another day.

Chris eventually was able to pull himself away from all the viewing spectacle. I think he had run out of notepad space for his listings and we reluctantly left for the return trip back to Bulgaria.

We booked into yet another lovely chalet cabin which was part of a ski resort complex as Simeon had further thoughts of Hazel Grouse in the morning before departing for the airport.

Over another delicious evening meal or was it the beer, we concluded a leisurely breakfast was in order and a relaxed two hour journey to get to the airport for our 11.30am check in .

26th October

Plan A was implemented, although we detoured in Sofia to add Rook to the trip list, and we said our farewells , arriving back at Luton via Wizz Air around 4.00pm.

Conclusion

Neophron had been very open and honest about achieving our demanding target list but had put an itinerary together which gave us the best chance of fulfilling it. Simeon was absolutely superb and we cannot speak highly enough of his professional attitude and approach to ensuring our trip was so successful. info@neophron.com

Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	1	A dozen or so at Lake Kerkin
Lesser White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser erythropus</i>	2	The wintering flock of 30 to 40 birds at Lake Kerkin
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	3	Frequent throughout the trip
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	4	Several at Lake Kerkin
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	5	The commonest duck on the southern lakes
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	6	A couple on lake Kerkin
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	7	Few at the Kavala pools and many at Lake Kerkin
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	8	1000 plus Lake Kerkin
Western Capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>	9	Flying female in forest above Borovets
Hazel Grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>	10	A roadside male on road nr Belmeken reservoir
Rock Partridge	<i>Alectoris grecca</i>	11	Superb bird to 4 yds, plus 8 flight and distant views
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	12	Pair at the Kavala Airport pools and on Lake Kerkin
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	13	Common Kavala Airport pools and Lake Kerkin
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	14	Many hundreds at Lake Kerkin
Great White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>	15	Dozen at Lake Vistonida, hundreds on Lake Kerkin
Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>	16	2 locations plus hundreds Lake Kerkin
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	17	000's on Lake Kerkin were an astonishing sight
Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>	18	Two at Airport pools and six on Lake Kerkin

Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	19	Common on all the lakes
Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	20	Very common on all the lakes
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	21	Very common on all the lakes
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	22	A couple at Lake Kerkini
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	23	30 at Lake Kerkini
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	24	Circa 7000 on Lake Kerkini also on the Airport pools
Greater Spotted Eagle	<i>Aquila clanga</i>	25	Superb perched adult at Kerkini ,5 in total
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	26	Frequent around the lakes
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	27	A ringtail stunning male at the Kavali Airport pools
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	28	An adult female in the mountains near Xanthi
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	29	Frequent through the trip in all habitats
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	30	Frequent through the trip in lower lying areas
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	31	Occasional birds
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	32	Hunting pair at the Airport pools + 1 above Xanthi
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	33	H Lake Kerkini
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	34	A few on the Lake Kerkini margins
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	35	Many at Lake Kerkini
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	36	A couple at Lake Kerkini
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	37	I would estimate over a thousand on Lake Kerkini
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	38	Single Bird at Lake Kerkini
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	39	Few at the Airport Pools and Lake Kerkini
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	40	Single Bird at Lake Vistonida pools
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	41	Large flocks at Lake Vistonida pools
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	42	Single bird at Lake Vistonida
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	43	Few at Lake Kerkini
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	44	Very common on all the lakes
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	45	Good numbers at Lake Kerkini
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	46	Singles on most lakes
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	47	Single bird at the Lake Vistonida pools
Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	48	A few on most lakes
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	49	Just singles on the lakes
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	50	100 + at Lake Kerkini
Common Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	51	1000's on Lake Kerkini
Slender-Billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>	52	Several on Lake Vistonida
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	53	Many on the various lakes
Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoleus minutus</i>	54	A couple of birds on Lake Kerkini
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	55	Single bird at Lake Vistonida
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	56	Around of course
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	57	A small flock at Lake Kerkini
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	58	Frequent
Tengmalm's Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</i>	59	Heard well and seen in flight in Rila
Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>	60	Several heard and two seen in Rila
Tawny Owl	<i>Stirx aluco</i>	61	H At Batak hotel
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	62	Frequent especially at Lake Kerkini
Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	63	Seen well in forests in Rila and nr Batak
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	64	H At Lake Kerkini
Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>	65	Seen well in the Forest near Batak
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	66	Frequent in all habitats
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>	67	Lovely female at Lake Kerkini
Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>	68	Eventually seen brilliantly in the Forest near Batak
Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	69	Calling and seen in the Nestos gorge
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	70	The only lark seen
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	71	A late bird in the Nestos gorge

Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	72	Single at Lake Kerkini
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	73	Few at Lake Kerkini
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	74	Scattered smart birds
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	75	3 on a pool up to Belmeken reservoir
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	76	Only see in the mountains
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	77	Scattered few
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	78	3 in mnts in Rila and in Nestos Gorge
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	79	Couple at the Kavali airport pools
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	80	Very common especially in the mountains
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	81	A few scattered birds
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	82	Several in the mountains
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	83	H At Lake Kerkini
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	84	Female at Lake Kerkini
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	85	Single bird in the Nestos Gorge
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	86	Several at Lake Kerkini
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	87	Along with Coal Tit commonest bird in the forests
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	88	Only see in the mountains
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	89	Late bird at Lake Vistonida
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	90	A few in the forests
Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>	91	Very common in the forests
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	92	Common in the forests
Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	93	Few individuals seen well in the mnt forests
Willow Tt	<i>Poecile montanus</i>	94	Lovely views of the pale race birds in the forests
Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	95	H Heard in the Nestos valley
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	96	Common in the forests
Western Rock Nuthatch	<i>Sitta neumayer</i>	97	H Heard in the Nestos valley
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	98	A couple in the mountain forests in Rila
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	99	Several on wires in low lying areas
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	100	Very common in all habitats
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	101	Very common in all habitats
Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	102	Common in the mnt forests in Rila
Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	103	A few scattered individuals
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	104	Only seen in Sofia
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	105	Common
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	106	A few in the mountains
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	107	A flock of some 3000 at Lake Kerkini
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	108	Common in villages at lower altitudes
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	109	A few at Lake Kerkini
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	110	Very common in the forests
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	111	A few scattered individuals
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	112	Just a couple in the Mountains
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	113	A few at Lake Kerkini
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	114	Many in the mountain forests
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	115	A few in the Nestos gorge
Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	116	Common in the mnt forests in Rila
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	117	A few in the mountains
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	118	Common in the mnt forests in Rila
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	119	A couple in the Nestos valley
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	120	Many on roadside wires at lower altitudes