

Autumn Migration Birding Tour in Bulgaria

20 – 29 September 2024

Trip report written by assistant tour guide Marina Georgieva, bird photos provided by tour guide Viktor Vasilev and tour participants

As autumn approached and thousands of birds began to gather and head south along the western Black Sea coast, the Via Pontica, we were contacted by a young Danish birder, Lars Kristian Refsgaard, who was keen to experience the spectacle of autumn migration for the first time. We had another person on our list, experienced birder and skilled wildlife photographer Cliff Morrison, who had travelled with us before and had expressed a certain interest in joining such a tour, so we contacted him and ... voila! The tour could begin, as the minimum of two participants was reached, and Lars, Cliff, Viktor, our bird guide, and I were off on an adventure to remember!



Eurasian Sparrowhawk (Accipiter nisus), Yatata Protected Area

The first day of the trip was dedicated to picking up our guests and driving to our first base, the coastal town of Kavarna on Bulgaria's northern Black Sea coast. With Lars arriving in the morning and Cliff in the early afternoon, we decided to fill the gap with birdwatching in the nearby nature reserve at Varna Lake - a wetland surrounded by grasslands, deciduous forests and rocky biotopes. It was quite an enjoyable start to the tour, with a good variety of water birds, including Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Ferruginous Ducks, Spoonbills, Purple Herons, Black Stork etc., plus a number of Lesser Spotted Eagles, Short-toed Eagles, Northern Goshawks, Sparrowhawks, Levant Sparrowhawks, Common and Honey Buzzards on their way south.

After a couple of hours of birding we headed back to the airport to pick up Cliff and then drove north to our B&B in Kavarna.

The next morning we spent exploring the steppes and cliffs of Cape Kaliakra, Yailata Nature Reserve and the surrounding grasslands. This is an area of outstanding natural beauty, with sheer cliffs and stunning seascapes, still untouched by development and mass tourism. Here are the last steppe remnants, typical in the past of the region of Dobrudzha.



Cape Kaliakra



Yailata Nature Reserve

It was quite windy there, as usual, but at this time of year we are grateful for the winds, especially those from the north-west, because as the sun warms the air they bring a good number of migratory birds. This morning the bushes were full of passerines, including Red-breasted Flycatcher, Northern Wheater, Black Redstart, juvenile Red-backed Shrike, European Stonechat, Chiffchaff and, what a surprise, a Yellow-browed Warbler, a very rare visitor with only a few records in the country!

Among the birds of prey flying overhead we had Red-footed Falcons, Eurasian Hobby, Booted Eagle, Black Kite, Common and European Honey Buzzards, Eurasian and Levant Sparrowhawks and Common Kestrels. We were impressed and delighted to see hundreds of migrating Alpine Swifts and Barn Swallows. The local European Shags were also around, drying their wings in their usual posture on the rocks below.



Red-footed Falcons (Falco vespertinus) at Cape Kaliakra

In the afternoon we visited the Shabla-Tuzla Lagoon, a small saline lagoon that hosts a wide variety of waterfowl and wading birds in spring, autumn and winter. Our highlights there included a good selection of ducks such as Common and Ruddy Shelduck, Gadwall, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveller, Eurasian Teal, Garganey, Mallard, and herons and egrets such as Little Egret,

Great Egret and Grey Heron. The local Osprey and Marsh Harrier patrolled the wetland, while the flock of about a hundred Greater Flamingoes fed and rested undisturbed. We also saw Caspian, Sandwich and Common terns, and our eyes were occasionally caught by the blaze of colour of a Common Kingfisher or a European Bee-eater.

Later we explored the local rocky outcrops in the hope of spotting one of the resident Eagle Owls, but we didn't see any (nor did we on our second attempt a day later). We did, however, find a group of 16 European Stone Curlews in the adjacent grassland. In the end, it was a day full of birding delights!

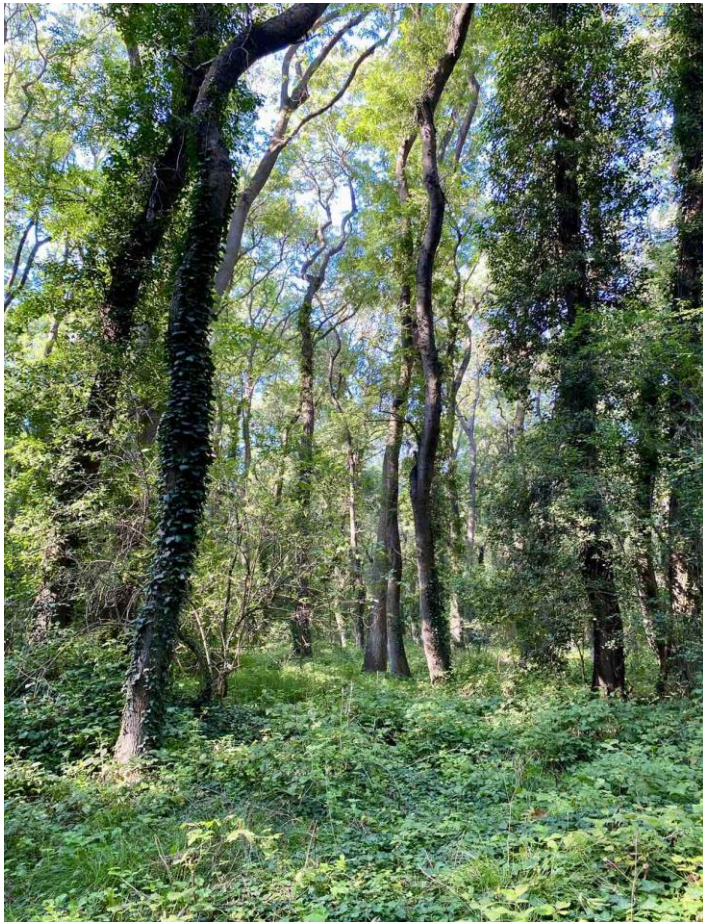


Eurasian Stone Curlews (Burhinus oedicnemus)

We were so impressed with the variety of birds at Cape Kaliakra that we decided to return there the next morning (day 3). However, the dynamics had changed and there was little to catch our eye. So we headed north to explore the coastal lakes of Durankulak and Shabla. Strategically located on one of Europe's major bird migration routes - the Via Pontica - the lakes are a haven for thousands of migratory birds passing through each year on their way from their breeding grounds or staying on for the winter. However, we found the lakes overgrown with reeds and difficult, if not impossible, access to the water.

So we had to “make do” with the passerines in the surrounding bushes - White Wagtail, Western Yellow Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, Black Redstart, Lesser Whitethroat, Cetti's Warbler, Willow Warbler, Crested Lark, Wood Lark, Tree Pipit, etc. Of course, the Bee-eaters and Kingfishers were always there to add a little colour. On the way back we visited the Stone Curlews in the steppe to enjoy them once again.

The theme for the next two days, our last day in the north and the day of the transfer south, was woodpeckers. We first visited the Baltata Reserve, which covers the mouth of the Batova River with its natural riparian forest and swamp habitats. There we saw a very obliging European Green Woodpecker, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker and had our first glimpse of the Grey-headed Woodpecker. The next day, when we visited the Kamchia Reserve further south, we were also able to enjoy the majestic Black Woodpecker.



A glimpse of the Kamchia riparian forest, European Green Woodpecker (Picus viridis)

The Kamchia Reserve comprises of riverine forests around the mouth and lower reaches of the Kamchia River, extensive sand dunes and beaches, shrubs and grasslands, freshwater marshes and marine area. Very typical are the

swampy forest areas – remnants of old river branches naturally connected with the river. Lianas and climbing plants entangled in the trees – *Clematis vitalba*, *Smilax exelsa*, *Periploca graeca*, etc. give the impression of a tropical forest. The flooded forest is composed of field ash (*Fraxinus oxycarpa*), eastern oak (*Quercus pedunculiflora*), field elm (*Ulmus minor*), field maple (*Acer campestre*) and black alder.

This afternoon we reached our second base, a B&B in the coastal town of Sarafovo, near the city of Bourgas. From here we would explore the famous Bourgas wetlands that surround the city.

The lakes around the city of Bourgas (Pomorie, Atanasovsko, Bourgas (Vaya) and Mandra / Poda) form the largest and most valuable wetland complex in Bulgaria. They are an important resting place for birds on their way from the Danube Delta and further north to the Mediterranean coasts. Moreover, a migration “bottleneck” for soaring birds – storks, pelicans and birds of prey - is formed there as they cross the easternmost part of the Balkan Mountains to the north, which is the lowest and easiest barrier to overcome.

We decided not to follow a strict programme for the next five days, but rather to go with the flow, following the weather forecasts and wind direction and trying to find the best vantage points to watch the migration spectacle. We had timed the trip to coincide with the peak of the migration, based on ornithological data from the past 20 years. However, the last days of September 2024 were either windless or with easterly winds blowing the birds inland, too far from the coast.

Fortunately, we had planned to spend five full days in the area, and even without the best of luck we would still be able to enjoy a massive migration. And so we did!

We visited all the birding hotspots in the area – Pomorie Lake, where we returned several times and enjoyed a great selection of terns, gulls and waders, the highlights being Slender-billed Gull, Little Gull, Caspian Tern and Terek Sandpiper – a rare autumn visitor at our Black Sea coast.



Looking for, and finding, the Terek Sandpiper (Xenus cinereus) at Pomorie Lake

At the Atanasovsko Lake birding hide we enjoyed another selection of waterfowl and waders, including lots of Greater Flamingo, Shelduck and Pied Avocet, Little Ringed Plover, Northern Lapwing, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Common Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Common Greenshank, Marsh Sandpiper and, the star of the place, Broad-billed Sandpiper.

On one of these days we visited a number of lookout points on the shores of Lakes Bourgas (Vaya) and Mandra, including Poda Lagoon and the BSPB visitor centre. Again lots of ducks, including a flock of very early wintering white-headed ducks on Mandra Lake, lots of Dalmatian and White Pelicans on both lakes, herons and egrets, including a Squacco Heron - the first of the trip.

Another day we decided to head inland into Eastern Imperial Eagle territory in search of this enigmatic bird that had eluded us so far. We didn't find it there, but instead we were treated to a great view of a Long-legged Buzzard perched on a green field. And what a fantastic view of our target bird for the day we had just a few hours later in the area of the Bourgas landfill!



Juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle (Aquila heliaca), Bourgas landfill

And that wasn't all – hundreds of White Storks, a flock of about 50 magnificent Black Storks, dozens of Lesser Spotted Eagles, Common Buzzards, Eurasian Sparrowhawks and a Sort-toed Eagle passing overhead! And the best was yet to come!



Lesser Spotted Eagles (Clanga pomarina), Atanasovsko Lake watch point



Black storks (Ciconia nigra) migrating over Bourgas

After two very "quiet" days at the main migration observation point at Lake Atanasovsko, which we spent exploring other hotspots, the "winds of change" came and blew us another batch of Lesser Spotted Eagles, Booted Eagles, Short-toed Eagles, Honey and Common Buzzards, Sparrowhawks, Red-footed

Falcons and Dalmatian Pelicans. But the biggest treat of all was the huge flock of 1500 Great White Pelicans that soared directly above us for about five minutes, at the perfect distance, as if to give us one last performance before they flew south and we left for the airport. It was a once in a lifetime spectacle and a trip to remember!



Dalmatian Pelicans (Pelecanus crispus) migrating over Atanasovsko Lake



Great White Pelicans (Pelecanus onocrotalus) migrating over Atanasovsko Lake

To round off the experience for all of us, our youngest tour participant, Lars, learnt a lot about bird identification and migration patterns from both our expert guide, Viktor, and Cliff. Viktor is not only one of our best ornithologists, but also an accomplished wildlife artist and photographer who teaches zoology at Shumen University. He even managed to surprise Cliff with a lifer - the Grey-headed Woodpecker. Cliff, who is also an experienced birdwatcher and wildlife photographer who has travelled the world, had come with no particular goals or expectations, just to enjoy the birds and the spectacle of migration. And we think he did. We all did!

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