

BBFS Tours 11-25 April 2008

Black Sea coast and Mountains

Highlights only of each day followed by a species list .

12 April After an evening flight to Varna where we were picked up from the airport by our guide Petar Iankov .

We woke up to sunny weather and were soon driving to an area of rocky terrain at Beloslav ,only one Northern Wheatear had arrived but a Tawny Pipit perched on a small bush and sang giving very good views. The local Long-legged Buzzard was perched but at a much greater distance .There was a small passage of raptors with a few buzzards, a Lesser-spotted Eagle, Sparrow-hawk and Booted Eagle.

Then across a small ferry to Yatata which is a "protected" area of wet land with fishermen and cars parked close to the waters edge, however there were 7 species of ducks , a Marsh Harrier and a Squacco Heron. We then stopped to over look the sea and eat our lunch with some woodland birds but the highlight was the sight of several flocks of Black-necked Grebes totalling more than 300 mostly in breeding plumage. The next stop was in Albena an upmarket holiday village but in April very few holidaymakers but this, plus the lack of foliage, made seeing Lesser and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers easier; at one point both on the same small branch. In the wooded area we found Semi-collared Fly-catchers and Short-toed Tree-creeper.

We then drove to our hotel at Kavarna stopping to carefully check an Eagle Owl site with one visible, found needless to say by Petar.

13 April very windy and so no raptor migration visible except for Marsh Harriers battling against the wind at several places with small flocks of Night Heron and Little Egrets. We drove across the "steppe" towards Cape Kaliakra stopping to admire some spectacular flowers which have a very short season before they dry out and some very close Calandra Larks. A sheltered valley gave us Syrian Woodpecker, migrating warblers, both Spotted and Collared Flycatcher and 3 Penduline Tits. Then to the Cape where the wind kept small birds out of sight but good views of more Black-necked Grebes and "desmarestii" Shags; on the way a Wryneck in a small bush gave very close views through the windows then flew down to sit on the road! There has been a large number of Wind Turbines erected here in completely the wrong area ,on main raptor migration route again on "protected area" against the rules ,they also destroy rare habitat and are a visual intrusion on one of Bulgaria's historic landscapes. There has been an appeal to the EU but with what success we shall see.

After that we drove to another site for Stone Curlews, more very close Calandra and Short-toed larks then back to the hotel for another good meal.

14 April On opening my bedroom door onto the balcony I disturbed 7 Night Herons which flew off down the valley, a good start.

We started off north towards the wetlands close to the Rumanian border where Durankulak had Savi's and Reed Warbler singing but Paddyfield Warblers had not returned yet however a close view of a flying Bittern, a number of Purple Herons and a passage of flocks of Gull-billed Terns and Glossy Ibis and a single late Whooper, Greylag and Whitefront almost compensated. As did some pairs of Ferruginous Ducks and an early male Red-footed falcon . At Shabla Tuzla the water level was quite high so there was a large number and good mixture of waders and waterfowl including Marsh Sandpiper , 2 Ruddy Shelducks 3 more Whitefronts some Pintails and Garganey total of 13 species of wildfowl and 12 of waders!

15 April left the hotel at Kavarna to drive south stopping at coast for a good view of Black-throated Diver in breeding plumage and then in some trees for both Pied and Collared Flycatchers more Lesser Whitethroats and other warblers and Hawfinches

Then stopping for a short walk at Goritsa forest where the BSPB has put up some nest boxes for Semi-collared Flycatchers; these were not yet in use so the birds were easier to see since they were not shooting in and out of the boxes as they tend to when breeding. Therefore all three "black and white" Flycatchers in one day! The expected Middle Spotted WP were not

seen however, possibly since the forestry department in its wisdom had recently taken out a number of old and dead trees

Arrived at Sarafavo for a two night stop

16 April a tour of the three main lakes near Bourgas gave us large numbers of waders at various sites with Ruff and Black-tailed Godwits predominating but Kentish Plovers, Curlew Sandpipers, Marsh Sandpipers etc 18 species in total but the high light was the visible migration taking place with small flocks of Lesser Spotted Eagles, Buzzards, Black and White Storks, and a flock of 600 White Pelicans, the best of all was a close view of a male Pallid Harrier flying along the coast low across the sea. There were also passerines moving including Ortolan Bunting and Yellow Wagtails

17 April journey west to Madjarovo to stay at the BSPB field centre and vulture feeding area. On the way a huge flock of White Pelicans at Vaya Lake, a Roller on the wire, a pair of Montagu's, Harriers close to the road, and a Black Kite and Booted Eagle flying.

A stop at an area of woodland hoping for Masked Shrike was not successful, however super views of a singing Bonelli's Warbler in the canopy was compensation since it was much more visible than later in the year when they tend to hide among the foliage. As we got closer to our destination a pair of long-legged Buzzards with the male passing a snake to the perched female was a good sighting.

We had three nights at Madjarovo which has a small number of bed rooms at the BSPB field centre, so two of us stayed in some flats in the village but ate at the centre with some very good cooking.

18 April after an early walk where two calling Wrynecks were the highlight; drove to Studen Kladenets the dam of a large reservoir which is a well known area for raptors, with a wing-tagged immature Black Vulture, one or two Griffon and Egyptian vultures, and a Kestrel mobbing a large female Goshawk the difference in size being surprisingly large; as was the equivalent later of a Golden Eagle and Buzzard together. Both dark and pale phase Black-eared Wheatear were seen and a Dipper flying along a small stream whilst we were eating lunch watching a nest building Nightingale. Some Crag Martins perched just over our heads on a rocky outcrop whilst watching a Black Stork feeding in the river below. When returning to Madjarovo both Rock Bunting and Rock Nuthatch and Blue Rock Thrush were seen appropriately on cliffs near to the village.

19 April a carcass had been taken up to the vulture feeding site and so we walked up early in the morning but the Griffon vultures had already found it and we did not want to disturb them by trying to get too close so kept our distance. There is a hide but to view the vultures close up or to check for wing tags etc one needs to get in before first light and then stay all day so as not to disturb them. We were told that one of the researchers was already in place! After a good breakfast we drove closer to the Greek border to Dolna Kula where a Sombre Tit feeding on some seeds at very close range and completely unconcerned gave me my best ever views. We also found the only Red-backed Shrike of the trip unfortunately dead; it seemed most unfair to fly back such a way only to be killed by a car. There was a displaying pair of Hobbies which was a much more pleasant sight.

At some very strange rock formation at Rogach there was a Rock Nuthatch nest building or repairing so we watched it coming and going with beak-full's of mud. On the way back another very close view this time of a hunting Short-toed Eagle very low when we had stopped for Subalpine Warbler

20 April early start to drive west to the ski resort of Pamporovo with arrival at about 4.0pm. On the way several stops with Barred Warbler, Isabelline Wheatear and mating Hoopoes being the highlights. A pre-dinner walk showed us a different set of birds with Willow and Coal tits, a Firecrest and Goldcrests and a flock of Crossbills and a heard only Black woodpecker. The resort is now expanding fast and resembles a building site but it is still possible to get away from the noise. There was no noise at night so the local Scops Owls could be heard.

21 April drove down to Trigrad gorge for Wallcreeper which was seen well and heard singing before it flew up the vertical wall and disappeared: this was after waiting at another site for

over an hour checking every movement which was invariably a Crag Martin or Black Redstart, and watching a pair of Peregrines.

Over the village of Trigrad we saw Pallid Swifts and on a walk above the gorge a Rock Bunting sitting close to the path apparently oblivious as we stopped and watched and heard it sing.

On returning to Pamporovo we had flight views of a Black Woodpecker, briefly, and a singing Wren apparently they are uncommon high forest birds in Bulgaria!

April 22 a pre-breakfast walk again gave the usual passerines but as we walked back there was a flash of grey between the trees, a very loud series of distress calls and then a variety of alarm calls. Petar moved quickly up a very steep slope and just as quickly back down to report that it had been a male Sparrowhawk attacking a Ring-ouzel which was still hiding under a bush whilst the sparrow hawk was being mobbed.

After this we set off down a smaller and even worse road down to the plain past some very picturesque mountain villages then up into a different part of the mountains. Stopping at an area of relic pine forest looking over a rocky valley it was then getting windy and the birds were not so easy to see but Yellowhammer was a new bird for the trip; again birds only of high ground in Bulgaria, as was Serin with a pair of Long-tailed Tits giving close views as they kept low in the bushes.

By the time we reach our destination at Dobrostan it was blowing a gale the scenery looking out over limestone cliffs is spectacular but the only birds visible were the local peregrine and a long distance blue rock-thrush. The rest of the birds must have been hiding from the wind as were a Rock Bunting and a Tree Pipit seen skulking in bushes.

On the way back we stopped off at Bachcovo monastery where a Green Woodpecker was very audible but quite invisible.

We got back to Pamporovo just in time for a hail storm luckily when we were safely in doors.

April 23 most of the day was spent driving to Sofia with various stops on the way with some good views of susliks and Isabelline Wheatears with both disappearing into burrows where they breed. Also Barred Warbler singing in the open with several other more common warblers on the edge of a vineyard. There seemed less evidence of migration although Turtle doves and the usual large flocks of hirundines were seen and Yellow Wagtails, the black-headed local race, were visible near some inland wetlands, as were Common Sandpipers and Little Ringed Plovers.

We had to drive round Sofia on the way to the hotel which is half way up Vitosha overlooking Sofia and the roads are now more crowded than ever. However having some local knowledge helped and we got to the hotel just before the rain.

April 24 looking out of the hotel bedroom in the morning I saw a Nutcracker on the top of one tree and a pair of Crossbills on another and female Sparrowhawk then flew across, another good start but the weather was not improving. Low cloud covered the top of the mountain putting paid to the idea of using a chair lift to get to the top so we decided to walk along some forest paths. There were still some snow patches to walk over and the rain started up again intermittently with a few flakes of snow not really good birding weather! However we saw most of the expected birds with a total of 10 Nutcrackers and Ring-ouzels with Firecrests, Willow Tits and Dunnocks etc. By lunch time we decided to get warm by having some soup at the nearest local restaurant in front of a open fire. This was most of the way down so on the way back up we stopped near a monastery with some large trees where we had good views of Lesser and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers and the day was much improved later with a very good sighting of a feeding Black Woodpecker and then hearing and, after some very good work by Petar, seeing a Grey-headed Woodpecker. Soon after the rain set in and we decided to return to the hotel which turned out for the best as it did not stop!

April 25 very early start to drive to the new and shiny terminal at Sofia airport ended a very enjoyable trip.

It was interesting to go in April when there is a different mix of species to that which occur in May with about the same total number of species. As can be seen from the following list by

no means all of the species seen have been mentioned just some of the more interesting ones. A total of 207 is a good number any where in Europe in April .This includes 22 species of raptors also 22 species of waders.

Total List Birds Seen & Heard

	Days seen	Maximum per day	Notes
Black-throated Diver	4	3	
Little Grebe	4		
Great Crested Grebe	5		
Black - necked Grebe	6	500	
Cormorant	8	200	
Shag	2		
Pygmy Cormorant	4		
White Pelican	3	600	Migrating Flocks
Dalmatian Pelican	3		
Bittern	1	1	
Squacco Heron	1		
Night Heron	4	20	
Purple Heron	3	20	
Little Egret	5	50	
Great White Egret	1	4	
Grey Heron	6		
Black Stork	5	20	
White Stork	9	30	Local breeders on nests whilst flocks still migrating north
Glossy Ibis	1	60	
Spoonbill	2		
Mute Swan	4	100	Migrants
Whooper Swan	1	1	Should have gone North
Greylag	1	1	"
Whitefront	1	4	"
Ruddy Shelduck	1	2	
Shelduck	5		
Wigeon	2		
Teal	4		
Gadwall	4		
Mallard	8		
Pintail	1		
Garganey	4		
Shoveler	4		
Pochard	2		
Ferruginous Duck	1	12	
Red-breasted Merganser	1	2	
Black Kite	1	1	
White-tailed Eagle	1	1	
Black Vulture	1	1	
Egyptian Vulture	3	7	
Griffon Vulture	4	20	

Short -toed Eagle	4	2	
Marsh Harrier	5	10	
Hen Harrier	1	1	
Pallid Harrier	1	1	
Montagu's Harrier	1	4	
Goshawk	3	1	
Sparrowhawk	7	2	
Common Buzzard	13		
Long-legged Buzzard	7	4	
Lesser Spotted Eagle	4	50	
Imperial Eagle	1	1	
Golden Eagle	2	1	
Booted Eagle	4	1	
Kestrel	12	6	
Red -footed Falcon	1	1	
Hobby	3	3	
Peregrine	4	2	
Pheasant	1	1	
Moorhen	4	2	
Coot	5		
Oystercatcher	1	4	
Black-winged Stilt	4		
Avocet	4		
Stone Curlew	1	6	
Little Ringed Plover	5		
Ringed Plover	1		
Kentish Plover	1		
Lapwing	1		
Little Stint	3		
Curlew Sandpiper	2		
Dunlin	1		
Broad-billed Sandpiper	1	1	
Ruff	3		
Whimbrel	1	1	
Snipe	2		
Black-tailed Godwit	1		
Curlew	1	2	
Spotted Redshank	2		
Marsh Sandpiper	3	2	
Greenshank	1	1	
Green Sandpiper	1		
Wood Sandpiper	2		
Common Sandpiper	4	5	
Mediterranean Gull	2	3	
Little Gull	1	1	
Black-headed Gull	1		
Slender-billed Gull	1		
Yellow legged Gull	7		
Gull-Billed Tern	2	25	Small flocks migrating
Sandwich Tern	1		
Whiskered Tern	1		
Black Tern	1		

Rock Dove	4		
Woodpigeon	4	3	
Collared Dove	9		
Turtle Dove	4	4	
Cuckoo	11		Mostly heard
Scops Owl	7		Heard only
Eagle Owl	1	1	
Little Owl	2		
Tawny Owl	1		Heard
Common Swift	9		
Pallid Swift	2	4	
Alpine Swift	9	40	
Kingfisher	4		
Roller	1		
Hoopoe	8	5	
Wryneck	4		
Grey-headed Woodpecker	3		One seen
Green Woodpecker	6		Two seen
Black Woodpecker	3		Two seen
Great Spotted Woodpecker	4		
Syrian Woodpecker	5		
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	1		Three seen
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	2		Three seen
Calandra Lark	4		Large numbers
Short -toed Lark	3	6	
Crested Lark	9		
Wood Lark	6		
Skylark	9		Very widespread
Sand Martin	3		
Crag Martin	7		
Swallow	11		Large numbers
Red-rumped Swallow	9		
House Martin	13		
Tawny Pipit	2		
Tree Pipit	6		
Black-headed Wagtail	5		
Yellow Wagtail	5		
Grey Wagtail	3		
White Wagtail	11		
Dipper	3		
Wren	2		Skulking forest birds in Bulgaria
Dunnock	3		Skulking mountain forest birds in Bulgaria
Robin	10		
Nightingale	10		Very common and widespread
Black Redstart	8		
Whinchat	3		
Stonechat	4		
Isabelline Wheatear	5	10	
Northern Wheatear	6		
Black-eared Wheatear	4	4	Both morphs
Rock Thrush	1	2	
Blue Rock Thrush	3	4	

Ring Ouzel	2	10	
Blackbird	13		
Song Thrush	6		
Mistle Thrush	6		
Cetti's Warbler	4		Heard only
Savis Warbler	3	6	Seen as well as heard
Reed Warbler	4		
Great Red Warbler	1	1	Heard
Olivaceous Warbler	1		
Subalpine Warbler	1	1	
Sardinian Warbler	1	3	
Orphean Warbler	2	2	
Barred Warbler	2		
Lesser Whitethroat	9		Very widespread
Whitethroat	5		
Blackcap	11		
Bonelli's Warbler	4		
Chiffchaff	12		
Willow Warbler	3		Passage migrants
Goldcrest	3		
Firecrest	2	2	
Pied Flycatcher	1	1	
Spotted Flycatcher	2		
Semi-collared Flycatcher	2	10	
Collared Flycatcher	3	7	
Bearded Tit	2		
Long-tailed Tit	4	2	
Sombre tit	3	1	Very good views
Willow tit	2	10	
Marsh Tit	1	1	
Coal Tit	4		
Blue Tit	8		
Great Tit	12		
Nuthatch	4	4	
Rock Nuthatch	3	2	
Wallcreeper	1	1	
Common Tree Creeper	2		
Short-toed Treecreeper	2	4	
Penduline Tit	4	3	
Golden Oriole	2		Heard only
Woodchat Shrike	5		
Jay	12		
Magpie	12		
Nutcracker	1	10	
Jackdaw	10		
Rook	2		
Hooded Crow	12		
Raven	8	4	
Starling	12		
House Sparrow	12		
Spanish Sparrow	4		
Tree Sparrow	9		

Chaffinch	11		
Serin	2	3	
Greenfinch	12		
Goldfinch	12		
Siskin	1		Flock
Linnet	7		
Common Crossbill	4	12	
Bullfinch	4		
Hawfinch	6	6	
Yellowhammer	1	1	
Cirl Bunting	4	6	
Rock Bunting	3		
Ortolan Bunting	1		
Reed Bunting	2		
Corn bunting	10		widespread
			212 species including 5 heard only