

BULGARIA WITH BIRDQUEST, MAY 2010

by Tim Wilcox



After the anxious wait with skies emptied by the volcano and potentially further by the BA strike the Birdquest group of 13 miraculously got our plane from Heathrow to Sofia on Tuesday 18 May arriving on time for an action-packed and absolutely superb 10 days birding around Bulgaria with our superb and humorous guides, Derek Scott from Birdquest and expert local guide, Lyubomir Profirov (Lyubo) and our genial coach driver, Evghani. We immediately headed straight out from the airport past Plovdiv and Asenovgrad on down to the out-of-season ski resort of Pomporova in the Rhodope Mountains soon leaving behind the last trace of decent road! The first birding was at a motorway pitstop for the always excellent coffee. I added my first of 60 lifers with a singing Black-Headed Bunting in scrub below the petrol station and a Red-Rumped Swallow. A party of Bee-Eaters flew low over in the strong wind. Corn Buntings sang too and this was to be a constant and much welcome soundtrack to our trip along with the clamour of Great Reed Warblers, Nightingales which kept up all night in the Arda River valley and abundant Cuckoos.



Black-Headed Bunting courtesy Russ Tofts



Bee-Eater courtesy and Red-backed Shrike courtesy of Russ Tofts



Spotted Nutcracker the first 'lifer-before-breakfast'

The first full day's birding started with a walk in the spruce forest just behind the hotel and we were not disappointed with Crested Tit, Firecrest, Red-Backed Shrike and one of my target birds for the trip, Spotted Nutcracker perched up superbly in a tall spruce right above our parked coach and allowing this hasty hand-held digiscope record. After that brilliant start there was hardly a day when I didn't add a lifer to the list before the inevitable breakfast fare of cold meats, boiled egg and cheese and loads of coffee. The only hoped-for bird which got away that morning was a Black Woodpecker somewhere nearby but it failed to respond to taping (Derek's machine!) and we didn't get another till the last day which also failed to show. Always good to leave a major target bird in store as the object of a future trip. A bonus was had in the shape of a superb *alpestris* eastern race male Ring Ouzel right at the side of the road on our way down from Pomporovo.

Our main expedition of the day followed to the Trigrad Gorge. A spectacularly deep gorge in the Rhodope Mountains where there is a deep cave which legend has it is where Orpheus entered the Underworld. The whole area from here to the Thracian plains was the heartland of the cult of Orpheus. A long wait at the side of the road ensued, where we were advised not to use our scopes in case one of us tripped over a leg and tumbled several hundred feet into the gorge! As we moved off to look further up I was lagging behind as the rest entered the road tunnel and suddenly there was a flash of grey and scarlet from behind me and one flew straight ahead across the gorge. I was able to track it as it moved quickly along the rock face flying and resettling but couldn't get anyone else onto it. A few others had a brief glimpse later but that was it before lunch at a fish restaurant further up the gorge where I added another lifer in the shape of a splendid male Serin. Then it was back down to stake out the Wallcreeper nest and hope for the best. Just as Derek thought we really had to move on one of us popped away for a pee and there it was above him on the rock face. Amazingly it moved round until it was right above us and we enjoyed splendid views of the male. A bird I have wanted to see since I looked through my dad's Peterson field guide as a small boy and the main target of the trip for many including me. Hardly surprisingly it was voted bird of the trip.



Trigrad Gorge and male Wallcreeper there courtesy of Russ Tofts

We then drove on to the Eastern Rhodopes to our next hotel on the Arda River seeing a superb Rock Bunting from a bridge along the way together with great views of Red-Rumped Swallows from above as they flew up and down the river with Crag and House Martins.

Another stop was to view one of the many White Stork nests which characterised the villages of the Rhodope and also gave us great views of Spanish Sparrows which commonly nest inside stork's nests.



White Stork's nest supporting a colony of Spanish Sparrows and The Arda River

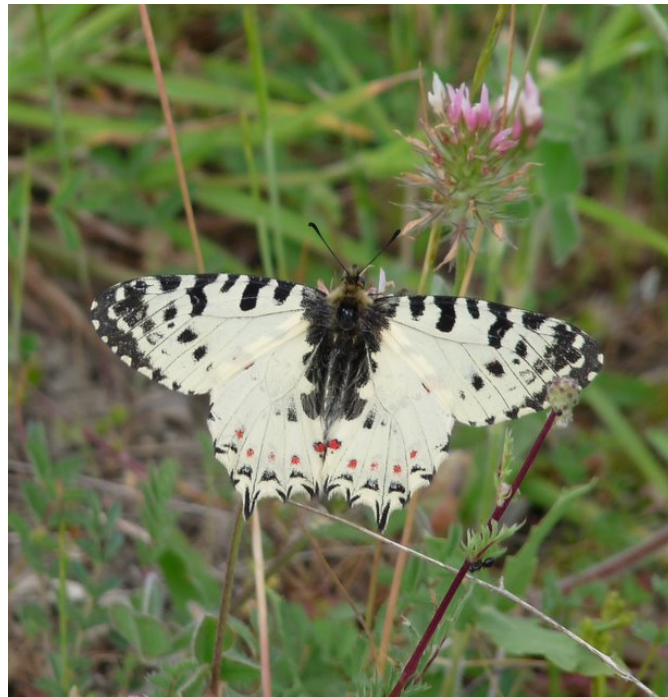
A morning walk from our hotel produced a very obliging Nightingale responding to Derek's machine, the first I have seen since I was a kid going to Minsmere. The best views of Hoopoes were to be had here together with an obliging Hawfinch in a low tree and another lifer-before-breakfast – Sombre Tit.



Red-Rumped Swallows near the hotel on the Arda and Studen Kladenets Dam

The first port of call that day was Studen Kladenets Dam where another colourful European special was added – Blue Rock Thrush along with very close views of a pair of Eastern Black-eared Wheatears the male exhibiting almost all black and white, Isabelline Wheatears and the first of several Lesser Grey Shrikes.

The main target of the day was to be the famous vulture feeding station of Madzharovo. We enjoyed 62 Griffon Vultures feeding on the carcasses laid out daily for them along with 4 Egyptian Vultures (the symbol of the Bulgarian equivalent of the RSPB) and a giant Black Vulture with a wing tag bearing the number 64 which had come over from northern Greece where they breed. Black Kites, 3 foxes and Ravens joined the banquet.



Above: Eastern Festoon courtesy Jean Thomas

Our picnic lunch gave us excellent views of Sardinian, Eastern Orphean and Barred Warblers, a Woodchat Shrike together with lots of Eastern Festoon butterflies and Black-veined Whites and a wild Tortoise. In the Krumovitsa Valley later on we waited a very long time for what turned out to be an all too brief view of another of the speciality birds of the trip, Levant Sparrowhawk along with Short-toed Eagle, a much appreciated Roller and several Golden Orioles which were in daily supply thereon. Somewhere near Studen Kladenets village was our 4th shrike of the day a beautiful male Masked Shrike. The Pallid Swift colony was no longer in the village due to building work however. The very end of the day produced one of many bonus birds for us – a Common Quail which shot out across the road in response to tape.



Black Vulture no.64 from Northern Greece (left) and Griffon and Egyptian Vultures (right)

The following day Lyubo guided us to a spot in the mountains where he had found a Rock Thrush's nest and it duly obliged around its strange cone-shaped nest on the rock face. Here too most had an excellent view of Subalpine Warbler, a very close Syrian Woodpecker (the first of several on the trip) and Russ found me an Ortolan Bunting about a quarter of a mile away in the scope! Another target lifer for me which fortunately I was to see more successfully later on. We also had at our feet the sight of an extraordinary type of lacewing called *Nemoptera coa*.



Above: *Nemoptera coa*

A stop in the Madzharovo Crater produced more Blue Rock Thrush, an obliging Chukar, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, soaring Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, two juvenile Peregrines and a pair of Long-legged Buzzards. Perhaps the best bonus bird of all was then spotted by young eagle-eyed Chris from the back of the moving coach. There on a dead stump out in the open in full view by the side of the road was a Nightjar.



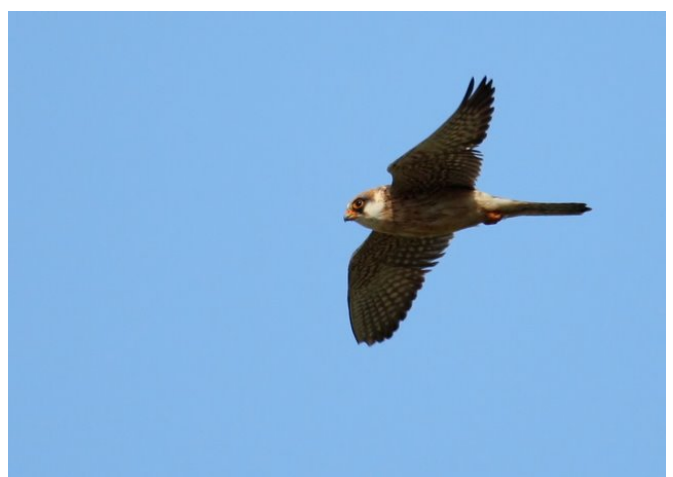
Chukar



Above: Nightjar courtesy Russ Tofts

This was on the way to see another trip special – Olive-tree Warbler which we saw but not terribly well. Others were to see one much better at another site on the way to Burgas but I missed it watching butterflies with Russ. The afternoon's stop was a closely guarded site where Imperial Eagles were nesting. We had views of the female coming into land and a juvenile then the female on the nest at some range and partly obscured by foliage. A pair of Montagu's Harriers seen well over fields from the moving coach brought the day's raptor tally to 13 species. Our drive then took us on to Burgas and the seaside resort of Pomorie where our aim was to explore the coastal saline lagoons.

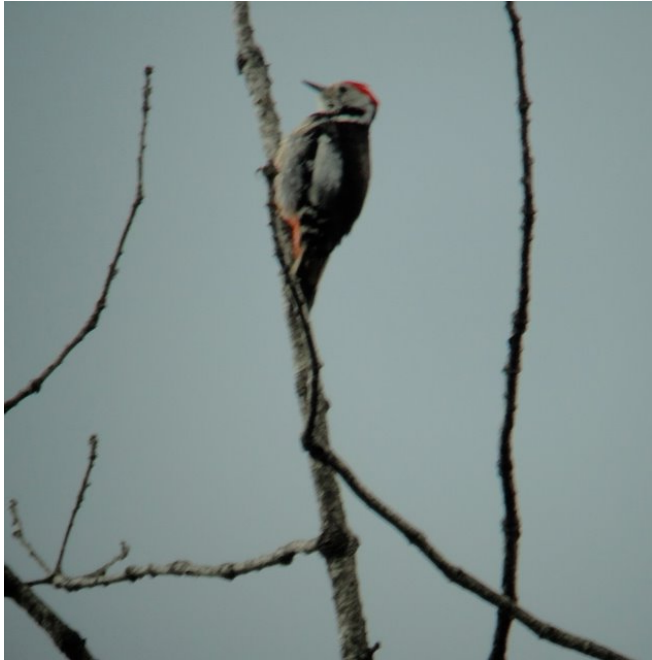
The following morning's pre-breakfast walk was not to disappoint in the lifer department with a Tawny Pipit. The first full day around the lagoons around Burgas produced a superb selection of wetland and waterbirds although we had missed most of the passage waders. The main trip speciality target was on Lake Vaya home to both Great White and Dalmation Pelicans where we also saw the first of many Black-crowned Night Herons, Purple Herons, Little Bittern and Squacco Herons and on a large expanse of flooded fields, creating excitement for Lyubo in particular, was a Cattle Egret – a Bulgarian vagrant. It was fun to tell him we'd had one in Manchester too! Here we had Ferruginous Ducks which counts as a lifer really as these were the real deal and not your dodgy English variety. A White-tailed Eagle came right overhead and there were Pygmy Cormorants but these were distant and remained so throughout the trip. I had much better views of this species in the Po Delta in Italy a few years back.



Ferruginous Duck Lake Durankulak and female Red-footed Falcon courtesy of Russ Tofts

Later in the day at a stop near Lake Atanasovo some of our party enjoyed Penduline Tits whilst Lyubo and I split off and he found me two Gull-billed Terns. Yet another lifer. This superb day ended with more much desired lifers for me: Collared Pratincoles, 43 Red-Footed Falcons and, at an area of stony ground near Pomporie, a pair of Stone-Curlew which I have never seen in England either having never made the pilgrimage to Weeting Heath.

The next days drive was north to Kavarna making a last exploration of the lagoons and turning up some smart breeding plumage Curlew Sandpipers, two Little Stint and some real Ruddy Shelduck. The prime target site along the way was for more trip specials and lifers in an area of forest near Goritsa. Here we had great views of Middle Spotted Woodpecker out in the open on a dead tree and a lifer for all: Semi-collared Flycatcher which breed here.



Middle-spotted woodpecker and Semi-collared Flycatcher

The last stop of the day was again a highlight for many with a visit to an area of cliffs near Kavarna which host breeding Eagle Owl and one was obligingly sat out in the open for us sunning itself.



Above: Eagle Owl

The following days target was Lake Durankulak where the westernmost breeding Paddyfield Warbler are to be found. However before that on the pre-breakfast stroll right outside the hotel a male Levant Sparrowhawk flew by practically right in front of my face.

Lake Durankulak right next to the beach is a superbly beautiful place and we wished we could have stayed there all day really. Our Paddyfield Warblers showed well as did Savi's Warbler (both lifers for me) and some obliging Cuckoos.



Birding on the beach, Lake Durankulak and Paddyfield Warbler Lake Durankulak courtesy of Russ Tofts



Above: Cuckoo Lake Durankulak



Above: ringed Savi's Warbler

Our picnic lunch stop was an area of cliffs at Vailata with Thracian burial tombs cut into the cliff edge and wide open plain inland alive with Calandra Larks, a couple of Greater Short-toed Larks and Pied Wheatear in the car park of the tiny visitor centre. Russ called in a group of 15 Rose-coloured Starlings and I got onto them as they zoomed past north. Luckily for all we later caught up with a bedraggled-looking flock of 40 at Cape Kaliakra



Calandra Lark Vailata archaeological site courtesy Russ tofts and Rose-coloured Starlings Cape Kaliarkra

The final morning at Kavarna started with another look for Levant Sparrowhawk outside the hotel looking down into the valley and Russ found a distant male adding it to his life list at last. Luckily the bird came closer and was seen well displaying to a female which perched up in a tree in the scope allowing everyone to get on to it. Lyubo explained a clear diagnostic feature of Levant Sparrowhawk which was clearly visible in the scope: the black eye as opposed to the yellow eye of Sparrowhawk. We also got to observe and note well the black tips to the wings of the male in flight. It was then on to the Danube Valley and Lake Srebarna famous for its breeding Dalmation Pelicans which we had already encountered earlier on the trip by good fortune. I counted off an impressive 223 White Storks, 61 Great White Pelicans, 12 Black Storks, 12 Spoonbills and various other herons ducks and waders on some flooded fields along the way. Lake Srebarna gave us excellent views of Whiskered Tern and more Ferruginous

Ducks, Black-necked Grebe on the nest and Great White Egrets which are surprisingly rare in Bulgaria as a breeding bird. Perhaps the highlight was watching a male Penduline Tit working on its nest. The Pelican Birding Lodge where we stayed the night in the village of Vetren was a delight and the evening was rounded-off with a Long-Eared Owl flying over the hotel, a Scops Owl hooting (not seen on the trip though) and Nightjar churring from the lane.

The final full day was taken up with a very long drive to Sofia bringing our total travel for the trip to 2060km (over 1,300 miles).

Along the way the high point was the abandoned fishponds of Nova Cherna where I added Marsh Warbler to my life list and we all had splendid views of a nesting Wryneck and an obliging male Little Bittern.



Above: Marsh Warbler Nova Cherna fishponds courtesy Russ Tofts

The long drive involved a number of speculative stops along the way which yielded a male *maura* Stonechat, Whinchat, more Black-headed Wagtails which featured prominently on the trip and a Corncrake which refused to show.

Our final night was spent on Mount Vitosha high above Sofia where our evening meal gave us Pallid Swifts at last right outside the panorama windows. Lifers were beginning to run out and there were none before breakfast! But the post-breakfast morning walk through the trees and up to the snowline gave us a pair of Water Pipits eating insects off the snow melt and a final cherry-on-the-cake lifer of a superb trip as we caught up with Rock Thrush and I was amongst an advance party to enjoy the best views before the rest of the party were all able to scope it off.



Above: digiscoped Rock Thrush!

The party turned a very impressive 210 species of which 4 were heard only. I missed a few but still hit 200 and saw 60 lifers. Many thanks to Birdquest, our guides Derek Scott and Lyubo Profirov, the great company of all our party and special thanks to Russ Tofts and Jean Thomas for letting me use their brilliant photos. All the other hand-held fuzzy affairs digiscoped by myself. See our tour leader, Derek Scott's trip report and full species list at www.birdquest.co.uk

Tim Wilcox, July 2010

www.manchesterbirding.com