

BULGARIA, September 2009

by Anne Wilkinson

with Richard Drew and Suffolk Birdwatching Breaks



White Pelicans and Cormorants, Bulgaria 2009 (Terry Mcgeever)

165 species in 4 days - that's the quality of the birding in Bulgaria. The reasons for the abundance of birds are two fold. Bulgaria is a poor undeveloped country with old fashioned farming methods and the country sits right on the Black Sea migration route, catching a big percentage of the birds coming out of Russia, eastern Europe and Scandinavia, all on their way to Africa. We spent the first two days on the north-east coast close to the Romanian border where sea-watching, lakes with wader scrapes, steppe and headland scrub were the order of the day. Straight away on the first morning we got the bird that had inspired me to go to Bulgaria, the Red-breasted flycatcher. Gorgeous little birds with a call just like a wren on steroids, they are unusual in that they winter in Western Asia. And that's why they are common on the Black Sea coast in September. I was also thrilled to see three Ospreys, my favourite bird, fishing on the sea and witness one catching a fish at its first attempt. Gull species were Yellow-legged, Mediterranean and Little whilst there were numerous Black Terns and some Whiskered. The wader scrapes on Lake Shabla were very interesting and produced at least one lifer for most of us with a Broad-billed sandpiper. There were also Dunlin and Little stint, Marsh sandpiper which is a lovely graceful tringa, and a Red-necked Phalarope. The dry steppe produced some interesting birds such as Isabelline wheatear, Tawny pipit, Stone Curlew, Roller and a lone Red-footed Falcon. It was here that we came to realise that in Bulgaria there were Red-backed Shrikes on every bush and Bee-eaters going over all the time. The headland at Cape Kaliakra was alive with birds and we wished we could have stayed longer. There was a large fall of Whinchats, a Corncrake, and a Thrush Nightingale showing really well, Hobby pretending to be an insulator on a pylon, Alpine Swifts, Blue-headed Wagtails, Wryneck and even a Little Crake in a tiny pool. Some German birders were also claiming a Baillon's Crake and although Richard our tour guide got a glimpse of it, the bird we all focused on turned out to be a Little Crake.



Isabelline Wheatear and Thrush Nightingale, Bulgaria 2009 (Terry Mcgeever)

Our journey to the south Black Sea area took us on a meandering route via a quarry at Whitesands where Eagle Owls roosted and a watch point in the mountains. There was no owl on view that day but we did see a small group of Levant Sparrowhawks climbing on the thermals and we were able to study them for a lengthy period and also compare them with a Eurasian Sparrowhawk that went up to challenge them. A beautiful rufous Long-legged Buzzard also performed some spectacular dives over the quarry. Magic! After that we climbed up to the tree line on the mountains but there was no further raptor migration happening that day. We did however see a spectacular flock of a thousand plus White Pelicans gaining height and turning towards the coast followed by both White and Black Storks. It was interesting to see how the pelicans kept in formation as a flock and then stretched out into V shape just like Pink-footed Geese. In the mountains we explored an area of open oak woodland, where we found Green, Middle Spotted and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Woodlarks, Short-toed Treecreepers and a pair of very elusive Sombre Tits.



Long-legged Buzzard and Dalmatian Pelican, Bulgaria 2009 (Terry Mcgeever)

Our third day was spent around the lakes and reservoirs of the Bourgas area. There were approximately 3000 pelicans on Bourgas Lake which was surrounded by heavy industry and shrouded in murky mist. It was almost surreal watching them systematically flying short distances around the lake and engaging in synchronized feeding frenzies - interspersed by lots of opportunistic Cormorants! There were only a few Dalmatian pelicans which seemed to keep themselves to themselves and I have to say that they were one of the ugliest birds I have ever seen. Whilst we watched the pelicans we were treated to fly-pasts of Gull-billed, Black and White-winged Black Terns plus Purple, Squacco and Night Herons. It was one of those birding experiences you never forget.

Moving on to the reservoir inland from Bourgas, we found yet more Ospreys, Garganey, Great White and Little Egrets with a few Ferruginous Ducks. The Bulgarian equivalent of the RSPB has a visitor centre amongst the reedbeds here and we enjoyed the best lunch venue of the trip, sat on the roof watching the birds fly overhead. The problem was that the weather was too settled and the spectacle of hundreds of raptors we had been promised did not materialise. Still it was nice to see an Osprey and a

Sparrowhawk climb up and up right above us until they were just specks in the sky. That WAS migration! Simeon our local guide had received a tip-off and we hot-footed it back to a creek leading off the reservoir. There we found a Little Crake out in the open feeding. Then it was joined by a Spotted Crake which emerged from the reeds followed by a juvenile Moorhen. Incredible! To see all 3 birds and compare the size differences was a wonderful experience. It was hard to turn our attention to a Wood Sandpiper and Black-headed Wagtail feeding just a little way along the bank but it was not a problem as the crakes carried on feeding with the Spotted continually bullying his smaller cousin; they were still there as we left. Only a White-tailed Eagle landing in a tree could compensate after that! We ended the day on another high, some salt pans where Slender-billed Gulls roosted. Although Richard was disappointed with the low numbers there and their winter plumages, we were more than happy to feast our eyes on these very different gulls amongst all the other terns and gulls.



Black-headed Wagtail, Bulgaria 2009 (Terry Mcgeever)

Our last day was spent in the mountains again, calling first at a reservoir which was accessed along a dirt track. We soon discovered that the valley was a magnet for migrating raptors and the bus pulled up to allow us to study a Lesser Spotted Eagle resting in the pasture. Soon we spotted other raptors on the ground and hunting over the ridge; Long-legged Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles and more Lesser Spotted Eagles. The valley was farmed in the traditional way with sheep and goats tended by shepherds and large dogs, a habitat rich in prey for the raptors especially Susliks, an endearing kind of ground squirrel which sits up motionless like a Meercat. We had gone to this lake to look for Ruddy Shelduck which breed there but none were to be seen. There was however an abundance of waders including a Lapwing which got Simeon, our local Guide very excited! The watch point on the mountain top again produced no visible migration but we had still seen most of the species we had come to see so no-one was too disappointed.



Lesser Spotted Eagles, Bulgaria 2009 (Terry Mcgeever)

So Bulgaria was a very successful trip and I wouldn't hesitate in recommending anyone to go in the autumn when as well as all the birds already mentioned we saw other notables such as Pygmy Cormorant, Little Bittern, Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, Montague's Harrier, Goshawk, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Hoopoe, both Grey-headed and Syrian Woodpecker, Calandra and Crested Lark, Red-rumped Swallow, Great Reed and Barred Warbler, Golden Oriole and Cirl Bunting. Spring sounds inviting

too when eastern European warblers, Masked Shrikes, Semi-collared Flycatchers and a host of other interesting birds can be seen. And if you are prepared to go up into the mountains you are guaranteed Nutcrackers and Wallcreepers (apparently). But if you do go you need to be prepared for a very different country, even to Hungary. It is very poor and shabby with numerous vestiges of its communist past, poorly constructed and unfinished buildings, peasant farming traditions in some places and piles and piles of rubbish everywhere. There were plastic bottles, cans and other unrecognizable items of human detritus in every conceivable place, alongside roads, in lakes and reservoirs, even along tracks in the middle of nowhere. There are a lot of smart developments along the coast, mostly unsold and they will never attract tourists unless they can clean up their country. As someone said; it was like the third world, but well worth visiting just for the birds.



Red-breasted Flycatcher, Bulgaria 2009 (Terry Mcgeever)

Anne Wilkinson, October 2009

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