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## SPRING BIRDWATCHING TOUR, BULGARIA (03-09.06.2008)

by Gerry Hinchon

**Participants:** Gerry Hinchon & wife, Nayden Chakarov, Svetoslav Velkov

Bulgaria is a republic occupying an area of over 110 000 square kilometres, but with a population of only 7.5 million. It is a beautiful country, with varied landscapes, fine foods and wines and superb birding. A lot of the birds are shared with other southern European countries, but some of the more noteworthy ones are **Pygmy Cormorant, Levant Sparrowhawk, Isabelline Wheatear, Pied Wheatear, Semi-collared Flycatcher, Paddyfield Warbler, Olive-tree Warbler, Sombre Tit, Masked Shrike and Rose-coloured Starling**. Raptors were not as common as I had expected, but we had excellent views of **Imperial Eagles** at two sites, saw several **Lesser Spotted Eagles**, and several **Long-legged Buzzards**. Some of the warblers were also either scarce or difficult to find and we did not see **Barred or Eastern Orphean Warblers**.

- June 3 - Fly LGW0635-SOF1145. Drive to Krapets
- June 4 - Lake Dourankoulak, Lake Shabla, Cape Kaliakra, Baltata Forest. Drive to Bourgas
- June 5 - Wetlands near Bourgas. Drive to Eastern Rodophe Mountains via Sakar Mountains
- June 6 - Eastern Rodophe Mountains
- June 7 - Eastern Rodophe Mountains. Arda River and roadside stops. Drive to Plovdiv
- June 8 - Drive Plovdiv to Trigrad Gorge with stops en route
- June 9 - Trigrad Gorge and nearby forest. Drive to Sofia with stop at Vitosha NP. Fly SOF2215-LGW2340

### June 3, 2008

We arrived at Sofia on time and were met by our guide and our driver. We then commenced our long drive east, stopping only a few times, for comfort and for food. On these occasions, and also while driving, a few interesting birds were seen. We saw several **White** and two **Black Storks**, two **Honey Buzzards**, a few **Red-rumped Swallows**, six **Yellow Wagtails** (of the race *feldegg*), a **Pied Wheatear**, three **Red-backed Shrikes**, and our first **Golden Oriole**. It took seven hours to drive to Krapets, on the Black Sea Coast, and we finally arrived at our hotel at 2030. After a light meal and a few beers we adjourned to our rooms for an early night.

### June 4, 2008

We met at the car at 0600 and drove to Lake Dourankoulak, where we spent a pleasant four hours birding. The key bird here is **Paddyfield Warbler** and about 25 were seen easily. Their superciliums are not nearly as obvious as shown in the field guide, nor as obvious as on the juveniles that turn up in Britain in autumn. However the quiet and varied song is diagnostic. They were easier to see than the **Reed Warblers**. **Great Reed Warblers** were singing everywhere, but only two **Savi's Warblers** were seen (but a few more were heard). Other interesting birds seen here were four **Little Bitterns**, four **Squacco Herons**, 10 **Purple Herons**, six **Ferruginous Ducks**, an adult male **Red-footed Falcon** (the only one we saw), three **Collared Pratincoles**, some **Little ringed** and **Kentish Plovers**, 20 **Cuckoos** flying in twos and threes, eight **Hoopoes**, seven **Bee-eaters**, two **Rollers**, some **Calandra Larks**, and one **Tawny Pipit**. We walked south until we reached a small wood. Here we found our first pair of **Lesser Grey Shrikes** – in the course of the day we saw 22. Our car was waiting here to take us for our much-needed breakfast. We then checked out and drove south to Shabla Lake where we had further views of some species we had seen earlier plus two **Bearded Tits**, more **Rollers**, and two **Golden Orioles**. After a few roadside stops, where we added **Spanish Sparrow, Hawfinch**, an



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**Ortolan** and 13 **Black-headed Buntings** to the list, we explored Cape Kaliakri. Here we saw two **Black-throated Divers**, 200 **Shags**, 25 **Calandra Larks**, many **Pied Wheatears**, two **Black-eared Wheatears**, and 20 **Alpine Swifts**. We then drove further south to Albena where two **Semi-collared Flycatchers** and a pair of **Middle Spotted Woodpeckers** were seen. It had been hot and sunny all day. We had a quick look at some saltpans north of Bourgas, where we saw plenty of **Black-winged Stilts** and **Avocets**, one **Sandwich** and five **Little Terns**, and 30 **Mediterranean Gulls**. We then found our hotel and enjoyed the local food.

### June 5, 2008

Another long drive and a long tiring day, but we made numerous stops along the way. The first stop was Vaya Lake, a wetland near to Bourgas where we saw many **White Pelicans**, and doubtless overlooked some **Dalmatian Pelicans** as there had been some of these here too. At a nearby site we saw eight **Pygmy Cormorants**. Later, when we stopped for three **Honey Buzzards**, we took a walk in the adjacent dry oak woodland and saw a pair of **Masked Shrikes**, six **Hawfinches**, an **Eastern Bonelli's**, an **Icterine**, and four **Olivaceous Warbler**. We also stopped further down the road to view Bulgaria's most well-known pair of **Imperial Eagles** and these were seen well. Nearby we managed to call out an **Olive-tree Warbler**, and this too gave good views. There were also 12 **Calandra Larks**. As we proceeded along our route we encountered seven **Yellow Wagtails**, four **Rollers**, a **Montagu's Harrier**, four **Lesser Spotted Eagles**, three **Ravens** and a **Long-legged Buzzard**. In the Eastern Rodophe Mountains we checked in to our guest house for two nights, in Borislavtsi Village, located in the Turkish area. In the course of the day we noted 35 **Turtle Doves**, our highest daily total. From the window of our little room on the edge of town we could look out across the countryside and see a pair of **Little Owls**, some **Olivaceous Warblers** and two **Red-backed Shrikes**. During the day we saw one **Ortolan** and many **Corn** and **Black-headed Buntings**. **Nightingales** were again singing everywhere. Today it was again hot and sunny.

### June 6, 2008

Today we drove a circuit of 180 km, searching various places in the Eastern Rodophe Mountains. At Studens Kladenets we saw our only **Black Vulture** and also five **Black Kites**, but raptors were not common here, the only other notable ones being 40 **Griffon** and three **Egyptian Vultures**, two **Long-legged Buzzards**, and two **Hobbies**. During the day we saw a **Hoopoe**, 100 **Alpine Swifts**, many **Bee-eaters**, two **Rollers**, 15 **Crag Martins**, 30 **Red-rumped Swallows**, six **Blue Rock Thrushes**, four **Sombre Tits**, 15 **Red-backed**, five **Woodchat** and three **Lesser Grey Shrikes**. There were also five **Hawfinches**, many **Corn**, 25 **Black-headed**, three **Cirl**, three **Rock** and two **Ortolan Buntings**. The weather was hot and sunny in the morning, but the afternoon became rainy and by evening this had become very heavy.

### June 7, 2008

Today we tried to find some of the species that we had missed yesterday, and after a lot of searching we located a **Subalpine Warbler** with her brood, then later we saw several more. In the same area there were two **Sombre Tits**, four **Cirl Buntings** and ten **Hawfinches**. We never did find **Eastern Orphean Warbler**. Two **Short-toed Eagles** flew over. We birded the mountains until 1100, then it was time to move on. It rained on and off for most of the day and it was rather cool. We stopped at a few places seeing 100 **Alpine Swifts**, several **Cuckoos**, 20 **Turtle Doves**, 15 **Crag Martins**, 25 **Red-rumped Swallows**, three **Rock Buntings**, numerous **Black-headed Buntings**. and three **Little Owls**. Four **Masked Shrikes** were found, one bird sitting on its nest in a poplar. Somewhere we had good views of three **Olive-tree** and some **Olivaceous Warblers**. Although we saw **Red-backed Shrikes** everyday, today we only counted seven, and just two **Woodchat Shrikes**. We saw our last **Lesser Grey Shrike**, which had previously been a common roadside bird. We saw our highest number of **Golden Orioles**, which was eight, and then spent a couple of hours birding by the Arda River. Here there were a lot of **Sand Martins** nesting in the riverbanks, and four **Little Ringed Plovers** on a sandbar (one seen to settle on four eggs). Our only **Kingfisher** was seen here and there was also a **Hoopoe**, 20 **Bee-eaters** and three **Rollers**. **Nightingales** were heard throughout the day. A male **Levant**



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**Sparrowhawk** flew by and into the poplar plantation. While we searched for it we noticed a nest that contained a sitting **Long-eared Owl**. The poplars contained a large population of breeding **Spanish Sparrows**. We then had another long drive to reach Plovdiv, where we stayed at the excellent Plovdiv Guesthouse. A **Scops Owl** was calling nearby.

### June 8, 2008

Last night we were able to look at the small Roman Amphitheatre, and this morning we saw the large one, here in Bulgaria's second largest city. We finally left Plovdiv at 0900 with another long drive ahead of us. At a known site we saw two immature **Imperial Eagles** sitting on a hilltop, and when they began to fly around we had superb views. Other raptors seen today were two **Long-legged Buzzards** a **Lesser Spotted Eagle** and a **Short-toed Eagle**. There are a lot of Susliks in the area and these are good food for many predators, but the land is being converted to vineyards in a lot of places, which makes the area poorer for wildlife.

**Calandra** and **Short-toed Larks**, **Tawny Pipits** and **Ortolan Buntings** were present in the grasslands. As we travelled further along the road a chance sighting of two flying **Rose-coloured Starlings** led to the discovery of a colony of 350 birds in a nearby quarry. They commuted from there to the nearest town where they feasted upon cherries. There was a pair of **Isabelline Wheatears** nearby. Our only two **Lapwings** were seen today and there were ten **Bee-eaters** and a **Roller**, and **Black-headed Buntings** were again very common along the roadside. As we began to get into the mountains we saw a **Lesser Spotted Eagle**. A single **Dipper** was seen on the river. When we arrived at the Trigrad Gorge it was about 1600, and we waited for a long while, but could not find the **Wallcreeper**. A **Peregrine** flew around. Most of the day it was dry, but it was more rainy in the afternoon in the mountains. From our guesthouse window in Trigrad there were three **Serins** and a **Black Redstart**.

### June, 9 2008

We took a pre-breakfast walk amongst the spruce forest and heard a **Nutcracker** and saw a **Black Woodpecker**. A **Firecrest** was singing and there were five **Serins**. There were four **Chiffchaffs** - we had only seen one previously on the trip. After breakfast we went to the gorge and after nearly three hours someone spotted the **Wallcreeper**. Unfortunately it was not close and also high up the cliffs, but that was our only sighting. Fifteen **Black Redstarts** and a **Marsh Tit** were seen. The **Peregrine** flew around the gorge repeatedly. At 1115 we decided to leave as it was a long drive to Sofia Airport. Another **Dipper** was seen along the river. It was raining on and off, sometimes heavily. We drove up to Vitosha NP and were lucky that it was not raining. We did not have a lot of time but had good views of four **Nutcrackers**, 20 **Crossbills** and a pair of **Willow Tits** of the race *montanus* feeding their brood in a hole in a dead conifer. Then it began to rain heavily again and we drove to the Airport for our 2215 flight back to the UK.