

Serbia 2004 August Mike Unwin

Warblers, Woodpeckers and White-tailed Eagles

This is a report on a nine-day guided bird-watching tour of Serbia on behalf of Birdwatch magazine by Mike Unwin

The tour was conceived as a press trip, for foreign journalists to review new ecotourism developments in Serbia. Upon arrival in Belgrade Mike discovered that he was this tour's first and only client. In fact, he was reputedly the first foreign birdwatcher to tour Serbia for 15 years. Arrangements were thus very flexible, and he was invited to make any suggestions that might reflect the interests of a visitor...

In August 2004, I took a nine-day guided bird-watching tour of Serbia on behalf of Birdwatch magazine. The tour was conceived as a press trip, for foreign journalists to review new ecotourism developments in Serbia. It was organised by Magelan Corporation, a travel agency based in Novi Sad, and co-funded by Serbian Tourism Promotions. My guides were Biljana Marceta, the manager of Magelan, and Milan Ruzic, a local ornithologist. The tour started and ended in Belgrade. We travelled by minibus and stayed overnight in hotels and lodges.

I discovered upon arrival in Belgrade that I was this tour's first and only client. In fact, I was reputedly the first foreign birdwatcher to tour Serbia for 15 years. Arrangements were thus very flexible, and I was invited to make any suggestions that might reflect the interests of a visitor. This resulted in a few ad hoc adjustments to the itinerary: we abandoned the plan to find Great Bustards on the grounds that the birds wouldn't be visible at this time of year; we also cancelled our planned visit to the Uvac Gorge region in the south, which would have meant an extra eight-hour drive each way with very little time at the destination. However, we added a visit to a Hungarian ringing camp beside a wetland in the north. In the event, our tour took place entirely within Vojvodina province.

Vojvodina Province

Vojvodina is Serbia's northernmost province, and the country's breadbasket. In prehistoric times this landlocked region was inundated by the great Pannonian Sea, and today its flat, fertile plains are known as the Pannonian Basin. Several major rivers meander across the province, most notably the Danube (Dunav), which flows in from Hungary in the northwest and out to Romania in the east. Belgrade, Serbia's capital, is in the south of the province, while Novi Sad, the second city – and also on the Danube – is in the centre. The land is unremittingly flat, except for the forested ridge of Fruska Gora (539m) which runs parallel with the Danube for 75 kilometres just south of Novi Sad. Arable farming dominates the landscape, but there are also large forested areas and extensive flooded wetlands along the river courses. Other habitats include the forested dune system of Deliblato Sands in the east, and extensive open steppe towards the northeast. Many large fishponds, created for commercial carp farming, are scattered across the province.

Day by Day

Day 1 (Thursday 12th): Belgrade Airport; Novi Sad; Apatin

I arrived at Belgrade Airport from Heathrow at 5.30pm. My hosts were waiting for me in the Magelan minibus – a large, air-conditioned Mercedes Sprinter that seats eight clients comfortably. We set off immediately for Novi Sad, following the main road to Zagreb. This road was once known as the Put Bratstva i Jedinstva – ‘the road of brotherhood and unity’ – but refugee houses scattered bleakly across the landscape gave a more telling impression of its recent history. The one-and-a-half-hour drive took us through flat arable farmland. Rooks flocked in thousands to the sunflower fields, and watermelons were piled high in wooden carts beside the road.

In Novi Sad we stopped briefly at the Magelan office, before enjoying a hearty meal of traditional fare at a popular local restaurant, the Plava Frajla. We then set off northwest towards Apatin, our first night’s stop. The two-hour drive was extended by an impromptu visit to an Italian-owned hunting lodge in the town of Doroslovo. This upmarket establishment attracts a mostly Italian clientele during the quail-shooting season. Its name, Re di Quaglie, means ‘King of Quails’, which – worryingly – is also a local nickname for the Corncrake. This was my first encounter with Serbia’s wealthy Italian hunting lobby. I was later to discover that it exerts considerable influence over the custodians of Serbia’s wildlife and protected areas.

We arrived in Apatin at about midnight. This picturesque town sits on the banks of the Danube – a mixed blessing, since it was virtually destroyed by floods in the 1700s. Today it is the home of the Jelen brewery, whose enormous trucks rumble through the streets. Our accommodation was at the Golden Crown, a smart new riverside hotel.

Day 2 (Friday 13th): Gornje Podunavlje; Svilojevo Fishponds; Kolut Fishponds; overnight Apatin

Breakfast was on the hotel terrace overlooking the huge, sluggish Danube. Little Egrets, Yellow-legged Gulls and Cormorants flew up and down the river. We were joined by our guide, Boris Erg, a local forestry conservationist, who then drove us to the nearby Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve. This large area of flooded forest is ecologically contiguous with neighbouring reserves in Croatia and Hungary, forming one huge wetland complex either side of the Upper Danube.

We explored the swampy terrain by Landrover and on foot, finding two White-tailed Eagles, Hobby, Kingfisher, Lesser-spotted Woodpecker and River Warbler. The hidden forest pools held Curlews and Greenshanks, with Whiskered Terns and Sand Martins darting over the water. Outside the forest, a raised dyke gave a better view over the whole area. From here we watched White-tailed Eagles again, together with at least 40 Black Storks and numerous Grey and Purple Herons. A pair of Honey Buzzards flew over, and Bee-eaters were everywhere. We also had fine views of Wild Boar and Red Deer foraging on the flooded forest floor.

Back in Apatin to collect our next guide, Jovan ‘Lucky’ Lakatos, a well-known Serbian wildlife photographer and ‘adventurer’, who has photographed sea eagles around the world for National Geographic. Lucky took us to Svilojevo Fishponds, one of many commercial carp ponds built in Serbia 15-30 years ago. Here, among huge flocks of Coot and Great-crested Grebe, we found a number of Ferruginous Duck, while Whiskered Terns, together with both Black and White-winged Black Terns,

danced over the water. A heronry in a flooded stand of willows was thick with Night Herons and Little Egrets, and also held a few Squaccos. A walk around one of the ponds brought Red-backed Shrike, Golden Oriole and Wood Warbler, while at least two Marsh Harriers quartered the adjacent reed beds. Milan found an exquisite Penduline Tit nest in a waterside willow, and we spotted a small party of the birds themselves among the reeds. Other birds included Sedge Warbler, Kingfisher and Bee-eater.

After lunch we headed to the nearby village of Kolut to meet Miki Miric, our guide to the Kolut Fishponds. First Miki showed us his private zoo: a dilapidated collection of caged animals – some rescued for charity, others acquired from crumbling collections elsewhere. Among the tattered wildfowl and balding macaws were a few depressed monkeys, a Kodiak/Polar Bear hybrid trapped in a miniscule cage and a collection of distressed Secretary Birds clearly on their last legs. This is clearly no place for the sensitive ecotourist, and I discreetly recommended that it be struck off the tour itinerary. Miki's heart seemed to be in the right place, but he has neither the resources nor staff for the job. Birders, however, might be interested by his Bewick's Swan – shot and injured by local hunters, before he rescued and rehabilitated it – since it remains Serbia's only record of this species.

We stopped briefly in Kolut village en route for the fishponds, allowing Milan to find us a Long-eared Owl roosting in a conifer. Roosting owls are Milan's speciality, and he took the opportunity to pack a carrier bag with pellets. The fishponds revealed some individuals from Serbia's largest population of breeding Greylag Geese (only 20-odd pairs), along with Mute Swans introduced by Miki. Thousands more Greylags spend winter here, as do White-fronts and a few regular Red-breasted Geese. We found masses more Coots and Great-crested Grebes, a few Pochard and Ferruginous Duck, Great White Egret, Whiskered Tern, Kingfisher, Dabchick, Marsh Harrier, and a Savi's Warbler singing from the dense marshy scrub. Unfortunately, these fishponds receive little protection, and are heavily hunted during the winter wildfowl season.

Dinner back at the Golden Crown was Riblji paprikas, a delicious spicy stew of perch and catfish. A Striped Tree-frog perched on the back of my chair throughout.

Day 3 (Saturday 14th): Sombor; Becej Fishponds; Pearl island; overnight Fantast Castle

After another large breakfast overlooking the serene Danube, during which a lone Black Kite drifted across the river, we checked out of the Golden Crown and drove the short distance north to the attractive town of Sombor. Here we spent a cultural morning in the company of the Director of Tourism, Bogdan Cuic, who has recently returned from living in London and is anxious to promote his town.

First stop was the town museum, whose curator, Viktorija Lakatos, gave us a guided tour. The museum contains everything from Neolithic remains to World War II artefacts, and provides a comprehensive introduction to the complex history of Serbia. The collection is attractive and accessible, with English translations for all exhibits, and Viktorija combined impressive knowledge with great enthusiasm.

Next stop was the Milan Konjovic gallery, devoted to the paintings of one of Serbia's most celebrated sons, who returned to Sombor after making a name in Paris during the 1920s. Here we saw a collection of over 1,000 raw and powerful expressionist canvasses. We then moved on to the imposing City Assembly building, which houses Serbia's most famous painting, the Battle of Senta, which depicts the final defeat of the Turks in 1697. This huge canvas, measuring 28 square metres, holds a special place in Serbia's national identity. It was concealed behind a false wall during World War II to save it from the Nazis.

We left Sombor after coffee in the Café des Arts – one of several inviting retreats on the main market street that contribute to the town's distinctive bohemian ambience. Here I was told that Sombor has many distinguished resident artists, and scrutinised every passer-by in the hope of spotting one.

From Sombor we drove east to Fantast Castle, a strange pseudo-baroque construction – with attached studfarm – situated in Serbia's arable heartland. It was built in the 1920s by a wealthy local landowner (Bogdan Dundjerski) to impress his mistress, and converted to a hotel in 1983. This was not chosen as a birding destination, but the mixed woodland in the hotel grounds turned out to be quite productive, and we'd seen Black Redstart, Golden Orioles and several Cuckoos by the time we'd checked in.

Before lunch, we pressed on to our next birding destination, Becej. Here we met up with the local fishponds manager. After an enormous lunch of carp stew in a pleasant outdoor restaurant, he led us on the short drive to the ponds. Milan and I took a walk around one of the larger ponds. Biljana later reported how the manager, mystified by the concept of bird-watching, had asked: "What's the point in seeing a bird if you can't shoot it?"

At the fishponds we saw numerous Marsh Harriers, as well as Little Egrets, Grey Herons and Whiskered Terns. Parties of Yellow Wagtails (the black-headed feldegg race) fluttered along the path in front of us, a Hoopoe flopped out of the scrub and a party of Snipe flushed from the marshy edges. Among numerous Great-crested Grebes and Coots on the water, we also found Ferruginous Duck, Garganey and a single Black-necked Grebe. Between two of the lakes, huge numbers of Rooks and Jackdaws had gathered in an area of short grass steppe. This is a known-site for the rare European Mole Rat. I suspect this is a tricky animal to find, though apparently the region's plentiful Otters are often seen.

Becej Fishponds were relatively disappointing – primarily because the water levels during our visit were too high for the stilts, spoonbills and other waders that are often here in large numbers. But I was assured that this is a very rich site, with a species list of over 180. The heronry is one of Serbia's largest, while large flocks of wildfowl gather here in winter and White-tailed Eagles often hunt over the lakes.

From Becej we drove to nearby Biservo Ostrvo, a narrow expanse of arable land lying between the Tisa River and one of its oxbow lakes and known in English as 'Pearl Island'. In spring, this habitat is a prime spot for breeding Ortolan Bunting, Barred

Warbler, Tawny Pipit and Wryneck – among others. We saw none of these, but we watched 18 Black Storks fly over, followed by a party of six Spoonbills, and saw noisy Common Sandpipers dashing up and down the river. At dusk, we stopped by a ruined farm settlement – one of many recently abandoned as Serbia's rural economy has fallen into decline. Here we watched first a Little Owl, then two Tawny Owls, and finally heard a Barn Owl, all without moving from the spot.

Dinner was at a pizza restaurant in a converted windmill a short drive from the Fantast Castle. A Barn Owl ghosted across the road as we drove back.

Day 4 (Sunday 15th): Novi Sad; Fruska Gora; overnight Fantast Castle

After breakfast, we had a brief guided tour of the castle, its grounds and stables. From the tower we enjoyed an impressive view of the surrounding farmland, reputed to have the richest soils in Europe.

Milan had earlier found Long-eared Owl pellets beneath several trees in the hotel grounds, and a short search revealed at least a dozen owls in two birches, giving us excellent views and photo opportunities. Apparently, this species forms huge winter roosts in Serbia; Milan has counted over 300 in one square in the centre of Novi Sad. Novi Sad was in fact our next stop, after a 100km drive south. We crossed the Danube on a bridge currently under reconstruction – all the historic Danube bridges having been destroyed during the recent NATO bombings – and followed the steep roads up to the Petrovaradin Castle.

This imposing structure was built by the AustroHungarians during the 1800s on an ancient defensive site overlooking the river and the surrounding countryside. After a guided tour of its impressive museum and art gallery, we were led around the extraordinary labyrinth of passageways that lies beneath its walls – built to defend the city or survive a siege. Numerous secret passages allowed its occupiers an escape route to the Danube below.

From Novi Sad we continued south to Fruska Gora, a forested ridge that runs east-west for 75km parallel with the Danube. This is the only raised land in Vojvodina and was once an island in the prehistoric Pannonian Sea, today it is known as Europe's third holy mountain, after Athos and Sinai. Its wooded hillsides shelter 16 orthodox monasteries, most of which have been rebuilt after centuries of conflict and destruction.

The road passed through a region of short-grass steppe on the lower slopes of the ridge, where we spotted several Sousliks scampering for their burrows. This endearing ground squirrel is the preferred prey of a resident pair of Imperial Eagles, one of only a handful in Serbia. Outside one of the monasteries, we scanned the surrounding forest ridges hoping to spot one. Within twenty minutes, a Goshawk, a Black Kite and two Honey Buzzards passed over. But no eagles appeared; or at least none that I was prepared to tick.

The happy blend of birding and culture continued over lunch at a picturesque nearby Salas (traditional farmstead), where we kept one eye on the ridge while downing huge

quantities of rough-hewn farm bread, chicken paprika goulash and succulent local melon – all washed down with local wine. We were joined by Rob and Tricia MacCurrach, an English couple who are working as partners with the Anglican mission agency Crosslinks. Rob is a keen birder and environmentalist, and has done much to enthuse young Serbian birders – including arranging for the RSPB to provide binoculars to Milan and others. Dragan Simic also joined us; Dragan is an inspiring Serbian journalist and ornithologist, involved in many conservation and ecotourism initiatives.

To everyone's delight, a Saker Falcon soon appeared, offering excellent views as it banked in a long stoop after a hapless distant passerine. While the others finished lunch, Milan and I scrambled down to nearby orchard, where we had good views of Syrian Woodpecker, as well as Golden Orioles, Red-backed Shrikes, Spotted Flycatchers and a Hoopoe.

Meanwhile, a large dark bird had been spotted atop a distant pylon. After lunch we piled into the minibus to track it down. It turned out (sighs of relief all round) to be an adult Imperial Eagle. We watched from about 100 metres away, its white shoulders and golden nape glinting in the late afternoon sun, before its mate arrived and both birds glided off to their roost in a nearby forest. It was sobering to learn that a 'rich local businessman' (there appear to be many of these in Serbia) intends to build a luxury resort spa in this valley. We can only hope he does the right thing by the eagles.

We returned via Novi Sad, popping in to visit Robert and Tricia en route. Dinner was in a local take-away, where we tucked into Banjalucki Cevaps – large spicy burgers filled with sour cream. Then it was back for our second and final night at Fantast Castle.

Day 5 (Monday 16th): Slana Kopova; Ludas Jezero (and ringing camp); overnight Sibila Hotel (Carska Bara)

We checked out early and drove east to Slano Kopovo. This is a wide salt-lake, surrounded by open steppe and arable farmland. The sparse terrain, coupled with the shimmering heat along the horizon, reminded me – on a small-scale – of the Makgadikgadi Pans region of Botswana's Kalahari.

We had breakfast – enormous egg, bacon and tomato rolls – beside the van, before Milan and I took a walk around the near shore of the lake. Curlew, Greenshank and Avocet were among many waders gathered on the far shore, while Little-ringed Plover, Green Sandpiper and Temminck's Stint all appeared in the foreground. Autumn migration was clearly under way, with Honey Buzzards, Black Storks and White Storks all passing overhead.

Slano Kopovo is best known for the huge flocks of Cranes that arrive later in the year, while both Saker and Red-footed Falcons hunt the surrounding steppes. We saw none of these, but we did find a handsome Lesser Grey Shrike, a Whinchat and – most unexpectedly – a Corncrake, which I flushed from a maize field while answering a call of nature.

From Slano Kopovo we headed north to Ludas Jezero Lake, where an annual bird ringing camp is run by a group of Hungarian students. We lunched on bean stew at a local Salas before visiting the camp. Here we found team leader Florian Horowat, a biologist and part-time taxidermist based at the north Serbian university of Subotica. He introduced us to the team – a group of a dozen or so students crouched in a makeshift reed shelter on the edge of the marsh. It was an impressive operation, despite this apparently ramshackle set-up, with log books of biometric data dating back 18 years. Florian explained that the camp operates during August and September each year, and that there are five or six qualified ringers and up to 25 helpers. Ringing focuses on *Acrocephalus* warblers (mostly Reed, Marsh and Great Reed), but over 100 species have been trapped and ringed here (from a total of 240 species recorded in and around the lake). All records are submitted to the Belgrade Museum.

As we chatted, helpers continually returned from the mist nets bearing small birds in cloth bags. Great Reed Warbler, Willow Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Marsh Warbler and Reed Warbler were all ringed, measured, weighed and released as we watched. More unusual species often turn up, and Spotted Crake and Kingfisher had already been caught that morning. Eight mist nets are set up at different points around the lake and reedbeds, each of which is checked every hour. At peak times these nets catch up to 300 birds a day. We visited some of the nets, while Marsh Harriers provided an impressive aerial food catching display overhead.

Florian then took us to a vantage point a mile away, where we had a better view of the lake and marshes. At least ten pairs of Bittern breed here. We heard Water Rail calling, and watched a Savi's warbler feeding its nestlings.

Bearded Tits flitted across the reeds and we saw both Garganey and Red-crested Pochard winging over the marsh. A small grassy bank overlooking the lake was scattered with the remains of terrapins, captured and dismantled by the local Otters.

We took our leave of the ringers and headed south to Carska Bara, the Ramsar-protected wetland that was our next destination. A drive of one and a half hours took us to the Sibila Hotel, which lies at the heart of the wetland and overlooks a fishpond complex. While we were unloading the van, a large Otter emerged from the darkness and trotted past just three metres away before sliding into the dark water on the far side of the car park. After this excitement, we retired for a decent dinner and a comfortable night.

Day 6 (Tuesday 17th): Carska Bara; overnight Dubovac Lodge (Deliblato Sands)

Lukacs Sandor, a well-known Serbian nature photographer, was waiting in the lobby to take us on an early morning exploration of Carska Bara. Along the way, and with the help of Milan's translation, he provided a brief overview of the reserve and its birdlife. At least 260 species have been recorded here, and breeding birds include nine species of heron, ten pairs of White-tailed Eagle and 560 pairs of Penduline Tit. Three million kilos of carp harvested a year was an equally impressive statistic. We drove out north along a long causeway, which divides an area of flooded forest from a huge reedbed, with fishponds beyond. These are apparently both the largest reedbeds and the largest fishponds in Serbia. Continuing on foot, we saw the usual Marsh Harriers, Purple Herons and other water birds, plus two White-tailed Eagles

perched in a distant dead tree. In the flooded willow and poplar forest beside the causeway we found various interesting smaller birds, including Wryneck, Lesser- and Middle-spotted Woodpeckers and Lesser Whitethroat, and I flushed a Quail from the path. On the return drive, we watched Bee-eaters raiding beehives. Apparently Serbian beekeepers kill these dazzling birds, which can do significant damage. Lukacs claimed that the male taps the side of the beehive, while the female catches the bees.

We took our packed breakfast to the shore of another fishpond, where I found a Sand Lizard at the water's edge. A security guard challenged us here, which seemed to suggest that the local authorities are more geared to dealing with fish poachers than birdwatchers – despite the fate that this nature reserve claims to have visitor facilities. Over our breakfast rolls, Lukacs explained his painstaking photographic techniques, including setting up his hide in the reeds two weeks in advance using an inflatable boat.

Next, we collected Milan Filipas, recreational manager for Carska Bara, who took us to a small jetty in the forest where two small boats are kept moored for visitor excursions. From here we enjoyed a pleasant one-hour cruise up a flooded creek, Cormorants and Night Herons lurched across the water and terrapins plopped off logs at our approach. We moored beside a wooden walkway that led through towering Phragmites stands to a raised hide. This gave a magnificent view over the reedbeds, which is reputedly a prime birding spot in spring. On this occasion we saw nothing unusual, and a single Black-necked Grebe was probably the highlight.

Back at the hotel, we met the new regional manager of Ribnjak Ecka, the Fishponds company that manages the reserve, and had a slightly awkward discussion about the region's ecotourism potential – of which he seemed to have little grasp. Lunch was a drawn-out affair, with salad, soup, chicken and chips. A White Stork explored the hotel grounds while we talked.

After lunch we set off west on the two-hour drive to Deliblato Sands: our final destination. En route we made an impromptu stop to explore an area of salty steppe beside the road, where large numbers of birds were gathered. We found a mixed flock of Lapwings, Curlews, Hooded Crows and Starlings, with one Golden Plover. Black Storks and a Kestrel drifted overhead. Then it was onwards to the village of Kovacitsa, home of Serbia's naive painters. The galleries were closed by the time we arrived, but we had an interesting peek at some garish oils through a front window.

Next stop was the town of Pancevo, where we called at the office of Marius Olda, the Deliblato Sands conservation director. We spent a pleasant half-hour with this extremely interesting man, the wheels of conversation oiled by a glass or two of Rakia. I left loaded with brochures, T-shirts and CDs about Deliblato – all testimony to his efforts to promote and protect this unique region.

As we approached Deliblato Sands, the landscape became increasingly undulating and grassy – like an American prairie. These were the first of the vegetated dunes. We passed along the southern boundary of the reserve and arrived after dark at a small hunting lodge deep in the forest. Here we tucked into an enormous meal of Wild

Boar steaks, served by two young women who seemed to run the place. After dinner, we transferred our bags to a battered old Russian jeep and lurched off through the forest with one of the hunters. Milan learned from our taciturn driver that we were now in a private fenced hunting area adjoining the reserve, and that at least one pack of Wolves operates in this area. After a fifteen-minute drive along rutted tracks through deep forest we arrived at Dubovac Lodge, our accommodation. One glance revealed this to be a hunter's haven – though the stuffed Long-tailed Duck on the wall seemed an incongruous trophy for a Serbian forest. It was too late and too dark to explore, so we each found a bed and turned in.

Day 7 (Wednesday 18th): Deliblato Sands; overnight Dubovac Lodge

We awoke at sunrise to discover that our lodge had a glorious view across a flooded stretch of the Danube. Mist rose from the water, and Squacco Herons were already up and poking around among the lilies that surrounded the small boat jetty. With dense forest behind, and the road going no further, this is an isolated and idyllic spot.

The jeep – now with a different hunter at the wheel – took us back to the main lodge for breakfast. By daylight we could see properly the mixed pine and oak forest that had loomed so menacingly in the dark. After breakfast – huge sausages, chunky toast and endless eggs – we returned to our minibus and headed for the reserve proper, on the other side of the main road.

Marius had given us a good introduction to Deliblato Sands and its unique animals and plant communities. There are several insect and plant species endemic to the dune forest, and an amazingly large selection of mammals – including rarities such as Marbled Polecat and an unusually high concentration of Wolves (five packs, we were told). The birdlife is particularly impressive here, with breeding Imperial and Lesser-spotted Eagles and a good selection of owls and woodpeckers. Knowing all this, I found the drive frustrating, since we didn't really take the chance to stop and explore. Deliblato is an enormous area – 33,000 hectares – but it's difficult to know where and how to enter it. Apparently guided trails with rangers can be arranged, but we hadn't done so.

We left the reserve at its northern boundary, where we took a walk around the edge of a small farming village.

It's a delightful habitat: grassy dune slopes with scattered cypress and stands of native white poplar, rich with butterflies, lizards and flowering plants. However there is a serious problem with encroaching Robinia and hawthorn, and Marius had told us of the urgent need for habitat management within the reserve. This is good Barred Warbler habitat in spring, and apparently European Rollers breed nearby. We found nothing so exciting, but there was a large Bee-eater colony, and we also saw Turtle Doves, one Hoopoe and a Whitethroat.

We headed back to Dubovac Lodge – first via another stretch of the Danube, from where we could peer across into Romania. A few Common Terns fluttered over the wide, choppy waters, and several Great White Egrets stalked the shoreline. The rest of the return drive passed through more undulating steppe. Here we stopped –

fruitlessly, as it turned out – to photograph Sousliks, and had our picnic lunch in the shade of a single oak beside a vineyard. Crested Larks fluttered around, a Buzzard drifted overhead and a single Lesser Grey Shrike stood watch on a thorn bush.

Back at Dubovac Lodge for an afternoon siesta, I had a chance to explore the foreshore – which was thick with large Marsh Frogs. I spotted three Grass Snakes and one larger darker snake – possibly an Aesculapian – after the amphibians, while Squacco Herons snapped them up from among the lilies.

At about six o'clock we took a boat trip. This for me was probably the week's highlight. The flooded Danube spread out here like an African wetland, with its swampy creeks, dense reedbeds, and drowned trees. We nosed down narrow channels, then out across the great expanse of the river itself. The African feel was enhanced by the water birds, which included countless Purple, Night, Grey and Squacco Herons, together with numerous Great and Little Egrets and several Little Bitterns. Whiskered Terns, Sand Martins and Bee-eaters dipped and wheeled over the water, while Greenshanks gathered along the exposed mudflats.

The Danube is five kilometres wide at this point, and our small motorboat gained speed as we set out for the far shore. Here was a large stand of drowned trees, laden with herons and hundreds of cormorants – including a small number of Pygmy Cormorants. To cap it all, we found a single Osprey atop the tallest tree. Hundreds of Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls passed overhead as the sun set over the water and we returned to the jetty.

That evening we bumped back in the jeep for dinner at the main Lodge. First, we stopped at a large enclosure, where an orphaned Red Deer had been hand-reared by hunters. The young stag appeared at the fence as soon as he heard the vehicle engine. We saw more wild Red Deer in the forest during our drive. Feeding stations are kept stocked for the deer and Wild Boar during winter.

Back at our own lodge after dinner we set to work on the Magelan brochure, editing it on Biljana's laptop so that I had something more accurate and up-to-date to take back to the UK (and specifically the Birdfair). We worked until the small hours.

Day 8 (Thursday 19th): Deliblato sands, Pancevo, overnight Park Hotel

We rose early and bleary, after a very brief sleep, and were driven back to the main lodge. Thousands of Sand Martins danced over the river as we packed our gear into the jeep. After the customary immense breakfast (what must you do round these parts to get fewer than three eggs?), we spent the morning indoors working on the brochure. At lunchtime we said our farewells and headed back towards Pancevo for our debriefing with Marius. Here we had more T-shirts, more discussion about the dilemmas of ecotourism and hunting, and more rakia.

It was late afternoon by the time we set off for the last leg of the journey – to Belgrade. We arrived in the city after dark, and it was sobering to see the stricken, bomb-damaged buildings that still disfigure its skyline. Our accommodation was at the cosmopolitan Park Hotel, where we had a quick turnaround before setting out for

dinner. Our restaurant, the Stara Koliba (old cottage), was an elegant floating affair on the Sava River. Here we were sumptuously wined and dined by Tijana Dukanovic of the national Tourism Association of Serbia. Dragan Simic also joined us. The food was superb (pike fillets in a cream sauce, followed by chocolate pancakes) and the ambience atmospheric and intimate – though slightly marred by strains of a rock concert from the beer festival further down the river.

After dinner, I declined – from sheer fatigue – the offer of Belgrade nightlife. So instead we went for ‘quiet drink’ at the Reka (river) bar in the riverside district of Gardos. This turned out to be a very lively venue, with an excellent local band that played turbo-charged traditional music. The place was packed, with much dancing and general revelry – though a hushed reverence descended when the mandolin player did his amazing solo turn, coaxing unearthly notes from his instrument with a beer glass. We didn’t leave until 3.00am.

Day 9 (Friday 20th): Return to London

We checked out of the Park Hotel after a substantial buffet breakfast, and drove the half-hour to the airport for the 10.30 flight to London. After I checked in, we endured a nail-biting wait for Biljana’s brother to arrive with the revised brochures (printed in Novi Sad, after Biljana emailed him the final files yesterday, then driven down the motorway at breakneck speed this morning).

Biljana handed me the package as they called my name on the tannoy. I said my goodbyes and ran to the plane.

Conclusion

I would certainly recommend Serbia to visiting birders. My own trip was not an intensive birding experience, and August is clearly not the most productive month. I chalked up 132 species in a pretty relaxed eight days, during which birds shared the agenda with culture. Much more is possible.

A visit in spring would bring displaying Great Bustards, calling Corncrakes and far more passerines – including such eastern species as Black-headed Bunting, Barred Warbler, Collared Flycatcher and Sombre tit – while a visit late in the year would bring large flocks of wildfowl and cranes. Nonetheless, I visited some excellent habitats, especially the flooded wetlands, and saw some good birds. With another week, I could also have headed south into the mountains to look for Griffon Vulture, Eagle Owl, Wallcreeper, Rock Partridge and many others.

Serbia undoubtedly has its problems. The economy has not yet recovered from a near decade of sanctions and the strain of accommodating nearly one million refugees, and the average monthly wage is among the lowest in Europe. This makes Serbia’s natural resources vulnerable to those who’ll pay good money to exploit them – most notably Italian hunters, who massacre Serbian birds with impunity.

In September 2004 (shortly after I returned), this grisly trade hit the headlines when Croatian customs officers impounded a truckload of dead Serbian birds en route to

Italy. And while there is no shortage of knowledgeable ornithologists and committed conservationists, there is little interest in birds among the general public.

But the birds are there, the infrastructure is perfectly functional – if a little creaky – and the people are charming. Ecotourism will no doubt arrive soon, and with luck its revenue will prove that there's more to be gained from protecting wildlife than selling it to hunters.

Meanwhile Serbia is a cheap and accessible destination, with some real surprises in store for the visiting birder and some excellent guides to show you around.

Mike Unwin – September 2004