

Customized birding trip in Bulgaria

May 25-29th, 2016

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Day 1: May 25th

route: Sofia - Plovdiv - Pazardzhik - Plovdiv

Birding trip today starts at 5,30. I start a new 5 day long birdwatching trip with a small group of 2 American birders. Our main areas will be the Western Rhodope mountains and the wetlands around Sofia.

The alarm rang at 5,30 a.m. I had a long way to travel to arrive in Plovdiv where I had a meeting with my guests. The early morning travel went smoothly and arrived on time for the meeting. Loaded the luggage of my guests and off we went out birding. The day was going to be spent around the area of Plovdiv and Pazardzhik where we were after birds of the open landscape.

Our first stop was by Maritsa riverside with a huge colony of Sand Martins and Bee-eaters. I counted over a 1000 nests of the Martin and at least a dozen nesting holes of Bee-eaters. Along the track to the colony we had our first Hoopoe, Crested Lark and distant Black-headed Bunting. Once at the colony we also noted a wonderful Kingfisher which had just caught a fish and a single Little Ringed Plover.

After we enjoyed the riverside birding we headed towards an abandoned quarry. Along the road we logged our first Roller which was rather obliging and sat nicely on the wires to be scoped. Just before we arrive in an abandoned quarry we had wonderful views of the Black-headed Bunting, Corn Bunting, Calandra Larks and Black-headed Yellow Wagtail. Once we stopped we looked at a Long-legged Buzzard which was sitting at its usual position. Here we also noted a Black-eared Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike, Spanish Sparrow with well marked black chest and Short-toed Eagle. A small group of **Rose-coloured Starling** flew over but too fast so not everyone managed to see them.

I didn't feel how time passed and soon it was time for lunch. We stopped by a local garage to get some supplies and off we went to the field overlooking some pseudo steppe habitat looking for Stone curlew but in vain. We did see Isabelline Wheatears and a few Short-toed larks but no Stone Curlew. A Lesser grey Shrike turned up struggling with the wind which had built up in the last hour. A Hobby flew over rather low down for our delight although it did find it difficult to fly against the wind.

A short off-road drive took us around the fields where we had superb views of several Ortolan Buntings that visited a little water pool for drinking and bathing. We also had good views of

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Red-backed Shrikes and a short view of a Masked Shrike which didn't stay long enough for our guests to enjoy it.

It was already the middle of the afternoon and the early start was saying its word. It was time to go home. We did stop one more time but with no result so we headed to our hotel in Plovdiv.

"It was wonderful day", said one of my guests.

Day 2: May 26th

route: Plovdiv - Krichim - Devin - Yagodina

The rain last night did not let us go out Scops owling but this morning we were determined to go out earlier. I picked up my guests and off we went on our way to the Rhodope mountains. Our first stops were going to be in the lowlands right before we enter the narrow gorge leading up the mountain.

We pulled out at an orchard where our main target bird was the Wryneck but at the end, it got more exciting than that. We had a few Red-rumped Swallows, nicely perched Bee-eaters, Isabelling Wheatears, Common Buzzards, Lesser-grey Shrike and Black Headed Bunting. A short toed eagle flew over and than a large falcon got my attention. Wow, what could that be? When it turned around i immediately spotted the dark underwing, the very thin mustache and dark brown colour... Saker Falcon! Oh my...This is really something. I haven't seen one for ages and here was one right over my head. It did a few circles and then immediately folded its wings and zoomed down. It must have got something in sight. I lost it but it must have got some prey down in the nearby vines. What a spectacle that was!

After this exciting observation we carried along our route with a few stops to stretch our legs. When driving a heard a Rock Bunting calling from the rocks by the road and stopped to see it. It didn't take us long to find it and enjoy it. After this we had some rain and drove to the hills around Devin to search for the Balkan chamois but in vain. Instead we had a Roe Deer grazing on the roadside meadows and singing Sombre Tit which came over to welcome us. A scan of the cliffs where I expected the Chamois to be produced a Red Fox which disappeared too fast for my guests to enjoy it.

Soon we carried along our road and reached the final parts of the route for the day. A roadside stream produced a well wanted Grey Wagtail in a variety of plumages and a family party of Dippers. The Dipper's chicks did stay for quite long for us to enjoy.

Further along the road i heard a Firecrest and we suddenly stopped to find it. It didn't take us long to see it and together with it we also saw a Goldcrest and a pair of Serins. Thus we called it a day and headed to our hotel for the night. En route we had a few Black Redstarts, Wrens and more Serins.

Day 3: May 27th

route: Yagodina - Trigrad Gorge - Dospat - Batak

The day was quite relaxed but at the same time we did feel rather exhausted. It did not include much traveling but all the emotions and coming in and out of the car did tire us up.

We started with a pre-breakfast walk at 7.30 a.m. around the hotel grounds. Some of the birds we saw were Wren, Black Redstart, Pallid Swift and Serin. After a nice breakfast we headed to Trigrad Gorge where our main target bird was going to be the Wallcreeper.

En route we saw a few Dippers and Grey Wagtails but once we arrived in the gorge there wasn't much. The scenery was gorgeous though. The Wallcreeper didn't turn up regardless of our long stay and constant scanning. Soon it was time to go and we hit the road to the west towards our hotel.

We drove up the road into a remote forest where there wasn't much. We did hear a Barred Warbler but couldn't see it. After some effort we got a few Crested Tits around us. This place did not produce much else so we headed to a well established dining place right in the middle of the forest. Local people have built a little shelter with a small fire place and even cooking equipment. We had sandwiches though.

En route we stopped at Dospat - a small town where we did some logistic things and carried on along our stop where we going to spend a few hours. We arrived in a wonderful forest right on the bank of Shiroka poliana reservoir. Our main target here was the Ring Ouzel and other birds of the conifer area. We stopped by a little puddle which was famous with the local birds. While waiting for the Ring Ouzel we had a pair of Crossbills coming over to drink, both Mistle and Song Thrush, and Serin took a bath. Right next to the car we had two Firecrests, Spotted Flycatcher and a Great spotted Woodpecker nesting hole. Several Ring Ouzels were calling from the area but none were showing and we decided to move away for a while. We saw nothing further along the track but once we came back we noted an adult Ring Ouzel feeding its growing up chick. More than that we had a bonus - Common Treecreeper and a pair of Bullfinches. Soon we were ready to go. The emotions of chasing the Ring Ouzels around did tire us up and we hit the road.

En route we had a sudden stop for a Whinchat and Yellowhammer which were new to my guests. It was getting late so we hit the road and arrived in a small cosy hotel on the bank of Batak reservoir at around 6.00.

Thus we called it a day and will be getting ready for an early morning walk.

Day 4: May 28^h

Batak - Sofia - Slivnitsa

We spent the day mostly traveling. We met at 7,30 for a pre-breakfast walk. Right outside the hotel car park i heard a familiar call. I could not believe it was the bird i could hear so waited for a few more repetitions and then the bird showed for a few seconds. This was enough to

nail it....A young Common Rosefinch. Wow, This would make my day. I haven't seen one for over 10 years. My guests got only a glimpse of it and could not see well all its features. Moreover it was not in its most typical plumage. For me that did not matter that much but i still wanted to see a nice male and would have been very nice to have the guests looking at it for a while. The bird disappeared in a short while and we couldn't get any more views of it.

In the meantime while waiting we had wonderful views of a Little Owl which was nicely sitting on the balcony of the nearby hotel. The mild morning light gave it a fantastic look. After we spent over 20 min waiting for the Rosefinch we decided to take a walk and so we did. Along the road we had a few Firecrests, Crested tit, and i heard a few Crossbills and Lesser Whitethroat. Soon it was time for breakfast and we headed our way.

We had to pack and leave the hotel as soon as possible because we had a long way to travel. We did stop in a broad leaved forest but not much to mention. It was fairly quiet. We drove along a picturesque road around Batak reservoir and stopped for a few pictures. We realised it was getting late so we hit the road.

We drove for a few hours with a few stops for lunch and arrived by some wetlands west of Sofia at around 3 p.m. The first bird we saw was a nice Black Tern. It was high time to change the habitat. We also noted a few families of Coots, and Little Grebe. Quite a few Yellow Wagtails were feeding around us. A distant Little Grebe and a couple of Squacco Herons also turned up.

We were eager for more birding so we went somewhere else. We were greeted by a booming Bittern which we couldn't see but we saw a Purple Heron and a few Marsh Harriers instead. A few Lapwings and a family of Great crested Grebe called it a day. It was 4,30 and all of us were tired from the long day. We headed to our hotel for our last night.

Day 5: May 29th

Here comes the end of our 5 day long birding trip in the Western part of the country. We had a total of over 110 species.

On the last day of our trip we did a quick visit to the nearby marsh which resulted in a few new birds. Some of the birds we managed to see for an hour birding were Bittern, Purple Heron, Great White Egret, Lesser Grey Shrike, Marsh Warbler, Black-headed Bunting and a few other more common birds.

"You did a great job", said one of the guests and left for their long flight to the USA.

Here is a checklist of the birds seen during the period 25-29th of May:

- 1.Gadwall *Anas strepera*
- 2.Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*
- 3.Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*
- 4.Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*
- 5.Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*
- 6.Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*
- 7.White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*
- 8.Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

9. Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*
10. Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*
11. Great Egret *Ardea alba*
12. Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*
13. Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*
14. Eurasian Marsh-Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*
15. Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*
16. Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*
17. Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*
18. Eurasian Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
19. Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*
20. Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*
21. Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*
22. Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*
23. Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*
24. Common Wood-Pigeon *Columba palumbus*
25. European Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia turtur*
26. Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*
27. Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*
28. Little Owl *Athene noctua*
29. Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*
30. Alpine Swift *Apus melba*
31. Common Swift *Apus apus*
32. Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*
33. European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*
34. European Roller *Coracias garrulus*
35. Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*
36. Eurasian Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*
37. Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*
38. Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*
39. Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*
40. Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*
41. Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*
42. Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*
43. Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*
44. Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*
45. Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*
46. Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*
47. Rook *Corvus frugilegus*
48. Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*
49. Common Raven *Corvus corax*
50. Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*
51. Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*
52. Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*
53. Skylark *Alauda arvensis*
54. Wood Lark *Lullula arborea*
55. Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*
56. Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*
57. Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
58. Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica*
59. Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

60. Sombre Tit *Poecile lugubris*
61. Great Tit *Parus major*
62. Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*
63. Coal Tit *Periparus ater*
64. Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*
65. Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*
66. Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*
67. Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*
68. Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*
69. Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*
70. Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna pallida*
71. Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*
72. Great Reed-Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*
73. Savi's Warbler *Locustellaluscinioides*
74. Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*
75. Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*
76. Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*
77. Greater Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*
78. Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*
79. European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*
80. Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*
81. Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*
82. Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*
83. European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*
84. Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*
85. Eastern Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe melanoleuca*
86. Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*
87. Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*
88. Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*
89. Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*
90. European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*
91. Rose-coloured Starling *Sturnus roseus*
92. Black-headed Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg*
93. Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*
94. White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*
95. Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*
96. Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*
97. Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*
98. Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*
99. Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*
100. Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*
101. Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*
102. Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*
103. European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*
104. European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*
105. Eurasian Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*
106. European Serin *Serinus serinus*
107. Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*
108. Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*
109. House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*
110. Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

- 111.Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*
112.Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*

Images



colony of Sand Martins and Bee-eaters © Jordan Hristov



Short-toed Eagle © Jordan Hristov



Black-headed Bunting © Iordan Hristov



Dipper chick © Iordan Hristov



Trigrad gorge © Iordan Hristov



Firecrest, *Regulus ignicapillus* © Iordan Hristov