

Bulgaria

14–24 May 2009

Participants:

Peter and Frances Barlow
Adrian Curley
John Garr,
Barry Mathews
Maurice and Lynsey McCann
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Leader: Dimiter Georgiev

Semi-collared Flycatcher

Day 1: We arrived at noon at Sofia Airport, and made the two-hour drive to the historical town of Koprivshtitsa, where had lunch and did the first birding of the trip. Birds seen included White-throated Dipper, European Serin and Grey Wagtail. In the early afternoon we visited pastures and small orchards at the foot of the Central Balkan Mountains where enjoyed plenty of Isabelline Wheatears and Red-backed Shrikes as well as Barred Warblers, a Common Cuckoo and a pair of Yellow (Black-headed) Wagtails. A Black Stork also flew across. We then had about an hour drive to the Beklemeto Mountain Resort making a short stop en-route at the ridge of the Central Balkan Mountains to see our first Ring Ouzels and Water Pipits.

Day 2: In the morning we birded the main ridge of the Central Balkan Mountain. Highlights included two pairs of Ring Ouzels, several Water Pipits, four Red-rumped Swallows, a male Whinchat, three Red Crossbills and a great view of a perched Common Cuckoo for more than 15 minutes. We tried for White-backed Woodpecker and Red-breasted Flycatcher in the beech forests here but, unfortunately, were unsuccessful. In the afternoon, we drove to the northern Bulgarian Black Sea coast with a stop at a Corn Crake site (heard by all the party but briefly seen only by one person). We enjoyed more good views of the Yellow (Black-headed) Wagtails here as well as plenty of European Turtle-doves, Red-backed Shrikes and Corn Buntings en route. We spent the next three nights in the town of Kavarna in a hotel facing the Black Sea coast.

Day 3: Before breakfast, some of the group found some interesting birds around the hotel including a flock of 19 Glossy Ibises flying above the sea, about 100 Alpine Swifts, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Black Redstart. After breakfast we spent the whole morning at Shabla Tuzla and Durankulak Lakes, with highlights there including seven Paddyfield Warblers, Eurasian Reed Bunting (the thick-billed *reiseri* sub-species), Marsh Warbler, Bearded Tit, Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls, Collared Pratincole, Purple and Squacco Herons, Ferruginous Duck and a pair of Red-footed Falcons. Great Reed-warblers were abundant in the reedbeds and showed extremely well. In the afternoon we visited the steps around Cape Kaliakra where a number of Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks were found. We also enjoyed very good views of Eurasian Thick-knee and Tawny Pipit whilst around the lakes and in the steppes we got the first Black-headed Buntings on the trip together with plenty of Lesser Grey Shrikes. We finished at the Bolata Valley in late afternoon, where we enjoyed two

Eurasian Eagle-owls. We also found the first Pied Wheatear on the trip as well as having good views of European Roller, European Bee-eater and Hoopoe.

Day 4: We spent the morning at Cape Kaliakra seeing plenty of breeding and migrating passerines, including Pied Wheatear, Icterine Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher and Thrush Nightingale. We also very good views of Alpine Swifts flying above the cape. On the sea we observed about 50 individuals of the *desmarestii* sub-species of European Shag. In the afternoon we visited the riverine forest around the mouth of River Batova, where enjoyed two very showy pairs of Semi-collared Flycatcher as well as Short-toed Treecreeper and Hawfinch. We also had great views here of both Lesser Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers. Moving for an hour to an inland area, where observed the Syrian Woodpecker and Black-headed Bunting. We finished the day at the Bolata Valley again where in addition to seeing the Eurasian Eagle-owls again, we got two nice Little Bitterns.

Day 5: Today we drove south to Bourgas via several birding sites. Firstly, we visited a marsh near Varna where we saw Pygmy Cormorants in a breeding plumage together with Squacco Heron. In an arid and cliff area nearby, where we enjoyed a pair of Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes as well a male Pied Wheatear and plenty of European Bee-eaters. In the afternoon, we visited the Eastern Balkan range, where we found Eurasian Wryneck, Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Wood Lark, Barred Warbler, Woodchat Shrike, Hawfinch, and a number of Black-headed Buntings. Two of the group also observed a Grey-headed Woodpecker here. We spent the night in the northern suburb of Bourgas, near the Black Sea coast.

Day 6: We spent all morning and early afternoon in the wetlands around Bourgas: Atanasovsko, Vaya and Mandra Lakes and the Poda Lagoon. We found an excellent variety of waterbirds including White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Purple Heron, Black-crowned Night-heron, Squacco Heron, Little Egret, Little Bittern, Eurasian Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Kentish Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Mediterranean and Slender-billed Gulls, Gull-billed Tern and all the three European marsh terns: Whiskered, Black and White-winged Terns. A Eurasian Penduline-tit was found building a nest Eastern Olivaceous Warblers were singing and an adult White-tailed Eagle was watched eating its prey from a perch; a really exciting observation. In the late afternoon we drove to Sakar Hills, stopping en-route to watch a pair of Montagu's Harriers as well as European Rollers, a flock of Black Storks and plenty of White Storks. We spent the next two nights in a hotel in Sakar.

Day 7: All day was spent in the Sakar Hills. Many exciting raptors were seen here including a pair of Eastern Imperial Eagles, two Lesser Spotted Eagles, several Short-toed Eagles and a Long-legged Buzzard. Other new birds included 6 Masked Shrikes, more than a dozen of Olive-tree Warblers, several Ortolan Buntings and a Sombre Tit. After dinner some of the group went out to watch a Eurasian Scops-owl calling from trees around the hotel.

Day 8: Today we transferred to the Eastern Rhodopes. The morning was spent at the Maritsa River, near the town of Svilengrad, where had splendid views of a male Levant Sparrowhawk. Also present and giving good views were European Bee-eater and European Roller. A further short drive took us to Madjarovo in the Eastern Rhodopes, where had a lunch at the BSPB Visitor Centre. In the birdwatching areas of the reserve we found several new specialty birds including Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Blue Rock-thrush, Western Rock Nuthatch, Eurasian Crag-martin and Rock Bunting as well as raptors including Eurasian Griffon, Egyptian Vultures and Peregrine Falcon. We spent the night in the town of Krumovgrad.

Day 9: Today we visited the Studen Kladenetz region in the Eastern Rhodopes. There is a vulture feeding station here where we watched four Egyptian Vultures and 32 Eurasian Griffons at a carcass. We also found Isabelline Wheatears, Woodchat Shrike, Barred, Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers, and Cirl and Black-headed Buntings, in the area. In the early afternoon, we explored the valley of the delightful River Kroumovitza where found Black Stork, Red-rumped Swallow, Lesser Grey Shrike, a singing male Common Redstart of the *samamisisicus* sub-species, as well as two males of the eastern race of the Black-eared Wheatear. Later in the afternoon, we left

for the Western Rhodopes Mountains, stopping en-route at a mountain chalet where a colony of Pallid Swifts breeds. We spent the night in the village of Trigrad.

Day 10: We spent the morning exploring the beautiful Trigrad Gorge where we enjoyed a pair of Wallcreepers, showing very close to us. Other birds we saw well here included the Peregrine Falcon, European Honey-buzzard, Alpine Swift and Eurasian Crag-martin. In the afternoon, we visited conifer forests of the area where we had nice views of Firecrest, Crested Tit and Red Crossbill.

Day 11: Early morning departure for Sofia for our flight back to the UK.

Dimiter Georgiev