

Bulgaria

Winter

10–14 February 2013

Participants

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Leader Simeon Gigov



Moustached Warbler

Day 1 The flight from Vienna arrived at Varna with two hours delay so we only had time for a short stop at the marshes in the western part of Varna Lake. This otherwise industrial zone of the lake offered us about an hour of very good birdwatching with beautiful quiet weather and nice sunset light. The highlights here were about 20 Pygmy Cormorants, one male Ferruginous Duck, one Northern Goshawk, two Western Marsh-harriers, two Long-legged Buzzards and two Water Pipits. Other birds seen here included Little and Great Crested Grebes, Grey Heron, Mute Swans, Common Shelduck, Gadwall, Common Teal, Mallards, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Common Pochard, Common Redshank, Green Sandpipers, Yellow-legged Gull, Crested Lark, White Wagtail, singing Cetti's Warbler, Eurasian Tree Sparrows, Eurasian Jackdaws (*soemmerringii* race), Reed Buntings, etc. After this short, but very successful stop we had to make an hour-and-a-half journey to our hotel in the small village of Kamen bryag, where we stayed the next four nights.

Day 2 After a very long day yesterday we decided to start a bit later today and left the hotel at 8:00. The cloudy and windy weather also contributed to this decision, so the first thing we did in the morning was to check the wheat fields around Tyulenovo for Calandra Larks and soon found a flock of about 100 birds accompanied by 30 Sky Larks and a single juvenile Merlin looking for its breakfast. After we spent half an hour with the Calandra Larks, we took the road towards Romania, which soon brought us to Durankulak Lake. Along the road we enjoyed very close views of two Great Grey Shrikes. The weather in the last two weeks was warm in the area so the numbers of geese significantly dropped from the peak in the middle of January, when more than 150,000 Red-breasted and White-fronted Geese had been counted in the area. Shortly after we arrived at Durankulak Lake we saw our first flying flocks of geese and they took us to a field close to the lake, where about 2000 White-fronted and 200 Red-breasted Geese were feeding on winter wheat. As soon as the geese calmed down and we had started our search for Lesser White-fronted Goose, an adult White-tailed Eagle arrived and flushed the whole flock. At least we could enjoy a good view of the largest European eagle for a while! Our next stop was at the reedbeds of Durankulak Lake, but the strong northern wind simply meant that looking for passerines would be waste of time, so we took a short walk and watched the birds in the lake. The waves didn't make it easy here but we could still see a Red-throated and two Black-throated Divers, more than 150 Great Crested Grebes, Great and Pygmy Cormorants, Mute Swans, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teals, Mallards, Common Pochard, Tufted Ducks, six Smew, four Red-breasted Mergansers, 15 Little Gulls and Black-headed

and Yellow-legged Gulls. Whilst checking the marshes Alan spotted a Great Bittern in flight, which all of us briefly saw. Further on, we saw 15 Greylag Geese, more Mute Swans and Eurasian Coots, more than 10 Western Marsh-harriers, Meadow Pipits, Common Reed Buntings and Eurasian Wrens. A brief scan over the fields produced quite a few raptors including Merlin, Peregrine, Hen Harrier and Common and Long-legged Buzzards, as well as several small flocks of Red-breasted and White-fronted Geese. Further investigation of the fields around didn't reward us with closer views of Red-breasted Geese, so we left towards Shabla for lunch. The afternoon started with a nice observation of a feeding flock of 50+ Whooper and five Tundra Swans as well as a single juvenile Common Crane, which spent the whole winter with this flock. Shortly after we arrived at Shabla Lake, another interesting observation was made: a single Greater Scaup was resting amongst Tufted Ducks, Common Pochard and Eurasian Coots. Before we left we spotted a Rough-legged Buzzard flying around as well as several Western Marsh-harriers and Common Buzzards. The next stop was at Shabla Tuzla Lake, where more Whooper, Tundra and Mute Swans were feeding. In the nearby trees we found three Hawfinches and a pair of Syrian Woodpeckers as well as one Great Spotted Woodpecker so we could see the differences between these two closely-related species. It was now getting late so we had to leave for the already-guaranteed Eurasian Eagle-owl. Site. On the way, we made a brief stop at Cape Shabla to add a few more species to the list. On the old ruined pier here there were several European Shags, Great Cormorants and Yellow-legged Gulls roosting and in the nearby gulf we saw a single male Red-crested Pochard accompanied by 100+ Eurasian Coots. At 17.00 we were already at Bolata Valley and didn't wait too long before the Eurasian Eagle-owl started calling. We enjoyed excellent views of this majestic bird before it flew to the steppes to look for its dinner.

Day 3 We started early today, leaving the hotel at 07.00 just to be on time to see the first flock of White-fronted Geese leaving their nighttime roost at Durankulak Lake and as soon as we arrived we saw a Golden Jackal crossing the field in front of the lake. Nice start indeed! It was a nice sunny and quiet morning with a beautiful sunrise above Black Sea with thousands of geese flying away to the adjacent fields. Soon the first Whooper Swans left followed by more and more flocks of White-fronted Geese. The Red-breasted Geese were the last to leave the roost and did it in a single flock of about 1500 birds. More than 20 Western Marsh-harriers and one Hen Harrier had also spent the night in the reeds and left to feed in the morning as well as hundreds of Eurasian Magpies and Common Starlings. After the show was over, we took the rough road that goes along the bank of the lake and stop at several spots to look for Bearded Reedlings and European Penduline-tits enjoying splendid views of both species. At another spot we looked for one of the most elusive European bird species; Moustached Warbler. It took us a while before we heard one singing but as soon as we had settled in the best position to see it, two birds responded to the tape almost immediately. Before we left the lake we checked the main water body of the lake again but the species were the same as yesterday, just different numbers; two Red-throated and three Black-throated Divers, 100+ Great Crested Grebes, 20+ Common Teals, 20+ Mallard, 100+ Tufted Ducks, 10+ Common Pochard, 10+ Little Gulls, etc. After we finished at the lake we tried one of the adjacent fields to get closer views of the Red-breasted Geese; we found about 300 feeding there. The first place we visited in the afternoon was a roost of Long-eared Owls with more than 10 birds seen hiding in the conifers. We spent about 30 minutes photographing and watching them and then left for Krapets. At the beach there, we found a mixed flock of about 30 Yellow-legged and Caspian Gulls so we could see the differences between the two species very well. At sea here we also spotted a few Common and Black-headed Gulls as well as Red-breasted Mergansers, European Shags and Great Cormorants. Most of the rest of the afternoon was spent at one of the fields near Shabla, looking for a Lesser White-fronted Goose among the thousands of White-fronted Geese but despite spending more than an hour looking, sadly we didn't find it. Our evening owl session today was for Short-eared Owl and we didn't wait long before we saw it flying over the steppes near Tyulenovo. Subsequently it perched on a metal pipe close to the road, so we could drive with the car and stop quite close to it and take some good pictures of the bird. But that wasn't all for today, when we got back in Kamen bryag we heard a Little Owl calling and eventually saw it on the chimney of a distant house.

Day 4 It was a woodpecker morning today, so we left the hotel at 07.30 for Baltata Riverine Forest Reserve. The weather was back to being cloudy, dull and even foggy at some places along the road, but as soon as we got

there the fog lifted and visibility was good enough to watch woodpeckers and songbirds in the forest. We stopped at several spots here, but before we left we had seen all the species we came for – Lesser, Middle and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Grey-faced Woodpecker and Short-toed Treecreeper, as well as our first Common Wood-pigeons, Eurasian Siskins and Eurasian Nuthatches for the trip. We also saw one male Roe Deer in the forest, which immediately fled as it saw us. The rest of the morning was spent seawatching along the coast between Balchik and the magnificent cliffs of Cape Kaliakra, where we had our best view on the tour of Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, Red-breasted Mergansers and European Shags. There were also more than 200 Black-necked Grebes, 80+ Mute Swans and 12 Northern Pintails. Lunch was taken in Bulgarevo, where some of us were brave enough to try a tripe soup. In the afternoon we tried visited the fields around Shabla looking for geese, but as we couldn't get any closer we left after a short while and went back to Shabla Tuzla Lake. Yet again we saw the mixed flock of Whooper and Tundra Swans in the fields together with the single Common Crane and on the lake itself, we saw eight more Tundra Swans, 52 Eurasian Wigeons, three Common Shelducks and a single Gadwall, as well as a Hawfinch in the nearby wood. On the way back to Kamen bryag, we again saw the Short-eared Owl on its usual perch near Tyulenovo. During the evening we spent time looking for the Little Owl in Kamen bryag and soon we were rewarded with good views of the bird sitting on the roof of a building close to the hotel and it was duly photographed! Another good end to a day and we went back to the hotel for dinner.

Day 5 We packed our luggage in the morning and left the hotel at 08:00 for an hour-and-a-half transfer back to Varna. Before we went to the airport we tried to see a Sombre Tit, which a friend of mine told me sometimes come to his feeder. So we went to Konstantinovo and waited for at least 30 minutes, but sadly it didn't show. Instead we had many Great and Blue Tits, Hawfinches, Chaffinches, Goldfinches, Eurasian Tree Sparrows and a single Dunnock. Nearby, we saw Long-legged Buzzard flying as well as two Common Buzzards and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk. We couldn't linger any longer as on our way to the airport we needed to make a stop for another half hour at a marshy area along the southern bank of Varna Lake. The most interesting species here was the Dalmatian Pelican. We saw two of them feeding in the marsh as well as a Smew, 300+ Pygmy Cormorants, 12 Western Marsh-harriers and 20+ Great White Egrets. On the way to the airport we took the ferry across the lake and by 11.45 we were at Varna Airport. It was a nice short winter trip with some very good species seen. Altogether we saw 99 bird and 2 mammal species during the trip.