

Visit to BULGARIA, Friday 4rd June to Friday 17th June 2010.

Albena Coastal, the Eastern Rhodopes and Sakar Mountains, and the northern coastal lakes of Shabla and Durankulak, and Cape Kaliakra.

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It was way back in July 1997 that we made our first visit to Bulgaria. We were not into birding then, but both remember commenting on the number of birds about. Since then, we caught the birding bug, and decided it was time to revisit.

We spoke to Dimiter Georgiev, Managing Director and tour leader for Neophron Tours whilst on our visit to the Bird Fair last year 2009, and we were very pleased that his company actually did one and two day birding tours. Inter-mixed with local birding, which we could undertake ourselves around the locality where we would be staying, fitted our criteria perfectly.

Our research showed that the two periods which were ideal for Bulgarian birding were, either the autumn, around September time, and the Spring, May to June. As we were also contemplating a holiday in January 2011 to somewhere in climes as yet unknown, which option to choose, was quite easy, so we opted for a spring visit. Researching on the Internet, **Travelling Birder.com** turned up quite a few reports which were quite encouraging, especially one written by **Trond Haugskott** who visited Albena on the Black Sea coast between 3rd and 17th June 2005. This happened to be the same time that we were expecting to visit. During his visit, which was a family holiday, he found a good number of species, and that was basically around the Albena area, with a few other trips thrown in, notably Srebarna, Durankulak, Shabla, and Cape Kaliakra.

We contacted Dimiter through his E Mail address on a number of occasions, and opted to take a two day trip with him into the Eastern Rhodopes and Sakar Mountains, and another one day visit to the northern coastal lakes of Shabla and Durankulak, and Cape Kaliakra. From the itinerary for each of the trips, and the birding which we would be able to do ourselves around the Albena area, we estimated that we should be able to see in the region of 150 species, including about 35 lifers which would be our priority. We decided to make the resort of **Albena** our base, and booked our holiday with Balkan holidays departing from Gatwick, commencing on 4th June for 14 days. Of course many of the birds in Bulgaria are common with the ones we see at home in the UK, but to us, it did not really matter. We visit our local patch sometimes two or three times a week, and it gives us a great deal of pleasure, and excitement when something different turns up, but that's bird watching.

The travel from the UK was uneventful and we arrived at the resort of Albena about 5:00 o clock in the afternoon. On the way we dropped off other holidaymakers in Golden Sands, a resort only a few miles away, but when we arrived in Albena we knew we had made the right choice of resort. Fortunately the Hotel which we had booked was not yet opened, so we were transferred to a different hotel, the Vita Park, which was far more centrally situated. Albena was created in the 1970's and was originally part of the Baltata Forest Reserve. The one thing that was very apparent about the resort was, that the hotels were well spaced out amongst the mature trees, and it appeared that the area was very sympathetically managed to maintain the green effect.

After being shown to our room we could hear, from the balcony, a cacophony of bird song, so it was time to investigate. **Common Nightingales** were singing everywhere, not low down and hidden in bushes like at home, but high in the trees, and it was not long before we sighted our first one. They were everywhere, but the song was not quite the same as we were used to. As we sat in the shade from the very strong sun, we noticed a bird high in one of the pines, too far away to positively identify. As we moved into a closer position, two birds flew into a tree quite close to us. We could not believe our eyes; just a few feet away from us were a pair of **Hawfinches**. In the early months of the year we travelled up to Lynford Arboretum to see our first sighting of this species, and that was a scoped view from about 300 yards away, and there they were, we could nearly touch them. We still had time to investigate further before dinner and added **Barn Swallow** and **Northern House Martin** to our Bulgarian List. **Yellow Legged Gulls** were floating across the sky in numbers and we could see a quite a few **Eurasian Magpies** in the surrounding trees. A very confiding **Eurasian Jay** came to give us a look, and we noticed a **White Wagtail** on a low building just over the way. We could hear our first **House Sparrows** of the holiday, keeping up our record of finding one in every country we had visited, once we had found their location. A group of **European Starlings** raced across the sky, and a couple of **Feral Pigeons** could be seen on a nearby hotel. High on another pine we noticed our first **Hooded Crow**, a much more handsome bird than his cousin the Carrion Crow we find in the UK. It was time for dinner so we wandered back to the hotel to get ready and conclude our first few birding hours in a new country.

Our first sight of a new morning was once again blazing sunshine, summer at last. Following our breakfast we decided to take a walk to find out more about the resort. Bins around our necks, we soon found more birds; **Chaffinches** were very vocal and easy to find, as were the **Eurasian Blackbirds**, once again with a

slightly different song. Probably the highlight of the holiday was our next sighting, a family of **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** feeding their young. They were only about ten feet from us, but were more intent on providing sustenance for their offspring to worry about as. This was our first lifer of the holiday which gave us great views for more than five minutes, in actual fact they were too close to use our bins. Once they had passed through we soon picked up **Long Tailed Tits** high in a nearby tree, and **Great Tits** and **Eurasian Blue Tits** followed quite quickly afterwards. We heard the call of **Eurasian Golden Orioles** and soon spotted a beautiful male in his immaculate breeding plumage. We caught the courtesy bus to the beach, just a five minute ride away, after we had finished our morning walk, with a view to exploring the Baltata reserve. We soon found out that we could only walk along the beach road due to the reserve being a marshy bog, although, there was a road which infiltrated the reserve which we thought could be quite interesting. We soon came across our first **European Robin** of the holiday, down a small track which led to what we considered to be a sewerage treatment centre from the smell it emitted. We also soon found a singing **Blackcap**, and a **European Greenfinch** "screeing" high in the canopy. We returned to our hotel later in the afternoon and continued to explore the area. There were some great walks, and plenty of potential for finding new birds. Many of the hotels were not yet open so we had plenty of areas to explore within the undisturbed gardens of the various hotels. We saw many of the birds we had seen already, but could not get to grips with the various Woodpeckers zipping from tree to tree, and not stopping for identification. There are three Woodpeckers available to see in Bulgaria which are all very similar, so a sitting bird is essential to identify the face pattern markings.

Day three dawned once again bright and sunny, with temperatures in the low thirties, somewhat better than we had at home before our departure. Continuing with our exploration of the area we found a bare patch of ground across the main road, where it appeared some sort of structure was planned. The footings were in and walls had been built to about two feet in height, ideal to sit in the shade and survey the surrounding areas of mature bushes and trees. We recognised the call of a **Eurasian Reed Warbler** and found it in a most unlikely place, where no water was evident. As we sat on the wall, **Golden Orioles** passed overhead and we could hear the calling of a number of **Common Cuckoos** and **Eurasian Turtle Doves**, but neither species came forward to be identified. My wife Isabel spotted a bird sitting low on a bush some twenty yards from us. We had seen a number of **Red-backed Shrikes** in Lesvos last autumn, but this one was showing its finest breeding plumage, a lovely bird. Once again Woodpeckers flew over us and disappeared into the foliage and **Barn Swallows** quartered low over the site for insects. As we returned to the hotel, **Hawfinches** and **Nightingales** were still very easy to see, and we were delighted when, in the same small fir tree that we saw our first Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers feeding young, we found a family of Nightingales doing just the same thing. We were fortunate to spot a **Green Woodpecker** feeding a youngster in a nearby hotel garden, once again a sight which we had not encountered before.

Monday 7th June was our first trip out with Dimiter up to the northern lakes close to the Romanian border. We opted for an early start and were picked up at 6:30 am. This trip we expected to cross off some of our target species. Before we had left, I E Mailed Dimiter with a wish list of species which would be new for us, and he indicated that only 35 species were likely. As he explained, species like Thrush-Nightingales, and other songbirds, were only possible in the early spring, and by the beginning of June they would be long gone. Many of them will be returning in the autumn as they go back to their wintering grounds but we couldn't wait until then. We had just passed by the nearby town of Balchik, just a few miles from Albena, when Dimiter pulled into a lay by and set up his scope. To our amazement, so close to the resort where we were based, he focused on a superb **Eurasian Eagle Owl** (illustrated) perched on a ledge halfway down a steep cliff face. Although it was some distance away, all the features were clearly identifiable, and his ear tufts quite distinguishable. The **Eagle Owl** is the largest of the Owls and is a real beauty, and one we were looking forward to seeing on this trip. So, this was our second lifer of the holiday, and another to cross off the wish list. On our way up to the lakes, Dimiter was continuously pointing out various birds, and it was amazing how many **Eurasian Turtle Doves** we saw; they certainly weren't scarce here. We arrived at our first destination, **Lake Durankulak**, the furthest of the lakes. One of the first birds we encountered was a flying **Purple Heron** together with a number of **Ferruginous Duck**, another life bird for us, which alighted on the lake to our left, allowing us good scoped views. A **Mute Swan** was on the lake as were a number of **Common Pochard** and **Eurasian Coot**. Dimiter spotted a **Great-crested Grebe** but it disappeared into the reeds before we were on it. A little further on we had five **Purple herons** in the sky at once as well as a single **Grey Heron**. A **Common Cuckoo** flew over and alighted in a low tree giving us easy scoped views. No more Lifers yet, but that soon changed when Dimiter concentrated his scope on a beautiful 'starling sized' **Great Reed Warbler** singing his unmistakable song from the top of some tall reeds. We had this bird down as seen in Majorca last autumn, but seeing this one, and hearing its harsh rough loud call, we were now unsure whether our identification was correct. It was very



windy up here at Lake Durankulak, and many of the warblers were laying low in the reeds, but Dimiter was excited as he pointed out a singing **Paddyfield Warbler** swaying perilously on the top of a nearby reed. As he said, a Paddyfield Warbler is comparatively difficult to find, but when the wind is blowing it's almost impossible. This was followed with a **Eurasian Reed Warbler** and a star bird on our wish list, a superb **Savi's Warbler** singing his amazing reeling song, similar to that of a Grasshopper Warbler, but in a deeper tone. **Sand Martins** were in the air, and a group of **Northern Lapwings** took up from near to the lake. A **White Stork** took off right in front of us and we spotted a **Western Marsh Harrier** quartering the wetland. Isabel spotted a nice male **Reed Bunting** of the eastern race, which quickly disappeared into the reeds. These eastern race Buntings have a much stouter bill than the ones we are used to seeing at home.



A **Common Cuckoo** came out of hiding and alighted in a nearby tree, and a **Eurasian Hoopoe** was an easy fly past sighting. On our way back to the vehicle we noted a beautiful **Lesser Grey Shrike** perched high in a distant tree accompanied by a few **European Bee Eaters** (Illustrated). Not an easy sighting, but on the beach we found a **Little Ringed Plover**, one of the only waders we found. Dimiter explained that the waders which appeared April/May time, were only present during passage to their breeding grounds, and would be returning around July and August when they will reside for a while during migration. Back aboard the transport, we headed for **Lake Shabla**, one of the other lakes and is Bulgaria's easternmost point. Once again, the almost deserted roads up in this north easterly part of the

European subspecies (soemmerringii) of the **Western Jackdaw**, which showed the distinct pale collar, a variation from our own species at home. A flypast **Red-footed Falcon** was our sixth lifer of the holiday, but we were hoping for a better view later on. We moved towards the ruins of an ancient fortress at the end of the Cape, and noted a hovering **Eurasian Kestrel** in the distance. Our first pull in near to the ruins gave us the bird that the Cape is renowned for, a beautiful male **Pied Wheatear** (illustrated), another target species, walking about just a few yards away on a rocky outcrop. This area also gave us **Black-headed Yellow Wagtail**, and after a long search we located an **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** sing in a nearby bush. We parked right at the end of the Cape and whilst searching the water at the foot of the steep cliff we spotted a couple of **Common Dolphins** cavorting in the sea below. A party of **Little Gulls** passed overhead, and we spotted a number of **Great Cormorants** on the cliffs. We had hoped to find the **Mediterranean Shag** but, not to be perturbed, Dimiter obliged by driving into the valley below Cape Kaliakra where we found a few

perched on the jutting cliff-face. On the way down to the valley, a **Black Redstart** flew up from the track. The Shag was another of our target species, and now brought our life bird total up to seven. We passed through the "Steppe" area of Cape Kaliakra after leaving the valley, and were pleased to see that it had not been polluted with the massive wind turbines found in other areas. Kaliakra has one of the last remains of steppe habitats in Bulgaria and is a nature reserve, where large numbers of typical steppe birds can be observed, and is one of the very good birdwatching sites in Bulgaria. We reached the nearby town of Kavarna where we had lunch and had our first **European Goldfinches** of the

holiday. We had heard them constantly in the Albena area, but had been unable to locate their whereabouts. Following lunch we moved away from the town into the open steppes habitat on the way to **Sveti Nikola**. There were masses of birds everywhere, although mainly larks, buntings and pipits. One of the commonest species of the habitat was the **Crested Lark**, closely followed by the large **Calandra Lark**, another one of our target species. The **Calandra lark** (illustrated) is a very large unmistakable lark, and could be seen almost everywhere in this habitat. We also picked up surprisingly our first **Wood Pigeon** of the holiday sitting on a telegraph wire, they are certainly less common here than at home. Other species we picked up on the steppes were **Corn Bunting**, **Eurasian Skylark** and **Tawny Pipit**.

We then found a superb **Long-legged Buzzard** sitting on a telegraph post some distance away, yet another of our target species. We moved on to another area of Steppe and searched for a few more species to adorn our ever increasing list. He searched for **Eurasian Thick-knee** (Stone Curlew) without any luck, and was disappointed that we also could not find any **Rose-coloured Starlings**, which are usually quite easy at this site. We did however find **Greater Short-toed Lark**, and **Eurasian Linnet**.

Dimiter was anxious to find the two Wheatear species for us, the **Northern Wheatear** which we find at home and the **Isabelline Wheatear**, (Illustrated) which was another of our target birds. He did not disappoint, and found them both, giving us ample opportunity to compare the two species. We had searched for this bird in Lesvos last time we visited but were out of luck. Dimiter told us that we would get better and closer views of this species when we visited the mountains in a few days time. One thing about this trip was that Dimiter gave us plenty of time to study the features of the birds, and was very patient to ensure that we got good views. We eventually arrived back at our hotel in good time for the evening meal and reflected on an excellent day where we added 10 more species to our life list and 66 species for the day. During the trip we saw very few mammals, although we did find a couple of road kills, which upset Dimiter. The first was a Wild Cat conspicuous by the ringed tail, and a Stone Martin an obvious relative of the Pine Martin seen in Scotland. It was quite amazing how these animals could have been killed since there was very little traffic on the roads, especially around the areas we had visited. The other mammal we were fortunate to see was a **European Souslik**, a ground squirrel, which could be likened to a mere cat.

We decided that after a long day, we would spend the next day at the beach relaxing and doing absolutely nothing. There were plenty of birds on the beach, but not the sort we were looking for.

Day six was to be another quiet day for us as the following day we would be embarking on a two day trip to the mountains. We did however decide to take a look into the Baltata reserve via the only road that went into the reserve, and reached the lookout tower where we sat in the shade listening to the birdsong. There were many birds about but difficult to see. The trees were heavily in leaf, but Isabel quickly spotted a **Short-toed Treecreeper** scuttling up the trunk of a nearby tree. Once again this was a lifer for us and it got even better when we discovered an unmistakable **Semi-collared Flycatcher** high in the canopy by a broken off branch. We watched the bird for some time and by the way the bird was reacting it could have been feeding chicks.



These were both welcome additions to our wish list. We also found a **Middle-spotted Woodpecker**, but nothing else of note. During an evening walk in Albena we heard, and eventually saw, our first **Song Thrush** of the holiday.

Day seven arrived of our holiday we were up bright and early for our trip to the Sakar Hills, and the Eastern Rhodopes Mountains. We were picked up by Simeon Gigov, another of the guides used by Neophron Tours and as we found out was a very skilful birder with great conservation and natural history knowledge. Under normal circumstances, Neophron operated this two day tour from areas south of Sunny Beach resort, but they kindly accepted our request to accept us from much further north. We knew it was to be a long drive, that's why we opted for an early pick up time. Dimiter had contacted Simeon and made him aware of our target species, and on the way he said that he would make a brief stop at the Bourgas Lakes. Our first stop

was at Atanasovsko Lake where Simeon new the whereabouts of a nesting site for the **Eurasian Penduline Tit**, one of our target species, and it was not long before we found the nest, and had great views of the species flying backwards and forwards with grubs for the young. We visited the Bourgas Lake where we had, **Black-headed Gulls**, **Pied Avocet**, **Great-crested Grebe**, **Black-winged Stilts**, **Kentish Plover**, **Little Egret**, **Gadwall**, **Mallard**, **Great White Pelican** and the one which was on our wish list, a **Dalmatian Pelican**. (Illustrated) The pelicans, swimming side by side, it was useful to be able to make comparison between the two species. Simeon also spotted a group of **Mediterranean Gulls** flying over the lake just before we left. A brief stop at the

"Poda" visitor's centre gave us two more species, namely **Common Tern** which were nesting on a raft, and another of our must see birds, the **Pygmy Cormorant**. Simeon spotted a **Eurasian Spoonbill** swooping over the lake, but unfortunately we failed to find it. Had we have visited Bulgaria earlier in the spring, or waited until the autumn, the lakes would have been full of various wader species most of which we have already made acquaintance with. Yes, it would have swelled our Bulgaria birds list, but would not have increased our world sightings.

We left the city of Bourgas and were soon into beautiful green countryside carpeted with wild flowers. It became quite apparent that the further we got into the real Bulgaria; we seem to be transported into a lost age. Motor vehicles gave way to mule carts and bicycles, and we soon started to see **White Storks** nests on top of pylons and telegraph poles. The stork's nests attracted **Spanish Sparrows**, which nested in the lower part of the structure. We were just through one village when Simeon stopped in a lay-by beside the road where we watched masses of **Common Swifts** intermixed with a few **Pallid Swifts** obviously nesting somewhere nearby. Once into the **Sakar hills**, we pulled in at the top of a rise which he called Sinaporo Junction, where Simeon indicated that there was a good chance of seeing the **Eastern Imperial Eagle**, (illustrated) a very large eagle, a bird most similar to a Golden Eagle but smaller. We had not been there long before our first one was spotted, soaring in the distance. It was coming our way so we had exceptional views as it came almost overhead. The **Imperial Eagle** was another which was on our target species list, and the fourth new bird for this two day trip. During the time we were watching we also spotted a **Black Kite**, and a number of **Common Ravens**. **Common Buzzard** were easy here in the hills, and it became quite monotonous when most of the raptors were "yet another Buzzard"; they were very common. On another stop we added **European Honey Buzzard** to our trip list, a bird slightly larger than the **Eurasian Buzzard** but having a flatter wing pattern when gliding. As we moved further towards the mountains we saw **Little Owls** on a couple of occasions, sitting on small stone buildings. We stopped for our lunch at a restaurant in a beautiful pine clad forest setting, and while away an hour watching the numerous birds flying past us. A **Mistle Thrush** alighted in a nearby tree, and amongst the hirundines, we noted a number of **Red-rumped Swallows**. It is very difficult to remember the exact locations of all of our sightings and also the order of seeing them, but generally I think I have got most of them correct. We were now into the **Eastern Rhodopes Mountains**, not high mountains, but quite breathtaking scenery. We made numerous stops along the way still adding new species to our list. We had, **Booted Eagle**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, and **Woodchat Shrike**, and of course many others which we had already seen before. We finally arrived at **Madzharovo Vulture Conservation Centre** where we were shown around, and had explained to us the reason for the centre. We had a brief rest before climbing the wooded slope behind the centre looking for **Eastern**



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Bonelli's Warbler, but alas it failed to show, which was a shame as it was one of our target birds. When we left Albena that morning, we had packed fleece sweaters, and our rainwear, but the temperature in the mountains was unbelievably hot, more so than at the coast, so it became apparent that that clothing would stay in the bag. We left the centre and arrived in a beautiful place at the foot of some high cliffs, the Kovan Kaya Cliffs. As we looked upwards into the sky, there were raptors everywhere. **Eurasian Griffin Vultures** were our first spot, huge birds with long fingers at the end of each wing, bigger than most Eagles, soaring effortlessly in the sky. There were quite a few **Crag Martins** in the sky together with **Red-rumped Swallows**.

There were also a couple of attractive **Egyptian Vultures** (illustrated) which were with the Griffins, but they were much smaller and unmistakably marked with a good deal of whiteness showing on the under-wing as they soared above us. These two vultures were part of our wish list, and were two welcome additions. A **Black Stork**, which apparently breeds on these cliffs, joined the party, a completely differently shaped bird with its long neck and long legs giving it a different silhouette in the sky. Simeon scoured the cliffs and somehow found a **Blue Rock Thrush** perched on a large rock. High in the sky we had a **Peregrine Falcon**, dwarfed by the vultures, it was a great place here. Simeon ceased to amaze us; high on a rock nestled in the cliff-face he spotted a **Chukar**, a bird we had unsuccessfully looked for in Lesvos. The Chukar is a similar bird to our Red-legged Partridge, but has a larger cream bib, and different neck markings. What a find, another target species, we would never in a million years looked up there for the bird. He followed this amazing sighting with yet another, when he scoped a beautiful **Eastern race Black-eared Wheatear**



(Illustrated) This eastern race bird has more extensive black on the face of the male than the western race, and is somewhat more attractive. Finally before we left the cliffs, Simeon pointed out a **Wood Lark**, perched on a lower part of the cliff. It was now quite late in the afternoon, so we left to find our base for the night, which was to be in Borislavtsi village. As we drove along the narrow road Simeon braked hard and stopped, he jumped out of the drivers seat and went around to the front of the van, bent down and picked something up from the road. It was an injured **Cirl Bunting**. He put it into a box in the back of the van and we continued to the Guest House, Thracian House, where we would be

spending the night. There was still time to do a bit more birding before dinner so we left the van at the house and walked down a small track to see what else we could find. We searched for the **Olive-tree Warbler**, but it was not showing itself, but we did find a superb **Rock Bunting** further along the track. Nothing else was forthcoming that evening, so we returned to the guest house ready for a wash and brush up before dinner. Simeon had disappeared in the van, and it was only when he returned we realised that he had taken the injured Cirl Bunting over to the Vulture Centre for assisted treatment. It transpired that the bird had a broken jaw, and that he did not give it too much hope, but when he arrived at the centre it was flying around in the back of the van. Who knows, a little bit of loving care may have saved its life. A rough estimate of the distance we had travelled that day was almost 500 kilometres, about 300 miles, all that distance and birding too. We were all quite tired, especially Simeon who had driven all the way from Sofia the previous day, he must have been totally shattered.

We rose bright and early the following morning and we ready for a walk around the area before breakfast. We retraced our steps of the last evening and came across a large number of sparrows on the ground in front of us. There were a large number of **Spanish Sparrows**, almost as many common **House Sparrows** and a few **Eurasian Tree Sparrows**. We expected to be going almost straight back, but Simeon had other ideas. In the area around Borislartsi village we found Subalpine Warbler, **Barred Warbler**, a **Sombre Tit**, (illustrated) and last but not least we found the elusive **Olive Tree Warbler** which wouldn't show the previous evening. That is another three birds on our wish list which is certainly increasing as every day passes. The Olive Tree Warbler, very elongated and with a long powerful bill, is one of the largest of the European Warblers, and is not just found in olive groves, as Bulgaria doesn't have olive trees. After breakfast we returned to the area around the Vulture Centre and were about to walk the wooded hillside again to look for the **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler**, but it was singing just a few yards from us. We returned to the Kovan Kaya cliffs just to see if there were any different birds in the vicinity. We saw most of the ones we had seen the previous day,



with the exception of a **Eurasian Hobby**. On the way from the cliffs we searched for the **Golden Eagle**, but just as yesterday he was not at home. Similarly we also could not find the **White-tailed Eagle**, but that's birding. We then drove up to the vulture feeding station at **Studen Kladenets**, and after parking the van walked up the hillside to view the feeding vultures. There were plenty of vultures in the sky but they were not going to come down to feed. It appeared that the carcase put out for them was not fresh, or maybe they were just not hungry. Since the BSBP/BirdLife Bulgaria (www.bspb.org) has introduced vulture feeding, the numbers have definitely increased over the past few years, which has got to be good news. We waited about an hour and then moved back down the slope to the van. Maybe now we would be going back. No we wouldn't, Simeon drove back to the Vulture Centre where we had lunch. By now we had found 27 of our target species. After lunch we set off for Albena, which we knew was a long long way. We had driven some way when Simeon pulled off the road, stopped and we all alighted from the van. He pointed to a small raptor which had flown into a tree a few yards from us. As we searched it appeared from the tree and we had excellent views as it rose into the sky and away. Simeon said we had been very lucky; sometimes he would have to search for a half an hour before he can get a sighting. We were just entering the town of Svilengrad, by the Maritsa River, and the bird was the **Levant Sparrowhawk**, yet another lifer for us. Surely now we would be heading back, no not yet, as further along the main Bourgas road, Simeon turned off onto a minor road, which he said runs almost parallel to the other major road. We pulled into the cover of some trees and once again started searching, this time it was for the **Masked Shrike**. Eventually it was spotted flying into the branches of a tree, and after a while, Simeon managed to train his scope on the bird. I was just focusing on it when it decided to move on. We both managed to catch the bird in flight, not the best view in the world, but sometimes you have to take what you are given. There will always be another time when we might see the Shrike in a more favourable situation. This time we were moving on, and eventually caught up with the main road we were on originally. It was a long journey back to Albena, during which we reflected on a great couple of days with Simeon.

For the next few days we decided it would be for relaxing. The two day trip to the mountains involved some 650 miles in total and as you can expect we were both feeling quite exhausted. Dimiter had offered to take us out in a morning, to try to find a few of the species we had missed out on, namely, **Black Woodpecker**, **Grey-headed Woodpecker**, **Icterine Warbler** and **Little Bittern**. Each of these species would be lifers for us, so we decided to give it a go. After contacting him, he said he would pick us up on Tuesday 15th June at 7:00 am. In the meantime we had walked in Albena, and had spotted two more species for the Albena list, a **Black Redstart**, which we found in one of the hotel gardens, and an overhead **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, a new one for Bulgaria. Dimiter picked us up on time for out 'top-up' trip, which we expected would be locally around the Albena area; not so, we were driven through Varna and into the countryside along a small dusty track until we reached an area of forest with a canal running along its edge. What was to follow was an experience we will never forget. Before we left we decided to use our shorts which had zip-on bottoms to hopefully protect us, and Isabel who had a long sleeved top, took that with her as well. Dimiter had casually suggested that we take some Mosquito repellent with us because there would be a few about in the forest. We zipped on our shorts bottoms; I tucked mine into my socks, and having no protection for my arms, covered them with repellent. We also covered our faces with the stuff, and me my head, since I have very little hair to protect me, so we were ready for battle, so we thought. Dimiter also asked for some repellent, so we thought, oh dear. No sooner had we stepped into the forest, our clothes were covered with the blighters. We were looking for the Icterine Warbler, and soon heard one calling. We saw glimpses of a bird in the tree tops, but we wanted better views than that, so we went deeper into the forest. We found another, which I got onto, but Isabel didn't, and by now we were getting bitten to pieces. Our Arms and faces, and I my head, weren't getting touched, but our backs were getting well bitten all around the shoulder region and me on my ankles through my socks. We had been in the forest for about thirty to forty minutes, it was torture, but Dimiter insisted on us both having good views, so when eventually the bird came close enough, we were both satisfied with the identification, we turned around and thankfully went back the way we came.

Hallelujah, we both got the **Icterine Warbler**, and we were out of the forest. These "mozzies" must have been as big as elephants to bite us through our clothing; it really did not seem possible, maybe a suit of

armour would have been a better idea. We walked along the bank of the canal and it was not long before I saw the first **Little Bittern** (illustrated), which flew away from us further upstream. However it proved to be quite an easy find and we had one sitting in the reeds just about 20 yards from us, so the identification was quite easy. We retreated back to the van and had some of the breakfast we had brought with us, and then stood for a few minutes looking for a **Lesser Spotted Eagle**, but unfortunately we were out of luck. The area we had been in was the **Kamchia Riverine Forest** reserve, so future visitors be warned. We then drove to three other sites which are fairly reliable for Woodpeckers, and had been seen there recently, but it appeared that at all of the

sites the chicks must have hatched and flown. If they had still been in the nest, then the sightings would have



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been fairly certain, but once they had fledged they could be almost anywhere. Well we did get two more lifers taking our total to 32 for the Bulgarian visit; not bad considering quite a lot of our holiday was on the beach. During one of our walks around the Albena area we were thrilled to find a **Red Squirrel**, the first one we had ever seen.

We thanked Dimiter for his efforts, and would certainly recommend his services to anyone interested in having a holiday which is birding and relaxation as well. He can be contacted at neophron@dir.bg. Overall we had 134 species during the holiday, and 32 life birds.

CONCLUSIONS.

The resort of Albena was almost perfect, very green with good wooded areas. The hotel, the Vita Park, was ideally located, and although some way from the sea, the courtesy bus took only five minutes to the beach and went every 30 minutes from 9:30am to 4:30 pm. On the beach there were free sun beds and parasols, as there were at the hotel. A snack bar at the beach, for all inclusive customers, was excellent with food, drinks and ice-creams available free of charge.

There were plenty of nice walks around the resort, and a good many birds to keep us amused. The food at the hotel was satisfactory and had good variations, in a self service restaurant. A small train, not on rails, but free moving, was available to go all around the resort to most of the hotels. and gave a chance for patrons to see the resort. It took about one hour to do the circuit and cost 10 leva, about £4 between us, to go all the way round, a nice way to spend the evening after dinner.

When is the best time to go birding in Bulgaria? It all depends what you want to see, but for sheer numbers of birds, probably the first half of May is very good. September is also good especially if you want to see plenty of birds during migration. It also gives you the opportunity to observe the raptor migration, which is at times, very spectacular so we are told.

What also has to be considered is that, during the first half of May, many of the hotels would not be open, and the weather might not be as good. September is possibly the best for weather but you need to be lucky to book the right time. Who knows exactly the dates that the migration will be in full swing.

Neophron Tours (www.neophron.com), the company who operate many of their own tours, and guide other tour companies, we found were excellent. The two guides we had spoke excellent English, and were very enthusiastic, and were also very good company. They knew the birds well and were only happy if you were satisfied.

A very interesting fact about Bulgaria is that there are no Rabbits only Brown hares. It seems logical that to have to artificially feed the vultures with meat carcases could be overcome by introducing rabbits to the country, especially in the mountains. This is just a view.

The photographs used in this report were by courtesy of their authors, to whom we are very grateful.

Anyone who needs any information please feel free to E Mail us.

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