

BIRDS, BEARS AND BUTTERFLIES IN BULGARIA

4th to the 12th June 2012

Participants: *John Anderson, Nicholas Carter, Roy and Janet Chapman, Stella Gamble, Martin Harris, Jill O'Rourke*

Monday 4th June

We left a rain-sodden England at around 6.20am: after a 2hr 40min flight we landed in a hot and sunny Sofia. Much to our surprise, the plane was completely full, prompting us to wonder where everyone was going to. Dobry from Spatia Wildlife arrived shortly after I had emerged with my bag, and we soon had the minibus loaded and away.

Our first stop was in a broad, grassy valley that apparently used to be grazed heavily by livestock, but has now reverted to relatively rank and long grassland. Our first bird was a singing marsh warbler, and we saw several more, followed by black-headed yellow wagtails. There were several whinchats and stonechats, linnets, sky and crested larks and a distant red-backed shrike, the first of many. Corncrake was our target bird, and we heard a couple, but not surprisingly didn't manage to see them.



Black-veined whites

We continued on through unspoilt and quite empty countryside until stopping for our picnic lunch in a butterfly-filled meadow. Here there

was a variety of blues (common, small, silver-studded) and fritillaries (Queen of Spain, cardinal, niobe, spotted), plus lots of black-veined whites, a few eastern festoons, small heaths,



Silver-studded blues

Berger's clouded yellow and what was probably a black hairstreak. Red-rumped swallows flew high over the valley, and unseen nightingales and orioles sang. The sun was hot and it was a little windy, so the butterflies were very active. We admired a huge golden eagle's nest on the nearby cliff, but apparently the pair isn't using it this year.

After lunch we had another short walk close to the river, watching silver-studded blues puddling for salts or minerals, seeing a flying glider and a large copper. Small tortoiseshell was also new for the list. Driving on, we passed several roadside red-backed shrikes, and flushed an ortolan bunting from the road. Unlike Poland, horses and carts are still common here. We drove briefly through heavy, thundery rain, but emerged again



for a stop in high, rolling meadows where Dobry hoped to find Russian heath. He failed, but we did enjoy the scenery, the chorus of crickets and a handsome herd of horses, including a hefty stallion and mares with foals. It was then just a short drive on to our hotel, the appropriately named Panoramic in the picturesque village of Koprivshtitsa. There was a black redstart singing from a nearby rooftop to greet us when we arrived. My room has a delightful view, with swifts, swallows and house martins feeding happily overhead, and a hummingbird hawkmoth sipping nectar from the petunias in the window boxes on the balcony.

Dinner was a jolly affair, with excellent salads followed by interesting main courses – I had moussaka, quite different from anything I've ever had in Greece. It had been a long day, so it was good to get to bed.

Tuesday 5th June

I heard the first black redstart singing at 4.20, when it was still dark (though a full moon meant that it wasn't that dark). We – John, Martin and Nick – met with Dobry at 6am, and enjoyed an interesting morning up the valley. Birds were a little slow, but we enjoyed good views of red-backed shrikes and barred warblers, for the two seem to like the same habitats,

if not each other. There was a woodlark on the wire that I scoped and a hawfinch was glimpsed. We took a short walk near a large,



Red-backed shrike

derelict building that held nesting swallows, house martins and pallid swifts. The latter gave terrific views as they screamed past us, just feet away. I can't recall ever seeing pallids better. According to Dobry, this is a species that has increased considerably in Bulgaria in recent years. It was a warm but overcast morning.

After a good breakfast we left the hotel at 9am, dropping down into the town where we soon found a perched male crossbill, sitting on



Spot the crossbill

top of a spruce close to the town square. A short walk around the town centre added a singing serin and handsome common redstart to the list. A hungry puppy joined us for most of our walk. Dogs are popular here: I saw both a giant schnauzer and a German shepherd being walked on leads. Several horse-drawn carts in town, evidently delivering milk in churns.

Our next destination was the mountain, our quarry rock partridge, a bird I really wanted to see. Dobry drove us up a narrow, rocky track, through a beech wood and then up to the open country beyond, where he knew the territories of three pairs of partridges. As we left the bus a few warning splashes of rain fell on us, and the more sensible and better prepared members of the group took their waterproofs. The rain, though, proved light and intermittent, though the thunder rumbled around the mountains and the sky looked increasingly



threatening. We listened to singing yellowhammers and tree pipits, saw a distant cock rock thrush and a couple of ravens, but of the partridges there wasn't a sign. The rain became increasingly heavy, and had a set-in look about it, so we decided to head back towards the bus. Most of us scrambled up the steep grassy slope. At first the intention was to try and find the partridges, but as the rain fell it became simply a matter of getting back to the main track, and the bus. I slipped over once, as the grass was becoming increasingly treacherous in the rain, and by the time I got back I was soaked through to the skin. Fortunately I had had the foresight to change my shoes. So the partridges beat us, though the weather played a major role in our defeat.

Descending down the track, Dobry stopped for a fire salamander he spotted crossing the track. The rain continued heavily throughout our drive to our next hotel. We arrived shortly after 2, but the rain was coming down torrentially so we didn't brave getting out of the bus for another 40 minutes. Between one and two inches fell must have fallen in less than an hour. When we did eventually climb out we found our rooms all sheltered by a broad veranda around a courtyard: they are simple but clean and pleasant. As we are still planning to go out for bears, we had our main meal in the mid-afternoon while the rain continued to fall and the thunder to rumble outside.

We set off optimistically for our bear watching: the rain had just about stopped and the prospects looked reasonable. I drove Dobry's 4WD Mitsubishi (right-hand drive, and imported from the UK) up to the starting point, where we left the bus and all transferred to 4WDs, one driven by the local ranger. We had driven about a mile when we came across the first rocks across the road, as the afternoon's torrential rain had caused a number of small avalanches. We struggled on, the 4WDs climbing over sizeable boulders, but



eventually the road became impassable and the expedition was abandoned, as the risks were too

great. I didn't fancy driving back down in the dark, for a start. The narrow track clung precariously to the side of the mountain, and 200 metres below was a deep river gorge with a raging torrent of a river. Most of us walked back down the track, with the rain falling gently once again. Martin, Nick and John were fortunate enough to enjoy good views of a golden eagle; I saw nothing of note. This proved to be the only golden eagle of the holiday.

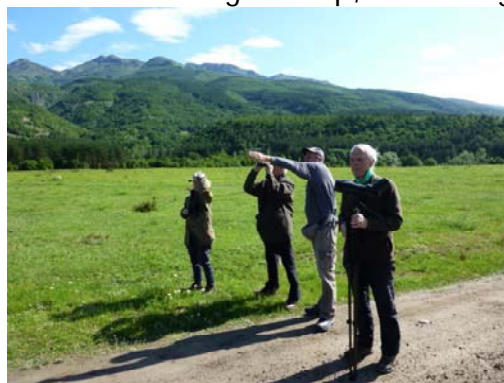
The rain eased again, so we decided to do a little more birdwatching. As we drove along the main road Dobry spotted an immature red-footed falcon on a roadside wire, and we stopped and had good views before it flew. Our final site was an attractive, broad-based valley, and here we saw several isabelline wheatears, a species that is apparently increasing in Bulgaria. We also saw a perched long-legged buzzard, and some distant bee-eaters. It was still raining, though only lightly, so we packed up and drove back to our hotel, finishing the day in the restaurant enjoying wine, Campari or ouzo with delicious fried cheeses. The forecast for tomorrow is good, so fingers crossed.

Wednesday 6th June

The rain had at least stopped when John, Martin and I ventured out for a walk along the muddy streets of Gabarevo; the cloud cover was appreciably higher, but it was a damp, cool morning. The birds were predictable, with no surprises: Spanish, house and tree sparrow (all nesting together in a stork's nest - the stork was very grubby), collared dove, several singing nightingales, swallows, blackcap, distant cuckoo. The locals all viewed us suspiciously (I suppose

we would view three Bulgarians walking around Bardwell in the same way), and smiles were not to be seen. Bulgarian girls aren't great lookers, but they would probably say the same about Englishmen... One house we walked past had a horse stabled in what was almost a downstairs room. As John pointed out, the price of petrol is so high here compared with average income it's hardly surprising that horses are still being used. Most houses had vegetable gardens with well-tended potatoes, beans and tomatoes, while free-range chickens foraged, and dogs looked at us as suspiciously as their owners. In the park we looked at an old fighter airplane (a MiG?), positioned as if racing skywards, but its fuselage now a nesting site for sparrows and starlings. Most of the village looks somewhat run down, the brickwork crumbling, and pavements cracked, the roads deeply potholed, while a few discarded crisp and fag packets litter the streets.

After breakfast we returned to the same broad valley we had visited briefly the evening before. This time the sky had cleared, and once again was a reassuring and cloudless blue, though a vicious wind had got up, making



conditions far from pleasant. It had ripped the tops off several wild rose bushes, the broken tops blowing across the grassland just like

tumbleweed. Presumably the wind was caused by the contrasting weather systems, with the low pressure giving way to high. It didn't last. This was souslik country, and we soon saw our first young sousliks in the grass. The valley produced most of the birds we expected, with numerous red-backed shrikes, a couple of pairs of woodchats, lots of bee-eaters nesting in the banks of the fast-flowing stream, red-rumped swallows, nightingales, and pair of wrynecks nesting in a nest



Souslik

box provided by Dobry. We sat and watched these for some time, enjoying the warm sunshine and the birds. The male was repeatedly visiting the nest to feed the female, who stuck her head out watching and waiting for him. Raptors were a little disappointing, as apart from long-legged buzzards (seen extremely well) and common buzzards, the only birds seen were a pair of griffon vultures. There is a nearby reintroduction scheme, but these were two wild, untagged individuals.

Butterflies were slow to emerge, but there were plenty of fritillaries to be seen, including cardinal and Queen of Spain. We missed, alas, the poplar admirals that Dobry had seen the week before. A try for lesser spotted woodpeckers failed, but we did see our first spotted flycatcher of the trip.

We enjoyed an outdoor lunch back at the hotel – it was difficult to

believe that only 24 hours before rain had been falling in torrents. Then it was back to the bears, or rather the rose-oil factory, and the rough track into the mountains. We walked the first mile, up to the avalanche site, seeing virtually no birds, but were relieved to see the grader had been hard at work on the road, which was now smooth and rock-free. We then climbed into the two 4x4s and drove up to the first hide, a bumpy 40-minute journey. Here we had a walk in the forest and heard a black woodpecker: I saw a dipper and a wren. Best of all were the clouded



Clouded apollo

apollos in the clearing. They were very sluggish, and one even allowed me to pick it up on a leaf and photograph it.

We then continued to the best hide, where George, the shaven-headed and unsmiling ranger, thought there was a very good chance of seeing bears. The hide was a bit cramped for eight of us, so Nick, Martin and John elected to go to the second hide, with Dobry. The rest of the party, including me, settled in for a long wait, looking



Sow and piglets

out on the steep grassy clearing, backed by tall spruce trees, then

giving way to pines. For the first 45 minutes nothing happened, other than few wood pigeons venturing out in search of corn. Then a party of wild boar came trotting down from the forest, confident but cautious. There were three nursing sows accompanied by no fewer than 17 striped piglets, and they entertained us for the next hour. As they left, one of the sows lay down and five piglets suckled from her. It had been getting stuffy in the hide, so we cautiously opened the double-glazed windows, but the boars didn't notice.

A 30-minute interval then followed, before I suddenly spotted some tawny fur in the darkness of the forest: it was the approaching bears, a mother and her yearling cub. They looked at their best as they came down to the bait through



Brown bears

the forest, bow-legged and sniffing the air, powerful but slightly scruffy. The old bear promptly climbed onto the platform with the corn cobs, where she sat and ate for the next 50 minutes. Junior bear was more entertaining, knocking a few cobs down from the platform and carrying them away to eat, disappearing into the forest for a while and then coming back again. They finally departed into the forest at 9.20, when it was getting almost too dark to see them. Apart from the bears, boars and pigeons we saw nothing more than a song thrush, though robins and blackbirds were singing not far

away. The vehicles came to collect us at 9.50, and we heard that the second hide had proved completely blank, which was disappointing, though its occupants didn't seem too bothered. We finally got back to base shortly after 11pm.

Thursday 7th June

After such a late finish we agreed on an 8am breakfast that most of the group woke up for. Our first birdwatching of the day was on extensive grasslands, almost steppe, at the foot of the mountains. We drove past a huge solar-energy farm, with thousands of photovoltaic panels in serried rows. Dobry told us that though he approved of renewable energy, putting the farm here in such a beautiful place was a crime when there were so many brown-field sites where it could have been placed. One had to agree. Nick then surpassed himself by spotting a very distant Montagu's harrier. It proved to be an immature male; we also saw a female.



Tawny pipit

We walked out on the grassland, enjoying the songs of scores of larks. These included both skylark and short-toed, and we had good views of the latter. We also found and scoped a single tawny pipit. A distant raptor revealed itself to be a black kite, not a bird we expected to see here. Our first black-headed buntings were singing by the side of the road, but it wasn't until we visited an ancient Thracian burial mound, only discovered 20 years ago, that we got a really good look

at one, singing from the top of a walnut tree. The burial mound was interesting, but there wasn't really



Black-headed bunting

a lot to see, and the arrival of a coach full of French people didn't enhance our visit, nor the fact that the coach driver kept his engine running. This was a shame, as it was a good spot for birds, with the ubiquitous red-backed shrikes, bee-eaters overhead, corn buntings rattling their keys, plus the black-headed bunting singing continuously.

We then visited a garden belonging to a friend of Dobry's, where there were feeders and a bird-photography set-up with pond and hide. Here hawfinches showed well, though they were reluctant to be photographed. We also saw Syrian woodpecker, nuthatch, greenfinch, great tit, golden oriole, nightingale and tree sparrow. I would have enjoyed spending a morning there.

Our route took us south, driving through attractive, unspoilt countryside with few villages and little traffic. We stopped for Dobry to buy provisions for our picnic in the attractive spa town of Pavel Banya. We had our picnic close to the road in the wooded hills, a quiet spot as no more than two or three vehicles went by all the time we were there. Apart from a red-backed shrike there weren't any birds to see, but the butterflies were excellent, and I saw and photographed my first-ever poplar

admirals, a large and handsome insect that I was delighted to see. I



Poplar admiral

also saw a green lizard with its distinctive emerald-green body and blue head.

Continuing south, we drove on along straight but often deeply pot-holed roads, past fields scarlet with



poppies. We stopped once at a small, shallow lake with a couple of pairs of black-winged stilts, and here we also saw a mallard (our first duck), a little owl cleverly spotted by Dobry, and a night heron that flew over. A singing olivaceous warbler was reluctant to give itself up, but did eventually with the help of my iPod.

Our best stop of the afternoon was by the banks of the river Maritsa, a large, impressive and fast-flowing river, no doubt full from the recent rain. Our first good bird here was a pair of grey partridges, but rollers soon stole the show, and there were probably three pairs present. We went on to see all the big five – bee-eater, hoopoe, roller, kingfisher and golden oriole. It was now very warm, if not hot, with the temperature up to 26degC. A male golden oriole made repeated flights out to the river to bathe, splashing into the river briefly before

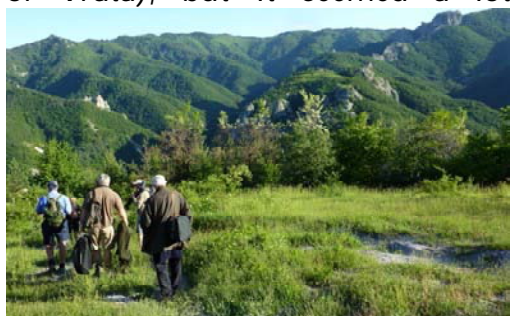
returning to preen unseen in a riverside poplar. A bonus find was a male lesser spotted woodpecker



Lesser spotted woodpecker

that appeared to be excavating a hole in a dead poplar; we also saw a green woodpecker. As we left a fine female Levant sparrowhawk flew over us, giving a great view.

There were no more stops now before getting to our hotel in the picturesque Rhodope Mountains, though we did pause once and see a black stork and what was almost certainly a calandra lark, though Dobry was surprised to see one there. Getting to our hotel was quite an adventure, travelling first on a rough forestry track, then eventually parking the bus at the top of a steep mountain, with impressive views all around. We had what was claimed to be a 200-metre walk down the mountain to the hotel (the Sabazii, in the village of Vrata), but it seemed a lot



farther, especially as the track was steep and the gravel slippery underfoot. It was a relief to find our hotel, tucked into the side of the mountain, where we were greeted by the resident cock peacock and a 20-year-old girl student who couldn't stop talking. John declared

she was definitely bonkers. Not surprisingly, we were the only guests. Dinner was fun, but after the salad and soup the main courses took some time to appear; mine was last. We drank the wine out of mugs. It would have been a wonderfully peaceful night but for the wretched peacock that yowled at regular intervals all night, though I did hear a tawny owl.

Friday 8th June

A wonderfully bright and clear morning. A cuckoo was calling first thing, while the other early morning birds were black redstart, coal tit, blackcap, white wagtail and red-rumped swallow. A short walk away I found a singing ortolan bunting, and a very distant black woodpecker was heard. We ate breakfast (pancakes, feta cheese and yoghurt) outside in the warm sunshine.



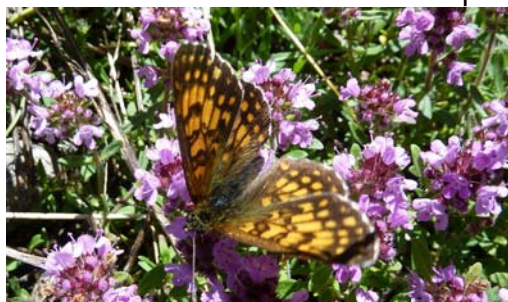
It was stiff climb back to the minibus, but somewhat easier than the descent the night before. The mule had to make two trips to bring our bags up. As we waited for the bags we heard and eventually saw a lesser whitethroat, while there was an abundance of butterflies to provide entertainment.

We spent our morning in the mountains, not far from the hotel. Our first stop was at a site that Dobry said was good for apollo butterflies, though he thought we were too early, so we scanned the

hill from the bus. I soon spotted one, so we all climbed out and enjoyed good views of this wonderful alpine butterfly. I hadn't seen one for 15 years.

We continued on to the end of the road, with Dobry bemoaning how the last 20 years have seen a huge reduction in the livestock grazing these mountains, and the subsequent change to the birdlife. We did see a small herd of cattle, but there used to be many more, plus some 3,000 sheep. The birds we did see were woodlark, corn bunting, northern wheatear and red-backed shrike.

At the end of the road we parked at a large and partially restored building, presumably a left-over from the communist era. Dobry then led us into the pine forest, and here we looked for hazel grouse. I played the iPod but with no success. There is a apparently a good population of grouse here, but they are very difficult to find so late in the season – in March and April



Glanville fritillary

they respond instantly to playback calls, but not in June. The track then took us out of the woods onto a grassy plateau with scattered trees, before ending at a spectacular viewpoint over the deep, long valley.

Alas, although the scenery was impressive, the wildflowers colourful and varied and the butterflies good (pearl-bordered, Queen of Spain and heath fritillaries dominating), the birds were notably few. We did hear



cuckoos and see coal and crested tits and tree pipits and the odd distant buzzard, but little else. This was good rock partridge country, but this was clearly a bird we were not going to see on the trip, as there wasn't a sign.



After the walk we drove back a mile or so to our picnic site by a small church, stopping en route for our first short-toed eagle, and then a sombre tit that I called in with the iPod. As we ate lunch in the warm sunshine (20degC) we watched and listened to a barred warbler, while



Northern wheatear

the local wheatears bobbed around us. After lunch we made a short stop again at the apollo site, and I managed to get the one good picture I was after. Common swifts screamed overhead, our first

whitethroat sang, and we also saw several linnets.



Apollo

Our relaxing morning was over, and it was now time to drop down from the mountains and drive south, the temperature rising steadily as we descended. We stopped in town for welcome ice creams, and then at the Assen Castle we saw the predicted blue rock thrush, plus a distant peregrine over the ridge. I photographed a cardinal fritillary



Cardinal fritillary

nectaring on a thistle. Then it was back into the bus and a long hard drive south for the next two and half hours, stopping only once to fill our water bottles.

For almost the entire route the road twisted like a wounded snake along the sides of fast-flowing mountain rivers, starting with the river Chaia, with one bend following another. It was a hard drive, made worse by road works and some poor drivers ahead of us. Birds glimpsed from the bus were few, though we did see a dipper and several grey wagtails.

We eventually reached our smart, modern hotel, the Arkan Han at

Trigrad, shortly after 6pm. Here crag martins hawked overhead, and



Grey wagtail

chaffinches and serins sang outside. The biggest excitement was a female great spotted woodpecker crashing into John's bedroom window. It was rescued and made a recovery.

Saturday 9th June

It was misty at 6.30, but the sun soon started to burn the mist off the mountain slopes. I enjoyed a



Black redstart

brief walk from the hotel, satisfactorily digiscoping a juvenile dipper, along with a black redstart and a grey wagtail. After our



Juvenile dipper

breakfast of unsugared doughnuts we drove down to the gorge, where we soon saw a pair of wallcreepers flying high above us. We walked on through the tunnel, and stood in the cool shade at the northern end waiting for our quarry to appear. It,

or rather the female, soon did, emerging from the nest hole in the cliff face just 30ft above the road, and close to where we were standing. We then enjoyed several outstanding views, including the male coming to the nest site and feeding the female. Never have I enjoyed better repeat views, while I never tire of watching these exquisite little birds. Everyone was delighted, but none more so than Nick, for whom seeing a wallcreeper had been a long-held ambition.

From the same viewpoint we watched the numerous crag martins and alpine swifts overhead, and we also saw a pair of peregrines, one calling noisily. It was cold where we were watching, so we walked on down the road, warming instantly in the hot sunshine, before turning up a side track. There were no new birds, but I was delighted with seeing several chequered skippers, a butterfly now extinct in England. Other butterflies here included scarce swallowtail, wood white, brimstone, holly blue, mazarine and common blue, peacock, small tortoiseshell and a single clouded apollo. Dobry had brought the bus down to us, so we didn't have to walk back. We returned to the original car park, where I managed to find a very high wallcreeper that no one other than Dobry managed to see. Nick suggested another look at the nest, so several of went back for another try, but we only had a brief view of the female flying in to the nest. We did see the peregrines do a noisy food pass, and met a group of Dutch birdwatchers. In the half hour before lunch we tried for black woodpecker, but only saw great spotted. (While writing this diary in the hotel restaurant I had

to rescue first a small tortoiseshell and then a nettle-tree butterfly.)

We had a siesta after lunch (salad and omelettes), not leaving for our afternoon excursion until 3.30, when we drove up the mountain behind the village. Here we walked up a forest track, and though the views were great the birds were relatively few. I managed to call in a firecrest that displayed his fiery crest beautifully, and I also called up a pair of crested tits that showed well. I tried for black woodpeckers without success, and we also scanned for rock partridges, but there wasn't a sign of any bird on the rocky slopes. It was, however, a wonderful sunny afternoon, so we enjoyed our walk. The light was good when we got back, so I went



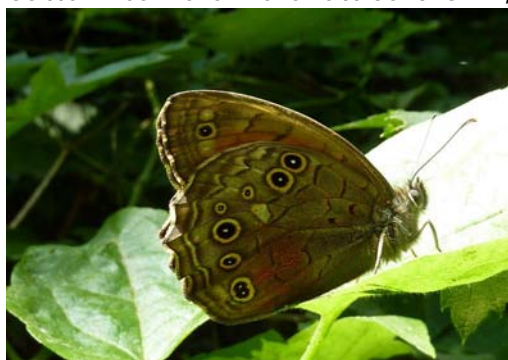
Crag martin

out with the scope and digiscoped black redstarts and a crag martin, and chatted to two young Englishmen who were thrilled to have seen their first wallcreeper.

Sunday 10th June

John arrived at breakfast reporting that he had heard a nightjar churring in the early hours of the morning. I wasn't surprised, as the habitat looks ideal. We breakfasted at 7am, so were away shortly before 8, as there was a long day's driving ahead of us. We stopped briefly for the wallcreeper, and enjoyed seeing the female come off her nest, flutter over us like a big butterfly, and then disappear up the gorge. It was chilly waiting for her, a mere

9.5degC. Our next stop, a short distance farther on, was at nesting cliff for alpine swifts, the birds racing around us almost at head height. *Apus melba* is an impressive bird, especially at such close quarters. The road twisted and bent continually for what seemed ages as we descended from the mountains. Our last mountain stop was at a much lower altitude, and here we saw our first honey buzzard, wing-clapping high overhead, while I called up a girl bunting with the iPod. New butterflies here were lattice-brown,



Lattice-brown

large skipper and silver-washed fritillary. Golden orioles called close by, unseen, from the riverside poplars.

A further hour or so of driving took us to our next site, an area of rolling limestone hills that until recently had been heavily grazed. The last 20 years have apparently witnessed a 95% drop in livestock numbers in Bulgaria. Around the edges of the hills wheat and barley had been sown, encouraged by the CAP subsidy, despite the fact that the crop will be very poor.

It was now very warm, with the temperature pushing the uppers 20s. We soon found ourselves admiring a handsome calandra lark, perched in front of us, the biggest of the European larks. We went on to see several more calandras, plus both short-toed and skylarks. Alas, the imperial eagles

that used to be found here have gone, and we didn't find the



Calandra lark

promised stone curlews, either. We did see both honey and long-legged buzzards and a pair of rollers, while a surprise to Dobry was hearing an olive tree warbler singing, its distinctive notes resembling a great reed warbler. He went back to the bus to get my iPod, and we eventually managed to call the bird up, and, though it was reluctant to show itself well, everyone managed a glimpse. This big warbler is a Balkan special, and one I've only seen a couple of times before.

We had our picnic lunch in the shade of young oak trees on the edge of the steppe. Here, in the flower-filled meadow, were numerous cardinal fritillaries, plus our first dark-green fritillaries.

Dobry had promised us rose-coloured starlings in the nearby quarries, but despite a good search we failed to find any, making do with ortolan and black-headed buntings, Spanish sparrows, bee-eaters, hoopoes and a few common starlings. There had, so we were told, been 100 rose-coloured starlings just a couple of weeks before, but they had clearly decided not to nest and had moved on. Disappointing, but you can never see everything.

We then had a two-hour drive, most of it on the motorway, to Sofia, then a sharp ascent up the mountain on a cobbled road to the

skiing area. Here we hoped to find nutcracker, ring ouzel and water pipit, but we arrived at 5pm on a busy Sunday, and the place was still busy with visitors. The temperature had fallen steadily as we drove up the mountain, dropping from 29.5degC to a mere 22degC, while the clear blue sky had clouded over and now threatened rain. We walked past the somewhat scruffy ski lifts and associated buildings, while walkers and mountain bikers went the other way, until eventually finding our first nutcracker, one of



Nutcrackers



three individuals that took no notice of us whatsoever. I saw a couple of crossbills, but we failed on the ring ouzel, though Dobry heard one calling. I also heard it, but could hardly claim to have recognised it as a ring ouzel. We scrambled a short way up the ski slope, but failed on water pipit, though we did add a singing dunnock to the list. A firecrest sang from the nearby forest. Time was now running out – no doubt we would have seen ouzels and pipits easily if we had made a morning visit. There was distant thunder and just a few drops of rain as we descended the dusty cobbles. It wasn't far to our hotel, but the

Sunday evening Sofia traffic was bad, so progress was slow, and we arrived eventually at 7.15, to find a bewildered and lost beech marten cub wandering around in the road



Beech marten



outside. It was totally fearless of humans. Sadly, its future is likely to be short. The hotel itself is modern



and surprisingly stylish: I had a spacious room with both double and single beds and a desk where it's actually possible to type easily. I'm not so sure about the glass washbasin. Dinner was good, but it was a shame that both the white and rosé wine hadn't been in the fridge, especially as it was such a warm evening. Both Stella and I had a lengthy wait for our chocolate

soufflé, but it was well worth waiting for. I retired to bed at 10.30: outside thunder crashed and rumbled a few times, but there wasn't much rain, so the storm must have missed us. It was a hot night.

Monday 11th June

With the light streaming into my bedroom there was no chance of sleeping on: I woke at 5.20, listening to the dawn chorus of blackbird, nightingale, cuckoo, greenfinch and the chirruping of both tree and house sparrows. I had a walk at 7am, braving the numerous dogs that barked at me from every house and villa. Some of the properties here are very smart, others run down but attractive with their carefully tended vegetable gardens. It was a beautiful sunny morning, still slightly cool. I saw all the typical suburban birds one would expect in Bulgaria, including Syrian woodpecker and lesser whitethroat. I was sure that hawfinches flushed from one cherry tree that was laden with fruit. However, I was prevented from stopping to watch by a particularly noisy dog. I have never come across so many barking dogs.



We set off at 9am for our first stop, an extensive reed marsh a short drive away. This was in a fine setting with rolling limestone hills behind. Here we were soon seeing

new birds, with great crested grebe followed by little grebe, coot and moorhen. Several marsh harriers put on a good display, including a fine adult male, while bitterns boomed and showed themselves frequently, flying low over the reeds. A pair of little bitterns appeared well in front of us, flying across the pool and even settling in



Great reed warbler

view in the reeds. Further additions to the heron list included a distant purple heron and great white egret. A pair of lapwings flew over and a reed warbler was seen, while great reeds crunched their songs continuously from the reeds. Black-headed wagtails landed close to us, and once a cuckoo flew by, chased by a black-headed bunting.



Black-headed wagtail

We eventually left our viewpoint and drove to the foothills of the hills, where the wildflowers added a vivid splash of colour to the landscape. We stopped to scope barred warblers, ortolan buntings (very keen bathers) and a pair of lesser grey shrikes, while quail called unseen from the nearby field of young sunflowers. It was idyllic, even if the sun was a little hot.



We then had a short drive to Dragoman Marsh, a rare example of a spring-fed fen on limestone, and a Ramsar (internationally important) site. It is the biggest natural karst wetland in Bulgaria. Dobry told us that the water level was very low after last year's drought, and the recent heavy rain hadn't made much difference. There was little open water to see, even from the tower hide that did give an extensive view out over the marsh. Disappointingly, birds were relatively few, though I did hear a Savi's warbler reeling but didn't manage to see it. A couple of ferruginous ducks flew over, showing well, and we also saw great white egrets, marsh harriers, coot, moorhens and a little grebe, along with both reed and great reed warblers. We had our lunch here, and saw a Dalmatian pelican soar up over the fen, a surprise sighting as Dobry had never seen one here before.

After lunch we drove along the edge of the fen, then onto to a disused airfield. Here there was a pool of open water, with little ringed plover and black-headed wagtails feeding on the edge, while a green sandpiper also flushed. We added sedge warbler to the list: one was singing, and I called it in with the iPod, but it didn't show at all. Another Savi's warbler was heard, this one singing much more strongly. As we watched the sky

darkened ominously, forks of lighting flashed and thunder rumbled, and after a while the rain reached us. As we left we stopped for a calandra lark on the track, and then a handsome male wheatear close to the road. We drove on to another site, with a large area of open water but with no birds visible on it. The rain became heavier, so we decided to retire back to the hotel. The rain never reached us again, so it was an afternoon of leisure. Several of us swam in the pool (very agreeable temperature of 24degC), while Martin and I had a knock on the Astroturf tennis court, which was fun. Our game finished when Martin knocked the only ball we had into the long grass over the fence.

Diner was a jolly affair – we particularly liked the local red wine that Dobry recommended. The food at this hotel is good.

Tuesday 12th June

Martin and Nick joined Dobry and me for our early morning excursion back to the marsh (John got the time wrong). It was a beautiful sunny morning, and though we didn't add any birds to the list, we



did enjoy great views of a number of species, including Savi's warbler, reed warbler, great reed warbler, marsh warbler, sedge warbler and whitethroat. Both bitterns and little bitterns showed well, and we scoped one of the former on the

ground. Ferruginous ducks were seen both flying and swimming, but no signs of the garganey that Dobry assures us breed here. Black-headed yellow wagtails sang and displayed all around us, while the rising sun burnt off the mist and warmed our backs.

All too soon it was time to go back for breakfast, pack the bags and leave for the airport. Our route took us through the middle of Sofia, past hideous high-rise flats from the communist era, then into the more attractive centre. Dobry accepted his tip graciously, but assured us it would all go to nature conservation. It had been an excellent holiday enjoyed by everyone. The bird total was 136 species, the butterflies over 60.

We landed at Gatwick to find the weather the same as when we left: 11degC and raining. It wasn't good to be home.