

Bulgaria in Winter

Sunday 7th – Sunday 14th February 2016

Trip report by Daniel Mitev

Tour leaders: Daniel Mitev

Tour participants: Mr. Fabio Olmos Correa Neves
Mrs. Rita Cerqueira Ribeiro
Mrs. Elsie Rotenberg
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Our goal was to watch the wintering Geese in Bulgaria, and particularly Red-breasted Geese. Due to the mild winter, and almost no snow cover, most of the geese have moved far NE in Ukraine and Russia. Usually February is the best time to enjoy these birds, the hunting season is over and Geese are much more relaxed, and easy to approach on a good distance.

Day 1 Sunday 7th February

The Brazilian group arrived at Varna airport at lunch time and the birding starts right from the parking lot, usually a place for Crested Lark. The bird was cooperative and allowed us to take a close view. After that we headed NE to the village of Tyulenovo, where our hotel was. On the way we made several stops to watch birds along the road. Many Buzzards have had landed on the trees along the road, and we were able to find a Rough-legged among them, another “good” raptor was a male Hen Harrier. Mixed flock of Finches and Buntings had produced a single Brambling. Of course the top sighting for the day was an Eagle Owl landed on a tree not too far from the road.

Day 2 Monday 8th February

We birded the area around Durankulak and Shabla Lakes. The goal was to find and watch Geese. The only flock which we saw was near Durankulak Lake. There were about 550 birds mainly Great White-fronted Geese, two Greylags and 57 Red-breasted Geese. They allowed us to come relatively close - about 150 meters away, and to get a good look.

A small flock of Grey Partridges was looking for food behind the Geese. In the lake we got to see Caspian Gulls and several species of Ducks, Grebes, and Pygmy Cormorants. Cetti's Warbler and Bearded Reedlings were everywhere, but difficult to be spotted. We had a good view of adult White-tailed Eagle dropping from the sky and taking a carcass of a dead Coot. Marsh Harriers were everywhere, Hen Harrier was present too, and here we encountered all three species of Buzzards. In the afternoon we visited Shabla Lake complex. Tuzla Lake was a home to all three European species of Swan, Shelducks, Gadwalls, Teals and Mallards. Here we had a good view of Syrian Woodpecker. In the nearest Pine tree plantation a Goldcrest and Coal Tit were nice surprises. Back in the town a Little Owl and Long-eared Owls were at their usual roost sites.

Day 3 Tuesday 9th February

We changed our initial plan for the day, because we got a report for Lesser White-fronted Goose being spotted near Durankulak Lake. We headed back to the place but after one hour of looking, we could not find the bird. Anyway, our efforts were rewarded with a nice viewing of Grested Pochard. In the afternoon we visited the steppe area around Cape Kaliakra. The highlights from here were European Shad and small flock Calandra Larks, but even without birds the area around was gorgeous.

Day 4 Wednesday 10th February

That day we had to move to Burgas area. Our first stop for the day was at Batova River, a flooded forest, to look for Woodpeckers. The birds were not very cooperative, but we still manage to get a great look of Green, Black, Middle Spotted and Great Spotted Woodpecker. Of course here we had Mistle Thrush, Nuthatch, Long-tailed Tit and other birds from the forest. Our next stop was in village of Konstantinovo near Varna. Here a local birder has a birdfeeder and Somber Tit was regular visitor. 5 minutes after we arrived at the place, the bird appeared and gave us a great viewing opportunity. On the way to Burgas we had another stop near Kamtchia River and gave it another try to spot Woodpeckers. Here we just heard a clear call of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, but couldn't actually see the bird.

Day 5 Thursday 11th February

Our first stop after very early breakfast was at Atanasovsko Lake, to watch the spectacular lift of the Geese. There were about 15-20000 birds in the roost, and most of them took off together. After that, later we explored the fields around the lake. Half of the Geese were very far from all usable roads and out of view, but we managed to get close to the birds on the west site of the lake. We scanned the flock for half our and found an adult Lesser White-fronted Gosse. Unfortunately soon after we discovered the bird, it flew off. We continue to search for the Goose, but could not find it. As a reword, we found Tundra Bean Goose, 6 Red-breasted Geese were presented too. In the afternoon our first stop was Vaia lake. The highlight here was Dalmatian Pelican, we saw Pygmy Cormorants, thousands of Common Pochards, Smew and other Ducks. Little Egret flew over our heads. Our next stop was at small bay on the Black Sea, here we saw Red Knot, Grey Plover and Curlew. At the last point, Poda reservation, we planned to spend the entire afternoon and did not get disappointed. At the entrance some Pelicans were soaring above and one of them was White Pelican. We took a short walk into the reservation to get a close view of one of the targets for the trip Pallas's gull. There were 4 adult birds in full breeding plumage, one still in non-breeding plumage and one 4 cycle. At the same place we saw 4 Caspian Gulls as well; Ferruginous Duck, Kingfisher, Redshank, and gorgeous pair of White-tailed Eagle.

Day 6 Friday 12th February

We started the day early again, to enjoy the flock of Geese taking off from the roost site. The view was spectacular. This day it took a bit longer to locate the lesser White-fronted Goose. We found the bird among 15000 Great White-fronted Geese. After that we went again to Vaia Lake in search of White-headed Duck with no luck, but witnessed a spectacular feeding frenzy. About 400 Great Cormorants, more than 100 Dalmatian Pelicans, hundreds of Gulls some Herons. In the afternoon we went to the area around Mandra Lake. Here we found another flock of about 5000 Great White-fronted Geese and a dozen of Red-breasted Geese. In flooded field west we found tens of Swans from all three European species, and a dozen of Greylags.

Day 7 Saturday 13th February

Again we start the day at Atanasovsko Lake to watch the roost take-off of the Geese. In the lake we found several Spotted Redshanks and nice male Pintail. After that our next stop was

at the field where the Geese used to graze. We manage to find again the Lesser Whit-fronted Goose, but visibility was very poor due to the haze and the Goose was a bit far away. Anyway, a Merlin flew by as reward. Vaia Lake presented the usual suspects - Pelicans and Ducks, but unfortunately no White-headed Duck, most likely all of them left the area due to the warm winter. As a small reward, we found a pair of Ferruginous Ducks. In the afternoon our first stop was the southern part of Atanasovsko Lake, where we saw several Slender-billed Gulls, a new species for the trip, about hundred Dalmatian Pelicans, Curlew, several hundred Shelducks and a lonely Avocet. On the way to Pomorie Lake we made a quick stop at the seashore north from Sarafovo. We scanned the sea and finally got excellent view of Black-throated Diver, this is quite a common bird during the winter in Bulgaria along the seashore, but we never got to see one till now. We finish the day at Pomorie Lake with thousands of Coots, Common Pochards, Shovelers, Grebes and Green Sandpiper.

Day 8 Sunday 14th February

The last day of the trip we had to spend driving to Varna airport. We had enough time to check again Vaia Lake, which presented the usual species, like pelicans, Smew, Pygmy Cormorants, Ducks including Ferruginous. On the way to Varna we made a short break at Gorica forest. Here several Middle Spotted woodpeckers gave us a great viewing chance, Short-toed Treecreeper - a new species for the trip was spotted too.

At the end, it was a successful trip, we got almost all of the targets and our trip list is as rich as 113 species.