

SPATIA WILDLIFE



Via Pontica – Autumn Migration along the Black Sea Coast

Bulgaria – 5 to 12 September 2011.

Tour leader Dobromir Domuschiev/Spatia Wildlife.



Broad-billed Sandpiper.

Day 0 – 5th September – the arrival time was 20.10 at the Burgas airport and I have arrived in the area just after 14.00 as I wanted to see how the migration was going on. I have spend about 2 hours near the birding hide of Lake A, but for that time only one Steppe Buzzard and few Marsh harriers flew across. Avocets, Black-winged Stilts, Redshanks and Spotted Redshanks were all around. Then I got a text from Peter that the flight will delay with 2 hours, so I had enough time for some more birding, then checked- in at our hotel in Pomorie and had a short rest. At 22.10 I was at the airport and shortly after the whole group have appeared trough the gates. 20 minutes transfer brought us at the hotel and everybody went straight to the rooms as it was a long day for all of us.

Day 1 – 6th September – we had a leisure breakfast at 08.30 and by 09.15 everybody had to be by the van, ready to start the birding. While we were gathering we look at the lake which is just behind the hotel – Kentish Plover, Little Grebes and Pigmy Cormorant were the first birds to be seen. Few minutes of driving brought us at the salt museum and the Green Balkans information and conservation center – one of the best birding spots of Burgas wetlands. First birds to be seen were few males Black-headed Yellow Wagtails, Kentish Plover and many Common and Whiskered terns and the first Red-backed Shrike appeared on the wire behind us. Few meters away we have seen the first of many Broad-billed Sandpipers. It was at about 30 meters from us, beautifully marked and in perfectly fresh plumage. Soon it was joined by a second bird and further away there were Little Ringed Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, few Greenshanks and Spotted Redshanks. We than moved to the salt pans at the western part of the lake where there were many waders' species – Little Stint, Spotted Redshank and many Avocets among many others. First Rollers were perched on the wires. For our lunch we went to the nearest Nesebar – the restaurant is right on the beach but the best bird here was a Hawfinch flying above us. Afterwards we have returned to the salt pans but again the “best bird” here was the Broad-billed Sandpiper – 5 of them as well as about a dozen Slender-billed Gulls.

Last place to check were few more pools of the lake – a wide selection of waders was present here too, including 31 Marsh Sandpipers and 5 Red-necked Phalaropes. The total number of wader species for the days was 24! Before leaving we also saw 2 Caspian Terns flying above us. Ten minutes of driving brought us back to the hotel where everybody had a drink and various meals were chosen from the menu.

Day 2 – 7th September – first stop after the breakfast was again at the salt museum hoping for a Terek Sandpiper that has been seen here yesterday in the evening. Unfortunately the bird wasn't there; a single Bar-tailed Godwit was new here. We than called at Lake Burgas (or Vaya) where there were over 500 White pelicans as well as about 20 Dalmatians. Here we had few marsh terns too and then moved further south to check the so called “Pork bay”. Here we had the first Booted Eagle pale morph and latter a Short-toed Eagle. Next stop on the lake provided 4 Ferruginous Ducks and while the others have started the short walk I and Jean enjoyed a Sombre Tit busy feeding on the nearest tree. By the bridge there were several Pigmy Cormorants and a single Kingfisher. Further along there was a big flock of Spotted Redshanks and at a distance we saw a migrating flock of about 400 White Storks.

We drove a bit further and reached a small hill overlooking the lake – an excellent raptor watch point and suitable picnic spot. Just before it we have passed a small bridge and the short stop provided a male Little Bittern flying towards us. There were no raptors but nevertheless the picnic was good (we had a fresh Swallowtail flying around) and afterwards we have started to scan the reeds in front of us as the water level was too low, so very good for crakes. In the next half an hour we had quite good observations (from about 80 meters, through the scope) of adult and juvenile Baillon's crakes, two Little crakes and one Water Rail. All the birds were feeding at the same spot of about 10 sq. meters so it was an excellent opportunity to compare their sizes and ID features. Over the bay we have also seen few Gull-billed Terns. After we left the area I have stopped near the road as it is a good site for the beautiful Map Fritillary – there were 3 of these, very fresh so we spend 20 min photographing them. Lang's Short-tailed Blues were also spotted. On the way back we have had a quick check at Lake A, but as the water level was too high so not many waders. We have also called at the salt museum but the Terek Sandpiper wasn't there again.

Day 3 – 8th September In the hotel there was another group of birders who were with a UK leader with which I had the great pleasure to lead a tour here last year. That day they had a little problem with their coach so at 07.00 I drove them to the salt museum and one hour later back to the hotel for breakfast. The Terek was there and I have seen it. After breakfast we drove straight to the site, but again no Terek! We moved south again and our first stop was at the dam of Lake Mandra where yesterday two Temminck's stints have been spotted. When we arrived there were no Temminck's stints but shortly after we saw them both flying around and they landed near to us, but only for a few seconds. However we had a Broad-billed Sandpiper that allowed close views and photography – at about 4 meters and it was soon joined by a second one and few Black-headed Yellow Wagtails. The reeds behind us provided Reed and Great Reed warblers as well as Penduline Tit. Dave had a glimpse of a bird that might have been a Thrush Nightingale but it never appeared again to be confirmed. We then drove to the oak forests near Ropotamo reserve where we had a picnic lunch while around us we had several flying Silver-washed Fritillaries and Great-banded Graylings. We then had a walk of 1.3 km through the forests and here we saw 2 Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, very good view of a juvenile Grey-headed Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreeper and Hobby. At the end of the track (a spot I like very much) – a meadow of about 20 acres with some stones, we heard 2 Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, and saw about 15 Cirl Buntings, 4 Red-rumped Swallows and 2 Lesser Whitethroats. Here we also had a very fresh Purple Hairstreak with its wings fully open so one can really see why it is called Purple. It is really a wonderful butterfly. After returning to the car we had a short drive to Alepy wetland where we had another Middle Spotted Woodpecker on the trees around the marsh. The water level here was also very low so we had very good views of juveniles Water rails as well as an adult one, few Snipe, Sedge Warbler and 2 Purple Heron. With everybody happy of what we saw we had a short drive to Sozopol where we had dinner in the old town, restaurant Ksantana, situated right on the cliffs above the sea. Two of us had steak Antoinette; two had a rabbit meal and the other three kavarma – a more or less traditional Bulgarian meal. Two bottles of red wine Cherga were enjoyed by everybody except me as I had to drive us back to the hotel which I thoroughly did.

Day 4 – 9th September The ladies from the party have decided to spend that morning on the beach in front of the hotel so after the breakfast the men loaded our cases and as usual we first called at the salt museum but again the Terek wasn't there. We then went to the raptor watching point near Lake A where we spend an hour in total but we only had few raptors – 2 Levant Sparrowhawks, Osprey, few Lesser Spotted Eagles and two Short-toed eagles, one of them quite low over us. Leaving the site we had the only Long-legged Buzzard of the trip and then we checked quite a reliable site for Stone Curlew. This time the vegetation was a bit higher than usual but nevertheless it took us a minute to spot the bird at about 20 meters in front of us. Then we drove to the western salt pans of Pomorie Lake where I dropped the gentlemen and went back to the hotel to pick up the ladies which have had nice and relaxing time. For our picnic site we went to Poroi village where we had the only Woodchat shrike and two juveniles Masked shrikes, Hoopoe and adult male Red-backed Shrike. Then it was the drive to our next base – the holiday village of Rusalka. On the way we had a quick stop at the junction to Irakli which is normally very good for passerines. We had a Lesser Grey Shrike here so this was the day of the shrikes with all the four species recorded. Passing the town of Kavarna I have noticed that the feral pigeons were in panic and the reason was clear – an immature female Goshawk. It flew about 15 meters above the van and on its right side so we had a very good view of this fantastic raptor chasing a misfortunate pigeon.

After arrival we had our dinner on the restaurant balcony just over the sea and we have also enjoyed the excellent performance of live music and dances by a professional dancing group. I have also enjoyed my favorite plum brandy – the Slivovits!

Day 5 – 10th September Peter, Dave and I met for a bre-breakfast birding and walked along the main alley of the resort. It is a really lovely place with all these little chalets situated along the beautiful rocky coastline. We had a couple of Red-breasted Flycatchers and few Red-rumped Swallows. We reached the end of the path which was actually going down to the sea and sat here for sea watching. It was well worth as we had 3 Yelkouan Shearwaters quite close to the shore which were feeding among few gulls. At the breakfast, which we had on the restaurant's balcony, we also had two juveniles Golden Orioles. We then went to the step north of the resort and here we had a big flock of Corn Buntings, Tawny Pipit and soon after we started walking a Quail that took off just in front of us. Coming out of small forest patch we had a juvenile Levant Sparrowhawk so low above us that we could see its throat line! We had another look at the sea from the cliffs – another Yelkouan Shearwater feeding in front of us for those that have missed it before the breakfast. I went back to fetch the van and near to it I had a nice set of harriers, all juveniles – Pallid, Montague's' and Marsh! The raptors actually were playing in the air together and at some point they moved towards the group so I hoped they have also seen them. They have, and also had an excellent view of a low flying Goshawk. Next birds were the only Pied Wheatear we had for the trip and Lesser Grey Shrike. Lunch was to follow in nice and clean café, in front of which there were at least 5 Cardinal fritillaries nectaring on the flowers. I then brought the ladies back to the resort and drove again to pick the men, seeing a beautiful female Red-footed Falcon on a wire along the road. We went back to see it and then moved to Shabla Tuzla Lake where we had a nice selection of waders including several Broad-billed sandpipers and great view of a Temminck's Stint as well as our second Little Bittern. We also had the 3 Black-throated divers at the sea, flying south – the first for the season. We drove back to pick up the ladies then altogether we went to find the Eagle owls at the Bolata valley. Unfortunately the owls were obviously not roosting this side of the gorge, but on the sea side as we couldn't find them on the rocks. Two Hawfinches were a nice reward and as it was getting darker we have prepared to get the Eagle Owl when it would start its night hunt. Right before the dusk, as usual the bird appeared – we heard it calling and have located it immediately – in front of us, on top of the rocks! We had the scopes on it, but even with the bins it was clear to see him calling, throat resonating and the ears up. It sat there about 2 minutes and then it flew towards the plateau. With a full moon behind it, it was truly unforgettable experience. We load into the van and were ready for the dinner, but it wasn't over yet. I drove about 50 meters and in the middle of the road there was a Nightjar. I stopped the van so everybody could see the bird from about 5 meters! Now it was a dinner time and went to the nearest restaurant – Sea Horse in the village of Bulgarevo. Everybody was happy its choice from the menu and the live music only added to the great day.

Day 6 – 11th September For our pre-breakfast birding we went the other way to the really lovely wetland at the southern end of the village named Tauk Liman (Birds' Bay). It is about 12 acres fresh water lagoon between the cliffs and the sea. Beside Wood Sandpipers and Greenshanks we also had Water Rail few meters from us. After breakfast we drove to Durankulak Lake (adding an Alpine Swift on the way and adult beautiful male Golden Oriole, perched on tree and accompanied by several females) but this time it was surprisingly quiet by providing us only with a Great Reed Warbler, Purple Heron and Ferruginous Duck. At Shabla Lake we had 5 Caspian terns and afterwards I dropped the ladies again in the resort and with the men we drove to Bolata valley again where the only new

bird was a Garden Warbler. We then drove to the steppe west of Balgarevo village where we had a flock of 300 + Calandra larks as well as Corn Buntings and Skylarks. We all had a dinner in the same restaurant as everybody enjoyed last evening so my suggestion for the fish restaurant was ignored.

Day 7 – 12th September On our last day of the tour we loaded the van after the breakfast and headed south. First stop was at Goritsa forest where we had a good look for a Black Woodpecker but it didn't appear for us. We had 3 Middle Spotted, 2 Great Spotted and 1 Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and a Short-toed Treecreeper. Next stop was a picnic where we had a 15 + Winchats and Lesser Spotted Eagle. We also checked the Pomorie lake again where we had a nice group of 3 Temminck's stints together just in front of us. Quick check at Lake A saw many waders but no new for the list but we have enjoyed Penduline tit's nest in an excellent condition and 9 Caspian Terns. Thus the total checklist came to 168 species! Short stop at a café near the airport for a drink and a cake and 3 minutes drive brought us at the airport. Time to say good bye.

Tour participants' opinion on the tour:

"I have been on six bird tours with Dobry to date and that in itself tells you that I am a very satisfied customer. His expertise in bird identification is truly inspiring. His keen eyesight and hearing seem to me remarkable. However, there is more to a tour than just finding the birds to make it a successful, memorable and very enjoyable one. Dobry always ensures that all participants have comfortable hotel rooms and good places to eat. Not once do I recall any tour member complaining about any aspect of accommodation or food. Nothing is too much trouble for Dobry in making sure every aspect of every member's experience is as good as it can be. He is always cheerful, kind and very considerate. Perhaps above all, you always feel you are in very safe hands. I think that says it all."

Peter Challinor - Lecturer in Ornithology in former Dept. of Professional and Continuing Education, Keele University and at Birmingham University Tutor for Workers Educational Association in Field Study of Birds Via Pontica – autumn migration tour; 5 to 12 September 2011