

Birds in Bulgaria: 17th to 22nd March 2013

A five-night visit to Bulgaria, in the company of Chris Cox, Richard and Lucy Devitt, Carolyn Heathcote, Derek Moore and Eve Wee. Our local guide was Dobromir Domuschiev (Dobry). Frustratingly, we failed to see our target bird, rock partridge, and struggled with the elusive hazel grouse, but we did see an unexpected flock of seven lesser white-fronted geese, as well as imperial, white-tailed and short-toed eagles. The weather was generally cold and wintry, which didn't help our efforts to find birds. We recorded 98 species of birds, and saw five species of mammals and seven species of butterflies.

Sunday 17th March

Sofia was very cold but brilliantly sunny when we landed at on schedule at 12.45 local time. Dobry had heard that the flight was delayed until 1.30, so was a little late arriving at the airport. He came with his bus, and his Mitsubishi 4x4 pick-up, delivered by his brother-in law: I drove it during the day. We soon escaped from Sofia, with little traffic to hold us up, carrying on to a small town where we had an excellent lunch. There were festivities in the main square, with men dressed up in fancy costumes (one as a bee), as well as national dress. This was apparently an ancient spring custom, suppressed but never exterminated by the Communists. Our lunch – we all had a shepherd's salad – was all that we wanted, and it seemed a shame to sit indoors when the sun was shining outside.

After lunch we drove south to the area where we had our first picnic a year before. I drove the pick-up down to the main road, stopping for fieldfares and seeing a hawfinch. The truck was left the main road, so I joined the minibus. A small group of house martins was seen flying in the valley by the side

of the bus – a hint of spring. We did well for buntings, seeing rock and cirr, along with numerous yellowhammers and a couple of corn buntings, while the best bird was an obliging sombre tit, a new species for Derek. We admired the old golden eagles' eyrie, but failed to see any eagles, though buzzards were common. Most notable were the flocks of mistle thrushes, while we also saw two or three black redstarts. Chaffinches were present in sizeable flocks.

Driving back north, we stopped for an excellent view of a perched long-legged buzzard, looking distinctly white and orange, a bird that has apparently increased



The hotel Panorama

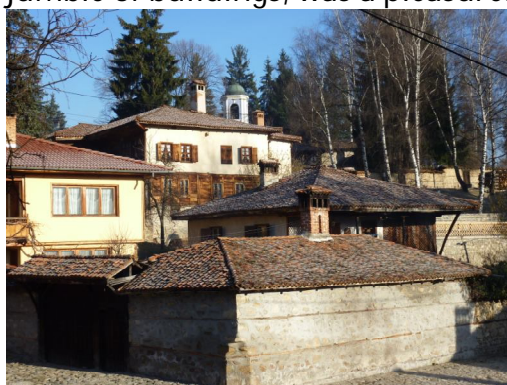
considerably in Bulgaria in recent years. A great grey shrike was also seen well from the bus, along with

stonechats and tree sparrows and big flocks of chaffinches.

We arrived at the Hotel Panorama in Koprivshitsa just as it was getting dark. I was told by our charming hostess, Nikki, who speaks excellent English, that the previous week the maximum temperature had been 24degC, the minimum -10degC. Dinner was excellent, washed down with some very agreeable wines.

Monday 18th March

A clear sky overnight, so the temperature fell to -8.9 at 7am, making a bitterly cold and frosty start to the day. However, there wasn't any wind, so our walk through the attractive and historic town of Koprivshitsa, with its cobbled streets and delightful jumble of buildings, was a pleasure.



Koprivshitsa

We saw lots of hawfinches, a common bird here in Eastern Europe; many were sitting on the tops of trees waiting to be admired. There was also the expected mix of village birds: coal, blue, great and

long-tailed tits, crossbills, chaffinches, siskins, a pair of bullfinches, grey and white wagtails and a very obliging dipper that



Dipper

allowed Derek to photograph it. I had been lazy and not brought my telescope, so did no digiscoping. Carrying a tripod on such a chilly morning isn't much fun.



Nikki serves breakfast

After a good breakfast we set off to look for imperial eagles, driving to an area of extensive rolling grassland surrounded by mountains. Here we soon saw a great spotted woodpecker, then crested and skylarks and a distant pair of woodlarks, plus lots of mistle thrushes. As we were chatting about imperial eagles, one suddenly appeared, giving everyone a good view. It was a lifer for several members of the party. Imperial is a big, square-looking eagle, soaring on much flatter wings than a golden. It was very chilly as we watched, with the temperature only a degree or so

above freezing, while a layer of high cloud cover was flooding in and quickly obscuring the blue sky. As we walked back to the bus a flock of about 60 white storks appeared, flapping north, before spiralling as they found a thermal. They were the first Dobry has seen this spring. It was now time to head for the mountains in search of rock partridges. The minibus was abandoned, and Dobry drove us in two parties up the mountain in the 4x4 to the partridge site. Lucy, Richard and I were the in second party, walking the first couple of kilometres up the forest track; birds were few, but the exercise warmed us up. Dobry picked us up, and as we drove we saw a lesser spotted woodpecker flush close to the track, and managed to locate it again feeding on a small oak just a few feet away. It was a female.

By the time we reached the ridge the sky was a threatening shade of leaden grey, and there was no sign of our quarry. However, a large sounder of wild boar was spotted galloping across a clear area several hundred feet below us. Two of the pigs were striking blondes. Birdwise it was very quiet, as we walked we did see a couple of buzzards, followed by a bright willow tit and a coal tit. A ring ouzel was heard, and I eventually managed to locate it and get the scope on it, though the distance was considerable and the bird was less than co-operative. It may be spring, but there's hardly a hint of the changing season in these juniper-covered hills apart from a sprinkling of yellow and purple crocuses, adding a touch of colour to the otherwise faded grasses.

We carried on walking, arriving above a bare beech wood that looked promising for black woodpeckers. I played my (new)

iPod, and soon got a response from a woodpecker. Eventually we glimpsed the bird as it flew. It perched on a bare beech tree the other side of the ravine, and here I was able to scope it. It was a female, which explained why its response was so muted. A raven soared below us, and shortly afterwards we saw two different peregrines, one distant along the ridge and one much closer. Dobry told us that they have an eyrie close by, though this year it appears to have been taken over by ravens. He also told us that this was once the nesting site of sakers in Bulgaria, with the last breeding attempt in 1999. The young were stolen from the nest.



The snow starts to fall

Sadly, there wasn't a hint of a partridge, while the first small flakes of snow started to fall. We



Picnic in the snow

scoured the grassy slopes with the binoculars, but failed to see anything. By the time we started our walk back to the car the snow had become more determined –

small flakes, but lots of them. Our picnic was late but very welcome, even if munching a sandwich in a snowstorm isn't what we were expecting. With the snow set in we decided that an early return to our hotel was the best option, so were back by 4.

It did stop snowing, but it remained cold and miserable, so didn't tempt me to venture out again.

Tuesday 19th March

A more promising start than yesterday. At 6.30 the temperature was half a degree above freezing, and the sky clear. Just Eve, Chris and Richard joined me for a 7am walk in the town, where we enjoyed



Hawfinch in the town

a feast of finches. We also added dunnock, goldcrest, treecreeper and marsh tit to the list, and I saw my first brambling. It was cold, but



Siskin

a beautiful sunny morning with a lot more promise than yesterday. The promise continued as we set off up the mountain to the rock partridge site. I walked with Chris, Lucy and Richard, while the rest

went up with Dobry in the pick-up. The sun was pleasantly warm on our backs as we walked; the sky was blue and my hopes were high. We stopped once to scope a distant soaring goshawk, while the advance party had good views of a rock



Rock bunting

bunting and a ring ouzel. The sun was still shining when we joined up: we spent a long time scanning the surrounding slopes for signs of our elusive quarry. There weren't any. We did find a few other birds. Skylarks were singing with an enthusiasm we hadn't heard yesterday, and both rock bunting and yellowhammers were seen, along with several buzzards. I glimpsed a long-legged buzzard go over the ridge, never to be seen again, while two goshawks cruised past. A black woodpecker called distantly. We walked on along the track, pausing to watch the odd raven. I spotted a peregrine again. A few butterflies had been roused from hibernation by the sun, and we saw small tortoiseshells and peacocks. A large raptor soared away from us, but it gave absolutely nothing away, though was probably a short-toed eagle.

Our first excitement was a group of five migrating black storks that we watched heading north. We reached the lower viewpoint with a fine view across the slope where we were told a pair of partridges lives. No signs. The sun was warm as we

sat, but increasing numbers of clouds were gathering. As we watched we found another party of



Migrating black storks

black storks, this time numbering about 28 birds, which we watched flapping and thermalling for some time. A goshawk appeared and frightened the local wood pigeons. Still no partridges. Dobry set off across the slope to get the Mitsubishi, which he collected several members of the party in, while the rest of us retraced our route. Another flock of 22 black storks came over, this time much closer.

We had our picnic with a good view of another area that, we were told, the partridges favoured, but not a hint. By the time we had eaten our lunch of bread, cheese and ham, plus tomatoes and cucumber, it was clear that the partridges had beaten us. Again, part of the group was driven down the mountain, while several of us (including Eve this time) walked. There was a minor excitement when what was probably a nutcracker flew across the track, but it wasn't seen again.

Our next target, in the late afternoon, was Ural owl and woodpeckers in the forest of Bogdan, which took some serious off-roading in the pick-up to get to. As we walked, Chris, Richard, Lucy and I saw a souslik. The forest was at about 5,000ft, and there were still drifts of snow on the slopes

and tracks. The advance party saw big flocks of bramblings and hawfinches, but little else. By the time we joined them it was very cold and starting to rain, and our prospects looked poor. So they proved, for the wonderful old beech forest was almost devoid of life apart from a few tits. We suspected that the woodpeckers had yet to move up from the lower ground. It was hard work walking through the snow, and with such a shortage of birds not much fun, either. My attempts to call birds with the iPod elicited no responses. We finally retreated at about 5.35, by which time the temperature had dropped to just 2.7degC. Signs of both wolf and bear had been seen, but that was it.

Wednesday 20th March

It was another very cold morning at minus 3. Our hotel is situated at over 3,000ft, so it's hardly surprising that the temperature drops so low overnight. Everyone except Derek joined me for the pre-breakfast walk, when we wandered once again through the cobbled streets of Koprivshtitsa. We saw then usual mixture of birds, with hawfinches and crossbills, grey wagtails, and mistle thrushes



Mistle thrush nest building

building nests. This really is one of the most attractive towns I've encountered anywhere in Europe, with a wonderful mixture of old buildings, many beautifully restored, and almost all with wonderful wooden gates.



White wagtail

We set off at 8.45, stopping not far from the town in a quest for shore larks that apparently winter here. We were unsuccessful, but did see a male hen harrier and a sparrowhawk as compensation,



Fine scenery, no larks

while the scenery was wonderful, especially with the backdrop of snow-covered mountains.

The sun was now shining warmly, and it was developing into a very pleasant day. We soon left the mountains behind, travelling through sparsely populated



Syrian woodpecker

farmland, much of which looked neglected, with overgrown orchards and vineyards. There were a number of small towns, but there were few people around, while the

architecture of the main buildings echoed back to the Communist era. We did see a number of horses and carts. In one village we stopped for a Syrian woodpecker that flew across the road, and here a tree



Tree sparrow

sparrow also posed for its picture to be taken. Otherwise roadside birds were unremarkable: chaffinches, blackbirds, a couple of stonechats, mistle thrushes, magpies, a few hooded crows and lots of buzzards.

Our drive took us south to a large, shallow reservoir, where our first approach produced a pair of little



Little ringed plover

ringed plovers that Derek photographed. The low water level revealed extensive bare banks. The setting was attractive, as a range of snow-covered mountains formed an impressive backdrop. There were numerous ducks out on the water, so we drove round in order to get better light, for it was beautifully sunny. As we did so many duck took off from the water, though why they flushed was a mystery. With the ducks were seven small geese that immediately

excited my interest. They flew away from us, but then turned and came back, landing on the water. They



Watching the lesser white-fronts in the sunshine

were clearly mallard-sized whitefronts, and proved to be a party of seven lesser whitefronts, an enormously exciting find, for this is Europe's rarest goose.

A careful check of the ducks revealed around 400 mallard, with plenty of wigeon, smaller numbers of teal and several garganey, along with similar numbers of shelduck. The sun was now delightfully warm on our backs, prompting much shedding and changing of clothes. Chiffchaffs sang from the trees behind us, and a single hoopoe was also seen. Chris surpassed himself by finding a white-tailed eagle, along with a lapwing, while at least three short-toed eagles were also seen. Other new birds included great-crested grebe, grey heron, cormorant and yellow-legged gull. Poor old Derek was struck down with severe stomach cramps, but he did manage to spot a bird he thought could be an osprey; it was. We had a very pleasant picnic here, enjoying the birds, the sun, and the 17degC temperatures. The warmth roused butterflies, and we saw brimstone, orange tip, comma and both large and small tortoiseshell. (I later I saw a Camberwell beauty close to our hotel). It was still a lengthy drive to the hotel, our route

taking us through the city of Plovdiv, which looked remarkably prosperous, and there were even people drinking coffee at open-air cafés. Derek was suffering badly, so instead of a planned stop at Assen Castle we drove straight to the hotel.

The temperature was a heady 17degC on the valley floor, but it fell steadily as we ascended, eventually settling on 9degC. Our hotel is beautifully situated, looking south over the Rhodope mountains. The



Arrival at our second hotel

rooms are large and attractive, but distinctly cool, while the shower is one of those irritating affairs you find in Eastern Europe that simply floods the bathroom floor.

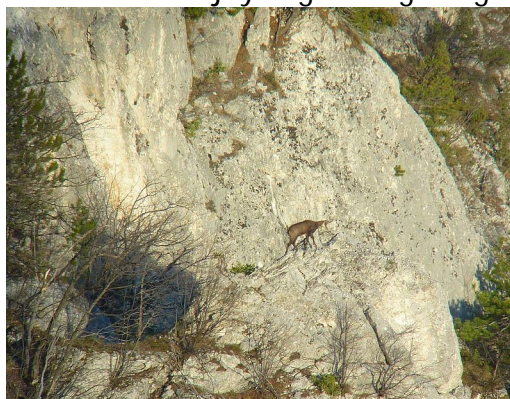
There was time for a late afternoon walk, so we drove back to the ridge where we had walked last year. I wasn't hopeful of hazelhen at such a time of day, but the sun was still



Crested tit

very pleasant, and there seemed a good chance we would see something. We did. I called in a crested tit with the iPod and it gave excellent view. From the viewpoint,

with its stunning views over the mountains, I tried for rock partridge, with the usual lack of success, but raised an almost instant response from a black woodpecker. It eventually flew within a couple of hundred yards of us, though unfortunately was partly obscured from view. After some effort we all enjoyed good sightings.



Spot the chamois

A single chamois added a diversionary interest, and this proved to be a challenge to see as it walked along the cliff side, for it merged so well with its background. On our return drive we stopped for a flock of fieldfares, with a single cock ring ouzel, and we also saw a couple of black redstarts.

We arrived back to base at dusk: as I walked to my room I heard a tawny owl calling. Dinner was fun, with a variety of local dishes, followed by some terrific chips that we all tucked into guiltily. We drank the local red wine (very local apparently); it slipped down easily enough.

Thursday 21st March

It was by far our warmest morning at 8degC, but the sky was cloudy, the wind blowing, and the prospects for the day looked poor. Sadly, initial impressions proved correct, and though there were some fleeting glimpses of the sun, it was a chilly day. It was also a

frustrating one, too, as our principal quarry, the hazelhen, proved extremely elusive. There were tree and house sparrows around the hotel, along with a chiffchaff, while en route to the forest our first linnets were seen. We returned to the same spot as the evening before and walked into the forest; I played hazelhen on the iPod more in hope than expectation. We carried along the forest track, and then dropped down the steep slope with some difficulty, before traversing the beech forest on our way to another vantage point. The woods still look desperately wintry, and it's only the crocuses that give a hint of spring. Apart from a fleeting glimpse of a peregrine, a raven, a singing nuthatch and a willow tit, birds were non-existent. The vantage point gave spectacular views, but the wind was gusting strongly, and it wasn't a place to dwell for too long. Far below us in the valley a grey-headed woodpecker called.



The not-so-red squirrel

We made our way back, with Derek surprising himself by climbing up the mountain without too much difficulty. We did come across a bird party (mainly chaffinches) on our way back, with notably good views of a pair of treecreepers, a goldcrest and a chiffchaff. Best of all was a co-operative red squirrel. Dobry hiked off in search of grouse, but without success.

Lunch was eaten in a smart new shelter, but our pleasure at eating was tempered by the cold wind that was gusting up to 18mph. I did call in a crested tit that showed well, but nothing else other than a coal tit was to be seen. After lunch I suggested to Dobry that perhaps we should drop down from the mountain to look for birds below, but he persuaded me to give the grouse another try. So all of us except Eve and Carolyn set off along another forest track, trudging through mud and at times snow in search of our quarry. I played the iPad repeatedly without response, and our only notable sighting was of a roebuck with his antlers still in velvet. We went a fair way before deciding to turn round, but almost as soon as we turned we heard the soft song of our quarry. Then followed a frustrating hour as at least two birds called tantalisingly close to us. Twice we even heard the distinctive wing-whirring display that according to *BWP* can be heard at up to 100 metres. I'm sure our bird was much closer than that. Seldom have I tried so hard to will a bird to appear. We stared out to a partly snow-covered clearing, fringed by pine trees, hoping to catch a glimpse.

Dobry thought our chances of seeing one of the birds was good, so went back to the bus to collect Carolyn and Eve. I settled on a comfortable twisted pine that provided a comfortable backrest. It was so comfortable that I soon dropped off to sleep, only to be abruptly woken by a hazel grouse singing close by. I heard it call twice more, but didn't see it. Dobry eventually returned with Eve and Carolyn, and I was delighted to hear that on their way they had actually seen a grouse that Dobry had called in.

The combined party attempted once more to see a grouse, but we didn't elicit any more responses, though I did glimpse a hazelhen flying through the trees perhaps 40 yards away. Sadly, that was as close as I came to see one. We had tried very hard, but the birds had beaten us. Before returning to the hotel we drove down into the river valley close to the village, but there was no bird movement, though as we left we saw some distant crag martins. Rain had threatened all day, but we never got more than a few spots, so it could have been worse. Despite lugging the scope around all day I never pointed it at a single bird, which must be a record.

In the evening we celebrated Lucy's birthday with fizz and a cake. The rain may have held off all day, but by 9pm it was sloshing down in determined fashion.

Friday 22nd March

The rain stopped during the night. It was another cold morning, as we have come to expect, but this time made worse by a strong westerly wind. Shortly before we left for our drive to the airport I watched a black woodpecker fly across the valley, but there was nobody to show it to. We left the hotel at 7.30, dropped down to the valley and drove back through Assenovgrad, with its numerous shops selling wedding dresses, and then Plovdiv. The biting cold wind buffeted the minibus as we drove north. Once we were on the motorway we started seeing a few birds, including four pygmy cormorants flying parallel to the road, giving remarkably good views. Three great white egrets clustered together with a group of grey herons were a notable addition to the list. We also saw a number of lapwings, several

kestrels, white storks, flocks of feral pigeons and a rook or two (including one in the middle of Sofia). However, the most interesting sighting was of swirling flocks of bramblings, numbering several thousand birds, as the road cut through a hilly area of snow-covered beech woods.

The temperature dropped progressively as we drove north, starting at 6degC and falling as low as -0.5degC. In Sofia Dobry took us to look at miserable block of flats, dating from the Communist era, which apparently supports a colony of alpine swifts. Not surprisingly in view of the temperature we didn't see any. In some years, we were told, the birds return in early March, in others not until April. It was freezing cold as we unloaded at the airport, so a relief to get inside the airport building where we bade Dobry a fond farewell. He had worked very hard on our behalf, and his efforts were appreciated.

Our plane had to be de-iced before take off. We arrived back in Gatwick on time at 1.30. It was almost as cold in England as it was in Bulgaria.

Thanks to Derek for supplying the pictures of dipper, black storks, rock bunting and little ringed plover.