

BULGARIA - Rhodope Mountains and Sofia Wetlands
5-12 May 2010 with Neophron Tours

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We wanted to see European Brown Bear but somehow the near-guaranteed sightings in Scandinavia didn't appeal and, anyway, that option seemed rather expensive. We knew bears were being seen in the Bulgarian forests and that Neophron Tours offered "Bears and Birds" in the spring. We had met Dimiter Georgiev at the British Birdwatching Fair and had heard good reports of their birding trips, the cost seemed fair and so we decided to give them a try. We were not disappointed! 134 bird species, plus a few more taunting us with calls only, orchids, insects, stunning scenery, and a brown bear! There was just two of us travelling and we added a few days to the standard 5-day tour, spending most of our time in the beautiful forests of the Western Rhodope mountains in the south west of the country and finishing with a visit to the rich wetlands west of the capital, Sofia.

Everything was well organised, the accommodation and food was excellent, our guide (Jordan Hristov) was good company, knew the area and its wildlife well, had the right balance between professionalism and friendliness and was happy to let us take each day at our own pace. Everything was totally flexible.

Our base in the Western Rhodopes was a small, very comfortable hotel nestling in a narrow gorge (hotel "ticks" were Alpine swift, Black Woodpecker, Yellow Wagtail, Dipper and Chamois). We enjoyed 5 days walking the gorges, spruce and pine forests, meadows and stream-sides all just a short distance from the hotel, mainly birdwatching and building up a decent species list, but we were easily distracted by butterflies, flowers and even wolf tracks!

The bear-watching set up is good, with just one ranger and our guide accompanying us. We liked the fact that bears are not guaranteed, that a lot of luck is needed and a fair amount of effort has to be made. There's a real sense of "wildness" with a long, bumpy jeep ride up steep, rough forest tracks before climbing higher on foot to beautiful open meadows. The hides are rustic and very basic, built into the hillside and are almost invisible from outside. We were lucky and saw a bear on our first evening. It came onto the meadow, well before dusk, and walked directly towards the hide, a truly thrilling experience. The next evening we tried a different hide; no bears but we had close views of wild boar and roe deer, Crested Tits and Crossbills. We returned to the first hide on our third night and although no bears turned up we were entertained by the antics of a badger and 3 roe deer for over an hour. We took blankets into the hide on this occasion so we could sleep there for a while, then around 3.30 a.m. we left the hide and went higher to try for lekking capercaillie. As expected, it was too late in the season for the main lek and we only had one sighting of a female flying from a tree while a couple of males called in the distance but the dawn chorus of mainly Ring Ouzels was pretty impressive! We found tracks of two different bears up here and a tree with deep scratches and lots of bear fur. On one of our walks, when we found two groups of Chamois, we heard a bear calling.

On our way back to Sofia we made several stops for birds (Black Stork, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Syrian Woodpecker, Calandra Lark, shrikes) and also to find Sousliks, the European "ground squirrel".

A full day was spent exploring first an open plain of grassland and cultivations (Isabelline wheatear, Long-legged Buzzard) then on to the stunning wetlands of Aldomirovtsi and Dragoman marshes to the west of Sofia. They were alive with the sound of Great Reed warblers and Marsh frogs. Although Jordan said we were not seeing the area at its best, many migrants having moved on, the marshes were full of birds - dozens of Little Bitterns, Bitterns, Squaccos, Purple and Grey herons, Great and Little Egrets, Ferruginous ducks and Garganey, warblers, crakes, Marsh harriers, Penduline Tits.....

We can thoroughly recommend this trip, not just for the chance of seeing a bear, but for an all-round wildlife experience in a beautiful corner of Bulgaria.

ITINERARY

- 5 May 2010 Arrived Sofia airport late morning. Drive to Teshel via Pazardjik, Peshera and Devin, with several birding stops. Checked in at Hotel Orpheus, Teshel mid-afternoon. Drive/walk to first bear hide SE of Teshel late afternoon. In hide 18.00-22.00
- 6 May Early visit to Trigrad Gorge.
Mid morning walk along mountain track near gorge.
15.30 Drive/walk to second bear hide near Devin.
17.30-22.00 In hide
- 7 May 06.30-0800 Walk from hotel along river/forest
09.00-14.00 Drive/walks meadows and spruce forest NW of Teshel
15.30 Drive/walk to first bear hide
17.30-03.30 In hide
- 8 May 03.30-05.00 Drive/walk to Capercaille area, above bear location.
05.00-08.30 Forest and meadow areas
Hotel area
15.00-19.00 Walking in gorges/meadows (Gela gorge/village)
- 9 May Early morning Hotel area
09.00-14.00 Shiroka Laka (gorge/meadows/forest)
15.00-21.00 Mountains, forest/meadows/valleys (chamois area)
NW of Devin
- 10 May Early morning Woodland walk near Teshel
10.00 Departed for Sofia via Pazardjik, frequent birding stops
Overnight at Hotel Generva, outskirts of Sofia
- 11 May Day spent west of Sofia:
Open plains/cultivations
Two separate marshes : Aldomirovtsi and Dragoman
- 12 May Morning flight to Stansted

BULGARIA May 2010

SPECIES RECORDED

BIRDS

134 species seen; 6 species heard-only; (+ dead Long eared Owl *Asio otus*)

LITTLE GREBE	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	
GREAT CRESTED GREBE	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	
CORMORANT	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	
BITTERN	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	
LITTLE BITTERN	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	
GREY HERON	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	
PURPLE HERON	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	
LITTLE EGRET	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	
GREAT WHITE EGRET	<i>Ardea alba</i>	
SQUACCO HERON	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	
BLACK STORK	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	
WHITE STORK	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	
MALLARD	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	
GARGANEY	<i>Anas querquedula</i>	
FERRUGINOUS DUCK	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	
EUROPEAN HONEY BUZZARD	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	
SHORT-TOED EAGLE	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	
MARSH HARRIER	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	
HEN HARRIER	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	
NORTHERN GOSHAWK	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	
COMMON BUZZARD	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	
LONG-LEGGED BUZZARD	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	
EASTERN IMPERIAL EAGLE	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	
GOLDEN EAGLE	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	
LESSER SPOTTED EAGLE	<i>Aquila pomarina</i>	
COMMON KESTREL	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	
HOBBY	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	
PEREGRINE FALCON	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	
CAPERCAILLIE	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>	
QUAIL	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	HEARD ONLY
WATER RAIL	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	
CORNCRAKE	<i>Crex crex</i>	HEARD ONLY
SPOTTED CRAKE	<i>Porzana porzana</i>	
COMMON MOORHEN	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	
COMMON COOT	<i>Fulica atra</i>	
COMMON CRANE	GRUS GRUS	
LAPWING	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	
WOOD SANDPIPER	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	
LITTLE STINT	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	
WOODCOCK	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	
BLACK TERN	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	
WHISKERED TERN	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	
STOCK DOVE	<i>Columba oenas</i>	
WOODPIGEON	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	
TURTLE DOVE	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	
COLLARED DOVE	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	

CUCKOO	<i>Cuculus anorus</i>	
LITTLE OWL	<i>Athene noctua</i>	
TAWNY OWL	<i>Strix aluco</i>	
ALPINE SWIFT	<i>Apus (Tachymarptis) melba</i>	
COMMON SWIFT	<i>Apus apus</i>	
PALLID SWIFT	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	
EUROPEAN BEE EATER	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	
HOOPOE	<i>Upupa epops</i>	
EUROPEAN ROLLER	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>	
BLACK WOODPECKER	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	
GREEN WOODPECKER	<i>Picus viridis</i>	
GREY HEADED WOODPECKER	<i>Picus canus</i>	HEARD ONLY
GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	
SYRIAN WOODPECKER	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	
SKYLARK	<i>Alaud arvensis</i>	
CRESTED LARK	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	
WOODLARK	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	
CALANDRA LARK	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	
CRAG MARTIN	<i>Hirundo rupestris</i>	
BARN SWALLOW	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	
RED RUMPED SWALLOW	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	
HOUSE MARTIN	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	
TREE PIPIT	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	
WHITE WAGTAIL	<i>Motacilla alba</i> (+ one with yarrellii features, dark back)	
YELLOW WAGTAIL	<i>Motacilla flava feldegg</i>	
GREY WAGTAIL	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	
WREN	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	
DIPPER	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	
DUNNOCK	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	
ROBIN	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	
NIGHTINGALE	<i>Luscinia megarhychos</i>	
BLACK REDSTART	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	
NORTHERN WHEATEAR	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	
ISABELLINE WHEATEAR	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>	
WHINCHAT	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	
STONECHAT	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	
RUFIOUS-TAILED ROCK THRUSH	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>	
MISTLE THRUSH	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	
BLACKBIRD	<i>Turdus merula</i>	
RING OUZEL	<i>Turdus torquatus alpestris</i>	
REED WARBLER	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	
BARRED WARBLER	<i>Sylvia nisoria</i>	
BLACKCAP	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	
LESSER WHITETHROAT	<i>Sylvia carruca</i>	
WHITETHROAT	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	
GREAT REED WARBLER	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	
SEDGE WARBLER	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	
REED WARBLER	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	
MARSH WARBLER	<i>Acrocephalus palustris</i>	
SAVI'S WARBLER	<i>Locustells luscinioides</i>	
ICTERINE WARBLER	<i>Hippolais icterina</i>	
OLICACEOUS WARBLER	<i>Hippolais pallida</i>	
CHIFFCHAFF	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	
FIRECREST	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	
SPOTTED FLYCATCHER	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	

GREAT TIT	<i>Parus major</i>	
BLUE TIT	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	HEARD ONLY
COAL TIT	<i>Parus ater</i>	
CRESTED TIT	<i>Parus cristatus</i>	
WILLOW TIT	<i>Parus montanus</i>	
MARSH TIT	<i>Parus palustris</i>	
SOMBRE TIT	<i>Parus lugubris</i>	
LONG TAILED TIT	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	
PENDULINE TIT	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	
NUTHATCH	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	HEARD ONLY
WALLCREEPER	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	
TREECREEPER	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	HEARD ONLY
RED BACKED SHRIKE	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	
LESSER GREY SHRIKE	<i>Lanius minor</i>	
WOODCHAT SHRIKE	<i>Lanius senator</i>	
MAGPIE	<i>Pica pica</i>	
JAY	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	
NUTCRACKER	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	
COMMON RAVEN	<i>Corvus corax</i>	
HOODED CROW	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>	
STARLING	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	
GOLDEN ORIOLE	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	
SPANISH SPARROW	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	
TREE SPARROW	<i>Passer montanus</i>	
HOUSE SPARROW	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	
SPANISH SPARROW	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	
CHAFFINCH	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	
GREENFINCH	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	
GOLDFINCH	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	
BULLFINCH	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	
CROSSBILL	<i>Loxia curvirostris</i>	
LINNET	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	
SERIN	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	
ORTOLAN BUNTING	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>	
YELLOWHAMMER	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	
BLACK HEADED BUNTING	<i>Emberiza melanocephala</i>	
CIRL BUNTING	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	
CORN BUNTING	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	
ROCK BUNTING	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	

MAMMALS 9 species seen

ROE DEER	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>
RED DEER	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
WILD BOAR	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
BALKAN CHAMOIS	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra balcanica</i>
BROWN BEAR	<i>Ursus arctos arctos</i>
BROWN HARE	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>
SOUSLIK	<i>Spermophilus citellus</i>
BADGER	<i>Meles meles</i>
EASTERN (SOUTHERN WHITE BREASTED)	<i>Erinaceus concolor</i>
HEDGEHOG	
(WOLF - TRACKS ONLY)	<i>Canis lupus lupus</i>

INSECTS

Butterflies

Southern Festoon *Zerynthia polyxena*
Swallowtail *Papilio machaon*
Scarce Swallowtail *Iphiclides podalirius*
Orange-tip *Anthocharis cardamines*
Berger's Clouded Yellow *Colias alfacariensis*
Clouded Yellow *Colias crocea*
Brimstone *Gonepteryx rhamni*
Green Hairstreak *Callophrys rubi*
Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas*
Painted Lady *Vanessa cardui*
Woodland Ringlet *Erebia medusa*
Small Heath *Coenonympha pamphilus*
Duke of Burgundy Fritillary *Hamearis lucina*

(?) Large Tortoiseshell *Nymphalis polychloros*
(?) Eastern Rock Grayling *Hipparchia syriaca*
(?) Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus malvae*
(?) Brown Argus *Aricia agestis*
(?) Small White *Artogeia rapae*
(?) Mountain White *Artogeia ergane*
Unidentified "Blues"

Moths

Silver Y *Autographa gamma*
(Larva) Burnet sp.
(?) Bordered White *Bupalus piniaria*

Other Insects

Unidentified Damselflies
Field Crickets *Gryllus sp.*
Scorpion Flies
Bee Fly sp.
Horse Fly spp.
Green Tiger Beetle sp.
Ground Beetle spp.
Cockchafer sp.

REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS

Green Lizard	<i>Lacerta viridis</i>
Common Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis muralis</i>
Erhardt's Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis erhardii</i>
Stream Frog	<i>Rana graeca</i>
Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>
[Tree Frog	<i>Hyla arborea</i>] HEARD ONLY
Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>
Nose-horned Viper	<i>Vipera ammodytes</i>
Grass Snake	<i>Natrix natrix</i>
Slow Worm	<i>Anguis fragilis</i>

PLANTS

Orchids

?Elder-flowered Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza sambucina</i> (red/purple)
?Pale-flowered Orchid	<i>Orchis pallens</i> (yellow)
Green-winged Orchid	<i>Orchis morio</i>
Lady Orchid	<i>Orchis purpurea</i>
Monkey Orchid	<i>Orchis simia</i>
Mammose Ophrys	<i>Ophrys mammosa</i>