

North Northumberland Bird Club Trip to Bulgaria 22nd- 29th September 2017

It seemed to have been a long time in the planning but on 22nd September 2017 sixteen of us boarded the plane for Burgas to begin our week's trip to the Black Sea Coast.

After a late arrival and night in our first hotel, the next morning started at 7am with an early walk down to the harbour, before boarding our spacious coach and heading North to Russalka where we were to spend the next three nights.

En route, after a spot of wine tasting, a shopping stop for picnic lunches (and wine) we arrived at our beautifully situated resort where we each had spacious rooms, a beautiful view over the Black Sea, and even an outdoor hot tub fed by a thermal spring!

We ended our first day in Bulgaria with a total of 86 species including Pygmy Cormorant, Great White Pelican, Short Toed Snake Eagle, Marsh and Montagu's Harrier, Crested Lark, Red Footed Falcon and huge numbers of migrating White Wagtail and Red Backed Shrike.

The following day we headed to Cape Kaliakra as our guide Mitko anticipated a good showing of migrating birds due to favourable winds. This was an unforgettable day with hundreds of raptors overhead heading south on the Via Pontica on their way to the Bosphorus and Africa! Marsh, Pallid and Montagu's Harrier were joined by Booted Eagle, Osprey, Lesser Kestrel, Hobby and Red Footed Falcon in a continuous stream of birds! We added another 18 species to our list!

Next day started with our now familiar pre-breakfast dawn walk and then a drive up to the cause looking for Stone Curlew - unsuccessful! A visit to Lakes Durankulak, Shabla (Centre for Red Breasted Goose Conservation) and Yailata (plus a little loafing on

dunes bordering Rumania!), enabled us to increase our list, adding among others:- Ferruginous Duck, Grey Partridge and (a rarity!) Ring Ouzel which clearly delighted Mitko our guide! This is the emblem of our North Northumberland Bird Club and is a species which breed regularly in the Cheviot hills in our area!

Apart from the awe inspiring photos of the huge numbers of migrating passerines and raptors, we were also struck by the great numbers of Corn Bunting - a species rarely encountered in our area - and certainly a first for me! Another personal first was Hawfinch - not one - not two - but a regular sight seen on all our dawn walks around Russalka!

On 26th September we reluctantly left Russalka and with storm clouds gathering, headed back towards Pomorie with its therapeutic mud and working salt pans. Prospects for migration were poor due to the weather but we added Steppe Buzzard, Gull Billed Tern, Black Tern, Red-rumped Swallow and Nuthatch to name but a few.

The following day got off to a poor start due to the weather, but we were cheered by a spot of shopping (more wine!) plus a pleasant interlude in a warm café before heading to the salt pans of Pomorie Reserve and Visitor Centre where 150 Black Storks were spotted as well as Wood Sandpiper and Kentish Plover. The next stop was at Lake Atanassovsko where we were amazed by a field full of wheeling, feeding Red Footed Falcon! About 500 was the estimate there, although we discovered later that 10,700 had been officially recorded that day!

Another unsettled day weather wise followed and found us at the Poda reserve opened in 1989 and covering 100 hectares. On the eastern migration route, 287 species have been recorded there due to its varied habitats of fresh, brackish and seawater habitats. The reserve is run by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds so

we were made very welcome! The world's only colony of Great Cormorants which nest on disused power pylons use this reserve!

The final evening saw Kath declared the lucky winner of the sweep to 'Guess the final total' with a figure of 157 (NB Final total later confirmed by Mick as 162 species).

On 29th with a lunchtime check in for the flight home, we spent most of the morning in an oak forest, with picnic lunch taken at a reserve near to the airport.

Take 16 people with similar interests, some unforgettable bird sightings, mix with a lot of laughter and a fair amount of Bulgarian wine and that was the recipe for a great week!

Liz Harrison

3rd October 2017