



Traventuria Ltd.
Address: 45 Veslets Str., 1202 Sofia, BULGARIA

Web: www.traventuria.com
Phone: 00359 2 4890884

E-mail: info@traventuria.com
Fax: 00359 2 4917352

Травентурия ООД
Адрес: ул. Веслец 45, 1202 София, БЪЛГАРИЯ

Уеб: www.pytuvane.com
Тел.: 00359 2 4890883

Ел. поща: info@pytuvane.com
Факс: 00359 2 4917352

AUTUMN BIRDWATCHING HOLIDAY IN BULGARIA (23 August – 8 September, 2007)

This is my account of a holiday that I undertook with three friends from England, Bob, Eileen and Terry.

Wednesday 23 August: We flew from a damp, cold Luton airport at 5:00 a.m. and just over three hours later were hit by the heat and humidity of Bourgas Airport. Dr. Boris Nikolov, our expert guide, and Iva Hristova our equally expert driver, met us with a minibus and took us the short distance to our accommodation in the seaside town of Sarafovo. Our arrival was heralded by around 150 migrating **White Storks** passing overhead.

After lunch we took a break until late afternoon to recover and then drove north along the coast to the salt pans at Pomorie. On the way a flock of **Glossy Ibis** flew past to whet our appetites. The light was just right with the sun behind us and there was a fine selection of gulls, terns and waders on offer. I was delighted to see **Little Gulls**, one in full summer plumage, a species I hadn't seen for some years. The highlight, however, was two **Broad-billed Sandpipers** which Boris picked out, a first for all of us. In addition amongst the waders were **Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, Little-ringed Plover, Redshank, Dunlin, Kentish Plover, Little Stint, Golden Plover, Oystercatcher** and **Greenshank** plus **Sandwich, Common, Little and Black Terns** and **Mediterranean Gull**. Further out on the deeper water we could see **Black-necked Grebe** while flitting around the buildings of the Salt Museum were juvenile **Woodchat** and **Red-backed Shrikes**.

We drove around to the western side of the salt pans and saw a flock of **Shelduck** drop down to the sea. Boris found a **Slender-billed Gull** and then in the distance a line of around 35 **White Pelicans** were heading south. What a superb way to end the day and start the holiday.

Thursday 24 August: The plan was to explore the lakes around Bourgas so after a leisurely breakfast we headed south. Our first stop was at Poda Lagoon at the south western end of Bourgas Bay. This is managed by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds and has an information centre and migration watchpoint. Initially it appeared a little quiet except for hundreds of **Cormorants** which nest on some old pylons. One or two have already rusted and collapsed as a result of this.

Then things began to liven up. A raft of over 500 **White Storks** drifted past. There were several **Wood Sandpiper** prospecting on the mud and then someone spotted a **White-tailed Eagle** perched on top of a distant tree. We would get much better views later in the trip but even at that distance I was impressed by the size. During the morning we saw over 50 **Dalmatian Pelicans**, a world-threatened species, but seen regularly here during migration although not in such numbers as the White Pelican.

We set off along the track into the reserve which runs between a marshy area and Bourgas Bay. Eight **Spotted Redshank** were a good find while out at sea was a large flock of **Great Crested Grebe** and **Sandwich** and **Common Terns** fed happily in front of us. A large flock of **Yellow Wagtails** preceded us along the path and there were stunning views of a male **Red-backed Shrike** – luckily for us Boris was an expert on shrikes.



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Flocks of **White Pelican** joined the migration as did a beautiful juvenile **Pallid Harrier**. Flitting amongst the bushes was a juvenile **Penduline Tit** and then a majestic **Caspian Tern** flew past calling. In flight it really is impressive with a forceful call and heavy red bill. Things seemed to be happening all around and there in a pool was a **Red-necked Phalarope**. Soon a second appeared and eventually there was a total of five. Another good selection of waders included **Ringed Plover**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Ruff**, **Little Stint**, **Broad-billed Sandpiper**, **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Common Sandpiper** and **Snipe** while a **Turnstone** flew out from the nearby shoreline. Near the end of the track we came to a freshwater lagoon and this produced **Squacco Heron**, **Little Grebe**, **Ferruginous Duck**, **Purple Heron**, **Pygmy Cormorant** and **Little Gull**. Well satisfied with our morning's work we returned to the hotel for lunch and a siesta as we were still catching up on a missed night's sleep.

Late afternoon we went to the salt pans on Lake Atanasovsko and again the light was just right. For me my first **Marsh Sandpiper** was a superb sighting and we saw our first **Curlew** of the trip. Plenty of waders, pelicans etc. and our first **Gull-billed Terns**. Then we drove to the part of the lake on the western side of the main road which is largely a restricted area. We had come to see what was happening with some ringing taking place there. While we were waiting we added **Bee Eater**, **Golden Oriole**, **Spanish Sparrow** and **Kingfisher** to our list. Finally at dusk we made our way deep into the reeds where three incredibly dedicated volunteers, a couple and their very young daughter, were busy ringing **Barn Swallows** and ignoring the mosquitoes. The prize for us though was a **Thrush Nightingale** which, when seen in the hand, allows one to note the differences from Nightingale. Another brilliant day and time for some more excellent Bulgarian food and wine.

Saturday 25 August: The weather continued to be sunny and hot and we faced a journey inland to Plovdiv. However, we first drove to Pomorie and this time along the eastern finger of land which separates it from the Black Sea. **Little** and **Black Terns** dived to feed almost at our feet while in the distance we saw a migrating **Black Stork** and **Short-toed Eagle**. On the water were several **Great Crested** and **Black-necked Grebes**. A family of **Penduline Tits** worked their way through the reeds and the Water Snakes entertained us by popping their heads above the water every now and then.

We drove back to the Salt Museum and saw many of the species seen the previous Thursday evening. One addition here was **Red-necked Phalarope** and eventually we saw a total of seven. I also saw the **Crested Lark** I had missed on the previous visit. We set off for Plovdiv and shortly after leaving Bourgas saw a flock of over 500 **White Pelicans** flying into Atanasovsko Lake together with a small flock of 9 **Dalmatian Pelicans**.

On the way to Plovdiv we broke the journey for lunch and then searched through the fields by the roadside near Kaloyanovo. We were hoping for Isabelline Wheatear but no luck. We did see **Skylark**, **Booted Eagle**, **8 Black Storks** and a glorious **Roller**. We resumed the journey and saw **Swift** and **Turtle Dove** before reaching Plovdiv and our accommodation in the middle of the Old Town.

Sunday 26 August: We drove east of Plovdiv to the Maritsa River near the village of Milevo. As soon as we arrived three **Levants Sparrowhawks** appeared and circled obligingly overhead. The first of countless **Spotted Flycatchers** seen over the next two weeks was busy catching insects. In a meadow near the river Boris found a juvenile **Masked Shrike**, one of the species I had really hoped to see. We later realised how lucky we were as it must have been one of the last in the area to migrate. We strolled on through the pastures and stands of poplar trees, the countryside reminding me a little of stretches of the River Wharfe



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in North Yorkshire.

There were plenty of butterflies and lizards for our amusement as well as the birds. We studied carefully all the spotted woodpeckers we saw but they all turned out to be **Great Spotted**. A **Thrush Nightingale** gave good views in a bush near the river, good to see one apart from in the ringing. A **Wood Warbler** called from the wood and we managed to track it down. **Little Egret**, **Little Ringed Plover** and **Common Sandpiper** were seen in the river and **Black Stork** and **Buzzard** circling over the trees in the distance. Our first **Blackbird** of the trip flashed across in front and we also saw **Golden Oriole**, **Bee Eater**, **Red-backed Shrike**, **Yellow Wagtail**, **Jay**, **Tree Pipit** and **Green Woodpecker**.

Iva had driven the minibus around to the neighbouring village of Popovitsa to meet us. In our absence she had seen a **Lesser Grey Shrike**. Standing around the minibus we noticed several fine **Rollers** on the electric cables. A flock of **Hooded Crows** passed by while **Whinchat** and **Corn Bunting** were in a small field. There was also a very brief view of a **Black-headed Yellow Wagtail** of the race *feldegg*. The weather had stayed fine for our visit but felt increasingly humid.

After lunch we travelled on towards the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. We noted **Black Stork** and **Short-toed Eagle** en route and our first **Moorhen** in a pond in a field. A few kilometres before the town of Madzharovo we stopped opposite a rocky outcrop to search for Rock Nuthatch. **Crag Martins** swooped over our heads and a **Bonelli's Warbler** of the eastern form *orientalis* moved through the bushes. On a distant peak sat a **Golden Eagle** and later another glided right over our heads. On the crags a **Blue Rock Thrush** appeared and a **Middle-spotted Woodpecker** flashed across. Eventually, much to our surprise, the **Rock Nuthatch** came up from behind and flew over the road. However, it was elusive and this was a species which we never really managed good views of despite hearing it on several more occasions. Some large drops of rain began to fall and having added **Red-rumped Swallow** we set off for our hotel in Borislavtsi.

Monday 27 August: Up at 4:30 a.m. and breakfast at 5 – the reason being that we were hoping to see vultures feeding. Just after leaving at 5:30 we saw two **Nightjars** sat in the road. On the way we counted a total of four **Little Owls** as dawn was breaking. At the village of Potocharka we took a rough track up the hillside, parked up and crept through the scrub to a vantage point. A dead horse had been deposited the night before on the opposing hillside and around eighty **Griffon Vultures** were sat quietly contemplating the scene from the surrounding rocks. Not so the **Egyptian Vultures** that were busy feeding on an old carcasse. As the sun began to rise the **Griffon Vultures** dropped down to settle around the dead horse. Over the next couple of hours they provided great entertainment chasing, sparring and tugging at the entrails reminding me of a rather disorganised and bad-tempered rugby match. Slowly, after feeding, they took to the air in small groups until finally the site was left empty and deserted.

Other points of interest during the morning were Fallow Deer grazing in the distance and a **Cuckoo** flew swiftly over our heads. We also saw **Raven**, **Bee Eater**, **Turtle Dove**, **Black Stork**, **Northern Wheatear**, **Kestrel**, **Buzzard**, **Willow Warbler** and **Red-backed Shrike**. Well-satisfied we returned to the minibus and on the dry grassy slopes near the village added **Tawny Pipit**, **Spotted Flycatcher**, **Whinchat** and **Yellow Wagtail**.

We drove to the nearby River Krumovitsa where **Black Storks** were feeding and a **Kingfisher** flashed to and fro. In the heat of the day not too much was moving so we returned to the reservoir of Studen Kladenetz. This too was quiet with only **Cormorant** and **Grey Wagtail**. Feeling the effects of our early morning start we set off for Madzharovo stopping at a kromlech on the way. We saw **Hoopoe** and when we climbed to the stone circles **Ravens** and a possible **Honey Buzzard**. Not to worry because when we stopped by the River



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Arda near Madzharovo we had a terrific view of a **Honey Buzzard** overhead. **Alpine Swifts** sailed above to complete our birdwatching for the day.

Tuesday 28 August: Another day of travelling but after a late breakfast we stopped again at the River Arda and scanned the cliff faces. **Rock Nuthatch** kept calling but we couldn't manage to locate it. However, first a **Peregrine** and then a **Sparrowhawk** produced great fly-pasts. There were several **Egyptian Vultures** wheeling around and the **Honey Buzzard** put in another appearance. Then into the bus and retrace our steps to Haskovo. Close to Plodovitovo, outside Plovdiv, we found a juvenile **Lesser Grey Shrike** sat on top of a bush in the middle of the dual carriageway. Quick exit onto the hard shoulder to make the most of this much to the puzzlement of the other motorists.

It was a very hot day and with diversions after Plovdiv it was proving a long journey. The compensation was that the scenery was becoming truly spectacular. We wound south along a road high above the Vucha reservoir. Stopping for a photo Eileen picked out a **Sombre Tit** which everyone saw apart from me. Amazingly we didn't see another in the whole trip so I've something to go back for. Further along, the road was temporarily blocked by an accident so we made use of the time to search for a Dipper in the stream below, again much to the interest of the other waiting travellers. No luck with the Dipper but we eventually got moving, passing through Devin and climbing up the Trigrad Gorge as the light was beginning to fade. Still a mouthwatering prospect for the morrow.

Wednesday 29 August: A beautiful morning with a fine view of the surrounding mountains and the village of Trigrad in the valley from the terrace of our hillside hotel. **Serin, Black Redstart** and **Treecreeper** were seen near the hotel as we prepared to leave. There were plenty of **Hooded Crows** about as we drove down to the gorge in the hope of **Wallcreeper**. **Coal Tits** and **Crag Martins** were plentiful but to begin with a fleeting glimpse of a **Wallcreeper** crossing the gorge was all we got. We hung around for some time and eventually our patience was rewarded when we located a bird which worked its way steadily towards us. It ended up being really close and gave excellent views both in sunlight and in shade and finally flew directly over our heads. For me it was an Oscar-winning performance.

After a light lunch in Trigrad we walked south up the valley in the direction of the Greek border. This valley was much flatter than I had expected and in the stream we found the **Dipper** that had previously eluded us. **Spotted Flycatchers** were everywhere and were joined here by several **Collared Flycatchers**. We saw our first **Chichaff** and **Robin** of the trip and had good views of **Bullfinch**. Other species included **Wood Warbler, Red-rumped Swallow, Whitethroat, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Hoopoe, Goldcrest** and **Jay**.

Thursday 30 August: In all the places we stayed I felt I could happily have spent longer but time now to travel back east. I took a walk before breakfast and had fine views of a **Nutcracker** eating a hazelnut by cracking it open on the branch of a pine tree. After breakfast we wound our way back down the gorge to Devin spotting a **Dunnock** on the roadside. We then turned south to the picturesque village of Shiroka Laka. After a break we travelled on through the mountains to the ski resort of Pamporovo, depressingly full of adverts in English for properties for sale and evidence of many being built. We continued to our hotel in Kosovo, a delightful village at the end of a narrow three kilometre road. It was set on the hillside at a point where four streams converged.



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After lunch we retraced our steps a little and then wound our way up into the mountains at the area of Chudnite Mostove which means wonderful bridges. This refers to two splendid natural arches which have been produced in the limestone. It was also a good area for birds with **Coal Tit, Crossbill, Spotted Flycatcher, Nutcracker, Black Redstart, Treecreeper, Grey Wagtail, Willow Warbler, Goldcrest** and **Crag Martin**. We were checking the area out for our early morning trek the next day. As we wended our way back down we found **Mistle Thrush** and **Tree Pipit** in a hillside meadow. Then some time to relax before tomorrow's exertions.

Friday 31 August: Up at 4:30 a.m. we carried breakfast with us and headed back to the area of Chudnite Mostove. We followed a track uphill into the woods and paused every now and then for Boris to imitate the calls of Pygmy or Tengmalm's Owls. Our hope was for some reply or even a sighting but we had no luck there. However, it did send the smaller birds into a frenzy of activity and a host of **Coal Tits, Goldcrests, Willow Warblers** and **Willow Tits** would appear in the branches over our heads. At one point we were stood waiting expectantly when there was a tremendous crashing in the undergrowth nearby. We froze and seconds later a female **Capercaillie** barrelled her way past us through the trees. I stood transfixed and shortly after the male and a third bird followed. What impressive birds; I was ecstatic! But little time to lose as we could hear a woodpecker drumming just up ahead. We crept forward and eventually discovered a **Three-toed Woodpecker** working away at the top of a dead tree. It must have had a musical bent for it would hit one note on a part of the tree and then move around and produce a different one. It serenaded us for some time before flying off into the woods. For me, these two rarities and lifers in the space of five minutes were the highlight of the trip.

We climbed on up and ate our picnic breakfast at the edge of a clearing with **Willow Tits** feeding in front of us. We carried on in the hope of more but although we heard Black Woodpecker we didn't manage to see one. We did find **Ring Ouzel**, saw our first **Wren** of the trip and other birds such as **Sparrowhawk, Nutcracker, Jay, Song Thrush** and **Red-backed Shrike**. By mid-afternoon we felt pretty shattered and headed back to the hotel. I toasted the day's success with a glass of chilled white wine on the terrace.

Saturday 1 September: For the first time it was a grey cloudy morning with a hint of drizzle in the air. Time to leave the Rhodope Mountains behind and return to the coast. On the way we called at the Bachkovo Monastery and had a distant view of Assen's Fortress before travelling on to Plovdiv. Being a holiday Saturday the road was very busy and the appearance of the sun made it steamy. Driving along the main road seemed quite "hairy" and I decided to doze my way through it. Iva was masterful at the wheel and took us safely to Bourgas.

Feeling in need of a break we decided to unwind at the salt pans of Atanasovsko Lake. With a cooling breeze blowing across the water and **Dalmatian Pelicans** soaring overhead it didn't take long to begin to relax. It seemed a long time since we'd left the waders behind and it was great to see four **Marsh Sandpipers** feeding together. There was a **Ruff** in stunning summer plumage and around 220 pelicans, mostly **Dalmatian**, which made a really impressive sight. Many of the waders and terns were the same as our previous visit but we did see our first **Teal** of the trip. Refreshed we drove the short distance to our hotel in Sarafovo with a storm threatening.



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Sunday 2 September: A spectacular thunderstorm overnight that took out the electricity for a while. A cloudy morning with some drizzle we went to Pomorie to check out the salt pans there. It was good to see a group of volunteers improving the habitat for nesting birds even if they had disturbed the birds present. Nevertheless, we managed a reasonable list including **Black-necked Grebe, Common, Sandwich and Black Terns, Mediterranean Gull, Greenshank, Curlew Sandpiper, Kentish Plover, Little Stint** and a colourful **Hoopoe**.

We continued our journey north parallel to the coast and I was surprised how hilly it was as we passed over the eastern ends of the Balkan Range. We paused for a while in the Goritsa Forest and were delighted to find **Red-breasted Flycatcher** as well as **Nuthatch** and **Great Spotted Woodpecker** – where is that Syrian? Semi-collared Flycatchers breed here in summer but had already left on migration.

On through Varna and north to our hotel in Krapets. The countryside seemed a little wilder to me and more in the way of raptors could be seen over the fields. We identified **Marsh Harrier, Kestrel** and **Levants Sparrowhawk** but with storms around we were happy to continue to our base for the next three nights.

Monday 3 September: A storm overnight but a dry morning and I decided on a walk just after dawn. Bob joined me a little later and we were surprised to see five **Night Heron** that settled in a tree not far from the hotel and later **Great White Egrets** pass over. After breakfast we set out for Shablenska Tuzla Lake seeing a mixed flock of **Rooks** and **Hooded Crows** on the way. Shablenska Tuzla held plenty of birds but the light wasn't good and with thunder rumbling nearby conditions were far from perfect. In spite of this we saw a flock of over eighty **Spoonbill** together with **Little Egret** and **Grey Heron**. A **Grey Plover** was the star of the waders that included **Dunlin, Black-winged Stilt, Ruff, Avocet** and **Kentish Plover**. In the reedbeds were **Redstart, Whinchat, Spotted and Red-breasted Flycatchers** and **Red-backed Shrike**. Out over the water it was great to see **Caspian Tern** again. With the storm getting closer we decided to leave and as luck would have it came upon a **Syrian Woodpecker** in some dead trees by the track.

The storm had left the streets of Shabla running with water but hadn't dislodged the **Rollers** from the electric cables on the road to Krapets. Here the roads were under water and such flooding put in doubt our visit to Durankulak Lake. We drove out to near the campsite at Krapets adding a **Black-eared Wheatear** of the eastern race and bided our time with a walk along the coast. Over the sea were **Mediterranean** and **Yellow-legged Gulls** with **Black-necked Grebe** on the water. In the dunes **Crested Lark** and **Northern Wheatear** flitted about. As we neared some ruins Boris found our first **Pied Wheatear** which we were grateful hadn't migrated yet.

A snack lunch and then off down a very narrow track with flooded potholes that could hold untold dangers. The trees and bushes scraped the sides and roof of the minibus and I wondered what on earth we'd do if we met something. Iva remained calm and did a fantastic job getting us through. We arrived at a makeshift fishermen's campsite under some trees and near to some extensive reedbeds. We set out to walk to the lake shore and in doing so picked up **Lesser Grey Shrike, Yellow Wagtail, Cuckoo, Snipe** and several **Purple Heron**. Disappointingly the open water seemed at first only to hold **Mute Swan** and **Mediterranean Gull**. However, a **Squacco Heron** came out of the reeds and settled not far from us to give superb views. Out over the water we identified **Common** and **Black Terns** and in the distance our first **Whiskered Terns**. **Great Crested** and **Black-necked Grebes** were present and a **Kingfisher** flew past on several occasions. On the shore were **Little Ringed Plover** and further inland **Crested Lark**. Durankulak is a huge area of water and our visit relatively brief but the potential of the area was obvious. On our return Boris was quick to light on a **Wryneck** that gave us the briefest of views. Overall we'd been lucky with the weather and added eleven



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new species to the trip list.

Tuesday 4 September: A gorgeous morning for our trip down the coast but first back for another look at the Wryneck if possible. I had seen it before breakfast and we wanted to give it another try. As we exited the minibus Boris noticed a **Lesser Whitethroat**; this was a lifer for me and gave me tremendous pleasure. We were also lucky enough to find the **Wryneck** once more. Then we turned south and headed beyond Shabla to Tyulenovo where Monk Seals once bred in the sea caves. Here we found the Mediterranean subspecies of the **European Shag** *desmarestii*. Numerous **Jackdaws** and pigeons flew in and out of the cliffs and **Mediterranean Gulls** passed out at sea. On the clifftops we saw both **Northern** and **Pied Wheatears** plus **Kestrel**, **Sand Martin** and **Little Egret**.

We moved on further south to Kamen Bryag and the nearby archaeological site of Yailata. As we approached a **Kentish Plover** sat in the road ahead of us. It ended up running alongside the minibus as if welcoming us. The coastal scenery here is stunning and we couldn't have had a better day to appreciate it. On the clifftop we saw **Skylark** and a handsome Green Lizard *Lacerta viridis* and the Balkan Wall Lizard *Podarcis taurica*. We wended our way down to the old Byzantine Fort where a patch of elders had the warblers thronging. **Lesser Whitethroat**, **Blackcap**, **Common Whitethroat** and **Garden Warbler** feeding up for the journey south. A **Levants Sparrowhawk** circled overhead and we also saw **Jay**, **Pied Wheatear**, **Red-backed Shrike** and **Red-breasted Flycatcher**. Just before getting back into the bus a pair of **Calandra Larks** chasing over the neighbouring fields caught our attention.

On to Cape Kaliakra which was rather more commercialised than I had expected. **Pied Wheatears** flitted among the rocks, **Levants Sparrowhawk** appeared again and the cape was full of **Red-breasted Flycatchers**. A fine viewpoint this but not too much migration to be seen in the mid-afternoon heat. Craving a little peace and shade we drove back inland and then turned north and dropped down into the valley of Bolata that holds a freshwater lake. We saw **Moorhen** for only the second time on our trip and some amazing bright green frogs, Marsh Frogs *Rana ridibunda*. As we walked by the reedbeds there were **Whinchats** and **Red-breasted Flycatchers** in profusion. We heard Water Rail and sighted a lone **Pochard** and **Little Grebe**. Other birds here were **Common Whitethroat**, **Bee Eater**, **Willow Warbler**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Jay** and **Red-backed Shrike**. On the return journey **Rollers** were again sat on the roadside cables.

We stopped at Shablenska Tuzla Lake where the light was good but many of the birds of the previous day seemed to have moved on. Still there was plenty to see with **Avocet**, **Curlew**, **Little Stint**, **Redshank**, **Little Ringed Plover**, **Oystercatcher** and **Dunlin** representing the waders. **Garganey** and **Shoveler** on the water and **Little Gulls** and **Black Terns** on the move. A very inquisitive **Thrush Nightingale** hopped about in the track just a few metres from us. We also saw **Turtle Dove**, **Marsh Harrier**, **Little Egret** and **Yellow Wagtail**. A tremendous day in every sense and I felt I had the right to feel exhausted.

Wednesday 5 September: Time to journey back south and in Varna we were treated to another cloudburst which flooded the streets and many of the shops alongside. We ploughed our way through and the other side of the estuary it was completely dry. We motored on south and then took the rough road that led out to Cap Emine. We abandoned the minibus to walk the last kilometre or so to the headland. The bushes were full of **Whinchat** and **Yellow Wagtails** with the odd **Northern Wheatear** and **Common Whitethroat**. A **Sparrowhawk** then displayed over our heads.



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Уеб: www.pytuvane.com
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Ел. поща: info@pytuvane.com
Факс: 00359 2 4917352

Access to the tip of the cape is restricted due to a military installation but we were able to reach the cliffs and enjoy the magnificent views in the sunshine. The views were breathtaking and the fact that **Cormorants** and **Yellow-legged Gulls** appeared to be the only birdlife around didn't seem to matter. Returning to the minibus we got fine views of **Lesser Whitethroat** and passing through the woods added **Marsh Tit**. Then on to our base in Sarafovo till the end of the holiday.

Thursday 6 September: A wet morning! Well it is a national holiday. We decided to return to Poda as it offered shelter and we'd liked it so much on our first visit. The rain had eased by the time we arrived. There were many more **Pygmy Cormorant** than previously and I was surprised how small they appeared next to the **Coot**. A **Marsh Harrier** quartered the reeds and we got a glimpse of a **Water Rail**. **Wood Sandpiper** and **Spotted Redshank** were in the pools and **Dalmatian Pelicans** passed above us. An **Osprey** flew around from the back, fished over the bay in front of us, made a catch at its first attempt and returned triumphantly directly over our heads with the fish in its talons. What a treat!

As the rain had now stopped we fancied another outing into the reserve. In the bay **Great Crested** and **Black-necked Grebes** were joined by **Sandwich Tern** and **Mute Swan** with **Turnstone** on the tideline. On the marshes we were delighted to pick out a **Temminck's Stint** together with **Ruff**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Marsh** and **Common Sandpiper**, **Little Ringed Plover**, **Little Stint**, **Snipe** and **Dunlin**. **Sedge Warbler** and **Penduline Tit** moved through the reeds and the freshwater pool held **Little Grebe**, **Purple** and **Squacco Heron**, and **Ferruginous Duck**. A **Goshawk** was seen flying to the south and the **White-tailed Eagle** appeared and circled inland providing much better views than on our first visit – spectacular through the telescope.

After lunch we moved south to Lake Alepu which lies beside a busy main road and didn't seem too promising when we first got there. Boris knew what he was doing though and soon had a **Lesser Spotted Eagle** in the scope. Distant at first it eventually gave quite good views. We also seemed to have picked up on something of the migration here with **Honey Buzzard**, **Montagu's Harrier** and a flock of over a hundred **White Stork**. With **Marsh Harrier**, **Buzzard**, **Raven**, **Snipe** and **Red-backed Shrike** we felt we'd done very well.

Late afternoon we made for Bourgas and then branched off towards Lake Mandra. As we approached we had to leap out of the van for the spectacle of **Lesser Spotted Eagle** and **Short-toed Eagle** wheeling overhead. Hardly had we got back in than we had to jump out again for a light phase **Booted Eagle**. We drove to the point where the River Izvorska joins Lake Mandra – a superb spot even if it was packed with fishermen. Again the sun was just right and we were able to enjoy superb views over the shallow estuary. Plenty of **Pygmy Cormorants** giving good views both in flight and perched on dead trees in the water. **Greenshank**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Redshank**, **Wood Sandpiper**, **Snipe** and **Little Stint** looked at their best in the evening sunlight while a **Ferruginous Duck** fairly glowed. **Gull-billed Terns** gave a fine display and **Little Grebe** dived and bobbed. A **Kingfisher** posed in all its glory while **Marsh Harrier** and **Bee Eaters** floated over the reedbeds.

Feeling peckish we made our way towards the minibus and as we were about to get in first a **Montagu's Harrier** and then a **Pallid Harrier** flew over. What a day! I had feared after the north it may be an anti-climax but Boris had made sure that didn't happen. As we approached Sarafovo we saw a **Swift** to complete the day's total.



Traventuria Ltd.
Address: 45 Veslets Str., 1202 Sofia, BULGARIA

Web: www.traventuria.com
Phone: 00359 2 4890884

E-mail: info@traventuria.com
Fax: 00359 2 4917352

Травентурия ООД
Адрес: ул. Веслец 45, 1202 София, БЪЛГАРИЯ

Уеб: www.pytuvane.com
Тел.: 00359 2 4890883

Ел. поща: info@pytuvane.com
Факс: 00359 2 4917352

Friday 7 September: Our final full day we were blessed with fine weather and set off for the ringing station at Lake Atanasovsko. Access was tricky for me and like a horse jumping the fences there were a couple of refusals before Terry hit on an idea to get me across. I was very glad he did as we could soon view a juvenile **Red-backed Shrike** in the hand and I was amazed how small it seemed. Out over the lake were literally hundreds of **White** and **Dalmatian Pelicans** wheeling around.

Some **Spanish Sparrows** were ringed and then things really began to liven up. **Lesser Spotted Eagle** and **Black Stork** appeared in the distance; an **Osprey** flew high over the marshes and then a **Bittern** rose up and gave brilliant views as it skimmed away over the reedtops. **Common Whitethroat** and **Great Reed Warbler** were ringed and a **Lesser Whitethroat** fed in a nearby bush. Over the lake pelicans arrived continuously and at times the flights to the airport have to be delayed to avoid any danger. **Honey Buzzards** passed through on migration, we saw at least thirty during the morning. Not finished yet a **Kingfisher** sat on a sluice in the dyke and then a **Great White Egret** sailed in over the reeds. Finally **Booted Eagle** and **Black Kite** passed over to complete an excellent morning.

We lunched in Pomorie then continued to the salt pans. There was a touch of autumn in the air and well over two hundred **Sand Martins** had gathered on the wires near the Salt Museum; nearly time to leave for all of us. We saw **Grey** and **Golden Plover** and many of the waders and terns seen there previously. We drove to the beach to look for Sanderling but instead encountered nudists. Very discreetly Boris worked his magic and picked out a glorious **Red-necked Grebe** still sporting much of its summer plumage. What an image to be able to take away!

We decided to pay one last visit to the salt pans at Atanasovsko Lake where a **Wigeon** became our 185th species seen on the trip. We also heard six others: Black Woodpecker and Crested Tit at Chudnite Mostove; Grey-headed Woodpecker in the Trigrad Gorge and Short-toed Treecreeper, Cirl and Rock Bunting near Madzharovo. I was more than happy with that and the weather stayed kind to us till the end. When we returned to the hotel it started to rain and did so heavily for much of the night.

Saturday 8 September: We flew out on a cool, grey morning – preparing us for Luton no doubt! I would like to thank Boris Nikolov and Iva Hristova for making the holiday such a pleasure and a success and also for the depth of knowledge they possessed and readily shared. My thanks also to Ivailo for the ideas and planning which were fundamental to the overall success. I would also like to mention the hospitality which we received along the way in the various family hotels where we stayed and which too was an important part of the holiday. Finally thanks to my friends Bob, Eileen and Terry without whom this would never have happened. I hope to return sometime in the future for those species which I missed.