



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

SPRING BIRDWATCHING TOUR FOR RAPTORS IN SOUTHERN BULGARIA (06-12.05.2008)

This spring birding tour took place in the beginning of May '08 and due to the interests of our client in raptors it was mostly concentrated in the southern parts of Bulgaria, still providing good overview on other rare species of birds. Although in the beginning the weather was too rainy for a normal spring we still succeeded in encountering what we have been looking for.

Participants:

Mick Baron, Ivailo Nikolov (tourleader)

06.05.2008

After meeting at the airport we had an afternoon transfer to the smallest Bulgarian city - Melnik, situated in the southwesternmost corner of Bulgaria. The weather en-route was rainy all the time and it did not really promise something better to happen within the next 24 hours.

07.05.2008

An hour in the morning without rain allowed some good views at the neighbouring sandy pyramids just behind our hotel: few **Cirl** and **Rock Buntings**, **Red-rumped Swallows**, songs of still active **Scops Owls** and a shade of a flying **Rock Thrush**. During breakfast it started to rain again but we were too enthusiastic and still in the beginning of the tour to allow weather to avert our plans. The meadow by Rozhen Monastery although not giving us enough good show of **Subalpine Warblers** still provided our checklist with some singing **Barred Warblers**, **Black-headed Bunting**, **Lesser Whitethroats**, **Rock Buntings**, **Cuckoos** and **Middle Spotted Woodpecker**. Of course most of the time it was rainy. The next stop was nearby - Rupite. The rocks along Struma River represent remnants of an ancient crater, still housing some hot springs in the middle. The rain was about to stop for a while when we tried to get to a previously known breeding site of **Rock Nuthatch** - successful! An adult appeared soon with a prey for the screaming youngsters inside the nest. As the rain stopped completely for the moment with no guarantee when it will start again we decided to spend more time at that place and the result was rather good indeed: **Nightjar** in the bushes, singing **Rock Partridge**, displaying **Black-eared Wheatear**, several noisy **Olivaceous Warblers**, **Black Storks**, **Hobby**, **Long-legged Buzzard**, **Ortolan Bunting**, a couple of **Rollers**, **Hoopoes**, **Calandra Larks**, **Turtle Doves**, **Crag Martins** and **Red-rumped Swallows**, flying in both directions above the river **Spoonbills**, **Bee-eaters** and many more. Enjoyable stop so to say especially bearing in mind the bad weather forecast for the following days. From Rupite we continued to the Central Rodopi Mountains, passing on the way by Dospat dam lake. By the blue waters of the reservoir we managed to spot some really interesting for this relatively high mountain lake species, probably brought down by the bad weather - **Black** and **White-winged Terns**, a flock of **Comon Sandpiper**, **Little Stint**, **Dunlins** and **Curlew Sandpipers**. Four migrating **Honey Buzzards** were good addition for the end of the day before our final stop in Trigrad Gorge and the picturesque village of Trigrad, where we stayed for the night.

08.05.2008

Trigrad Gorge is probably one of the most famous places in Europe for watching **Wallcreepers**. We had initial information where the birds use to spend a lot of time in the morning and as we were still walking to reach that place we managed to spot a playing couple. We enjoyed these amazing birds for quite a long time and moved to another location in the gorge where we saw probably the same birds. **Crag Martins**, **Alpine Swifts** and **European Serins** were also spotted on that place. From the gorge we continued towards



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the Thracian Valley and Maritsa River, where a short but heavy shower welcomed us. Two **Lesser Spotted Eagles** en-route were just an appetizer of what we observed at Maritsa River in the afternoon. Although the previously known breeding sites of **Masked Shrikes** there in Poplar trees seemed to have been corrupted during wintertime we still managed to spot a pair. **Lesser Grey** and **Red-backed Shrikes** were also present. The weather here was much better than the one in the mountains a day before. While enjoying the sun we had some **Golden Orioles, Rollers, Hoopoes**, a couple of **Black Kites** and **Lesser Spotted Eagles, Migrating Black Storks, Montague's Harrier, Night Heron, Lesser Spotted** and **Green Woodpeckers** and not the least a female **Levant Sparrowhawk**, the latter unfortunately not very well seen by Mick. This of course was good reason to try our luck tomorrow on the same place, hoping to see even more birds. Short rain again on the way back to Plovdiv, where we spent the night, accompanied by singing **Scops Owls** in the centre of the town itself just over our table during dinner. Mick even managed to spot one of them flying for a second.

09.05.2008

The morning found us on the same place where we were last afternoon - by Maritsa River. It was more cloudy but still not rainy. The same birds were spotted like yesterday but this time a male **Levant Sparrowhawk** (perfect views while perched on a dead tree) made for us a good show chasing **Sand Martins** of the nearby colony. Flying over **Collared Pratincole** was rather unexpected species for this particular place but still nice addition for the checklist. From Maritsa River we continued towards the Eastern Rodopi Mountains - the recognized realm of the birds of prey in Europe and of course the place which was mostly expected by Mick because of its raptors. As we were travelling we stopped on several times as because of the good weather quite a lot of birds were active in searching food after the several rainy days in a row. These were **Short-toed Eagles, Isabelline Wheatear, Black Kites, Long-legged Buzzards, Bee-eaters** etc. We stayed in Gorno Pole village, close to the town of Madzharovo. For the next 2 nights we were about to stay in a farm with very pleasant family, being also served extremely delicious meals prepared by our hostess in the meantime (stuffed pumpkin with calf among them). We could not resist a walk in the afternoon by some of the rocks in the area, where we got the first **Egyptian** and **Griffon Vultures**, displaying **Blue Rock Thrushes, Sombre Tit, Crag Martins, Black-eared Wheatears**, fishing **Black Storks** in the river, **Honey Buzzard** and many other local specialties. Few times we had short showers that only refreshed the landscapes and made the birds even more active. In the bushes nearby difficult to see **Olive-tree Warblers** were noticed, **Woodchat Shrikes, Black-headed Buntings, Barred** and **Olivaceous Warblers** too. As we still had some time we decided to check also the closest bays of Ivailovgrad dam lake. Luckily this reservoir provided us with superb views of **Ruddy Shelduck** and **Slender-billed Gull** (the latter strangely distant from the sea). Few dozens of **Swans**, several **Black Storks, Black Terns, Honey Buzzard, Black-headed Buntings** and **Barred Warblers** were also enjoying the meadows and the shallow waters by the lake. Seems like the weather was about to get better as today and yesterday we only had few rains every day, but rather short and varied by clear blue skies.

10.05.2008

This day was dedicated to watching feeding of vultures at the feeding place close to Studen Kladenets dam lake. The weather was rather misty and cloudy and no vultures from the neighbouring breeding colonies in Greece were able to see the soaring raptors above the specially placed carcasses from longer distance and to come and eat from it except for the **Griffons** from the nearby colony. We stayed there until noon hoping a **Black Vulture** to appear but as this did not happen we were only grateful to the flock of **Pallid Swifts** that were flying very close to us as well the singing **Subalpine Warblers** which Mick was able to attract playing records of their songs. Seeming like there was nothing more to miss here we headed for lunch in the neighbouring town of Krumovgrad. Right after it we decided to visit Krumovitsa River. At that time of the day the weather suddenly changed - blue skies, warm sun, no sign of wind or rain at least until dinner - terrific! But we were not the only creatures to be delighted by the weather. As we were staying on one



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place the raptors started to show up as on a fashion parade - above the hills started to appear one by one **Short-toed Eagles, Long-legged** and **Common Buzzards**, young and adult **Golden Eagles, Montague's Harrier, Griffon** and **Egyptian Vultures, Kestrels, Hobbies, Sparrowhawks, Booted Eagle** and as for a desert we had a brilliant look of a perched **Levant Sparrowhawk**. As Mick said we should not have had problems staying there for a whole day. However we walked a bit more in the area just to enlarge the species list for the day with some more **Black-eared Wheatears, Syrian Woodpecker, Sombre Tit, Stonechats, Hoopoes, Rollers, Crag Martins, Olivaceous Warblers, Cirl** and **Black-headed Buntings, Black Storks, Wryneck** (heard) etc. In the afternoon we checked again the feeding place but outside the **Griffon** and **Egyptian vultures** we only spotted a fox feeding on the carcass. **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler** was seen in the evening in the woods by Madzharovo as we headed back to our accommodation.

11.05.2008

Early morning get up surprised us with a fog in the lower parts of the valley. However we walked below the rocks waiting for the mist to disappear which happened rather fast when the sun gave heat. A flock of **Sombre Tits** were quarreling in the bushes while **Blue Rock Thrushes** were singing up in the still foggy rocky peaks. Typical for the area **Cirl, Rock** and **Ortolan Buntings** were displaying atop trees and rocks. After short stop at the bushes with the **Olive-tree Warblers** (this time also seen by Mick as well) we continued to Sakar Mountains, where we were hoping to find **Eastern Imperial Eagle**. En-route by the town of Svilengrad we stopped for half an hour to "warm up" the day with **Booted Eagle, Black Kites, Lesser Spotted Eagles, male Levant Sparrowhawk, Black Storks, Bee-eaters** etc. In Sakar we stayed by one of the nests of **Eastern Imperial Eagle**, where we met some other birders waiting for the same bird to appear. They were a bit impatient and after an hour with no success (besides the **Short-toed Eagles** and **Long-legged Buzzards** nearby) went for lunch with the intention to come back in a couple of hours. We were more stubborn and decided to stay and soon after they were gone an adult **Eastern Imperial Eagle** flew over us and started to display above the field nearby. We enjoyed the acrobatic flight of the bird for twenty minutes and continued northwards to the town of Sliven, where there was a huge chance to spot some other young **Imperial Eagles** feeding in the fields, housing some of the largest Souslik colonies in the country. Along the road we stopped many times for **Long-legged Buzzards, Lesser Spotted Eagles, Black Kites, Black Storks** etc. Unfortunately when we arrived at the Souslik fields we only spotted two of the ground squirrels. It was very cold and a rain was about to start in a very short time. No **Eastern Imperial Eagles** were seen. However few Long-legged Buzzards gave some good views on this actually last point of our birding tour. Three hours drive to Sofia and some good sleep before the flight on the next day left Mick with hopefully good impressions on his birding tour in Bulgaria, which finally gave him almost 35 lifers (out of about 140 species for the whole journey, which was actually not bad result bearing in mind the bad weather and the lack of appropriate wetlands visited).