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3 days in Southern Bulgaria, Wallcreepers, Warblers & Raptors (and a whole lot more) (10th – 13th May 2009)

Following much grovelling I was allowed to abandon my wife and daughters for 3 days birding abroad this year. I decided that Bulgaria was an attractive destination as I have not really been to SE Europe before (well only a couple of Greek islands) and it also gave me a good chance of seeing Wallcreeper.

To make the most of my limited time (and to avoid having to drive!) I decided to hire a guide. After emailing various potential guides I employed the services of Ivailo Nikolov of Traventuria Ltd. so on Sunday 10th May I flew out to a very hot and sunny Sofia courtesy of Easyjet to meet him. Ivailo collected me at the airport and we drove out of Sofia, seeing our first White Storks nesting beside the main highway.

Our first destination was the hills around Pazardzhik about an hour and a half from Sofia. At our first stop we quickly found a pair of smart Isabelline Wheatears (the first of over 20 lifers for me) these gave stunning views as they hawked for insects. They nest in the burrows of the Souselik which live in the hills. Corn Buntings and Calandra Larks were everywhere and a Tawny Pipit put in an appearance. We checked out a nearby quarry which had held Rose-coloured Starling (without success as we were still a bit early for them) but did see our only Northern Wheatear of the trip there.

Continuing our drive through the hills a pair of Golden Oriole flew in front of the car. Our efforts to relocate them were unsuccessful but we had many more of this species later in the trip. Our next stop produced our first pair of Red-backed Shrike, a Black-headed Bunting and several Bee-eaters; all these species were to prove very common throughout. Our first raptor of the trip was a Long-legged Buzzard which drifted over whilst we were stopped and this species was seen everyday.

Another short-drive brought to us another hillside meadow and more Corn Buntings and larks galore, Calandra, Crested, Sky and our particular target here Greater Short-toed Lark all performing well. 3 more Long-legged Buzzards and a Short-toed Eagle kept the raptor interest coming. These meadows were a lepidopterist's paradise with numerous different butterflies flying up from our feet as we walked.

We then began a long and slow drive along tortuously curvy and pot-holed mountain roads to the well-known Wallcreeper site of Trigrad gorge. Now I was seriously glad I was not driving as Ivailo did a remarkable job of avoiding both potholes and oncoming traffic. We stopped at a dam for eye-level views of Crag Martins and a male Black Redstart was also added. Our original plan had been to go for Wallcreeper first thing in the morning but Ivailo suggested it would be worth a try tonight to maximise chances.

After my early start from Oxford I was pleased to manage a refreshing 20 minute nap in the car before we arrived at the entrance to Devil's Throat cave in the Trigrad Gorge at about 5.30pm. The gorge is a bit like Cheddar Gorge on drugs and without the masses tourists or the cheese and with some seriously good birds instead.



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Now it was serious neck ache time as we scanned the sheer cliffs for the Wallcreeper.

Peregrine and Raven glided over, a Black Redstart sang and a Grey-headed Woodpecker called (but did not appear) but no Wallcreeper. Local honey-sellers who had been in the area all day happily informed us the Wallcreeper had been present all morning so encouraged we maintained our vigil despite protestations from the neck muscles. Finally we were rewarded. Ivailo spotted the Wallcreeper high up and serious neck strain really kicked as we followed its' progress along the cliff. It was a male bird and appeared to be hawking for bees in bee-eater fashion. It then obligingly flew down to just above eye-level, giving great views and some relief for the neck. After enjoying this wonderful bird for some time the smell of a nearby barbecue got the gastric juices flowing and we headed for the small village of Yagodina and out hotel for the night, adding Grey Wagtail as last species of the day.

The hotel was something else! It was not actually in a village – just beside a lonely mountain road in the middle of a forest with a small brook running alongside. From my balcony Swallows, House Martins, Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins were enjoying a feast of evening insects and I was glad to partake in a bit of a feast myself, delicious Bulgarian “Shopska” salad (accompanied by the traditional brandy) followed by baked trout with a sort of potato rosti. It was all excellent and a great end to the day. Over dinner we agreed that we were not going to get better views of the Wallcreeper and that we would make an early start the next day back down the mountains towards the Maritsa River near Plovdiv.

Following a good breakfast featuring some delicious wild strawberry jam we started a 2.5 hour trek down the twisty mountain roads. En route we came across two Dippers, located a roadside colony of Alpine Swifts and then added both Pallid and Common Swifts over a small town. We next stopped for a break at Bachkovo monastery and enjoyed fine views of a pair of Honey Buzzards overhead.

We arrived at Maritsa River just before lunch; this was a well-known spot for Masked Shrike but produced so much more! Golden Orioles were frankly common in the riverside plantations competing with the Nightingales for the loudest song. Black Storks drifted overhead, a Hoopoe flew over the river, Olivaceous Warblers sang from riverside thickets and Spanish Sparrows flitted through the trees. On the river was a pair of Oystercatchers and a Yellow-legged Gull. Another Honey Buzzard cruised over but the only shrikes were of the Woodchat variety. Ivailo was concerned that the Maskeds may not have arrived from winter quarters but a quick phone call to a local contact confirmed that at least 1 pair had definitely been seen at our location this spring. Happily we were then able to confirm this ourselves when first the male then the female put in an appearance. The male gave stunningly close views. I'm admittedly a big Shrike fan so was delighted to get such good views of a truly stunning bird.

Ivailo's contact pointed us towards a field where a pair of Stone Curlew had set up territory and some Collared Pratincoles had been seen so we duly set off in that direction, pausing again en route to enjoy 3 pairs of Montagu's Harriers quartering the same field and our first Black-headed Yellow Wagtail of the trip. On reaching our destination we quickly located the Stone Curlews but concluded the Pratincoles had departed.



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After lunch at Bulgaria's answer to Little Chef we began the long drive to the Eastern Rhodopes (Ivailo described this as the best birding area, given what we had seen in the past 24 hours I thought where we had already been was pretty damn good!). As usual our journey was delayed by more avian delights, European Roller, Black Kite and Lesser Grey Shrike being the particular highlights. It was also somewhat delayed by the street layout in the town of Haskovo, which was presumably designed by dropping a plate of spaghetti from a great height.

The landscape in the Eastern Rhodopes was very different from the West, with broad-leaved trees replacing the spruce in rolling hills and mountains rather than the sheer gorges and steep cliffs of the West. Our first stop though was a cliff just outside the semi-abandoned mining town of Madzharovo to look for vultures. The cliffs acted as a bit of a sun trap and the heat soared as we scanned the crags and were quickly rewarded with several new species, Blue Rock Thrush, Black-eared Wheatear, Rock Bunting, Griffon Vulture and Egyptian Vulture. A quick walk enabled us to hear distant Ortolan Bunting but we were unable to track it down. Red-rumped Swallow and Crag Martin were very numerous here.

A very short drive brought us to a hillside. "This is the Olive-tree Warbler site, do you want to try?" asked Ivailo. My answer was a resounding yes despite Ivailo's warning of the previous night that they were difficult to see and the species reputation as a skulker. Reputations were somewhat blown away when on exiting the car we immediately heard and then saw the bird. It gave good views sitting pretty much in the open. "That was too easy!" noted Ivailo. A smart bird this one and really one I had not at all expected to see.

Next stop was Ivailovgrad Lake. As we drew up Ivailo was straight on to a Barred Warbler but I missed it and then birding karma kicked in, the pay-off for the easy Olive-tree Warbler being a real struggle to see Barred Warbler. A walk along the lakeshore produced several White Storks and Grey Herons and a stunning Squacco Heron but the Barred Warblers were limited to snatched bursts of song with the birds doing all they could to stay out of sight. A Whitethroat was somewhat scant consolation. We were just about to call it a day when one called from close by and then gave good if brief views as it obligingly settled on a dead tree. A most distinctive Warbler, with the glaring yellow eye and big-headed appearance being more noticeable than the barring.

It was now about 8pm but still time for one last stop. The target here was Subalpine Warbler but already birds were settling down and we only added Woodlark and Cirl Bunting and we headed for our overnight accommodation. This night's accommodation was a real treat, as we stayed on a working farm in the tiny village of Gorno Pole. A sumptuous three course meal of shopska, mountain lamb with rice, and layered dessert that I never found the name of. This was accompanied by home-made brandy, homemade wine (I was dubious but delighted to find it extremely palatable!) and yoghurt with superb homemade honey. Everything we were served had been produced on the farm it was delicious and the local Scops Owl gave us a suitable musical accompaniment.

The next morning began where we had left off the night before with a farmhouse breakfast including homemade tea and milk which was literally still hot from the cow.



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The latter was a real treat with a taste very different from the cold pasteurised stuff we are used to. Before we left I took the opportunity to purchase some of the farm's honey. I asked for the smallest jar they had – which happened to be about the biggest jar of honey I had ever seen!

First stop on our final day was back at Madzharovo at the vulture watch point. As we waited for the thermals to kick-in we saw Lesser Whitethroat and a Hawfinch flew past us. After a short wait the raptors began to appear firstly Honey and Common Buzzards, then a distant Golden Eagle over the mountains. Finally the enormous Griffon's and a single Egyptian Vulture took flight, coming right over our heads, providing astounding views. Descending back down the hill we paused in a small woodland where a pair of Eastern Bonelli's Warblers were yet another lifer for me.

We returned to the cliff face we had visited the previous day but before we arrived a cowherd flagged us down and pointed out a small snake. Ivailo was very excited by this - it transpired that the snake was a Sand Boa (*Eryx jaculus*) an extremely rare species in Bulgaria. Having removed it from the middle of the road to a safer location, Ivailo took many record photos of this rare reptile.

Meanwhile the raptors kept on coming, Short-toed Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Kestrel and Peregrine all making appearances and best of all a Lesser Spotted Eagle, thermalling with the vultures before heading West. In about an hour we had seen 10 different raptors including 3 eagles and 2 vultures.

We then headed east to the rocky hills above the Studen Kladenets dam. More reptile action en route was provided by a Hermann's Tortoise crossing the road and once again we decided that moving it off the road was a prudent course of action. We stopped just past the dam and after a short but steep climb highlights were a tricky to find singing Ortolan Bunting (I got it eventually with much help from Ivailo – their song really does echo making them hard to pinpoint), more Black-eared Wheatears and being able to look down into a Black Stork's nest on the cliff. A pair of Mute Swan on the river looked rather out of place! In the mountain stream Ivailo was able to show me the boldly marked Yellow-bellied Toad.

We made a brief stop in Potochnitsa for a very brief lunch before heading for the vulture feeding station. A handful of Griffons and a single Egyptian were the only vultures present however much entertainment was provided by other species and yet again warblers were the stars. First off was a stunning singing male Subalpine Warbler, then a Barred Warbler showed with a great more ease than the previous day's bird. A pair of Sardinian Warblers scolded us away from where they were presumably nesting and best of all was a quite showy Orphean Warbler who easily saw off a Red-backed Shrike that got too close and in doing so gave us a nice size comparison. Another bird belying its' supposedly skulky nature was a Wryneck which showed well foraging for ants on the ground and then sitting at the top of a dead tree.

A Southern Crested Newt was also of interest here.

One last stop was to be made at the Krumovitsa River for Western Rock Nuthatch. 2 Hobbys proved to be our final raptor species here. The Nuthatches were being very unobtrusive and it took us some time to locate one and then it had a frustrating habit of flying out of sight around the nearest bluff as soon as it was in the bins, eventually however good views were obtained.



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We departed at about 6pm, well behind schedule due to all the extra birding we had crammed in, and despite the late end to the day Ivailo still found time to give me a quick driving tour of the centre of Sofia, which I was then able to repeat on foot the next morning before my lunchtime flight back to Gatwick.

All in all an excellent 3 days birding with Raptors, Shrikes and Warblers being very much to the fore. The scenery was some of the best I have seen in Europe. It was an intensive 3 days and we covered a lot of ground (nearly 1000km in the car – I'll plant a tree) if you could stay for a week I'm sure the extra time would be very well-rewarded, in terms of fitting as much into such a brief time as this Ivailo did a superb job and I would recommend him thoroughly. (I also particularly liked the choice of accommodation with some really good local cuisine!).