

BULGARIA IN WINTER

19 – 25 FEBRUARY 2006

TOUR REPORT

LEADERS: MARK BEAMAN and NIKOLAI DILCHEV

Bulgaria in winter is, needless to say, not a big list trip, but we still managed 104 species in total in just a few days in the field. Of course we were not there for numbers of species, but with one major target in mind, the rare and much-prized Red-breasted Goose. As well as some great encounters with this beautiful bird, including 2500 in a single concentration, we also enjoyed such highlights as good numbers of Pygmy Cormorants, both Great White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Great Bittern, the beautiful Smew, Long-legged and Rough-legged Buzzards, Mediterranean Gull, a calling Eurasian Eagle-Owl at dusk, Syrian and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, the hulking Calandra Lark, Great Grey Shrike, lots of Hawfinches and some fine Spotted Nutcrackers amongst the snows of Mount Vitosha.

After a very straightforward flight to a wintry Sofia, we had some time to wander around the local woodlands before dinner. Most of the birds were typical European species, such as European Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, and Eurasian Nuthatch, but Short-toed Treecreepers and Hawfinches were well received. After an excellent dinner in a local tavern we headed for the railway station and the overnight train to Varna on the Black Sea coast. For someone used to Indian Railways' idea of what a sleeper train should be, the smart interiors of the 'executive' class compartments came as a pleasant surprise. In no time we were heading off into the night at a fair pace. It was a pleasant thought to ponder how much driving time we were saving on those winter roads.

We arrived in Varna in thick mist, the ornate station buildings appearing quite ghostly in the early morning light. Luckily, however, it soon began to lift and we had not gone far towards Kavarna before we were travelling through a sunlit landscape of low hills, forests and broad areas of cultivation. Skeins of Greater White-fronted Geese were heading inland and, much to our delight, we soon came across a mixed flock containing five Red-breasted Geese, which we could observe from the roadside at relatively close range. An excellent start! Common Buzzards were suitably common along the way and in one area we found a good number of Calandra Larks amongst the Eurasian Skylarks.

After settling in to our comfortable guesthouse, and enjoying a late breakfast, we set out for the lakes and wide open spaces that typify the Bulgarian Dobrogea. A stop along the coast at Shabla turned up our first Black-throated Divers, Black-necked Grebes and European Shags of the form *desmarestii*. After that we went on to explore Lakes Shabla and Durankulak, although access to some parts was restricted due to some recent confirmed cases of avian bird flu. Of particular note during our travels

were a lone Pygmy Cormorant, some Greylag geese (not a numerous species in this area), a good number of Whooper Swans, a nice little gathering of eight 'redhead' (i.e. female or immature male) Smews, a nice Northern Goshawk, a lone Rough-legged Buzzard, a very fine Merlin on the edge of a village, a flock of European Golden Plovers, Syrian Woodpecker, a number of Crested Larks and flocks of Fieldfares. Best of all was the large flock, some 720-strong, of Red-breasted Geese, mixed with 40 Greater White-fronted Geese which we found near Shabla (and a further 20 Red-breasteds were seen nearby). We were able to get reasonably close and enjoyed some great scope views of the packed ranks moving steadily across a field of winter wheat as they fed on the new growth (they must be popular with the local farmers!).

Next day we headed inland, looking for a really large goose concentration, although Nikolai had warned us that the unusually mild late winter weather had resulted in a great diminution of the numbers compared to January. We kept seeing skeins of Greater White-fronts heading in the same direction, so we followed them, stopping from time to time to take a new bearing. Eventually we came to the right place – here the flocks were descending into a bowl in the Dobrogea and vanishing from view. On closer inspection the bowl proved to be a huge marshy area, and it was seething with geese! We spent several hours exploring the entire area and estimated that around 20,000 Greater White-fronted Geese were present, but amongst these were some 2500 Red-breasted Geese and about 250 Greylag Geese (and Nikolai even spotted five Lesser White-fronts flying past while off by himself, but sadly the rest of us missed these). They were relatively unwary as well, so by making a slow and careful approach we managed to get close enough for wonderful views of the vast flock and even some nice photographs. From time to time, however, huge numbers of geese were suddenly flying up from the southern end of the marsh, and after going round to investigate we were rewarded with splendid views of two big *calidus* Peregrines repeatedly hunting over the marsh, and causing great consternation every time they did so. The sheer noise of wings and calls as thousands of geese took to the wing at the same time was quite extraordinary. Even a couple of Long-legged Buzzards were hanging around, obviously hoping to pick up an injured or dying goose to feed off. After that we headed back to Kavarna, although we were delayed en route by a nice Great Grey Shrike on the roadside wires. After a walk along the shore, and a chance to study the finer points of Caspian and Yellow-legged Gulls, it was time for another pleasant dinner and a chance to sample the ever-improving Bulgarian wines, which are nowadays really pretty good!

In the morning we drove out to Cape Kaliakra, past some giant wind turbines that must surely wreak havoc with the many migrating birds that pass this area (many thousands of storks and raptors pass the headland every spring and autumn). The limestone cliffs at Kaliakra were spectacular in the extreme and the still waters below held many Black-necked Grebes, cormorants and Red-breasted Mergansers, as well as a lone Red-throated Diver and a couple of Black-throated. Of course every place in Bulgaria has its 'wicked Turks' story, and Kaliakra is no exception. Here the local maidens tied their long hair together and jumped off the cliffs rather than fall into the hands of the invaders! Further north we explored a small valley where a Golden Jackal and an obliging Lesser Spotted Woodpecker were the best finds and some remaining steppe habitat where a lone Greater Short-toed Lark was lingering amongst the Calandras, while at Shabla an adult Dalmatian Pelican flew south along the coast and many Little Gulls were passing offshore. We even had an opportunity to drive up close to some 400 Red-breasted Geese, thanks to Nikolai's willingness to take that minibus almost anywhere! That evening we visited a rocky valley where, right on cue, as the light faded, a big fat Eurasian Eagle-Owl suddenly appeared on the skyline and started to call. A fitting finale to an enjoyable day.

From Kavarna we headed south to Burgas, stopping along the way to watch, to our surprise, an overwintering White Stork in a field and later a display-fighting Woodlark. A walk at the extensive Goritsa forest resulted in some good views of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers. Eventually, with the weather deteriorating after the mild sunshine in the north, we arrived at Lake Pomorie in the fog, although it was not quite thick enough to deny us views of the only Red-crested Pochard of the trip.

Our last full day was a real contrast with what had gone before. Wet and misty weather, with a cutting wind! Yes, winter had returned. This made exploring the Burgas lakes and the nearby coastline much harder work, but we persisted and were rewarded with many Pygmy Cormorants, three Great White Pelicans (wintering much further north than usual), a couple of juvenile Dalmatian Pelicans and no less than 55 Smew, including a number of pristine adult males in their pied finery. Down the coast we found a great little restaurant with good views over the sea, and passing Mediterranean and Little Gulls. After a final dinner at our rather strange hotel, positioned behind a filling station, we headed for Burgas station and the night sleeper to Sofia.

Glorious sunshine greeted us in Sofia and, after breakfast at McDonald's (the only place open in town!), we were climbing the road up Mount Vitosha, a 2290m peak that dominates the city's southern horizon. Heavy snow clothed the mountain and the coniferous forest looked an absolute 'fairy tale'. Once up at the ski resort below the summit, we walked along the rather slippery road, enjoying marvellous views of Spotted Nutcrackers, Willow Tits and Common Crossbills (the latter feeding on the spruce cones in the sunshine). After that it was time for lunch and the flight home after a very enjoyable short break in a little-known corner of Eastern Europe.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

GAVIIDAE

Red-throated Diver (Red-throated Loon) *Gavia stellata*: A rather uncommon winter visitor to the southern Black Sea. One off Cape Kaliakra.

Black-throated Diver (Black-throated or Arctic Loon) *Gavia arctica*: Three off Shabla, two off Kavarna and two off Cape Kaliakra.

PODICIPEDIDAE

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: Three at Lake Mandra.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*: Common and widespread on the Black Sea coast.

Black-necked Grebe (Eared Grebe) *Podiceps nigricollis*: Widespread and locally common on the Black Sea coast, with 200 off Cape Kaliakra.

PHALACROCORACIDAE

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: Common and widespread on the Black Sea coast. Maximum count 200 off Cape Kaliakra.

European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*: Up to 20 recorded at several points along the coast in the Kavarna region. The form here is the Mediterranean and Black Sea *desmarestii*.

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*: Just one in the Kavarna region, but 30 south of Varna and no less than 160 at the Burgas lakes.

PELECANIDAE

Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*: Three (an adult and two juveniles) at Lake Burgas. Looked a bit sorry for themselves in the rain.

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*: An adult flew north at Shabla, while at Burgas we found two juveniles on Lake Vaya.

ARDEIDAE

Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*: Just one observation, of a single at Lake Burgas, but splendid close views.

Great Egret *Egretta alba*: One in Kavarna region and a total of four at the Burgas lakes.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: Three south of Varna and 10 at the Burgas lakes.

CICONIIDAE

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*: One in a field near Kavarna did not seem injured, but had failed to migrate south for the winter.

ANATIDAE

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*: Common and widespread on the Black Sea coast, especially at the Burgas lakes where we recorded 82 in total. These are the genuine wild article, not introduced birds.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: Small numbers in the Kavarna region.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*: By far the most numerous goose in the Kavarna region, with a maximum count of 22,000 in a day (including 20,000 at the big marsh).

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*: Five at the big marsh amongst the vast concentration of Greater White-fronts were sadly only seen by Nikolai.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*: Five at Durankulak and about 250 at the big marsh.

Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*: Many had moved north into Romania or beyond due to the unusually mild weather, but even so we recorded up to 2550 in a day in the Kavarna region, including a splendid concentration of 2500 at the big marsh. What a beautiful little goose it is.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*: A total of 350 at the Burgas lakes.
 Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: Common and widespread on the Black Sea coast.
 Gadwall *Anas strepera*: Fairly common and widespread along the Black Sea coast.
 Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*: Common and widespread at the Black Sea coast.
 Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Common and widespread on the Black Sea coast.
 Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: Rather patchily distributed and not common. We had a single at Shabla, six at the big marsh and 10 at Lake Pomorie.
 Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: Small numbers in the Kavarna and Varna regions, but more common at Burgas where the lakes held 120 in total.
 Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*: Just one male at Lake Pomorie.
 Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: Patchy but fairly common in the Kavarna/Varna region, and very common at the Burgas lakes where we recorded a total of 1000.
 Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: Common and widespread on the Black Sea coast.
 Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*: A total of four at the Burgas lakes.
 Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*: One at Kavarna and three at Lake Vaya.
 Smew *Mergus albellus*: A total of 9 'redheads' in the Kavarna region and no less than 55 birds, including five splendid adult males, at the Burgas lakes.
 Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*: A single off Shabla and 60 off Cape Kaliakra.

ACCIPITRIDAE

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*: Widespread in small numbers on the Black Sea coast.
 Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*: Frequently encountered in small numbers in the Kavarna region, but just one in the south, at Pomorie Lake.
 Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*: One north of Balgarevo, and Nikolai had a second individual at Shabla.
 Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: Scattered singles in the Kavarna region.
 Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*: Widespread in small numbers on the Black Sea coast.
 Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*: Two at the big marsh.
 Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*: Just the one, between Kavarna and Durankulak. Bulgaria is at the southern edge of the winter range, so unusually mild weather is likely to see the population shift northwards.

FALCONIDAE

Merlin *Falco columbarius*: A male at Balgarevo.
 Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*: Two hunting at the big marsh caused great consternation amongst the packed masses of geese. These large individuals were apparently wintering birds of the Arctic-breeding form *calidus*.

RALLIDAE

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: Two at the Burgas lakes.
 Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*: Common and widespread on the Black Sea coast. Maximum count 450 at the Burgas lakes.

CHARADRIIDAE

European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*: 25 near Balgarevo and 12 at Shabla.
 Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*: Two at Senokos, and one for Duncan at Durankulak.

SCOLOPACIDAE

Sanderling *Calidris alba*: 12 at the beach at Dyuni.

LARIDAE

Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus*: A first-winter at Shabla and three adults at Sozopol.

- Little Gull *Larus minutus*: Two flying south at Shabla on our first visit and 40 on our second. In addition, 30 along the coast south of Burgas.
- Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*: A total of 115 flying south off Shabla and four near Varna were the only records in the north. In the Burgas area, we recorded a total of 540.
- Common Gull *Larus canus*: Scattered records on the Black Sea coast, mostly of small numbers, but 20 at Durankulak. Beaman & Madge use the name Mew Gull for this species, but it reverts to the name formerly standard in Europe when the North American form *brachyrhynchus* is treated as specifically distinct (under the name Mew Gull, or sometimes Short-billed Gull).
- Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*: Scattered records of small numbers in the Kavarna region. Beaman & Madge lump Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis* and other members of the *cachinnans* group in this species, using the name Yellow-legged Gull for the enlarged species. The *cachinnans* group was formerly lumped in Herring Gull *L. argentatus*.
- Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*: Common in the Burgas region, where we recorded a total of 136, but only a few records of up to 10 in the Kavarna/Varna region.

COLUMBIDAE

- Rock Dove *Columba livia*: Widespread and fairly common on the Black Sea coast. The population here is a feral one.
- Stock Dove *Columba oenas*: A total of three in the Kavarna region.
- Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*: Eight between Varna and Kavarna.
- Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: Widespread and locally common on the Black Sea coast.

STRIGIDAE

- Eurasian Eagle-Owl *Bubo bubo*: We were delighted to be able to watch one calling at dusk from a rocky ridge.
- Little Owl *Athene noctua*: One at Balgarevo.

PICIDAE

- Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus*: (H): Heard at Shabla and at Lake Vaya.
- European Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*: Singles at Sofia and Shabla, and two more in the Kavarna area.
- Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*: Singles at Sofia and Goritsa, and another heard at Vitosha.
- Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*: A total of four in the Kavarna region.
- Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*: Great views of three at Goritsa.
- Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*: A male seen well near Cape Kaliakra.

ALAUDIDAE

- Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*: Locally common in the Kavarna region, where we recorded up to 40 in a day.
- Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*: A single en route to Shabla may have been one of the local breeding birds that was hanging on through the winter, or a visitor from further north.
- Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*: Small numbers in the Kavarna region.
- Wood Lark *Lullula arborea*: One song-fighting between Kavarna and Varna on a very mild morning.
- Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*: Common in the Kavarna region, but scarce in the south where we heard just one around Burgas.

TURDIDAE

- Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*: Common at Sofia. In addition, small numbers in the Kavarna region and at Goritsa, and a single at Vitosha.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*: Locally common in the Kavarna region and at Goritsa.
Song Thrush *Turdus iliacus*: One near Cape Kaliakra.
Redwing *Turdus iliacus*: One in the Kavarna area.
Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*: 10 at Goritsa.

SYLVIIDAE

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*: One seen and another heard at Vitosha.

AEGITHALIDAE

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*: Fairly common in the Sofia area.

PARIDAE

Willow Tit *Parus montanus*: Four at Vitosha.

Coal Tit *Parus ater*: Common at Vitosha.

Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus*: Common in Sofia and at Goritsa. In addition, small numbers in the Kavarna region.

Great Tit *Parus major*: Common at Sofia. In addition, small numbers in the Kavarna region and at Goritsa.

SITTIDAE

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*: Common in the Sofia area and four at Goritsa.

CERTHIIDAE

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*: One seen and another heard at Goritsa.

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*: Two at Sofia, and Nikolai heard one at Goritsa where the two species overlap.

LANIIDAE

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*: One in the Kavarna region.

CORVIDAE

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*: Small numbers in the Kavarna region and at Goritsa.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*: Common and widespread. Beaman & Madge use the name Common Magpie for this species, but following the splitting off of the North American form *hudsonia* (Black-billed or American Magpie), the residual *P. pica* is best called Eurasian Magpie.

Spotted Nutcracker (Eurasian Nutcracker) *Nucifraga caryocatactes*: 10 at Vitosha, where we enjoyed some excellent views. These birds belong to the thick-billed western form (nominate *caryocatactes*) of southern Scandinavia and the mountains of central and southeastern Europe.

Western Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*: Local but not uncommon on the Black Sea coast.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*: Common on the Black Sea coast. Also one at Sofia.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*: Common in Sofia but surprisingly localized and mostly uncommon on the Black Sea coast.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*: Two over Sofia and two on Vitosha.

STURNIDAE

Common Starling (European S) *Sturnus vulgaris*: Common and widespread in the Kavarna region, where we recorded up to 200 in a day. Also two at Sofia.

PASSERIDAE

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: Widespread and fairly common.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: Small numbers in the Kavarna region.

FRINGILLIDAE

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*: Fairly common in the Sofia area, in the Kavarna region and at Goritsa.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*: Just two for most of us in the Kavarna region, although Nikolai had a further 10.

Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*: Two between Kavarna and Varna, plus five for Nikolai near Cape Kaliakra.

Common Crossbill (Red Crossbill) *Loxia curvirostra*: Six on Vitosha mountain. The Balkan crossbills are usually assigned to the nominate race.

Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*: One for Nikolai on Vitosha.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: Not uncommon on the Black Sea coast. In addition, five at Sofia. We enjoyed some great views of these 'megabills'.

EMBERIZIDAE

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: Scattered records of small numbers from the Black Sea coast.

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*: Locally common in the Kavarna region.

MAMMALS

European Hare (Brown Hare) *Lepus europaeus*: Three singles in the Kavarna region.

Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*: One at Vitosha mountain.

Golden Jackal (Common Jackal) *Canis aureus*: One near Cape Kaliakra.