

Trip Report: SPEC Birding expedition through northern Greece and central Bulgaria ~ 12-19 April 2018

Woodpeckers, Owls and Grouse Tour

Introduction

This eight-day tour to Northern Greece and central Bulgaria was titled **“The Woodpeckers, Owls and Grouse Tour”** and was planned early in the season to give a good chance of seeing some mountain and forest birds that are generally elusive and become more so once the canopy on the wooded mountain slopes closes. Our main targets were Rock Partridge (a new bird for everyone on the tour), Three-toed, Grey-headed, Black, Syrian, White-backed, Middle-spotted and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, Pygmy, Tengmalm’s (or Boreal) and Eagle Owls. This meant that we would have to linger at some of the sites for long periods in the hope of locating some of these tricky species, but there would also be many more SE European specialties to search for at some of the most beautiful sites with the most spectacular outlooks that you could ever imagine.

We had used Neophron as our ground agents on three previous tours of Bulgaria and they had never disappointed, so this specialist wildlife touring company was hired again for this trip. We also made a special request for Minko to accompany us as our local guide. Minko is part of a Neophron’s team of superb English-speaking guides who is a brilliant birder, but also enjoys and joins in with UK banter! The admin for our tour was handled by Kathy Piotrowski who also manned mission control at home whilst the rest of us were away.

The following is the tour’s blog with each day written by tour members to enable each person the opportunity to express their feelings of that day, but also the tour as a whole.

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12 April: London ~ N. Greece – Paddy Shaw

Like birders in a gilded cage, we awoke at 3.30am in the Premier Inn at Gatwick (but at least had six- hours sleep) for the short walk across the road to the airport and the hoped-for group assembly at the EasyJet check-in.

We were all present and correct, so there was enough time to grab a coffee and a sandwich before the trek to our gate for our three-hour flight to Thessaloniki. Some pretty impressive turbulence trapped Rob in the toilet, with the stewardess shouting *“remain seated, sir!”* through the toilet door. Airports always seem easier to get out of than into and this was the case at our destination. We met Minko (our guide from Neophron Tours, who some of us have known for many years) who showed us to our rather swish transport – a very comfortable minibus (driven by the ever-helpful Ivan),

which was almost our home for the next seven days. Of course, birding begins at airports and, as we were loading, a Crested Lark was making its way along the pavement.

This was to be a smooth journey along the E90 motorway towards Kavala and slowly, travel-head became birding-head, with some good and sometimes surprising spots along the way – a pair of Dalmatian Pelicans on Lake Koroneia, flyovers by Yellow-legged Gull, then around 120 Flamingos on Lake Ekvoles, together with Great White Egret. The journey also notched up House Martin, Pallid Swift, Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard and White Storks, attending their massive nests of twigs in the villages that impressed Lesley no end!. A ring-tailed harrier, thought to be a Hen Harrier, was not clearly seen, but Hooded Crow and Raven were unmistakable.

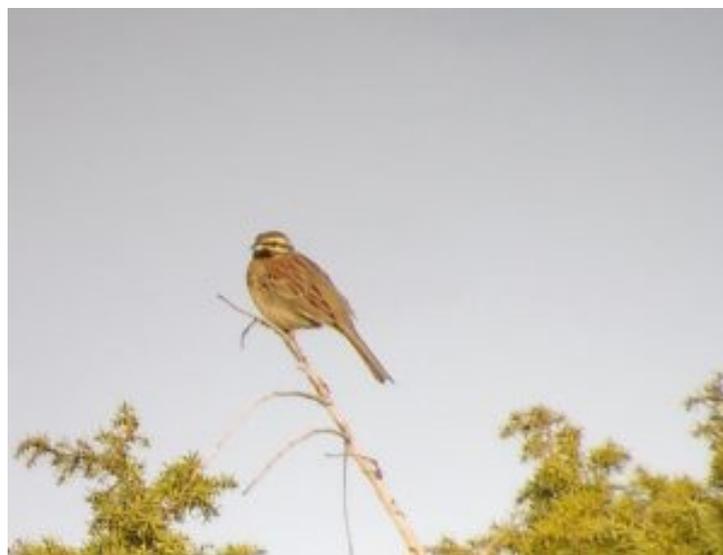
We arrived at the Hotel Filoxenia, in the village of Toxotes, Ksanti, which is nestled in the Nestos River gorge. This range of mountains is an extension of the Eastern Rhodopes in Bulgaria, so highly-regarded by the Waveney Bird Club members of the party, who have visited them twice before. Comfortable rooms, a lovely temperature after the tricky UK winter, balconies and a singing Nightingale. Welcome to Greece! Of course, the temptation to chill out with a cold beer was quickly suppressed, and scopes were hastily assembled for an immediate trek up the mountain that we would repeat several times over the three days in this area.

The target of this repeated journey up the winding road was Rock Partridge, a notoriously difficult European mountain species with a restricted range. One must remember the context at times like this. I've had a Red-legged Partridge wander into my kitchen and have a good look round before departing again in the past; but here we were on a 30-minute, totally uphill drive to the top of a Greek mountain to find its cousin. Limestone rock, scrub bushes and no traffic at all – just a herd of cows slowly making their way up, shepherded by a lone dog.

At the top, it was perfectly still – a massive panorama, looking out over the Nestos River, snaking through the gorge below us. The westering sun made difficult, milky light for scanning the rocky slopes below us, but it was just grand to be out birding so soon, and makes you marvel at international travel. One minute waking up in an air-tight room in an airport hotel, and seemingly the next scanning limestone crags on a Thracian mountainside.

With little partridge activity (other than calls) we entertained ourselves with the singing Sub-alpine and Sardinian Warblers, fly-overs by Raven, two Short-toed Eagles, flocks of Crag Martin and Red-rumped Swallows below us and a distant Blue Rock Thrush. Just before leaving, Minko identified a Lesser-spotted Eagle, with its distinct double white upper-wing patches. And it didn't end there! The descent produced great views of Black-eared Wheatear, Cirl Bunting and further Sardinian Warblers. Not bad for what was not yet Day One! So – back to the hotel, for a quick scrub-up before the tradition of seeing how much beer you can drink before dinner (typical Greek salad, kebabs and baklava) and The Log, hosted as usual by Eric 'D'Weasel' Patrick, with all its usual disputes and banter.

We prepared for a return to the mountain the next morning and Rock Partridge before breakfast – hopefully! It had been a long, long day, following a long day the day before! We retired to bed to the serenade of a Nightingale outside, its beautiful song soon drowned out though by Steve’s snoring inside!





Friday 13 April 2018 ~ Martine Huit

This is our first blog. I am a relative newcomer to 'birding' while my companion and roommate Erica is a more seasoned member of the birding fraternity.

Not quite up before the lark, the day started sedately with an early-morning cup of coffee at 6.30am at the Filoxenia Hotel, before setting off to drive up the hair-pinned road to one of the gorges in the Rhodope mountains. Being early in the year, the limestone hillsides were clad in green bushes and trees, with enough grass on the verges to provide fodder for cattle and horses. There was some evidence of quarrying in the area, but this didn't distract from the natural beauty of this region.

As soon as we got off the coach, Minko heard and saw the elusive Rock Partridge. Only a few of the group got a passing glimpse of the bird a while later, when it took flight out of the scrub to disappear into distant bushes. After identifying several other species, we headed up to the top of the peak where the flora changed with a greater abundance of beautiful wild flowers, including Early Spider Orchid and anemones that were a vibrant

crimson/pink colour. Views from the mountain were stunning. The Nestos River made sweeping meanders, cutting through rock to disappear into the Trakea Plain which traverses both Greece and Bulgaria. Birdsong and cow bells were the only sounds to break the silence in this idyllic spot.

Members of the group were quick to point out birds they spotted, sharing their wealth of knowledge when it came to identifying the fauna and flora in the area. Multiple varieties of butterflies alongside lizards, common and rare plants added to the enjoyment of the day.

The recorder for the group (D'Weasel) was sharp in spotting birds and kept a list of those identified together with the numbers seen throughout the day, information that was shared with everyone after the evening meal.

As we headed back down the mountain, we avoided running over a Hermann's tortoise, which was safely moved to the verge to enable him to continue on the same course of his journey, all-be-it a slow one.

All of the above took place before breakfast! Cereals, fresh bread, cold meats, cheese and delicious Greek yoghurt with honey set us up for the next few hours. This was followed by a brief stop to stock up on food for lunch. Queuing to pay was interrupted by the call "Griffon Vulture overhead" – after all, you can't miss a golden opportunity for such a clear sighting!

Our next stop was by the quiet, single track railway line running close to Galini Village. We had great views of the Rock Thrush and Rock Nuthatch on the cliff-face close to a cave entrance. Our stop was enriched by the sounds of marsh frogs and Nightingales.

After a short drive which took us through Keramoti Village, where the ferry goes to Thasos Island, we stopped by small lakes where amongst a list of birds and other fauna identified, we also saw a Caspian Tern and Black-winged Stilt. Moving on again, Steve alerted us to the sighting of a Spur winged Plover - all I can say is that this unexpected stop was well worth it, a stunning bird!

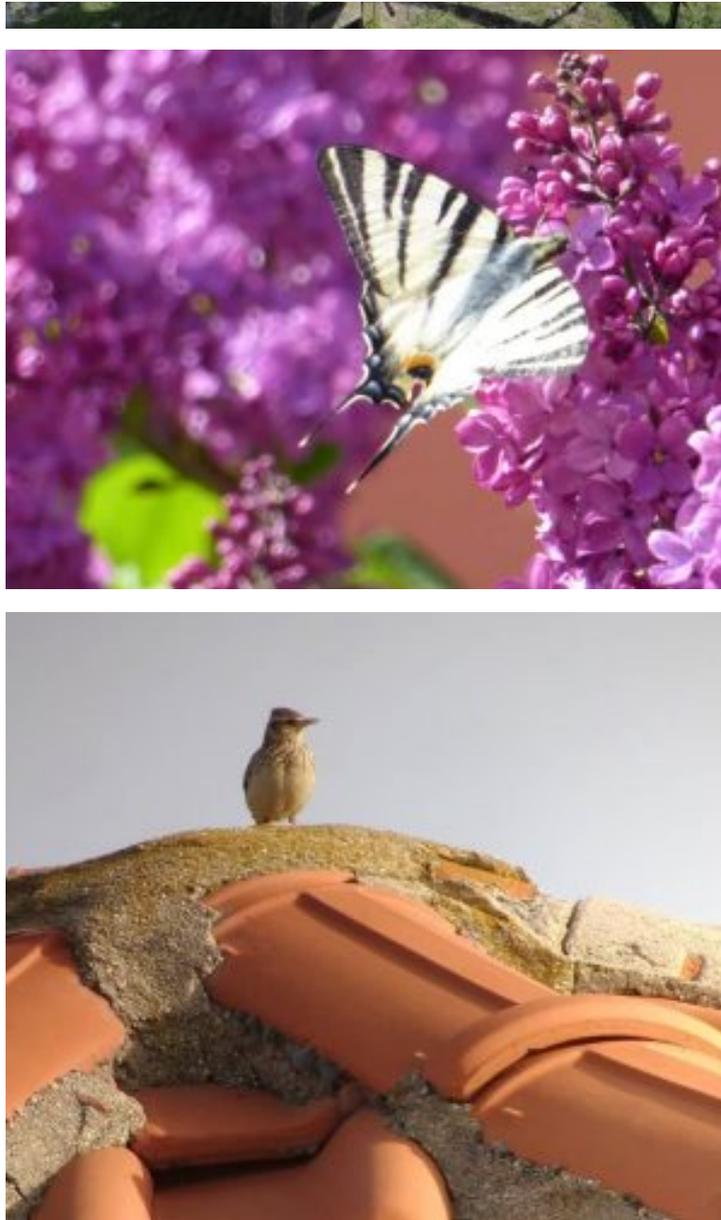
Lunch was taken at the Coffee Place on the Nestos River. Trees provided welcome shade and an opportunity to see and hear Nightingales. The local coffee was great, topped with cinnamon. Just before leaving the area, we saw a flock of Yellow legged Gulls; rescued another tortoise, this time of the Spur-thighed variety, this one having a foot missing!

A half-an-hour's rest was taken before driving back up the mountain to try and see Rock Partridge. We had great views of a Hobby, but no partridge on this occasion. Although late afternoon, it was very warm and the heat caused a haze on the horizon stretching out across the Aegean Sea. The decision was made to head part way down the mountain and stop off at an abandoned village. A menagerie of farm fowl and dogs broke the tranquillity but we had some great bird sightings. One tree provided a great point for watching the display flights of Chaffinches as well as clear scope views of Hawfinch. A

pair of Short-toed Eagles flew overhead as we made our way back to the vehicle, which would drop us off at a local taverna where cold refreshing beer rounded off this part of the day nicely.

An evening meal was shared together before going through the different birds and wildlife sightings for that day. Quote of the day "There's a stork nesting over there"! Guess those of you reading this will have to have been there to understand why this was quote of the day.....





Saturday 14 April 2018 ~ Simon Piotrowski

As yesterday's views of the Rock Partridge were limited, and some of the group hadn't managed to connect at all, we returned to the East Macedonian and Thrace National Park within the Nestos River Gorge for pre breakfast birding. The highest peak here is 891m (2923') above sea level.

Most of us had views of Jays as we were driven expertly up the winding mountain road by our driver Ivan. However, Eric managed to miss them all much to his disappointment. Raven, Hooded Crow, Cuckoo and Black-eared Wheatear were also noted. Once at the peak we scoured the mountain surfaces once more for the elusive Rock Partridge, this time to no avail! We were, however, rewarded with great views of the Sub-alpine and Sardinian Warblers along with a pair of Woodlark, several Cirl Bunting, and a trip-ticked Common Whitethroat. Eric skillfully avoided adding Jay to his Greek birding list on our descent; but Sally spotted a pair of Hoopoes, which was another nice addition as at this point - most had been only heard.

The Hermann's Tortoise that had been spotted the previous day was back on the fringes of Toxotes this time with a mate and, thanks to some expertly delivered marital advice from our group; we'll soon be listening to the cracking of hatching Tortoise eggs in the near future.

After our last breakfast in Greece, we checked out of the hotel and started our transfer to Bulgaria. It was decided to take a detour via Lake Kirkini to get a few more species and make the most of our last day in Greece and we were not to be disappointed. En-route we stopped to see Spanish Sparrows nesting in an occupied White Stork nest shortly followed by a Syrian Woodpecker in a garden in the village of Petrietsi, our first woodpecker of the trip.

Once at Lake Kirkini the trip ticks came thick and fast, highlights were White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Night and Squacco Herons, Pygmy Cormorant, Garganey, Penduline Tit, our second woodpecker species (Lesser spotted) and a flock of 20 Bee-eaters.

We crossed the Greek/Bulgaria border at 5.00pm and straight away adding Crested Lark, Little Ringed Plover, Corn Bunting, Swallow, Red-rumped Swallow and Black Redstart to our trip list.

We arrived at the Hotel Andela Complex in Yondula, just outside the spa town of Velingrad at 7.30pm. The Hotel was a lovely collection of individual log cabins with a main reception/dining area which more than met our expectations. We were served a fantastic three course dinner complemented by some vintage Kamenitza (local Bulgarian beer) then, weary from a busy and exciting day and the bar closing at 10.30pm, it was time to call it a night.





Sunday 15 April 2018 ~ Lesley Glassington

It was a later start if we wanted, but some of our more staunch birders were up at 6am to explore the hotel grounds, so when the rest of us met for breakfast we were greeted with a long list of sightings and possibilities that we were hopeful of seeing later in the day. This was woodpecker territory and we were all excited at the possibility of seeing: Black, Grey-headed, Middle and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers to say the least! After a delightful breakfast, including the gorgeous local honey, we set off to a local supermarket in Velingrad to stock up for lunch. Back on the minibus again we headed for our morning destination in Beglika, which was a protected conifer forest area. The passing terrain was really interesting, alongside the various 'shout outs' and disagreements of what was seen, or missed! Gradually, we left the flatter land and went further up into the spruce. As we got higher, the scene of the forest stretching out for miles was spectacular and we soon spotted our first snow. The land itself was flattened with this recent snow, but large pockets of purple crocus showed the first signs of warmer weather and added colour to accentuate the general beauty and awe of the landscape.

Gradually, our road became narrower until it was nothing more than a dirt track and eventually we stopped in a remote spot. There was a generally buzz of excitement with the anticipation of seeing who knows what! Minko explained that we needed to walk uphill from here through the thick forest and, as there were no tracks we should stay close together, so we didn't get lost in the forest or in case we encounter bear! D'Weasel had a bag full of apples and other goodies sort after by bears, so we all avoided walking with him! We set off and the forest sounded alive with bird sound and immediately the more experienced birders started identifying calls.

Gradually, we settled at a point and waited patiently, eyes up and alert for the unmistakable sound of woodpecker's drumming! However, with the slight disappointment of near sightings and sounds, we eventually started to tackle the steep decline back to the bus. This in itself was an adventure and I believe a little of the spirit of Bear Grylls was felt by all of us!

We took the same route out of the forest area, passing some crumbling and derelict houses alongside a small dwelling and a working farm. Minko stopped the bus here as this was a good place for woodpeckers. As we got out of the bus, a sound of recognition and our patience was soon rewarded as someone suddenly spotted a Grey-headed

Woodpecker, almost at the same time another shout that the Black Woodpecker had been spotted and was perched clearly for all of us to see. A general air of excitement and celebration was felt within the group as I heard a cry of, "It's in the tree! Which tree? The one in the middle... Oh no, it's flown!" During this time other birds were seen such as the Crested Tit and a favorite amongst the group, the Common Crossbill. As we got back into the bus we agreed this place had been an unexpected marvel and I think we each took back a special memory of the day.

At the hotel later that evening, we had the incredibly good fortune to have a couple of musicians playing traditional Western Rhodope folk music that had been specially arranged for us. Before they started, Paddy gave a moving introduction about the musicians, where they came from and how the tradition was passed down through a family lineage to ensure that this unique music was not lost. He explained that the singer would be accompanied by a musician playing an instrument that looked rather like a huge set of bagpipes called a Kaba Gaida. He told us that this instrument was made of goat skin and has two sounding parts: the Gaidounitsa and the drone. The Gaidounitsa is the most important part of the Gaida on which the performer plays the tune and the drone accompanies the melody with a constant buzzing sound. I have heard nothing quite like it before. We later learnt that the lady singer had trained for five years to sing in this way. We were all mesmerized and after a couple of songs we were invited to dance a traditional Bulgarian dance, which I think we all took up with gusto! We chatted to the band after their performance and Paddy surprised us all by picking up the bagpipes and expertly playing them. Few of us knew that Paddy was a professional bagpipe player himself and was in high demand on Burns Night and other Scottish festive occasions back in UK! Following this and with a general sense of it being 'a good day' we gradually went for a well-earned sleep!





Monday 16 April ~ Rob Gooderham

The group assembled at 6.30am. It was cold and overcast, but we were not to be deterred and made our way along the rugged tracks through the coniferous forest. Pygmy Owl and Hazel Hen were our targets. In the tree canopy, we could hear and see Crossbill, Ring Ouzel, Firecrest and Crested and Willow Tits. The familiar sound of Woodpigeons reverberated and we found imprints of Roe Deer, Wild Boar and Pole Cat on the muddy track. The track rut puddles were home to frogspawn.

We returned to the hotel at 9.00am for a Bulgarian 'Full English Breakfast', which one has to say does bear more than a passing resemblance to the English version and provided the same satisfactory fix of carbohydrate and fat to keep us going through the day!

Our plan today was to travel by minibus up mountain roads to above the tree line until snow blocked the route. Our first stop was within the forest and we walked along a snow-lined track where we had sensational views of Nutcracker. We passed some impressively horned 'cows' (or were they bulls?), and 'what was the difference' we discussed – disgraceful!! D'Weasel then gave us the benefit of his vast field-craft experience telling us how to separate sheep from goats! Goats have their tails up, sheep have their tails down he said. There was Pulmonaria on the side of the track and Willow Tits and Firecrests were numerous. We heard a Grey-headed Woodpecker calling and had wonderful scope views of Crossbill, Ring Ouzel and Mistle Thrush. We arrived at a large clearing in the forest and after a brief rest returned to the main road leading ever upwards. A Red Squirrel and more Nutcrackers were seen.

We noticed that many forest trees were randomly damaged or felled and speculated that this must have been caused by the heavy winter snow fall. The roadside snow steadily increased in depth and encroached across the road in places. Eventually, we arrived at the Belmekon Reservoir within the Rila Mountains with the snow-covered Pirin Mountains rising impressively to the south. The reservoir was mostly frozen over and beyond this point the road was blocked with snow. This was a bleak and remote area of snow-flattened grass with carpets of wild crocus poking through in great profusion. There was at first little avian activity, but eventually a Northern Wheatear and Mallard were seen. A large raptor species, identified as a Golden Eagle was spotted by Fiona, but it disappeared far too quickly over a ridge for all to get a view.

Although this area was quiet during our visit, it was a centre for outdoor activities at other times of the year. There was a post-Soviet /Alpine styled building with a small café where we stopped for coffee and homemade chicken soup that was offered and gratefully consumed. We were watched closely by four very large drooling dogs. We were

told that these were the notorious Karakachan dogs used by Bulgarian shepherds to protect sheep and goat flocks from wolves and other dangers such as birdwatchers. Previously, we have been advised to not become placed between dog and goat or you are likely to become 'toast' or rather dog food, so we were keen to avoid this experience!

Our time sitting outside the cafe proved to be a remarkable experience. Flocks of Hawfinches, Ring Ouzel of the eastern alpine race and Crossbills came and went in the nearby trees giving us all stunning views.

We moved down the snowy mountain road to a site where Minko had seen Pygmy Owl previously. At 5.30pm and with a chilliness creeping onto us, it was decided that part of the group would go back to the hotel and the remainder would continue their vigil in the light rain until dusk. The mini-bus duly returned with bottled beer to sustain our efforts. At 7.20pm a call from a Pygmy Owl was heard by our excellent guide Minko and it was located on the tip of a near pine and being characteristically mobbed by small birds. Although brief, we managed great scope views. We piled back into the bus and headed back to our hotel for dinner.

At 9pm the most hardened members of the group returned to the same site to listen for Tengmalm's Owl. Unfortunately, despite their determination they returned at 10.30pm without success.





Tuesday 17th April ~ Mervyn Jones and Fiona Smith

We were on the road by 7.45am sharp. The mist hung low over the fields as the minibus echoed to the inevitable joshing as to who had seen what and in what numbers during the pre-breakfast stroll. Banter was first-class, as always!

After an hour or so of delightful Balkans scenery, we arrived at Govadartsi village and a rendezvous with three off-road vehicles, among which was a Soviet-era military-green Uaz, sporting a bewildering range of gear levers and an earnest-looking and very focused driver who was clearly determined that the Land Rover Discovery ahead would not have the better of him.

Ascending a forest-covered mountainside we caught glimpses through the foliage of the snow-covered peaks we had been yesterday and then, lo, we emerged into sunshine! No sign of the showers that had been forecast as yet! We were not long out of our vehicles before our target, the thus-far elusive Three-toed Woodpecker, was calling and drumming. Halleluia! Alas, the bird – after obliging us with two or three circuits through the trees – then shot off and was not to be persuaded back. The joys of birding!

More good views of a Nutcracker were certainly adequate compensation, as was the thunderous drumming of another Black Woodpecker. Helen desperately needed to answer her call of nature, so she waited until the rest of the party had walked further down the track and then made her way down the slope to a large stump to hide behind. As she bopped down, a splendid Nutcracker landed on that very stump no further than three feet in front of her. She stooped up a little to get a better view but, to her horror, noticed that telescopes were trained on the bird or were they fixed on her? Paddy's photo tells it all!

The heavens opened as we descended the mountainside, which offered more than ample excuse to duck into a nearby village tavern. A moussaka lunch (for me) washed

down with a couple of beers set the tone for a mellow departure towards the town of Teteven, skirting Sofia en route.

The deluge ceased by the time we reached the town of Teteven, a shell of its former self with substantial numbers of houses and factories lying idle and crumbling. Something of a time-capsule, we might very easily have been driving through 1980s Teteven if all the more recent cars had been substituted by Trabants, many of which we had seen on previous occasions.

This was ideal territory for a Little Owl, but none was seen. We did though catch up with a pair of Dippers on the river. We then settled into the charming little Hotel Enitsa, in the town of Teteven and, following another exciting day's birding, another convivial meal and evening was enjoyed by all.





Wednesday 18th April ~ Sally Middleton

Our last full-day's birding proved to be one of the most enjoyable and fruitful, with a total of 62 species seen.

It started strongly with Steve getting up early and observing Dippers and a Kingfisher on the River Vit. Our hotel rooms had themes such as Africa, Sailing and Butterflies. Luckily, there wasn't a birding theme, which could have caused arguments over occupancy!

We set off and headed for the mysterious and pristine beech forest of Boatın in the Central Balkan National Park before 9am, in the hope of seeing a White-backed Woodpecker. However, they proved elusive. Instead, we were delighted by a number of Red-breasted Flycatchers flitting around in the canopy. Also, surprisingly for the time of day, we heard a Tawny Owl call. Our souls cleansed by the chuckling of forest streams and the spring-green leaves dappling the light that fell to the forest floor, we headed back to the coach for lunch.

The next stop was a photo opportunity in Polaten village for a White Stork on a nest with the quote of the day as *"I want a stork nest with a stork on it"* by guess who? The stop proved unexpectedly fruitful, as we not only saw the obliging stork, but also had an unexpected fly-by from a Black Stork, plus a few Whinchats and a pair of Hoopoes. Unfortunately, we also found a dead Common Redstart by the side of the road that had presumably collided with a vehicle. The next stop was to meet Minko's father-in-law who had very kindly arranged to supply a kilo of local honey to anyone interested. I've now tried it and it was delicious.

We headed off to the small town of Elin Pelin (on the 6002 road to Lesnovo) where the driver spotted the town's Little Owl. We created quite a stir amongst the locals who were surprised to see so many people staring at the tumble-down chimney of one of their houses. They were very interested in having a look through the scopes to see what all the fuss was about.

Next, we had an unexpected treat just outside Musachevo (still on the 6002) with Minko spotting a Pallid Harrier from the coach. We pulled over and managed to get a reasonable view of the bird before it disappeared across the fields. We also saw some lovely Whinchats enjoying the sunny weather.

I had been particularly hoping to see a Sombre Tit on the holiday, so I was excited by our next stop on the sleepy road from Toros that crosses the River Vit. We initially saw a Common Whitethroat and a Chaffinch on a nest, before getting fabulous views of our target feisty little tit.

It was now past 6pm, but our day's birding was not yet near completion. The next location was Lake Ognyanovo. Here we saw the stunning Black-headed Wagtail (*feldegg* subspecies) as well as Great Egrets, Linnets, Cuckoo, Garganey and a male Stonechat.

Finally, we travelled to a nearby quarry along an unmarked road by the River Treska. Our goal was to see the Eagle Owl. Sadly, the owl had better things to do that evening, but we were entertained/terrified (depending on the person) by the sight of an enormous Alsatian-type dog playing with the severed head of a Roe Deer. The dog belonged to an army base whose occupants tolerated us staring at the empty quarry until evening fell. Accompanied by three equally viscous companions, the pack took more than a passing interest in Paddy who had stationed himself 200m further up the track. As the dogs snarled, barked and growled, D'Weasel suggested that the dogs wouldn't be quite so brave if Paddy started playing his bagpipes or perhaps a Gaida! This went down as quote of the entire tour.

We were then on the road back to Sofia, and most enjoyed a snooze in the bus before a 9pm dinner in the Hotel Edi and a few beers to drown our sorrows that our holiday was drawing to a close.



With the sudden and unannounced early closing at the bar, we were treated to an early night ready for our flight back to London. The hotel had more-or-less run out of beer, so it would have been pointless them staying open in any event. However, Paddy, D'Weasel and I did have that déjà-vu feeling as exactly the same thing happened when we were at this hotel in 2013.

We rose early for breakfast with plenty of time to pack and wander round the nearby square. We viewed the hotel where some of us stayed in 2017 and the bar frequented by Paddy, together with my son Mark, when the bar suddenly closed the last time we stayed there. There were a few birds in and around the fast flowing alongside the hotel, the best being a Dipper.

Breakfast should have gone smoothly, but alas it didn't! The food was well laid out, but overall service was poor. Other issues made our stay at our final hotel very disappointing in comparison to the excellence of the others.

Thanks to all tour members for making this such a wonderful and memorable trip. The company was superb, the birds and landscapes amazing and I'll round things off with Mervyn's testimonial: *"The admin (thanks Kathy!) was superb, Minko was extraordinarily good in every respect, the driver was a gem, the hotels were entirely good enough and the food throughout was excellent. The group dynamics were excellent, the banter first-class and the group size perfect."*

