

To Fulfil a Dream!



Trip report By Derek Elmer

Photos By Brian Dawson

It was 5am on a cold mid-February Saturday when our party of six set off for Luton airport in the hope of fulfilling a dream to have close views of Red-breasted Geese in large numbers. We arrived at 6.15am and after parking the car, unloading our heavy bags (we were allowed 32 kg for all the cold weather clothes and for the first part of the trip we were glad of them) found our way to the booking in desk only to be told our 8.20am Wizz Air flight to Bulgaria would now be at 10.00am. Not a very good start but the flight was uneventful and we landed at Burgas Airport at 3.30pm (Bulgaria time 2hrs different to UK) to be met by our guide for the week Tihomir, known as Tisho, with the people carrier, who took us to our nearby hotel in the small town of Sarafovo just 10 minutes from the airport for our 1st night's stay.

We were soon off to Vaya Lake, (one of the three Burgas lakes) to get acclimatized to the cold weather and snow! Large numbers of Common Pochard, Pintail, Smew and our first of many Dalmatian Pelicans were a good start to our Bulgarian week's bird list. It was nice to get back to our warm hotel and evening meal as by then we were all feeling a bit tired.

The next day we drove along the coastal road passing the sprawling holiday resort of Sunny Beach stopping before the coastal city of Varna for lunch at a roadside restaurant by the Goritz Oak Woods and a quick walk up the snow covered track into the bare spindly Oak trees added two Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and several Nuthatches to the tour tally.

After a very welcome warm lunch we continued north passing the holiday resorts of Golden Sands and Albena not looking very inviting with snow banks all around. Tisho said we should call into the village of Ezerets, where in a small park in the centre of the village was a group of five pine trees in which Long-eared Owls roost and sure enough we found four, giving tremendous views plus a close Syrian woodpecker and Hawfinch in nearby trees.



Continuing on our way the fields gradually got larger and larger no hedges, only snow filled ditches and very few trees, a very bleak area in winter allowing the wind to really blow through helping to keep the fields clear of snow allowing the geese to feed. These fields dwarfed anything I have seen in this country contained mostly shooting winter wheat or spent maize or sunflower plough waiting to be sown in the spring. Nearly all held flocks of White-fronted Geese (most well over a hundred some nearer a thousand). I had seen large numbers of geese before in Holland but never anything on this scale. As we got nearer to Durankulak my dream came true as Red-breasted Geese were among the Whitefronts in large numbers and quite close to the road. By this time, the afternoon was drawing in and we made our way back a few miles south to our hotel in Bulgarevo, our base for the next two days goose chasing.

Monday morning was bright but very, very cold as we drove to Durankulak Lake and the surrounding area to try to get close to the geese for Brian our group photographer. There were geese everywhere but they were very wary after the hunting season, and as our white people carrier slowly pulled up their heads would go up and as soon as we stopped they were off, making for spectacular sights, but as we didn't want to disturb them, we kept at a reasonable distance. The biggest flocks were in a huge field right by the Romanian Border, the border guards must have a tremendous view from their post. On a small unfrozen area of the lake we found among the Pochard a pair of White-headed Ducks and a bit farther along the reed edge a pair of Ferruginous Ducks plus more Black-necked Grebes which were becoming a common bird on this trip.

Common Buzzards in various colours and Marsh Harriers were everywhere, in large numbers floating over the huge reed beds, in one field close to the track was a Long Legged Buzzard feeding. Visiting the nearby Shabla Lake provided us with over eighty Whooper Swans with twenty Bewicks Swans bathing in the lake. On our way back to the hotel we again called into Ezerets, this time were rewarded with six Longeared Owls staring down at us from the trees, a Great Grey Shrike on the wires by the road rounded up a brilliant day's birdwatching.

Tuesday morning, we visited the Durankulak Lake area again getting our fill of geese. It was an unusually cold winter in Bulgaria and Romania with lots of snow causing bigger numbers of geese than usual to be in the area attracted by the fact that lakes Durankulak and Shabla are fed by underground streams which allows large areas of water to remain unfrozen and as the Geese have to drink as they feed in the fields they attract very big numbers with 100,000 Whitefronts and 37,000 Red-breasted Geese in the winter wildfowl counts for the local area this year.

Calling in at Kamen Bryag on the way, we added two superb male Hen Harriers "sky dancing" and four Calandra Larks to our tally, going down a rough track to the sea near Durankalak we came to a vast reed bed and standing on top of the dune between the reed bed and the sea was one of the most incredible bird watching experiences I have ever had, as literally thousands of Whitefronts and Redbreasts poured over our heads as they went to and from the lake to drink and the fields to feed, the sound of the different calls and the views as they flew low over us made this truly magical. There were also lots of Marsh Harriers with fourteen in my binocular view at one time, and then to finish off the morning a juvenile White-tailed Sea Eagle flew by.

Wednesday morning saw us ready for an 8.30am start for our drive back south to our first hotel at Sarafovo, for our final three nights. Before we headed south it started to get noticeably warmer and Tisho said he thought all the geese would start to leave by the weekend on their way north to their breeding grounds in Siberia. We were only just in time!

A small area of Baltata forest by the holiday resort of Albena on the coast was our first stop and what a Woodpecker haven it turned out to be, here we had terrific views of a pair of Grey-headed woodpeckers destroying a rotten tree, Middle Spotted, Great Spotted, Lesser Spotted and Green Woodpecker all seen in just one hour in this small piece of forest. From a view point just off the road, overlooking the Yatata wetlands we saw more Black-necked Grebes, a lot of Pygmy Cormorants sitting in the reeds, four Pelicans, most of the duck species and a Coypu swimming across the lake. It was 6.30 when we arrived back to our original hotel in Sarafovo just in time to unload and get ready for dinner at 7.30

Thursday morning the temperature had really changed, no need for thermals now! It was almost shirt sleeve weather, very nice indeed if you could get out of the wind. The plan was to visit more areas around the Burgas lakes in the hope that the spring migration had started which would bring us more different birds, but the wind which was gradually getting stronger, was blowing in the wrong direction, blowing birds back out to sea rather than inland, although first thing, we did see a large flock of Common Buzzards riding a thermal on migration, a taste of what might have been!

You could never call the Burgas lakes scenic being surrounded by a big industrial city but they are in a good place at the bottom of the mountains, are very large with huge reed beds and on Europe's busiest flyway the Via Pontica. Lake Mandra was our target for today and viewing from various locations gave us a lot more Pelicans, hundreds more Pochard; no wonder we don't see many here they are all over there! Black-necked Grebes were again present in big numbers, lots of Pygmy Cormorants, Marsh Harriers Two more White-tailed Sea Eagles one a juvenile, and three more Pallas Gulls.

A picnic lunch was eaten sitting in the sun on the viewing area of the Poda reserve building, very pleasant it was to, just imagining what it would be like to be there in the spring or autumn with migration going over head –must be awesome.

We had to be at the airport for 12am Saturday morning check in, so before breakfast we had the van loaded and at 8.30 were off to the nearby Lake Atanasovsko. This smaller lake is given over mainly salt pans but in the short time we had there we saw a few more waders including Avocets, Curlews and to Bob's delight several more Slender-billed Gulls and a Crested Lark in the car park. Then it was all over, a fantastic winter trip with sights we shall all never forget.

We had managed to see 112 different species which for the very cold weather at the beginning of the trip was not bad at all, plus we didn't see any other birdwatchers in the entire trip!! Winter goose chasing in Bulgaria is to be recommended but remember to take your thermals!!



Red-breasted Geese: Mission accomplished!