

BULGARIAN MOUNTAIN and GREEK WETLANDS APRIL 2019

Thursday morning and a 3am start saw our party heading down the motorway to Heathrow Terminal 5 for our early morning British Airways flight to Sofia Bulgaria. After an uneventful flight we were quickly through immigration and baggage reclaim to be greeted by the friendly face of Tisho our guide and driver for this trip. Tisho was our guide in winter 2017 when we went to see red-breasted geese. Loading up the people carrier we were on our way heading for the Pirin Mountains and our two nights' accommodation in the town of Melnik, the smallest town in Bulgaria. It is set in the Sturma valley; mountains close by on both sides, very scenic and quite close to Greece. Stopping of at a disused flooded quarry near the village of Kocherinvo the first bird to be seen was a little bittern standing at the



reed edge, what a start! A little farther on in a willow tree, a penduline tit was at its superbly built nest, suspended under a branch hanging over the water. Great reed warblers were calling everywhere, some showing well. Terrapins {European pond turtle} were sun bathing on floating logs and marsh frogs were calling ever where. These little amphibians would become a sound track throughout the whole trip. Our next stop was Ilindents hills with crag martins flying around with several red-rumped swallows and large numbers of sand martins and barn swallows. These distractions meant that we didn't arrive at our hotel till 7pm.



We met the next morning at 7.30am for a breakfast walk up a gorge near to the hotel. Common nightingales, whitethroats and cettis warblers were singing in nearly every bush and Black-eared wheatears and black redstarts were active around the houses. Hirundines were everywhere. After breakfast we drove the short distance through the mountains to Rozhen monastery.

Walking up the path above the monastery to the view point gave us incredible views of snow covered mountains and sand stone cliffs, displaying subalpine warblers, two thermalling short-toed eagles and alpine swifts. In the trees around the monastery were several hawfinches, two turtle doves and, among the grazing cows, yellow wagtails of the black-headed "feldegg" race were feeding on the ground. At this view point we meet two Dutch birders the only birdwatchers seen during the whole trip!



Moving on to the Rupite crater, the large site of an extinct volcano, added two long -legged buzzards, three short-toed eagles showing very well, several common buzzards and a blue rock thrush to our list. Next stop was the flooded forest near Novo-hodzhuvo trying to find breeding semi-collared flycatchers but, alas, no luck! Cettis warblers were calling everywhere and in every pool marsh frogs were blowing out their checks calling in their mating display. Near the village of Harsovo on the way back to the hotel a male wood- chat shrike sat on a roadside wire also a large flock of linnets in a field by the road



After breakfast on the Saturday morning we left the lovely quaint town of Melnik behind and headed south for the Greek part of our trip. We crossed the border at Kulata and drove the short distance to Lake Kerkini. This huge man made inland lake formed in 1932 by damming the Strimonas River is in the Lake Kerkini National park an area of approximately 83,100 hectares and is one of Greece prime birding spots and we soon saw why. Stopping at a bridge on the Strimonas River entering the lake, looking over this area provided us with a osprey, marsh harriers, two honey buzzards, red footed falcon, alpine swift, hundreds of house and sand martins, several red-rumped swallows and ruddy shelduck with several greylag geese in the river. Visiting the eastern side of the lake taking the water edge track, great cormorants, white and dalmatian pelicans were in the hundreds feeding out on the water, all along the water's edge were pygmy cormorants sitting in the bushes, little and great white egrets along with a good number of squacco and purple herons feeding at the water's edge giving at times very close views from the people carrier. Around the shallow marshy water edges large groups of several hundred water buffalo were feeding on the waterside vegetation. Having booked a 12pm boat trip made us move along to the meeting point.



This small boat could take fifteen people but as there was only six of us plus Tisho for this 2 hr trip we had plenty of room to spread out and look around, soon we were speeding across this vast lake to see the pelican breeding platforms and flamingo colony, passing several black-necked grebes in full breeding plumage also large numbers of mute swans and great-crested grebes on the water and flying all around us cormorants and the huge great white and Dalmatian pelicans made for a memorable sight This vast, fairly shallow lake, stretched as far as the eye could see and must be very productive to be able to sustain so many fish- eating birds.



The rest of the day was spent around the lake before setting off for the 3hr drive to the small Greek town of Keramoti on the Aegean Sea coast opposite the island of Thassos. Our hotel for the next two days was very near the sea and morning walks along the shore gave us various gulls, terns, waders and flocks of Yelcouan shearwaters passing by and shags on the sea edge rocks.

Sunday morning and the area to explore today would be the Nestos Delta and Nestos Gorge. One of the rare birds of the delta is spur-winged plover. Tisho thought it could take several hours to find



them in the large delta, but driving out of town after breakfast on this quiet Sunday morning there, by the football pitch, two of these most striking birds were feeding on the ground giving us very close views.

Spending the morning in the delta

gave us more waders, three slender-billed gulls, five more spur-winged plovers, various wildfowl including large groups of common shelduck good numbers of garganey (mostly males) and in among them three male ferruginous ducks looking superb in the morning sun.



After lunch we headed for the Nestos Gorge. The visitor centre car park was really busy as it was a lovely warm spring Sunday afternoon. Walking the cliff path above the river the weekend visitors soon thinned out: no health and safety here, a really narrow, rocky steep path with no rails and a very deep drop made passing people going the other way quite interesting! The views and scenery were spectacular with a very nice male blue rock thrush on the cliff edge above our heads and flying overhead we had alpine swift more crag martins. We also had very good views of a grey-headed woodpecker in the trees across the river at the bottom of the gorge.

Monday morning saw us loading up for the next part of the trip to the Forest of Dadia National Park and Evros Delta spending the day travelling, at first on rural roads but visiting very good bird watching sites on the way. Our stop was the wetland edges of Kerimoti where among the various



waders were three more spur-winged plovers. Our stops at Lake Vistonida and Porto Lagos Lagoon were very productive with two caspian terns, good numbers of waders including a large flock of dunlin, most in breeding plumage, several wood sandpipers, black-winged stilts, grey and Kentish plovers, large numbers of common shelduck, more garganey, a flock of 28 full plumage spotted redshanks, large numbers of avocets and a huge flock of over a thousand flamingos. The final

stop before the two hour motorway drive to Dadia was at the very small rural village of Nea-Adriani were by the church two lesser kestrels were flying around and over nearby fields a group of seven lesser kestrels were busy catching insects, on a roadside wire sat a little owl, the only owl for the trip! Arriving at the motorway exit for Dadia we saw, flying low over the road, was the first of several lesser spotted eagles for the trip; approaching the village circling over head was an imperial eagle and a very good way to end another excellent day.

Dadia Forest National Park set in very rural Greece is 73sq miles of forest set up in 1980 to protect some Greece's rarest birds and animals. Our small party was spending the next three nights at the Forest Inn Eco Lodge very near the very rural village of Dadia at the entrance to the forest and a very good place to stay.

Our Tuesday pre breakfast walk gave us black-eared wheatears on rocks by the car park, singing serins on the overhead wires and calling golden orioles in the trees around the complex. Wild Iris's were in flower all over the rocky areas both sides of the road to the lodge from the village.



After breakfast we drove to the Evros Delta which is a fifty -minute journey through rural villages. It was a common sight to see white storks sitting on roof tops, on their pole top nests and feeding in the fields. Arriving at the Visitor centre at 10am to pick up our official guide who turned out to be a very nice young lady allowing us to visit protected places were you normally couldn't go.

Evros Delta is a vast wetland of 182sq km on the Greek /Turkish border the middle of the Evros River being the border. Setting of from the visitor centre, in nearby bushy area was a superb red-breasted fly catcher sitting out on top of a bush, the start of a brilliant morning bird watching.

The area of the wetlands our guide took us to in the morning was Anthia marshes, a large temporarily flooded freshwater-brackish marshy area, one of the best spots for birds in the delta. It is flooded only in spring and autumn and is full of pink flowering tamarisk bushes, the water shimmering white with water buttercups.

The area is divided up with long strips of reed bed; a water birds paradise. Displaying Garganey ducks were very common as were black-winged stilt, spoonbills. black and white storks, many terns including whiskered and gull-billed terns ,nice groups of glossy ibis, a wide selection of waders ,a close flypast of seven collared pratincoles, another osprey and the star bird of the morning a superb male pallid harrier gliding by. The first of several spur-thighed tortoises was found among the grassy tussocks. After eating lunch in a watch tower over looking the marshes the afternoon was spent in the western branch of the Delta this was not so productive as the morning probably due to the area being more open and the wind getting up so after dropping of our guide back at the visitor centre at 4pm we spent the next hour around the bushy area we had passed that morning. finding spotted flycatcher, pied flycatcher and, flitting on and off a fence in the nearby church yard, five collared flycatchers which were busy feeding up having just arrived on migration.



Wednesday was to be our last full day at Dadia. After our morning walk and breakfast at 9am we were taken up the mountain track /road by the centre mini bus to the Dadia forest feeding station where a very comfortable hide was situated overlooking a nearby hill where a dead carcass lay surrounded by 3 egyptian vultures, 23 griffon vultures, 21 black vultures each dwarfing the scavenging ravens and magpies. Several Hoopoe were calling and flitting around in front of the hide and our second imperial eagle was soaring overhead: it in turn dwarfed the common buzzards .The two hours spent here flew by and at 11.15 we started the 2hr gentle walk back through the forest to the lodge stopping to see and listen to various birds on the way including Orphean warbler, short-toed tree creeper and several golden orioles. Lunch taken



driving to the river valley near Lylra, village walking along

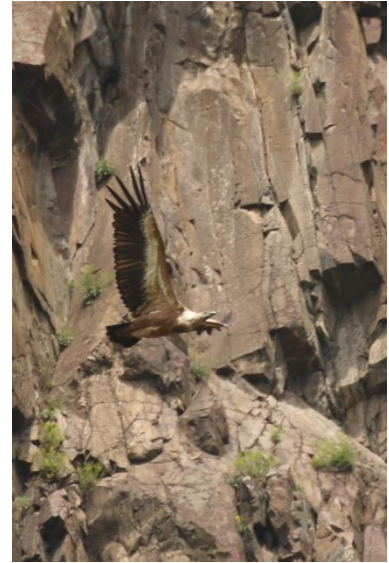
the bank in the warm afternoon sun the noise was incredible. There were singing marsh frogs, whitethroats, nightingales, hoopoes flying around calling and the ever present corn buntings were everywhere. Two more Spur-thighed tortoises were found and a coypu sat on the far bank eating reeds.



Common and scarce swallow-tailed butterflies were flying around, two woodchat shrikes sat on top of scrubby bushes and a very graceful Montague's harrier flew by; a nice change from the very common marsh harriers.

Our penultimate day was spent travelling through the beautiful Eastern Rhodope Mountains incredible views

and scenery all the way back to Sofia. Just before Madjarovo, a booted eagle was spotted flying over the road causing us to make a rapid stop. We enjoyed a picnic lunch at a scenic view point overlooking the river valley bends and under the sand stone cliffs at Madjarovo. Sitting in the sun we watched a pair of griffon vultures nesting on a ledge above our heads, sub-alpine warblers in the bushes beneath us, black storks flying up and down the river and also a blue rock thrush flitting about the cliffs; what better way to eat lunch!. Later in the afternoon at a mountain site known to Tisho saw us watching a lovely male rock nuthatch at its superbly built mud nest blending into the cliff crevice, talk about trying to see a needle in a haystack! A little farther on the other side of the river a pair of golden eagles sat near their nest site. It was 6pm when we arrived at the hotel in the village of Cherven for our final night's stay.



No morning walk today but an early breakfast so as to be loaded and away by 8am for the final drive to Sofia and a 12.30 check in for the flight home .Sitting outside the hotel restaurant before breakfast enjoying the early morning sun as beeaters were calling overhead, a cuckoo flew down the road being mobbed by the local martins and swallows which were busy building nest under all the eaves of the houses. One final stop at a disused quarry in the hills near the village to look for calandra lark was a great success. Several birds were feeding on the ground and more flying around displaying. Northern wheatears perched on several rocks and common buzzards were thermal ling overhead. Taking a short walk down the track by the corn fields quail were calling all around but we couldn't see them. There "wet my lips" call very distinctive. Also flying around over the fields two montagus harriers and finally the last bird for the list flew by, a wood pigeon the first we had seen and apparently quite rare for the area bring up the total number of bird species seen to 180 a brilliant trip and fantastic scenery.



Trip report by Derek Elmer

Photos by Brian & Shelagh Dawson.