

MIGRANTS and MOUNTAIN SPECIALITIES

1 - 11 May 2023 (Tour code: MMS)

Leader: Dimitar (Mitko) Petrakiev

PRICE: £1,650

(Based on a group of 8, a smaller group may incur a supplement).



Bulgaria's location where the Balkan mountains meet the Black Sea, not far north of the border with Asia, makes it one of the Western Palaearctic's foremost birding destinations. Few other European countries can match its diversity of species and habitats, or its spectacle of mass migration.

This tour is an opportunity to see the best of Bulgaria's birds at carefully selected sites, and at the height of spring migration. It was originally devised by Dominic Mitchell, then editor of Birdwatch magazine, as a Reader Offer.

Dimitar (Mitko) Petrakiev is a tour leader and mountain guide with over ten years' experience of birdwatching, butterfly and other natural history tours. He is also qualified as a climbing instructor and for cave rescue and first aid. He has also led archaeological and cultural tours for the B-BS.

The country's beautiful scenery, friendly people and excellent wine and food are additional highlights, and the tour price includes a donation to the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds or other Bulgarian conservation organisation.

The B-BS offers you the benefits of over forty years' experience of organising tours to Bulgaria. For your financial protection our tour operators for over twenty-five years, Balkania Travel Ltd. are licensed by the UK Civil Aviation Authority, ATOL 4465 and bonded by the International Air Transport Association, IATA number 91- 2 7839.

Hotels are comfortable (and well situated for birdwatching!) but not luxurious. The holiday is on a Half-Board basis. Final details and bird lists will be sent to participants approximately two weeks before departure.

Projected Itinerary (which may be subject to adjustment)

Monday 1 May Flight from Heathrow to Sofia. Drive to Teshel for a one night stay, calling at Besaparski hills and the Vacha river valley. Stops on the way for a first taste of Bulgaria's birds, perhaps including European Roller and Eurasian Stone-curlew, Long-legged Buzzard, Calandra Lark, Barred Warbler, shrikes (Red-backed, Woodchat, Lesser Grey) and, with luck, Eastern Imperial Eagle.

Tuesday 2 May The mountains here are breathtakingly beautiful. The birds are no less impressive, and we shall be looking in the morning for the elusive but mesmerising Wallcreeper. Other mountain specialities abound, and we hope to see Peregrine Falcon, Dipper, Alpine and Pallid Swifts, Eurasian Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Willow Tit and European Serin for example.

Afternoon drive via Kurdzhali to Studen Kladenets for a three night stay, looking out for possibilities such as Black Stork and European Honey-buzzard, the latter just returning to Europe from its African winter quarters. Studen Kladenets is a huge reservoir occupying a valley along the River Arda in craggy surroundings, it has the potential for additional new species such as Little and Scops Owls, Spanish Sparrow and Woodchat Shrike. Little Bittern and Little Egret are present in wetlands in the Arda valley.

Wednesday 3 May Visit to the vulture feeding station at Madzharovo, in the rugged Eastern Rhodope mountains, one of the highlights of the tour. Here we can appreciate the size and splendour of these birds, notably Egyptian and Griffon Vultures but also the rarer Eurasian Black Vulture. Other raptors in this area include Golden, Short-toed and Booted Eagles and Long-legged Buzzard, while among mountain specialities are Black-eared Wheatear, Western Rock Nuthatch and Blue Rock Thrush, and a potentially exciting range of warblers including Eastern Bonelli's Warbler.

Thursday 4 May Visiting the areas around Krumovgrad and Rogach, including the Dolna Kula rock formations, we shall use our last day in this area to round up any missing species before heading further east. These might include such specialities as Western Rock Nuthatch, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear and the characterful Sombre Tit, and we hope to enjoy further views of such welcome birds as European Roller and both Eastern Subalpine and Eastern Orphean Warblers – both differing from their west European counterparts which may be familiar from Spain, and now countable in their own right as full species.

Friday 5 May This morning we drive east to the Burgas area for a three-night stay at Pomorie, stopping initially at Madzharovo for Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting and a last look at the vultures, and calling at Yerusalimovo and Golyamo Krushevo en route to search for the delightful Masked Shrike, the impressive Olive-tree Warbler and Eastern Imperial Eagle. Other possibilities during this travel day are Montagu's Harrier at Bolyarovo and White-tailed Eagle and Ruddy Shelduck at Mandra Lake.

Saturday 6 and Sunday 7 May From our base on the western shore of the Black Sea, not far from the port of Burgas, we will spend two full days exploring the extensive wetlands, marshes, scrub and woodlands which are home to some of the country's most exciting and evocative birds. There will be excursions to Pomorie, Poroy Reservoir and Forest, Atanasovsko, Vaya and Mandra Lakes and Poda Reserve, where possible species include Squacco and Black-crowned Night Herons, Pygmy Cormorant, Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Great White and Dalmatian Pelicans, a wide range of waterfowl including Garganey and perhaps Western Marsh Harrier, waders such as Pied Avocet, Kentish Plover, Collared and the regionally rare Black-winged Pratincoles, Gull-billed, Little and Whiskered Terns, Cetti's Warbler, and Penduline and Bearded Tits. Migration is often in full swing in early May, and at such times the skies can be full of storks and raptors drifting high overhead, while passerine migrants like Red-backed Shrike, now so rare in western Europe, can be abundant. The beautiful song of Common Nightingale sometimes seems to emanate from almost every clump of bushes.

Monday 8 May Today we drive north to Kavarna for a three night stay, calling at Beloslav Lake, IBA Yatata and coastal woodlands. As well as a range of ducks, waders and terns, other possibilities today include Eurasian Eagle Owl, Grey-headed Woodpecker and Thrush Nightingale.

Tuesday 9 May The different landscape in NE Bulgaria offers the chance of some exciting new species, and we will visit the steppe areas around Cape Kaliakra – a fantastic migration hotspot – Bolata Valley, Rusalka and Yailata to look for both Pied and Isabelline Wheatears, as well as Calandra and Short-toed Lark. On the cliffs here is European Shag, another potential addition to our trip list, while raptors could include the often gregarious Red-footed Falcon.

Wednesday 10 May One of the country's top sites, Durankulak is a natural coastal wetland separated from the sea by a strip of dunes and beach. It's a must-visit location and here and at nearby Shabla Lake we'll try for good views of the diminutive Pygmy Cormorant, graceful Marsh Sandpiper and rather more tricky Paddyfield and Savi's Warblers, both of which breed here. Moustached and Great Reed Warblers also nest, as do the likes of Purple Heron, Ferruginous Duck and Western Marsh Harrier, while migrant passerines including chats, flycatchers and buntings could be possible at this coastal hot-spot.

Thursday 11 May Sadly, all good things come to an end, and today we must drive to Varna Airport for the morning flight back to Sofia. As the British Airways flight to Heathrow is in the evening, we'll take you to Sofia's favourite mountain, Vitosha for some last mountain species to add to the trip list.



OUR PRICE INCLUDES:

- Flights from Heathrow to Sofia and Varna to Sofia and on to Heathrow, including all taxes and charges.
- Half Board.
- Accommodation in small, friendly (often family-run) hotels with en suite facilities on a twin-bedded shared occupancy basis.
- Coach for transfers and excursions.
- Specialist Bulgarian leader.
- Donation to Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds or other Bulgarian conservation organisation.
- All reserve entrance fees.

NOT INCLUDED:

- Lunches (about £4 - £5).
- Travel Insurance (compulsory). Balkania Travel can advise.
- Drinks and personal expenses such as gratuities.
- Single room supplement (£120).

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Further information from Dr Annie Kay, B-BS Tours Organiser.

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