



Bulgaria - Spring intense birding tour

Introduction:

This birding tour has been conceived especially for those enthusiasts who, although pressed for time, are eager to see as much as possible. Despite comprising a fairly intensive itinerary, which will mean a lot of travelling, there will be ample time to enjoy some of the most representative birding areas in Bulgaria. The trip starts with a visit to the eastern Rodopi Mountains where more than 20 species of breeding birds of prey (including the Black, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard), as well as large variety of small passerines (Black-eared Wheatear, Red-rumped Swallow, Sardinian Warbler, Olivaceous Warbler, Masked Shrike, Sombre Tit, Cirl Bunting and so on) are expected. Later in the trip special attention will be given to the wetlands by the Black Sea coast and along the Danube River (offering Dalmatian Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Spoonbills, Glossy Ibises, Purple, Night and Squacco Herons and Ferruginous Ducks). This tour is a good choice in terms of time, value and species (often featuring more than 170 species).

Special highlights:

Atanasovsko Lake is a shallow hyperhaline lake which lies on Via Pontica migratory route and this is the reason why the species variety (with more than 300 species recorded so far) and astonishing numbers of birds attract birdwatchers, photographers and scientists from all over the world especially during migration. This is one of the places in Europe with more frequent observations of Slender-billed Curlew.

Srebarna Lake is a lake of international importance, situated in North-Eastern Bulgaria. Srebarna Lake is most famous for its colony of Dalmatian Pelicans but there are also colonies of cormorants, heronries, dense population of Ferruginous Ducks and many other waterfowl.

Studen kladenets Dam is situated in the Eastern Rodopi Mountains. Highly impressive cliffs along the deep main valley of Arda River and shrubby slopes around predetermine the vicinity as an important area for many species of European and global importance. The site is housing three species of vultures - Griffon, Egyptian and Black Vulture and many other raptors and small passerines.

Dourankoulak Lake is situated in the north-eastern parts of the country. Dourankoulak Lake is one of the most significant wetlands along the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast. The fresh waters of the lake, the extensive reedbeds along the shore and the location of the wetland on the Via Pontica migratory route are some of the important details, supporting an impressive avian richness throughout the whole year.

Sakar Mountains are located between the valleys of the Maritsa and the Toundzha Rivers in South-Eastern Bulgaria and are mostly characterised by its low hilly relief (highest peak is Vishegrad – 856 m.a.s.l.). The temperate Mediterranean climate and the combination of uncovered shrubby slopes, checkered by small oak and other broad-leaved woods are appropriate for nesting of many interesting species of birds.

Itinerary:

Day 1. After arrival at Sofia or Plovdiv airport and transfer to Plovdiv, where we stay overnight (transfer from Sofia – 2hrs, from Plovdiv airport – 20 min).

/dinner/

Day 2. In the morning a short stroll along Maritsa River will furnish us with the first specialties for the journey (the Levant Sparrowhawk, Roller, Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Syrian Woodpecker, Red-backed Shrikes, Woodchat Shrike, Masked Shrike, Golden Oriole, Spanish Sparrows, Black-headed Bunting and so on). At around noon we head into the kingdom of the Eastern Europe's birds of prey – the eastern Rodopi Mountains – and the town of Madzharovo. Later in the afternoon we will have some time to enjoy the terrific view of the valley of Arda River from above (featuring Black Stork, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed Eagle, Booted Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Scops Owl, Rock and Blue Rock Thrush, Barred, Orphean, Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers, Cirl and Rock Buntings, Red-rumped Swallows, Black-eared Wheatears and Rock Nuthatches). We spend the next two nights by Madzharovo.

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 3. An active birding day. In the morning we journey to the spectacular Studen Kladenets dam and explore its vicinity. A visit to the "vultures' restaurant" will be accompanied by the spectacle of feeding vultures (Egyptian, Griffon and Black Vultures, Long-legged and Honey Buzzards, Short-toed and Imperial Eagles, Roller, Barred, Orphean, Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Sombre Tit, Cirl and Rock Buntings and many more).

In the afternoon we journey further on to the Krumovitsa River, where we will continue watching and listening to the passerines intent on making their presence in the undulating countryside (the Stone-curlew, Olive-tree and Olivaceous Warblers, Red-backed, Woodchat and Masked Shrikes) (total transfer time about 3-4 hrs).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 4. After breakfast we venture to the foothills of the rocky cliffs by Madzharovo, again observing nesting vultures as well as a huge variety of passerines (including Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and Short-toed Treecreepers). Then we journey through the Sakar Mountains (Lesser Spotted, Booted and Imperial Eagles, Isabelline Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike, Olivaceous and Orphean Warblers, Black-headed Bunting and so on) to the town of Bourgas on the Black Sea coast, where we stay overnight (total transfer time about 3-4 hrs).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 5. The most interesting wetlands around Bourgas will be visited in the morning – including the Atanasovsko salt lake. The area is well known for its irregular sightings of Slender-billed Curlew (as well as White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorant, Night, Squacco and Purple Herons, Little Egret, Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Yellow-legged Gull, Mediterranean and Slender-billed Gulls, Little Terns, Whiskered Terns, Collared Pratincoles, Avocet, Black-winged Stilts, Great Snipe, Curlew Sandpipers, Penduline Tit, Savi's and Cetti's Warblers and Black-headed Bunting). At around noon we continue northwards to Cape Kaliakra, where the biggest and most valuable steppe habitats are still available in Bulgaria (possible sightings include the European Shag (Mediterranean race), Stone-curlew, Alpine Swift, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Olive-tree Warbler, Pied Wheatear, Tawny Pipit, Rose-coloured Starling, Black-headed Bunting). We stay overnight in the area.

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 6. After breakfast we head to Dourankoulak Lake – a wetland of international importance for the wintering population of the Red-breasted Goose (Little Bittern, Purple Heron, Glossy Ibis, Great Egret, Ferruginous Duck, Stone-curlew, Whiskered Tern, Paddyfield Warbler, Calandra Lark and others) and the wetlands by the town of Shabla

(Ferruginous Duck, Caspian Tern, Little Tern, Black-winged Stilt, Curlew Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, Bee-eater, Roller, Hoopoe, Lesser Grey Shrike, Kentish Plover and many more). In the afternoon we pass through the region of Ludogorie, reaching the town of Silistra and Srebarna Lake on the Danube River, where we stay overnight (total transfer time about 5 hrs).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 7. Srebarna Lake is probably the most famous wetland in Bulgaria. We will spend a few hours there enjoying its inhabitants (which include the Red-necked Grebe, Dalmatian Pelican, Pygmy Cormorant, Little Bittern, Squacco, Night and Purple Herons, Little and Great Egret, Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill, White-tailed Eagle, Black Kite, Levant Sparrowhawk, Ferruginous Duck, Pochard, Whiskered Tern, Ortolan Bunting, Penduline Tit, Golden Oriole, Red-backed Shrike amongst others). This period will be followed by a fairly lengthy transfer back to Sofia (about 6 hrs). We stay overnight in Sofia.

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 8. Time permitting, we will devote some time to sightseeing before heading to Sofia or Plovdiv airport for departure.

/breakfast, dinner/

Best period: May – June

Tour type: GT/IG

Weather:

Temperatures expected for this period are between +15 and +30°C. Rainfalls or short but heavy showers are possible, being a bit prolonged during spring and late autumn.

Difficulty grade:

No special physical condition required. 2-4 km per day walking along dirty roads and flat paths.

Accommodation:

We stay overnight in 3-star hotels (days 5 & 7) and guesthouses (rest days) with ensuite facilities on HB (breakfast and dinner included). Ordering lunchpacks is also possible.

Equipment and clothing:

Luggage transportation is taken care throughout the whole journey. However a small rucksack with personal things is quite useful during the daily trips. For full list of recommended items see "General".

Vaccination:

Tick-borne encephalitis, Marseille fever and Crimea haemorrhagic fever is recommended by some medical sources if travelling in certain areas of Eastern

Europe, at specific times of the year. Check latest requirements with your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure.

Group size: Min. 2 persons

The price includes: accommodation and boarding as mentioned above; transfers to/from Sofia or Plovdiv airport; English-speaking guide; luggage and private transfers as mentioned above; entrance fees for Poda lagoon and Cape Kaliakra; VAT and all local taxes.

The price does not include: flights, maps (could be requested in advance when booking the tour), tips, alcohol drinks, other entrance fees and meals (lunchpacks/lunches), cigarettes and other personal expenses.

GENERAL

TOUR TYPES

We provide different varieties of tours as regards to their types! Whether you will choose individual and group tours with a guide or combined tours with a guide for some part of the trip depends on you. We emphasize on using local experienced guides with knowledge of the local language, culture, history, art, etc. The tours are conducted in the English language. Guides in other languages are available upon request. **GT: Group tours**

There is a guide accompanying you throughout the whole trip, meeting you at the airport upon arrival and leaving you at the airport again for departure. We use well-trained and experienced local people with good knowledge of English. The group size is normally 6-12 people, if not specially mentioned. **IG: International group tours** The tours are similar to our group tours. The only difference is that these are multi-national. Guided services are in the English language, if no special arrangements have been ordered.

Extensions: Yes, Black Sea

This is a unique proposal, which gives you the opportunity to stay in Bulgaria for one week more at the incredibly low price! We can offer a great variety of means of accommodation - from home stays (no meals) to 2, 3 and 4-star hotels (BB or HB) on the Southern Bulgarian Black Sea Coast:

- Sunny Beach - a big modern resort with hundreds of hotels, cafes, pubs, casinos, water-sports facilities etc.
- Nessebar, Sozopol - small towns (founded by the ancient Greeks) with picturesque Old Quarters and a specific atmosphere.
- Lozenets - a peaceful small village with a beautiful beach. Only 4-5 km from the forests of the Strandzha Mountains where you can go walking, biking or riding horses.

Equipment and clothing:

You should always remember that you must try to keep the weight of your clothing equipment down to a minimum. Your packed rucksack should weigh no more than 10-15 kilograms.

Recommended items: waterproof rucksack (60 l) & daypack (35 l); walking waterproof boots with suitable ankle support; sandals; light casual shoes for walking and/or for travelling; gaiters; loose, casual trousers for trekking; waterproof trousers; fleece windstopper jacket; windproof, waterproof outer shell garment (breathable if possible!); hat for sun protection; sunglasses with UV protection; sunscreen lotion and lip balm; water bottle; torch (headlamp); mobile phone; underwear (not cotton); mosquito repellent; trekking sticks.

Vaccination:

Tick-borne encephalitis, Marselle fever and Crimea haemorrhagic fever is recommended by some medical sources if travelling in certain areas of Eastern Europe, at specific times of the year. Check latest requirements with your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure.

Money and personal expenses

You will need some extra money to cover meals, drinks and extra trips not included in the tour price. Additional money for souvenirs and personal things could also be spent. That is why it is always necessary to have Bulgarian money in cash.

The payments in Bulgaria are usually made in "LEV" (BGN), which is the official currency. The exchange rate with EU and USD is quite changing sometimes, but approximately it is: BGN:EU - 2:1; BGN:USD - 1,7-1. Credit Cards could be used primarily in some supermarkets and restaurants in the biggest cities as well as in the petrol stations. Usually it is marked on their front doors if Credit Cards are accepted. ATMs ("bankomates") are more frequent (again in the biggest towns only!). Traveler's cheques take quite a lot of time to handle and not each bank deals with them (in many cases it takes even few days since their deposition in the bank!) - thus they are not recommended! Here are some examples of comparative costs in Bulgaria (NB: prices in mid-range restaurants!):

- Coffee – 0,3 Euro
- Tea – 0,3 Euro
- Beer (0,5 l) – 0,5-1 Euro
- Soft drink (0,5 l) - 0,4-0,5 Euro
- Bottle of water (0,5 l) - 0,3-0,4 Euro
- Bottle of mark red wine (0,75 l) - 5-10 Euro
- Three-course lunch - 4-7 Euro
- Lunch pack - 2-3 Euro

Cell phone coverage

Currently the whole territory of Bulgaria is covered with a mobile connection. However the trekking & cycling tours are done in mountainous areas where the signal could be weak or even lacking from time to time. In

such a situation you just need to change your location a bit in order to find available network.

Electricity

In Bulgaria two-pin sockets are normal. Voltage is 220 watts. If you come from the U.S. or UK you need to purchase an adapter, which is available only in Bulgarian cities and biggest winter and sea resorts.

Brief about Bulgaria

Territory - 110 912 sq. km.
Population - 7 538 000 (2003) (83,9 % ethnic Bulgarians; 9,4% Turks; 4,7% Roma; rest – smaller minorities Russians, Armenians, Vlachs, Jews, Karakachans etc.)
Religion – 82,6% Orthodox, 12,2% Islam, 0,7% Protestant, 0,5% Catholics, 4,1% Others.

Capital city - Sofia (1 377 531 people in 2006)

Bigest towns - Plovdiv, Varna, Bourgas, Rouse, Stara Zagora, Veliko Tarnovo, Pleven

Mountains - 37 (biggest - Balkan Mountain: length - ~ 550 km.; width - ~ 30-60 km.); (highest - Rila Mountain - peak Musala - 2 925 m.a.s.l.)

Boundaries - North - Romania; East - Black Sea (coastline 378 km.); West - Serbia, Macedonia; South - Greece, Turkey;
Distribution of the lands - 0 - 400 m.a.s.l. - 59,8 %; 400 - 1000 m.a.s.l. - 27,6 %; 1000 - 2000 m.a.s.l. - 11,9 %; over 2000 m.a.s.l. - 0,7 %

Protected areas - 3 national parks, 10 nature parks, 55 reserves, 35 managed reserves, over 350 protected areas and 500 natural monuments

Weather

Mean year temperature - + 10,5 °C (Abs. Min. - -38,3 °C ; Abs. Max. - + 45,2 °C)

Mean rainfall per year - 416 - 650 mm. in the lowlands; 650 - 1193 mm. in the highlands
Rainy days per month – May – 7; June – 8; July – 6; August – 3; September – 6; (number may be higher in the mountains)

Mean daily/night temperatures (up to 1000 m a.s.l.) - May – 22/12 °C; June – 26/16 °C; July – 28/17 °C; August – 26/15 °C; September – 23/13 °C;