

# Romania & Bulgaria: Black Sea Coast Migration

## September 20-29, 2024 | Trip Report by Gerard Gorman



**Participants: Naturalist Journeys group leader Gerard, co-guide Dimiter and Husam, Carol A-R, Donna, Margie, Marion, Carol L., and Andrew.**



This second Naturalist Journey's trip to Romania and Bulgaria saw us once again visit two intriguing and welcoming countries in the eastern Balkans. We journeyed around some wonderful wildlife habitats and took in spectacular landscapes and seascapes. After some days in Romania, we drove southwards closely following the coastline of the Black Sea into Bulgaria, getting almost as far as the border with Turkey. We visited a rich range of habitats - plains and farmlands, salt marshes, brackish lagoons, freshwater lakes, rocky headlands, sandy beaches, parks, and verdant deciduous woodlands. We strolled around ancient sites from Thracian, Slavic, Greek, Roman and Turkish times. We ate and drank well, too, the red wines of the region being particularly fine and remarkably inexpensive.

Our trip mostly followed the Via Pontica, the name given to Europe's eastern bird migration flyway which hugs the western coast of the Black Sea. We recorded thirteen species of wildfowl, sixteen shorebirds, ten larids, eleven birds of prey, six corvids and seven woodpeckers. Terrific sightings included 100s of Great White Pelicans soaring



above us, several sightings of Dalmatian Pelicans including over thirty roosting together, flocks of feeding Greater Flamingos and over a dozen Eurasian Thick-knees resting at a favorite migration stop-over spot. Smaller birds, like Red-backed Shrikes, Willow Warblers, White Wagtails and Red-breasted Flycatchers, were constantly on the move and seen almost daily. A bonus bird was a Terek Sandpiper, a rare species hereabouts.

In addition to wildlife, stops at the ancient Greco-Roman ruins at Histria in Romania, the spectacular Cape Kaliakra in Bulgaria, the Genoese fort ruin at Enisala which overlooks the Danube Delta, and going inside a Thracian Burial Mound in Bulgaria all proved popular. And, we were fortunate to have fine weather, often warm and sunny, throughout our stay.

### **Fri., Sept. 20 | Romania | Bucharest | Baia**

Some of us had arrived in Romania a few days before our trip began. We all met at 1pm in Bucharest and after introductions set off for the east of the country, our destination today being the flat Dobrudja region which lies along the coast of the Black Sea. After negotiating the capital city traffic, our trusty driver took us along a comfortable highway in the direction of Constanta, Romania's second city and major port, crossing two branches of the powerful River Danube via impressively high bridges. Roadside raptors included hovering Eurasian Kestrels and Common Buzzards. At a "comfort stop," for fuel and refreshments, we had good looks at some common birds, like Eurasian Collared Dove, Eurasian Magpie, Eurasian Jackdaw, Rook, and Barn Swallow. Mixed flocks of Caspian, Mediterranean and Black-headed Gulls were flying over the cereal fields. We arrived at our guesthouse, run by a charming family, at around 6pm, checked into our rooms and then had dinner. We had the place to ourselves. After outlining our plans for the next day, we retired for the night. It had been mostly a transit day, but a very good day, full of sights and sounds!

### **Sat., Sept. 21 | Baia | Jurilovca | Lake Sinoe | Enisala | Lake Babadag | Babadag | Baia**

Most of us went out before breakfast for a stroll around our accommodation, seeing Crested Lark, Spotted Flycatcher, House and Eurasian Tree Sparrows, White Wagtail and Common Chiffchaff. At about 8am we set off on our bus to explore the diverse wetland and grassland habitats of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. Our first stop was near the settlement of Jurilovca from where we scanned a big reed fringed lagoon. The place was packed with birds. There were herons, gulls, terns, egrets, herons, Great and Pygmy Cormorants (a major part of Europe's population of the latter breeds here) and ducks like Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Red-crested Pochard and Ferruginous Duck. A real highlight was seeing our first parties of Great White Pelicans, some flocks in flight, others fishing together. Bushes at the edge of the village hosted Red-backed Shrike, Red-breasted Flycatcher,





Common Redstart, Willow Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat; all moving through on passage. Eurasian Skylarks were over a field. It was a marvelous start to our first full day of birding. In the afternoon we visited the ruins of a fortress at Enisala. Built in the 14th century by Genovese merchants, it is now isolated from the sea, which has retreated over the centuries, and towers over the surrounding steppe, vineyards, and the Razelm lagoon. Everyone took advantage of the panoramic photographic opportunities. Enisala is an ideal place to combine culture, history, and birds. We saw Crested Lark, a flock of European Goldfinches and several raptors: Eurasian Kestrel, Common Buzzard,

Eurasian Marsh Harrier and Eurasian Hobby. Being on a hilltop, we could watch several of these birds at eye-level as they passed by. There were more flocks of soaring Great White Pelicans over the lagoon, and a solitary Dalmatian Pelican, too. We moved on and stopped by Lake Babadag and walked on an easy track, seeing more egrets, herons, and shorebirds. Next, we drove a short way into the small town of Badadag, a settlement with a rich Ottoman heritage, indeed Babadag means “Mountain of the Father” in Turkish. Here we spent a little time looking at the Gazi Atik Ali Pasha Mosque and its minaret, which date back to the early 17th century. It was under one hour back at our guesthouse in Baia and we were there in the late afternoon and so had plenty of time for some “R and R.” Some of us continued to bird around our base. After another fine home-cooked dinner (our hosts went out-of-their-way to cater for everyone’s dietary requests) we ran through our day’s sightings: we’d visited great places, taken in the local history and culture and seen a nice selection of Eastern European/Balkan birds, and everyone had picked up a few “lifers”.

## **Sun., Sept. 22 | Baia | Lake Sinoe | Histria | Vadu | Baia**

Today we continued our journey around northern Dobrudja and the Danube Delta hinterland. The weather was perfect, sunny, and dry with no wind, as it would indeed be most days on our travels. Around Lake Sinoe we saw Graylag Geese, Mute Swans, Common Shelducks, a range of smaller ducks, Eurasian Coots, several Purple Herons and both Dalmatian and Great White Pelicans again. The former species, the biggest pelican in the world, is often seen alone or in pairs while the latter are almost always in flocks. Next, we strolled around the archeological site of “Histriopolis,” in modern times known as Histria. It is thought that a settlement was first established here in the 7th century BC, and later inhabited by Greeks and in the 1st to 3rd centuries AD by Romans before being abandoned in the 7th century AD. Histria is always a very popular stop on this tour and this occasion was no exception as everyone enjoyed visiting the ruins and the museum. In addition, besides the ancient history of the place, there are also birds. In mid-morning, raptors started to appear. A couple of Ospreys, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk, European Honey-buzzards, Short-toed Snake Eagles, Eurasian Marsh Harriers and, arguably the best of all, a gorgeous male Pallid Harrier which came low and close to us over the coastal dunes. A fantastic view! Passerines amongst the ancient columns and stones included Red-backed Shrike, Spotted and Red-breasted Flycatchers and Common Redstart, all moving south. We then headed south, too, to Vadu. This is another great birding site by the sea, but a curious place. The stark remains of an industrial complex which somehow never took off and was abandoned loom large, but there is a fine restaurant here where we had lunch - most of us chose the



locally caught . We then birded the adjacent marsh and ponds, picking up an excellent selection of shorebirds: Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Northern Lapwing, Little Ringed Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Ruff, Dunlin, Common Snipe, Green, Wood and Marsh Sandpipers, Spotted Redshank, Common Greenshank, and even Red-necked Phalaropes! Shorebirds which breed in the north of Europe were on migration, too. There were also Little and Eared Grebes, Squacco Herons, parties of Whiskered Terns and our only Gull-billed Tern of the trip. Once again, we returned to our guesthouse at a comfortable time after another fun-filled and bird-filled day.

**Mon., Sept. 23 | Baia | Cheile Gorge | St. John Cassian Monastery | into Bulgaria at Vama Veche | Durankulak | Kavarna**

This morning, we said goodbye to our hosts and friends in Romania and journeyed southwards towards Bulgaria. But we took our time, stopping at various spots on the way. Our first one was unscheduled as a woodpecker was spotted flying across the road in front of us. Our driver pulled over and we were soon all

out watching a pair of Syrian Woodpeckers in trees by a schoolyard. This was not an unusual sighting as this woodpecker is typically found in urban and suburban habitats. Continuing on, we explored a rocky gorge by the village of Cheile, seeing several Great Tits, Red-backed Shrike, Eurasian Jay, Common Raven, Black Redstart and Whinchat. We then visited the Monastery of St. John Cassian, taking in the architecture and the views from its hill-top location. The yard hosted Willow and Wood Warblers, Common Chiffchaff and Eurasian Tree Sparrow and Common House-Martins were swirling around. Several Ring-necked Pheasants were spotted at roadsides as we went along. After a lunch stop, we crossed the border at Vama Veche, a straightforward affair, into northeastern Bulgaria. We were in a new country, with a different language (Slavic not Romance) and alphabet (Cyrillic not Latin) and currency (the Lev not the Leu; neither use the Euro although both are members of the European Union). The coastal landscape, however, was similar. Our first birding stop in Bulgaria was at Durankulak, a shallow lake with reedbeds and an adjacent sandy beach. This was the closest we had been to the Black Sea so far and so one or two of us dipped our toes in to mark the event! There were Spanish Sparrows in the bushes here and Great Cormorants, Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls flying back and forth over the sea. Before reaching our next hotel, we checked for Eurasian Thick-knees at a regular grassland stop-over site. We quickly found a dozen of these “peculiar” birds, which have long legs, big eyes (they are mostly active at night) and usually move around slowly. Thick-knees are classed as shorebirds but seldom go near water, rather they tend to inhabit dry, stony grasslands. What a bird to finish the day with! After settling into our rooms in the town of Kavarna, we went to a nice local restaurant for dinner where there was a very good choice of dishes, with local and international cuisine.



## **Tue., Sept. 24 | Kavarna | Cape Kaliakra | Lake Sabla | Kavarna**

Today we drove a short way to Cape Kaliakra, a rocky peninsula of the Black Sea that is a famed birding site but also a place steeped in history. Kaliakra means “beautiful cape” and it is indeed a very scenic spot. It is thought that Thracian tribes first settled here in the 4th century BC, then the Romans in the 4th century AD. Remains of medieval churches have also been found by archeologists here. A tall statue which commemorates a local legend stands near the parking lot. The story goes that forty Bulgarian maidens jumped off the steep cliffs into the sea rather than be captured by invading Ottomans, entwining their hair together so that they would be joined as they plunged to their deaths. Back to the birds. One of the key species here is the European Shag, a species of marine cormorant, and we soon spotted a few perched on the rocks below. Sandwich Terns, Yellow-legged Gulls, and Great Cormorants were perched on lines of fishing poles in the sea, too. Cape Kaliakra is a renowned watch point on the Via



Pontica migration flyway and as the air warmed up, we saw some passage raptors go over – several Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Eurasian Hobby, Osprey, European Honey-buzzard, Eurasian Marsh Harrier and Montagu’s Harriers, the latter another new bird for the trip. Two warblers, Eurasian Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat, and our first European Robin, were in the bushes and a Northern Wheatear stood on the Roman ruins. We had lunch in a village restaurant and saw a Syrian Woodpecker as we parked up. In the afternoon we went to Lake Sabla, another protected coastal wetland which is separated from the Black Sea by a bank of high sand dunes. On the way we saw large flocks of martins and swallows on the move and flocks of Corn Buntings perched on roadside wires doing their “jangling keys” song. Sabla is a shallow, brackish lake and today it was busy with wildfowl - Mute Swans, Common Shelducks, Northern Shovelers, Gadwalls, Mallards, Green-winged Teals and three new species for our trip list, Northern Pintail, Eurasian Wigeon and Garganey. There were feeding Greater Flamingos, pink adults and paler, often white, juveniles. Other birds included Caspian Terns, Little Grebes, and Common Ringed Plovers, Dunlin and Common Snipe were seen well on the shallow muddy margins of the lake. We returned to our hotel and later walked through the park in front of our hotel to the restaurant. It had been yet another varied day, once again a combination of birds, other animals, diverse land and sea habitats and places with historical and cultural significance.

## **Wed., Sept. 25 | Kavarna | Balgarevo | Tyulenovo | Lake Sabla | Kavarna**

For some baffling reason, we had still not seen a Little Owl, although this bird is common in both Romania and Bulgaria and is often diurnal, habitually sitting out during the day. Such is birding at times. Thus, we decided to try to rectify this and make a focused effort to see one. Today we were heading to the steppe around Balgarevo but on the way our ever-attentive driver drove especially slowly through each village (he had clearly done birder trips before) and we scanned the chimneys and rooftops of the houses. Sure enough, it did not take long to find one, and someone shouted out “owl.” We first watched it from the bus and then disembarked, and it stayed and showed very nicely, peering at us sternly with its yellow eyes. Success! Next? A Balkan Green Lizard, with its bluish head, was spotted on the wall of a garden. The day had started very well. We stopped again when a Spur-thighed



Tortoise was seen on the road in front of us, it was small, young, and we probably saved it as we safely moved it to the roadside verge. Heading on up the coast, for a return visit to Lake Sabla, we stopped near the village of Tyulenovo to take photos of the Sabla lighthouse. This impressive red-and-white building is the oldest lighthouse in the country, built by the Turks in 1856, and lies the easternmost point of land in all Bulgaria. Some of us bought souvenirs from a lady with a stall there. Back to the birds. As we went along, we saw another Short-toed Snake Eagle, perched and flying, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Eurasian Hobby, Northern Wheatear, Tree Pipit, and a party of



European Bee-eaters. A couple of Woodlarks singing from wires and a flock of Eurasian Linnets were both new for the week, too. At Lake Sabla we saw most of the birds we had watched the day before again but noted that there were fewer shorebirds yet more flamingos. As is often the case with migration, things can change on a daily basis with weather being one of the influencing factors. In the evening, we had our final dinner in our favourite restaurant, did our day's checklist (again, life birds for most) and then returned to our hotel to prepare for the morrow, when we would head on, southwards along the Black Sea coast to our final base.

## **Thurs., Sept. 26 | Kavarna | Baltata Reserve Albena | Pomorie Saltworks | Sozopol**

We left Kavarna and headed south mostly following the coast road. Our first major stop was at the Baltata Reserve in Albena. Here we walked an easy trail into a woodland, and we were soon watching our first Middle Spotted, Lesser Spotted and Gray-headed Woodpeckers. We heard a Eurasian Green Woodpecker, too. Suddenly our





woodpecker list has grown! Another new species for our trip that we found here was Short-toed Treecreeper. We also got repeat views of several common woodland birds we had seen previously on the trip - it is always good to get multiple sightings. Quite simply, after many wetlands and the seacoast, we were in a new kind of habitat. We also saw a Eurasian Red Squirrel here. We continued, leaving the coast for a while and having lunch in a traditional eatery in a small village, with a pleasant garden - very authentic and popular with the locals, too, which is always a good sign. From there we followed back roads through the foothills of the Eastern Balkan Range. We noted that the settlements here were certainly “poorer” than those we had seen along the coast – less income from tourism here. Our next main stop was back on the Black Sea coast at the Pomorie Saltworks. Here we saw Little Ringed Plover, lots of Pygmy Cormorants and Sandwich Terns perched on posts in the water and more Great White Pelicans. New trip species here were Little Egret and one that we saw up-close on the shoreline, Western Yellow Wagtail. But a really good find was Terek Sandpiper, a rare passage shorebird migrant that breeds in the Arctic. Fall is certainly a fun time to visit this part of Europe. Another sight here was people (not clear whether locals or tourists) bathing in the shallow water and covering themselves in thick black mud. Apparently, the saline mud is of therapeutic/medicinal value. That might be true, but we did not have the time to join in and try it! Today had been a mainly transit day, but we had packed in a rich range of sites, habitats and hence birds into it. We checked into our delightful guesthouse, a family-run place that overlooks the old port town of Sozopol, in the late afternoon.

### **Fri., Sept 27 | Sozopol | Ropotamo Nature Reserve | Strandzha Hills | Sozopol**

The destination today was the riverine woodlands of the Ropotamo Reserve and the forests of the Strandzha Hills, just to the south and not far from the border with Turkey. It was to be essentially a day of woodland birding. A good range of woodpeckers were recorded: Middle Spotted, White-backed, Gray-headed and Eurasian Green Woodpecker all seen and Great Spotted and Lesser Spotted (Europe’s smallest picid species) heard. The White-backed Woodpecker was a particularly good record as this species is endangered across much of Europe; furthermore, the sub-species found here in the Balkans, *lilfordi*, may well be granted full-species status in the near future. Four other new birds for the trip were seen today - Eurasian Blackbird, Long-tailed Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch and Common Chaffinch. These are all widespread species that we had probably not encountered previously on our trip as we had mostly been in coastal, wetland habitats where they are less common. In the Strandzha hill forests Fallow Deer, a handsome species with spatulate antlers and a white-spotted coat, were also seen. We returned to Sozopol in the mid-afternoon, and some took the opportunity to explore the lovely, quaint old town. It was established by the Greeks as Antheia in the 7th century and later called Apollonia and later still Sozopolis. It is one of the oldest Black Sea ports, some artifacts found here have been dated to the Bronze Age. It had been another super day, a blend of wildlife, culture, history, and even a little souvenir hunting.

### **Sat., Sept 28 | Lake Mandra | Lake Atanasovsko | Pomorie Tumulus Museum and**



## **Saltworks Pomorie | Sozopol**

It was our penultimate day, and after yesterday's woodlands it was back to the Black Sea coast and its wetlands. We visited several spots around the city of Bourgas. Lakes Mandra is one of the deeper, more freshwater wetlands hereabouts and Atanasovsko is a series of salt pans. We also returned briefly to the Pomorie saltworks lakes and paid a visit to the nearby Tumulus Museum. Also known as the Beehive Tomb, it has been dated back to the 2nd-3rd century AD, though some say it is older and of Thracian origin. This dome-shaped tomb, the largest and best preserved in the country, can be entered and contains various artifacts. At the wetlands we observed again many of the birds that we had not encountered for some days, like Graylag Geese and Ferruginous Duck, Great Crested Grebe, Purple and Squacco Herons, Common Kingfisher, Western Yellow Wagtail, and various shorebird species. At Atanasovsko the shorebirds were often quite close. But even at this late stage in our journey, we found a new duck for the trip; Common Pochard. There were many more sightings of Great White Pelicans, too, both flocks in the air and fishing parties in the water and at Atanasovsko we had splendid views of Dalmatian Pelicans, dozens of these big, impressive birds were resting on a wooden platform in the lake. We also came upon our only Greater Whitethroat, Common Cuckoo and Golden Oriole of the week, perhaps proving that it is never too late to find new birds when on a trip. On the non-bird front, a Caspian Whipsnake was also found in a field by Lake Mandra. We ended this day in the now usual manner: back to our hotel in good time to refresh before dinner before completing our daily checklist while sampling some fine Bulgarian wines. Once again, many had gotten "lifers" today.

## **Day 10 Sun., Sept. 29 | Sozopol to Sofia Airport and City**

After breakfast we checked out of our comfortable hotel and headed inland, mostly westwards along a quite modern highway towards Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, and its airport. We made a couple of stops for refreshments and also watched another Little Owl, sitting on the chimney of a house in a small village. Along the way, we also spotted some White Storks feeding at the roadside and a Black Stork in flight over a rice field. Even on the final day we had good sightings of new species.

I would like to thank everyone involved for making this latest Naturalist Journey's adventure to the Black Sea coast of Romania and Bulgaria a success.

*Photo Credits: Group, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Hooded Crow, Catch of the Day, Sabla Lighthouse, Sozopol, Spur-thighed Tortoise, Little Ringed Plover, Great White Pelicans (Gerard Gorman)*