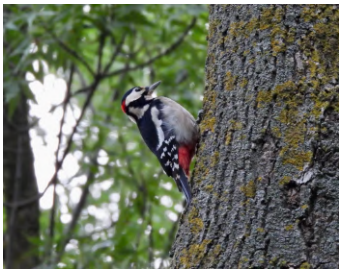


Romania & Bulgaria: Fall Migration & the Black Sea Coast

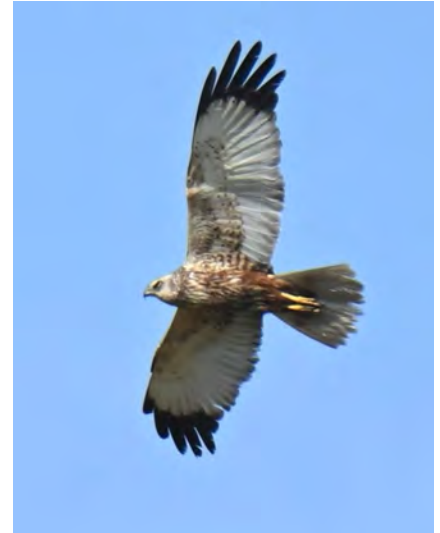
Sept. 20-29, 2025 | Trip Report by Gerard Gorman



Participants: Naturalist Journeys group leader Gerard, co-guide Marina, Pat, John, Leigh, Nick, Inge, Don, Celia, and Fred.



This latest Naturalist Journey's tour to the Black Sea coast of Romania and Bulgaria was once again enjoyable and successful. We spent time in some terrific wildlife habitats and took in many outstanding landscapes. The seascapes, too, were memorable. We began in the Dobrudja region of eastern Romania before driving south along the Black Sea coast into Bulgaria, taking in birds, other wildlife, and historical and cultural sites as we went. The environments were diverse: grassy and stony plains, vast cereal fields, saline marshes, brackish lagoons, freshwater lakes, rocky peninsulas, sandy beaches, parklands, old settlements, and verdant deciduous woodlands. We strolled around historical ruins from Thracian, Slavic, Greek, Roman and Turkish times, and also saw remnants of the Communist era such as Socialist Realist statues. We also often sampled authentic local cuisine, with fresh salads and sea-fish often featuring, and tried some fine and exceptionally good value red and white wines. Our route followed the so-called *Via Pontica*, Europe's eastern bird migration flyway along the western coast of the Black Sea. We observed thirteen species of wildfowl, eighteen shorebirds, eleven larids, thirteen diurnal birds of



prey, all six possible corvids, seven Eurasian warbler species and all nine possible woodpeckers. Special sightings included Dalmatian Pelicans, pink-colored Greater Flamingos, a dozen Eurasian Thick-knees resting at a favorite stopover site, dazzling Common Kingfishers and the weird and wonderful Eurasian Wryneck. Red-backed Shrikes, Common Chiffchaffs, White Wagtails and Spotted and Red-breasted Flycatchers, were seen in good numbers heading south to their wintering areas in Africa and the Middle East. We also observed some decidedly eastern European and Balkan species such as Ruddy Shelduck, Caspian Gull, Pygmy Cormorant, Dalmatian Pelican, Levant Sparrowhawk, Long-legged Buzzard, Red-footed Falcon, and Syrian Woodpecker. With sunny and fine weather on most days, we also saw several butterflies, such as Clouded Yellow, Silver-washed Fritillary and Speckled Wood.

The Greco-Roman ruins at Histria, the Genovese Fort at Enisala and the Old Minaret at Babadag, all in Romania, and in Bulgaria the scenic Cape Kaliakra, Yailata Archeological Site and reconstructed Thracian Mound Museum were some of the fascinating and popular historical places we visited. And, of course, we had great fun along the way!

Day 1 Sat. Sept., 20 Romania | Bucharest | Dobrudja | Baia

We had all arrived in Romania a day or two before our trip began, several having spent time sight-seeing in the bustling capital of Bucharest. We met at 1pm and after brief introductions boarded our bus and drove eastwards in the direction of Constanta, Romania's second city and a major port. Our ultimate destination was the Dobrudja region which lies along the coast of the Black Sea. The weather was perfect, sunny, and dry with no wind, as it would indeed be on most of the days ahead. We crossed two arms of the mighty River Danube via a long and high toll bridge. Roadside raptors spotted included the occasional hovering Eurasian Kestrel, several Eurasian (Western) Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards, which is indeed Europe's most common *Buteo*. Numerous Rooks and Black-headed Gulls were feeding in fields. At a rest stop, we had good looks at some common birds, such as Eurasian Collared Doves, Eurasian Linnets, White Wagtails, Eurasian Magpies and Hooded Crows. We left the highway just before Constanta and headed north on a minor road towards our first base in the village of Baia near the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. Many Caspian Gulls and a single Gray Heron flew over us. We arrived at our guesthouse at around 5.30, and as we unloaded our luggage, a pair of Eurasian Jackdaws posed nicely for us on a chimney. After checking into our rooms, we met before dinner for a welcome drink. Dinner was a sumptuous three courses of local dishes. Some remarked that there was too much food (with every dietary need catered for) but that was something we would get used to, as in this part of the world feeding visitors is paramount!



Day 2 Sun. Sept., 21 Baia | Histria | Vadu | Baia

Before breakfast we strolled around the grounds of our hotel where we found Common Chiffchaff, Lesser Whitethroat, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch and Spotted Flycatcher. After breakfast we headed to the archeological site of Histria. Just as we started to leave we were soon out of our vehicle as two Syrian Woodpeckers appeared right in front of us, low down on a tree trunk. We all got wonderful views and even photos, before finally departing. It is thought that a settlement was first established at Histria in the 7th century BC by Thracians before later being inhabited by Greeks. In the 1st to 3rd centuries AD the Romans arrived and named the place Histriopolis before they abandoned it in the 7th century AD. Histria is always an immensely popular stop on this tour and this occasion was no exception as everyone enjoyed visiting the ruins and the museum. Histria is also a renowned birding spot and the rich range of birds we saw included a Little Owl which conveniently posed on a building, Caspian Tern, Pygmy and Great Cormorants, a fly-by Eurasian Spoonbill, our first Dalmatian Pelicans, a Levant Sparrowhawk, six Eurasian Marsh Harriers and a Eurasian Hobby. Smaller migrating species that we found amongst the ruins were Red-backed Shrike, Common Chiffchaff, Lesser Whitethroat, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Redstart and Whinchat. As it was warm and sunny, Red Admiral, Painted Lady and Clouded Yellow butterflies were on the wing, too. A really fine diversity of species. Some of us went into the museum to see some ancient artifacts from the site up close, before we moved on from this wonderful place. But we did not get far before we had to stop to watch a dozen Red-footed Falcons hunting over the grassland: males, females, and juveniles. Our next destination was the village of Vadu, a really eclectic place with an adjacent abandoned factory where sand and quartz was once processed, marshes, ponds, and a tourist beach at the end of an old road. We had lunch in a fine restaurant that entrepreneurs had created in an old building and then began to explore the wetlands and finally reached the sandy beach by the sea. Once again there was a good mix of species. We had great views of Sandwich Terns, Little and Eared (Black-necked) Grebes, more Pygmy Cormorants, Purple Herons, an Osprey and six Crested Larks, amongst others. We also saw a reptile today, European Pond Turtle (also known as Pond Terrapin) a species that has declined in several countries. After a fruitful day we headed back to Baia and arrived at our hotel in good time to freshen up before having another fine dinner.

Day 3 Mon. Sept., 22 Baia | Jurilovca | Lake Golovita | Babadag | Sarichioi | Enisala | Baia

Most of us went out before breakfast for a stroll around our accommodation, seeing Spotted Flycatcher, House



and Eurasian Tree Sparrows, White Wagtail and Common Chiffchaff. 100s of Mediterranean Gulls flew over, too, on their way from coastal roosts to farmland feeding areas. After breakfast we set off to explore the diverse wetland and grassland habitats of the region. Our first stop was by the village of Jurilovca which, like many settlements hereabouts, had some striking blue-and-white painted cottages; typical of the Lipovan people who settled here in the 17th and 18th centuries. We scanned one of the Danube Delta's wetlands, Lake Golovita. Almost as soon as we disembarked, a Eurasian Hoopoe flew by. On the wetland, there were Graylag Geese, Common Shelducks, Pied Avocets, a Eurasian Curlew, two Dalmatian Pelicans, more Marsh Harriers and various other shorebirds and gulls. Bushes held Red-backed Shrike and Common Chiffchaff, all on the move, and Crested Larks also showed well by the edge of the village. Near Sarichioi, we stopped to watch a Long-legged Buzzard and other raptors and as we did so ten Northern Lapwings flew over. In the small harbor at Sarichioi there was a Caspian Gull, three Sandwich Terns, a Little Egret, a dozen Eurasian Tree Sparrows, and a lone Great White Pelican flew over. Marsh and Edible Frogs were seen and photographed, too. After lunch we drove into the small town of Badadag, a settlement with an Ottoman heritage (Babadag means "Mountain of the Father" in Turkish). We stopped briefly to take photos of the Gazi Atik Ali Pasha Mosque and its minaret, which date back to the early 17th century. In the mid-afternoon we visited the fortress at Cetatea Enisala, built in the 14th century by Genovese merchants. From this hill we scanned the surrounding steppe and wetlands seeing Pygmy Cormorants, a remarkably close Eurasian Hobby, three Eurasian Kestrels and more Marsh Harriers. After a day that had taken in, as ever, both birds and culture, we returned to Baia for our final night and what would be our final dinner in Romania.

Day 4 Tues. Sept., 23 Baia | Cheia Gorge | Dionysius Monastery | into Bulgaria at Vama Veche | Durankulak Beach | Kavarna

We began our journey southwards towards Bulgaria. We first stopped at a rocky gorge by the village of Cheia, seeing several Great Tits, Eurasian Jay, and Black Redstart. A Common Cuckoo and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew over, and we also came upon a female Praying Mantis. We then visited the Hermitage Dionysius Exiguus Monastery near Targusor. As we approached a Middle Spotted Woodpecker showed very well and there was a Syrian Woodpecker in the grounds. There were also Great Tits and a Spotted Flycatcher, which seemed to be everywhere. Before we left, one of the nuns, who spoke good English, presented us all with a souvenir gift. We drove through open country and, after a lunch stop, passed by Constanta, and followed the coast southwards. In the mid-afternoon we crossed the border at Vama Veche into northeastern Bulgaria. The frontier was "open," with no checks at all, as both countries are in the Schengen Area of the EU. Some things were now different: a different language (Slavic not Romance like Romanian), the Cyrillic alphabet (not Latin) and the currency was the Lev, not the Leu - this really was a tour packed with diversity! Our first birding stop in Bulgaria was by the sandy beach at Durankulak. Great Cormorants, Yellow-legged, Mediterranean, and Black-headed Gulls, two Ospreys



were seen flying back over the sea. There were Red-breasted Flycatchers, another Spotted Flycatcher and Common Chiffchaffs in the bushes, European Goldfinches, and a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and three Gray Wagtails were pleasant surprises here. It was time to push on but before getting to our hotel, we made a stop to look for Eurasian Thick-knees at a steppe-grassland near Balgarevo which these birds often use as a stopover when on migration. Sure enough, six of these weird and wonderful birds, which have long legs and big eyes (they are mostly active at night). Then it was time to check into our next hotel in the town of Kavarna where we had dinner and afterwards ran through our day's sightings.

Day 5 Wed. Sept., 24 Kavarna | Cape Kaliakra | Yailata | Lake Shabla-Tuzla | Sveti Nicola | Kavarna

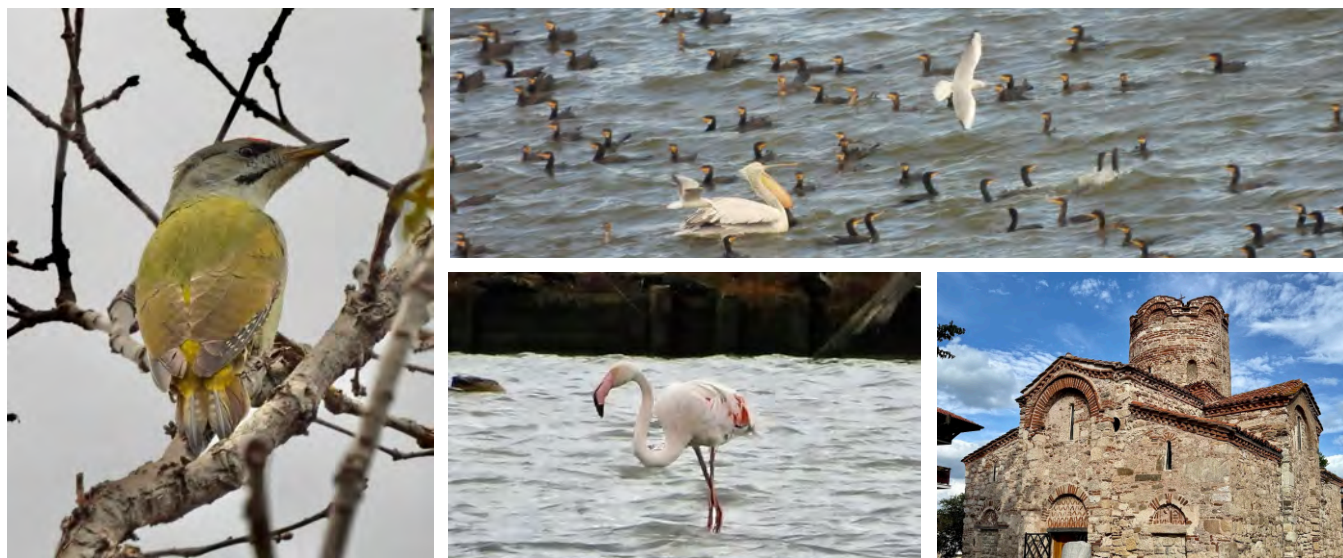
Before breakfast we checked the park in front of our hotel, finding both Syrian and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, and thus were able to compare these two similar species. Later, we drove a short way to Cape Kaliakra, a rocky peninsula that juts out into the Black Sea that is a famed birding site but also a place steeped in history. Kaliakra means "beautiful cape," and it is indeed a picturesque place. Archeologists have found that Thracians settled here in the 4th century BC, followed by Greeks and then Romans in the 4th century AD. Remnants of medieval churches have also been unearthed. An impressive statue commemorates forty Bulgarian maidens who apparently leapt from the high cliffs into the sea rather than be captured by invading Turks in the Middle Ages, interlacing their hair together so they would stay together as they plunged to their deaths. Scanning the sea and cliffs we soon spotted a new species for our trip, European Shag, a species of marine cormorant, perched on rocks below us. There were also many Great Cormorants for comparison. We had close views of Yellow-legged Gulls, too: indeed, from here on we would see this species rather than the Caspian Gulls which we had often encountered in Romania. Cape Kaliakra is a good place on the Via Pontica to watch for migrating birds, both in the sky and in the bushes and on the walls and stones of the ruins. We saw around five Eurasian Sparrowhawks, a Levant Sparrowhawk, and about thirty Alpine Swifts swirling above us. Lower down we found Red-backed Shrikes, Eurasian Blackcap, Lesser Whitethroat, Common Chiffchaff, Red-breasted Flycatchers, and many White Wagtails. Our next stop was up the coast at the Yailata National Archeological Reserve, another fascinating and scenic location. As we drove on towards our lunch stop, four Gray Partridges flushed from the roadside. We briefly stopped near the village of Tyulenovo to take photos of the Shabla lighthouse. Built by the Ottomans in 1856, this red-and-white tower is the oldest lighthouse in Bulgaria and lies on the easternmost point of land in the country. As we waited for our lunch orders to arrive, Marina pointed out that one of the gentleman on a nearby table was a former president of Bulgaria. What followed was surely one of the funniest things ever on a Naturalist Journey's tour. Upon hearing this Celia went over to the politician and asked for a photo. The former president and his team (mostly big lads, probably security personnel) responded in a very obliging manner, the



politician even standing up and suggesting that he and Celia move into better light to get their “selfies.” Celia then went all-in and talked politics with him! We finished our lunch, thanked our new friends for their good humor, and then moved on. It was a sort drive to Lake Shabla-Tuzla, another protected coastal brackish wetland which is separated from the Black Sea by a bank of sand dunes. There were many Eurasian (Green-winged Teal), Little Ringed Plovers, Common Snipe, a Temminck’s Stint, a Ruff in non-breeding plumage, several Wood Sandpipers, Dunlin and Caspian Tern. As we watched theses on the lake, a flock of Spanish Sparrows were active in bushes behind us. The highlight here for most, however, was a Ruddy Shelduck, a real Balkan specialty. On the way back to base we saw a Eurasian Hobby perched by the roadside and at the edge of the village of Sveti Nikola watched Great Spotted and Syrian Woodpeckers, four Eurasian Jays, a “charm” of European Goldfinches (is there a better collective noun for a flock of birds?) and, in the same tree, a Willow Warbler and a Lesser Whitethroat. It had been yet another very eventful day!

Day 6 / Thursday September 25 / Kavarna / Lake Durankulak / Lake Shabla-Tuzla / Kavarna

Today we decided to return to the Durankulak area where we had briefly stopped when first entering Bulgaria. On the way we came upon a handsome male Red-footed Falcon on a roadside wire and a flock of Corn Buntings. A marshy area just before the main lake of Durankulak proved very productive with Little Grebe, Garganey, Northern Shoveler and many Gadwall and Eurasian Coots on the open water. The muddy margins had Common Snipe, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Purple Herons, and Little Egrets. Real highlights here were watching a Whiskered Tern going back and forth, two interacting Common Kingfishers and then two huge White-tailed Eagles flying by. We also met a local bird bander here, who showed us a Marsh Warbler he had just caught. We then visited the main Durankulak lake and its Archeological Park and Visitor Centre where we watched a short but fascinating video about the ancient history of the area. After a fine lunch here, we went back to Lake Shabla-Tuzla, seeing many of the birds we had seen there previously but also adding Black-bellied and Common Ringed Plovers to our trip list. In addition to birds, a Red Squirrel was also spotted today. This evening, for a change, we went for dinner in a local restaurant and then announced our plans for the following day when we would move on, further south to our third and final base.



**Day 7 Fri. Sept., 26 Kavarna | Balchik | Baltata Reserve Albena | Gorica |
Nessebar | Pomorie Saltworks | Rosenets**

We left Kavarna after breakfast and headed south mostly following the coast road. A roadside stop at the Balchik-Topola cliffs produced a Eurasian Sparrowhawk and a Lesser Spotted Eagle. Next, we walked for an hour in woods of the Baltata Reserve in Albena which proved to be a woodpecker hotspot with Middle Spotted, Eurasian Green and Black Woodpeckers all seen. In addition, we found a party of delightful Long-tailed Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper and two obliging European Robins. Butterflies included Red Admiral and Small and Large Whites. We then went inland for a while, taking lunch in an authentic rural “taverna” in a small village before carrying on down the coast. Next, we spent an hour in the quaint, old town of Nessebar which lies on a peninsula in the Black Sea. This pretty place is rich in history, the Thracians having settled here around 3000 years ago, followed by Greeks in the 6th century BC and later by Romans and Turks. Some of the wooden houses here, from the 19th century, are typical of this region of Bulgaria. Some of our group went sightseeing and souvenir shopping in the town, whilst others chose to brave the wind which had got up and look for birds in and around the small port. There were many Yellow-legged Gulls and Hooded Crows, Great Cormorants, a solitary Shag, and a new species for our trip list, three Red-rumped Swallows flitting over the houses. Pushing on, we drove a short way to the Pomorie Saltworks. On the salinas here we found many shorebirds such as another Black-bellied Plover, Eurasian Curlews, Wood Sandpipers, Common Redshank and many Dunlins in various states of plumage but some still with black bellies, all quite close. There were many Pygmy Cormorants and Sandwich Terns perched on posts in the water and two new larids for our list, Little and Slender-billed Gulls, the latter a specialist of saline wetlands. Then it was time to head to our hotel, set in quiet woodlands at Rosenets just to the south of Burgas.

**Day 8 Sat. Sept., 27 Rosenets | Lake Mandra | Poda Reserve | Lake
Atanasovko | Pomorie Thracian Mound | Pomorie Saltworks | Lake Vaya |
Rosenets**

Some of us went out into the deciduous woods around our hotel before breakfast where we good views of Great Spotted, Eurasian Green and Gray-headed Woodpeckers, Eurasian Jay, Eurasian Blackbird and others. Our first stop after breakfast was at Lake Mandra at the mouth of the River Izvorska. From a hilltop here we scanned the wetlands below seeing four Dalmatian Pelicans fishing among many Great Cormorants as well as Pygmy Cormorants, Eurasian Spoonbills and ducks and herons. Overhead, we spotted an Osprey, six Honey Buzzards, a



Common Raven and later three Black Storks also flew by. Next, we visited the Poda Protected Area near Burgas. We went into the reserve's visitor centre and shop and then scanned the surrounding wetland from its rooftop viewpoint, seeing many Mute Swans, Eurasian Wigeons, Great Crested Grebes, Little Egrets, Common Snipe and other birds. On the other side of Burgas, the shallow salt pans at Lake Atanasovsko hosted a dozen Common Shelduck, Northern Pintails, Wood Sandpipers, and over a 1000 Greater Flamingos. We had seen many good birds, so it was time for a little history and culture! Hence, we visited the Thracian Mound Museum at Pomorie. This dome-shaped tumulus is the best preserved site of kind in Bulgaria. Also called the Beehive Tomb, owing to its shape, it has been dated to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, though some authorities believe it is even older, of Thracian origin. After lunch we returned to the nearby saltworks, an always productive birding spot. Two Eurasian Oystercatchers were new, there were more Common Redshanks and Dunlins, a Common Greenshank, and a big flock of Common Starlings feeding like shorebirds on the sandy edge of the lake. Our final stop today was Lake Vaya (also known as Lake Burgas). Before returning to our accommodation, we stopped by Lake Vaya. This proved very worthwhile as there were around a hundred Common Pochards and thirty Great White Pelicans on the water and, arguably best of all, a Eurasian Wryneck was spotted. This unusual member of the woodpecker family was high on the wanted list of several in our group. It had been another great day, once again a splendid blend of birds and culture.

Day 9 Sun. Sept., 28 Rosenets | Ropotamo Forest | Strandzha Forest | Lake Mandra | Rosenets

Once again some of us explored the woods around our hotel before breakfast. A Song Thrush on the lawn was a new trip bird. Middle Spotted, Great Spotted and Gray-headed Woodpeckers showed well, as well as Great Tits, Eurasian Nuthatches, Short-toed Treecreepers, Spotted Flycatchers, European Robins, Common Chaffinches, European Goldfinches and at least a dozen Eurasian Jays. Our main destination today was the forests of the Ropotamo Reserve and the Strandzha Hills, which lie to the south close to the border with Turkey. At the Ropotamo Nature Reserve we searched for White-backed Woodpecker, a threatened species across much of its European distribution. We had no luck here, but saw Common Chiffchaffs, a Eurasian Nuthatch and other songbirds and heard a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (Europe's smallest woodpecker species) call. On the non-bird front, we found Large White, Small White, Speckled Wood and Red Admiral butterflies, too. Determined to find the last woodpecker species that was possible on our tour, we continued up into the Strandzha Hills, a mostly forested area protected as a Nature Park. At first, things were a little quiet, but later things picked up. We stopped to watch a Eurasian Green Woodpecker and further on took a short walk. We saw a Black Woodpecker and then, finally, found our main target, a White-backed Woodpecker! It played hard to get, moving in the



canopy but in the end, everyone got decent views. The sub-species that occurs here and in the rest of the Balkans is *lilfordi*, which some consider a full-species, so-called “Lilford’s Woodpecker”. Satisfied with this great bird, we drove back north, stopping for lunch in a small town. We decided to return to Lake Mandra, on the way seeing a Short-toed Snake-Eagle atop an electricity pylon and a little further on, another showed well in flight. We pulled up again to watch a very cooperative Little Owl that was perched on a house chimney in a village. Our final stop was at the mouth of the River Izvorska. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the birds we had seen here before were still present, but we also found a new one: a Water Rail that several times ran out from the reeds onto an open area of mud. Back at Rosenets we had our final dinner together and ran through our list of trip sightings. We had done well; everyone had contributed to spotting the birds and helping others to do so. We had seen a range of both resident and migratory birds, some common, some rare, and many being “lifers”.

Day 10 Mon. Sept., 29 Rosenets to Sofia Airport and City

We checked out of our hotel and set off westwards towards Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria. It was raining slightly, the first time during our trip. Yes, we had had mostly fine sunny weather throughout. As we passed through Burgas we saw Alpine Swifts flying quite low and later a herd of Roe Deer in a crop field. During our drive I asked everyone to list two things: their favorite one or two birds of the trip and favorite cultural site or an event. The choices were as follows:

Pat: The Common Kingfishers and the blue Lipovan cottages by the Delta.

- John: White-tailed Eagle and the Histria archeological site.
- Leigh: The Long-tailed Tits, Grey-headed Woodpecker, and the peaceful woodlands.
- Nick: The Eurasian Thick-knees and Cape Kaliakra.
- Inge: Black Stork and Nessebar old town.
- Don: Wryneck and all the historical sites.
- Celia: European Robin, the Common Kingfishers, and the Dionysius Monastery.
- Fred: White-backed Woodpecker, the Common Kingfishers and seeing the eastern Balkans in general.
- Marina: White-backed Woodpecker and Celia posing for photos with the Bulgarian ex-President.

In the early afternoon, two of us were dropped off at the airport while others were taken to hotels nearby and in the city.

I would like to sincerely thank everyone who came along on in this latest Naturalist Journey’s tour along the Black Sea coast of Romania and Bulgaria! I am already looking for to getting back in the fall of next year!

Photos: Group (Gerard Gorman - GG), Great Spotted Woodpecker (Celia Gerry - CG), Greater Flamingos (CG), Little Owl (CG), Spotted Flycatcher (CG), Whinchat (CG), Dalmatian Pelicans (CG), White Wagtail (CG), Scenic (CG), Common Kestrel (CG), Middle Spotted Woodpecker (CG), Gray Wagtail (CG), Group (GG), Willow Warbler (Nick Rothman - NR), European Robin (CG), Gray-headed Woodpecker (CG), Dalmatian Pelican and Great Cormorants (CG), Greater Flamingo (CG), Eurasian Wryneck (CG), White-backed Woodpecker (CG), Short-toed Treecreeper (NR)