

# BULGARIA: WINTER BIRDING WONDERLAND CUSTOM TOUR TRIP REPORT

**26 JANUARY - 3 FEBRUARY 2019** 

By Dylan Vasapolli



Spotted Nutcracker is always a highlight and didn't disappoint on this tour.



#### Overview

This private tour followed the exact route of our winter set-departure tour, taking place directly preceding it. The tour began in the coastal town of Varna, from where we spent a few days exploring the northern Bulgaria Black Sea region, before transferring to the large port town of Burgas. Here we spent time birding the southern Bulgarian Black Sea region, including the Strandzha mountain massif, before transferring inland to the capital, Sofia, where the tour concluded on the snow-covered Vitosha mountain.

This winter was mild and warmer than it usually is, although still the weather was somewhat of a mixed bag, with cold and windy conditions present on many days. The warmer-than-usual weather, though, also meant that the large geese flocks that are usually present in the region, the main drawing card for this tour, never quite established themselves, resulting in our spending quite some time searching before we were able to find and enjoy a largish flock of geese. Arguably the biggest target for this tour is the prized **Red-breasted Goose**, which we were able to find, and other highlights for the tour included **Greylag** and **Greater White-fronted Geese**, **Tundra** and **Whooper Swans**, **Red-crested Pochard**, **Smew**, **White-headed Duck**, **Black-throated Loon**, **Eurasian Bittern**, **Dalmatian Pelican**, **Eastern Imperial Eagle**, **Hen Harrier**, **White-tailed Eagle**, **Rough-legged** and **Long-legged Buzzards**, **Slender-billed**, **Pallas's**, and **Caspian Gulls**, a large roost of **Long-eared Owls**, **Middle-spotted**, **Syrian**, and **Black Woodpeckers**, **Spotted Nutcracker**, **Coal**, **Marsh**, and **Willow Tits**, **Calandra Lark**, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Fieldfare**, **Brambling**, **Hawfinch**, **Red Crossbill**, and **Yellowhammer**, among others.

The tour list just exceeded 100 bird species seen, along with 5 mammals; the highlight of the latter was views of **Harbour Porpoise** in the Black Sea.



*Greater White-fronted Goose* was the most numerous goose encountered on the trip.



#### **Detailed Report**

## Day 1, 26th January 2019. Arrival in Varna and transfer to Kavarna

Following our afternoon arrival into Varna on Bulgaria's northern Black Sea cost, James, Barbara and I met up with our local guide, Yordan, and transferred north to Kavarna, where we'd spent the next four nights. En route we made a stop at the Topola Cliffs for Eurasian Eagle-Owl, but the owl was nowhere to be found, and we gave up and completed our journey to Kavarna, arriving at sunset. The only notable bird seen en route was **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**. Following a hearty meal we settled in for a good rest, looking forward to the following days' birding.

## Day 2, 27th January 2019. Birding Durankulak Lake and surroundings

We made a pre-dawn start and headed for the Topola Cliffs again to try to find Eurasian Eagle-Owl once more and arrived at sunrise. At our last spot, after some time spent searching, Yordan saw one of the owls as it flushed from its roost and promptly disappeared behind a ridge, out of sight. Sadly, the rest of us were unable to see the bird, eventually conceding defeat once more and returning to our accommodation for breakfast.

Following a good breakfast (and warming our bodies back up again) we set off for the day, bound for the area of Durankulak Lake. We started well with a sea watch that produced a few Blackthroated Loons, Red-breasted Merganser, and Black-necked and Great-crested Grebes, and one of our highlights were a few small groups of Pallas's Gulls among groups of Yellow-legged Gulls. We walked a bit further along the trail and began noting larger numbers of geese flying around, and some patient waiting resulted in the flocks heading straight over us. Greater Whitefronted Geese made up the bulk of the flock, numbering 100 to 200, but also present were a few Greylag Geese, Mute and Whooper Swans, and eventually our main target, and the main target of the trip, **Red-breasted Goose**, a small flock of which flew low overhead, giving us some good, albeit brief views. Scanning of the open water also proved productive, giving us a few of the prized Smews, including a fine male, among many Common Pochards and Eurasian Coots. We were also able to pick up both Great and Pygmy Cormorants along with a distant White-tailed Eagle. The farmlands surrounding the lake yielded a few Long-legged Buzzards along with Grey Partridge, Common Pheasant, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Western Jackdaw, Rook, Common Reed Bunting, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, and a few of the snazzy Hawfinch.

Following our lunch break we headed to some other lakes and marshes. Here we were able to add **Eurasian Wigeon**, **Common Shelduck**, **Northern Shoveler**, **Tufted Duck**, **Western Marsh** and **Hen Harriers**, and **Little** and **Caspian Gulls** to our growing list.

Further coastal stops along our route back yielded **European Shag**, a large flock of over 200 **Dalmatian Pelicans**, along with many **Black-throated Loons**, and a few surprise **Harbour Porpoises** moving around.

A good warm meal awaited us in the evening, following our successful day in the cold, windy winter conditions.





We had good looks at the sought-after European Shag.

## Day 3, 28th January 2019. Birding Bolata, Shabla, and surroundings

We awoke to a cooler morning, with a stiff wind blowing, and following breakfast headed to the nearby Bolata Valley, where we spent some time. Despite scouring the many rocky ledges we were once more unable to find Eurasian Eagle-Owl but did come up trumps with a large group of **Hawfinches** and a vocal pair of **Syrian Woodpeckers** that showed well. **Peregrine Falcon** and **Whooper Swan** were also noted. As we continued working our way through the area some scrub held a large mixed group of passerines including **Great Tit**, **European Greenfinch**, **European Goldfinch**, **Eurasian Siskin**, and **Yellowhammer**.

We then visited Cape Kaliakra and the ruins there, but did not notice much more besides **Common Reed Bunting** and **European Shag** on some the offshore rocks. Our next stop found us in one of the small villages, where we quickly found a large roost of over 50 **Long-eared Owls** – almost all crammed within one tiny tree. It was an absolute thrill, and we spent quite a while watching and enjoying them before tearing ourselves away and continuing onward. Some open farmlands yielded a large flock of **Calandra Larks** and an excellent **Rough-legged Buzzard**.

Lunch was next on our list, and it took us a while to find an open restaurant on this Monday, but we eventually did and enjoyed a good, warm meal as we thawed out. Following lunch, we worked our way back to our hotel along the coast, searching the sea along with the open steppes and farmlands, but with the stiff winds not much was around. A lone **Greater White-fronted Goose** looked sorry for itself among some of the coastal rocks, while **European Shags** fished close ashore, and the steppes gave us a few close **Hen Harriers** and a group of **Crested Larks**. As the mist began to roll in we called it a day.





Just a few of the many **Long-eared Owls** seen today

## Day 4, 29th January 2019. Birding in southern Romania

We had gotten word of Red-breasted Geese that had been in some of the southern Romania fields, and with the apparent lack of these geese in north-eastern Bulgaria we decided to spend the day in Romania and try our luck there. We were soon off, pleased with a clear, sunny day (for now, at least), and made our way into Romania. It took some time to clear the border, but we soon found ourselves at our first stop at the Tuzla Lake. Some careful scanning of the reed edges produced a fine Eurasian Bittern perched out in the open before it took flight over the lake toward us and disappeared into the reeds. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk patrolled the skies, while many Blackheaded Gulls floated over the water, but we couldn't find much more. We continued to another section of the lake, finding a large flock of Common Shelducks, well into the thousands, but little else was present. A surprise Mistle Thrush in a lone garden, a pair of Peregrine Falcons, and a **Corn Bunting** were the only other birds of interest.

We continued to Constanta and visited a number of sites, turning up only Mew Gull and Gadwall as new species, with a supporting cast of other species we had already seen, such as **Red-breasted** Merganser, Great and Pygmy Cormorants, and Great Crested Grebe.

We enjoyed our packed lunch on the black sea coast before starting our afternoon birding spell. We headed further north and began searching some of the many fields in this area for geese, but, try as we might, we couldn't find any. But a freshwater wetland system produced many birds, including Greylag Geese, Eurasian Teal, European Shoveler, Red-crested Pochard, Mute Swan, Grey Heron, and Common Reed Bunting, while the edges held a flock of Fieldfares and a few **Meadow Pipits**. Here we picked up on a few large flocks of geese flying in the distance but lost sight of where they were headed. So we resumed our search through the many fields in this are, and spent some time combing through them, but then we ran out of time and had to make our way back to the border, sadly geese-less. We enjoyed a good meal to cap off a long day.



We had many good looks at Western Marsh Harrier on this tour.

## Day 5, 30th January 2019. Transfer from Kavarna to Pomorie

We had a bit of ground to cover today as we transferred south to the Burgas/Pomorie region along the southern Bulgarian Black Sea coast. Our first stop was along the Topola Cliffs, where we spent some time scanning once more, still unsuccessfully, for Eurasian Eagle-Owl, with not many other birds present in the area. Our next stop was at the large Varna lagoon, which proved rather quiet as we bypassed it.

However, in stark contrast to the rest of the lagoons/lakes in the area, the Yatata Reserve was packed with waterbirds, with the top picks being Eurasian Spoonbill, many Grey Herons and Great Egrets, Pygmy Cormorant, and Common Kingfisher, with other species seen including Eurasian Teal, Gadwall, Common Shelduck, Western Marsh Harrier, an out-of-place Black Kite, and Corn Bunting. Continuing on our way south we found a large group of swans close to the road, and upon closer investigation we found a single Tundra Swan among the many Whooper Swans present. Sadly, the birds didn't hang around for too long, wary of our presence, and soon took off and landed deeper in the field.

Following a great lunch at Goritsa we headed into the nearby woodlands in search of woodpeckers. We didn't have to wait long, almost immediately finding **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**, which, while we were admiring it, was chased off by a **Middle-spotted Woodpecker**. We turned our attention to this prized species for a while, noting a second bird as well, and watched them for some time before continuing. We spent some time searching for other species, but the woodlands were on the quiet side. Eventually, however, we were able to find a **Short-toed Treecreeper**, after hearing one call for a while. Other birds seen here included **Great** and **Eurasian Blue Tits**, **Eurasian Nuthatch** and **Great Spotted Woodpecker**.

Our last stop for the day was a little outside Pomorie, where we spent the last bit of the afternoon exploring some woodlands. These woodlands were also on the quieter side, with not many birds active, but we managed to eke out both **Middle** and **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** once more, along with a group of **Hawfinches**, and amongst them a few **Bramblings**. Shortly before arriving



at Pomorie we stopped on the side of the road to enjoy a very large flock of geese coming in to roost in a large wetland - a good sign for the coming days!



Two out of the large group of Whooper Swans feeding in the fields.

#### Day 6, 31st January 2019. Birding Pomorie and Burgas

Armed with a full day to explore the area we left after breakfast and birded the nearby Pomorie Lake. Although most of the birds were distant in the middle of the lake we managed to see Gadwall, Northern Pintail, Red-breasted Merganser, large numbers of Tufted Ducks and Common Pochards, Sandwich Tern, and Common Redshank.

The bulk of the geese in Bulgaria this winter had been wintering in the fields around Burgas, as opposed to typically around Shabla and Durankulak, and during our first stop we were waiting for the geese to come into a favored field. We watched them for a while as the flocks flew up and down but didn't seem to be settling. We decided to head on and bird a few other sites before returning later in the day after they had settled. A number of **Eurasian Skylarks** were seen while we waited.

Our next target was **White-headed Duck**, and our first stop produced the birds, but they were all on the side of the lake facing into the sun and left us wanting more. We decided that we would return later in the day when the light was better to try again. Then we investigated the fields to the south of Burgas, and while working our way around one of the lakes we came across a large flock of geese resting on the water. We stopped and began sifting through the distant flock but could only note white-fronted-type geese before about half the group took off and flew straight over us, giving us excellent views and allowing us to confirm them as **Greater White-fronted Geese!** This was a monstrous flock; easily as many as 5,000 birds flew over us, and there were still many thousands left on the water. A large group of **Dalmatian Pelicans** were feeding on the lake as well, and **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** and **Western Marsh Harrier** both gave great views flying over. We did a quick loop through the fields but couldn't locate any of the geese that had taken off. So we worked our way back to Burgas, following a lunch stop.



A stop at the Poda Nature Reserve was on the quiet side, with the wind picking up and the clouds coming in, but we were able to pick out a Pallas's Gull among many Yellow-legged Gulls, while the waterfowl present was a similar suite to what we had already seen. A stop for White-headed Duck gave us much improved views, despite the distance, and Little Gulls were also noted flying around.

We headed back to look for the geese flocks in the surrounding fields and soon saw a few birds coming in to land in what looked like a ploughed field. We pulled off to have a look, and the ploughed field turned into an enormous flock of geese – easily over 10,000 birds all feeding in the new growth. We began scanning through the birds, and it was evident that the bulk of the birds were Greater White-fronted Geese, probably the same large flock we had found earlier on the water, and in between them we hit the jackpot, finding a smallish flock of around 120 Red**breasted Geese**. We spent quite a bit of time watching the geese through the scopes as they went about their business, before eventually tearing ourselves away after long, satisfying looks at this prized bird!

The last part of the afternoon was spent on the Burgas salt pans, where we enjoyed numbers of Dalmatian Pelicans, Eurasian Spoonbill, and a few Slender-billed Gulls together with numerous Black-headed Gulls, among others. We enjoyed a good dinner following our success with the geese!



We were elated to finally find a large flock of geese – spot the **Red-breasted Geese**!

#### Day 7, 1st February 2019. Birding the Strandzha mountains and surroundings

Following our success the previous day, and with another full day at our disposal in the region, we decided to spend the first part of the day birding in the Strandzha mountains near the Turkish border. We had a spectacularly sunny day, although the wind kept things quiet as we slowly explored the vast woodlands of this area. One of the first birds seen was a stunning Black Woodpecker as it rapidly moved through the trees. We spent a while trying for god views, but it remained shy and only gave us a few sightings before moving off. Middle Spotted Woodpecker



was next up, and we were able to spend some time with a few birds as they moved around before coming across a single **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**. Many **Eurasian Nuthatches** were seen in the area, along with **Short-toed Treecreeper** and **Eurasian Blue**, **Great**, and a single **Marsh Tit**. The woodlands were extremely quiet, and we struggled to eke out any other birds and went through many patches where we were unable to find anything. We eventually gave up and made our way back to Burgas.

Here we headed to the Burgas salt pans to maximize the good light for photography. We spent a while here, sifting through the birds, and enjoyed taking pictures in the good afternoon light. Species seen included Common Shelduck, Eurasian Teal, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Spoonbill, Dalmatian Pelican, and a single Great White Pelican among the latter, Pygmy Cormorant, Black-headed Gull, and White Wagtail.

We spent the last portion of the afternoon searching for the geese. We found the flock of geese in a similar area to that of the previous day, although the flock wasn't as large as yesterday, and decided to try a dirt road to see if we could get behind the sun. But the road turned into slippery clay and mud, and we sadly flushed the geese as we began turning around to make our way back to the main road. With daylight running out we called it a day and headed back to Pomorie, where we settled in for dinner.



The scarce Middle-spotted Woodpecker showed well!

#### Day 8, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2019. Transfer from Pomorie to Sofia

Faced with a long drive to the capital city, Sofia, we briefly visited the nearby Lake Pomorie after breakfast, noting many of the same waterfowl species as we had seen already on the trip, including numbers of **Common Pochard**, **Tufted Duck**, **Northern Pintail**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Pygmy Cormorant**, and **Sandwich Tern**, among others, before beginning the drive.

Just outside of Burgas we stopped in the geese fields to look at the large group of swans gathered, but the distance was a bit too great to be sure of anything else besides **Whooper Swan**. All was not lost however, as a young **Eastern Imperial Eagle** came flying by, giving us some good views



before it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. Our next stop, shortly before our lunch break, was at some woodlands near Brezovo, where we tried our luck to find Sombre Tit, but after some searching we came away empty-handed, and the only notable birds were a few **Northern Ravens** and a group of **Hawfinches.** 

The rest of the drive to Sofia was uneventful, and we spent the last bit of the afternoon at the top of Vitosha mountain. Sadly there was a stiff wind blowing, and not many birds moved around, but some persistence gave us **Spotted Nutcracker**, **Coal Tit**, and **Red Crossbill** among the snow-covered hillside.

We ended the day with our last group dinner.



A surprise Eastern Imperial Eagle was a good find en route to Sofia.

# Day 9, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2019. Birding Vitosha mountain and departure

We had an early start this morning as we made our way up Vitosha mountain once more in order to beat the skiing crowds looking to take advantage of the snow. The birding was good this morning, and we were able to enjoy a number of confiding **Spotted Nutcrackers** along with a few **Coal**, **Great**, and the sought-after **Willow Tits**, **Red Crossbills**, and a few **Goldcrests**. We weren't able to find any Eurasian Bullfinches, however, and began making our way back down the mountain as the crowds began to gather on the upper reaches. Despite the many people we enjoyed **European Red Squirrel** and a herd of **European Roe Deer** on our way down.

We gathered our things back at the hotel, checked out, and enjoyed our final meal together before saying goodbye to James and Barbara at their hotel.

I would just like to thank James and Barbara for the good times shared on the trip along with the many great birds we enjoyed. Although the weather and conditions proved challenging at times, we did well, finding the majority of our targets and many of the most sought-after species occurring in the region. Eventually enjoying a flock of Red-breasted Geese that gave us good, long views,



together with Spotted Nutcracker frolicking in the snow, would have to be some of the top highlights of the trip. I look forward to the next one!



We had great views of Coal Tit to end the tour.



## **Bird List - Following IOC 9.1**

Birds 'heard only' are marked with (H) after the common name, and 'guide only' birds are marked with a (G) – all other species were seen.

The following notation after species names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened.

Common name	Scientific name
Ducks, Geese, Swans (Anatio	lae)
Red-breasted Goose - VU	Branta ruficollis
Greylag Goose	Anser anser
Greater White-fronted Goose	Anser albifrons
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor
Tundra Swan	Cygnus columbianus
Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata
Gadwall	Mareca strepera
Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos
Northern Pintail	Anas acuta
Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca
Red-crested Pochard	Netta rufina
Common Pochard - VU	Aythya ferina
Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula
Smew	Mergellus albellus
Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator
White-headed Duck - EN	Oxyura leucocephala
Pheasants and allies (Phasian	nidae)
Grey Partridge	Perdix perdix
Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus
Loons (Gaviidae)	
Black-throated Loon	Gavia arctica
Grebes (Podicipedidae)	
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis



Common name	Scientific name
Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus
Black-necked Grebe	Podiceps nigricollis
Ibises, Spoonbills (Threskion	·
Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia
Herons, Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
Eurasian Bittern	Botaurus stellaris
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea
Great Egret	Ardea alba
Pelicans (Pelecanidae)	
Great White Pelican	Pelecanus onocrotalus
Dalmatian Pelican - NT	Pelecanus crispus
Dannatian i Chean - 1vi	1 ciecuius crispus
Cormorants, Shags (Phalacr	ocoracidae)
Pygmy Cormorant	Microcarbo pygmeus
European Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo
Kites, Hawks, Eagles (Accipi	tridaa)
Eastern Imperial Eagle - VU	Aquila heliaca
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus
Black Kite	Milvus migrans
White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla
Rough-legged Buzzard	Buteo lagopus
Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo
	<u>I</u>
Rails, Crakes and Coots (Ra	llidae)
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra
Sandpipers, Snipes (Scolopa	ridae)
omimpipers, ompes (occiopa	ciuut)





Common name	Scientific name
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula
Rook	Corvus frugilegus
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix
Northern Raven	Corvus corax
	'
Tits, Chickadees (Paridae	e)
Coal Tit	Periparus ater
Marsh Tit	Poecile palustris
Willow Tit	Poecile montanus
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus
Great Tit	Parus major
Larks (Alaudidae)	
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis
Crested Lark	Galerida cristata
Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra
Cettia Bush Warblers and	d Allies (Cettiidee)
Cetti's Warbler (H)	Cettia cetti
Cetti's Warbier (11)	Centa cent
Goldcrests, Kinglets (Reg	nlidae)
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus
Wrens (Troglodytidae)	
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes
Eurasian wren	170 Stodytes trostodytes
Eurasian wien	Trogroupies rrogroupies
Nuthatches (Sittidae)	Trogroupies trogroupies
	Sitta europaea
Nuthatches (Sittidae)	
Nuthatches (Sittidae)	Sitta europaea
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Nuthatches (Sittidae) Eurasian Nuthatch Treecreepers (Certhiidae	Sitta europaea
Nuthatches (Sittidae) Eurasian Nuthatch Treecreepers (Certhiidae	Sitta europaea ) Certhia brachydactyla
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Nuthatches (Sittidae) Eurasian Nuthatch Treecreepers (Certhiidae Short-toed Treecreeper Starlings, Rhabdornis (St	Sitta europaea ) Certhia brachydactyla



Common name	Scientific name
Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus
Chats, Old World Flycatche	ers (Muscicapidae)
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula
Old World Sparrows, Snow	vfinches (Passeridae)
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus
Wagtails, Pipits (Motacillid	ae)
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba
Meadow Pipit - NT	Anthus pratensis
Finches, Euphonias (Fringi	llidae)
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs
Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina
Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus
<b>Buntings (Emberizidae)</b>	
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella
Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus

Total seen:	104
Total heard only:	1
Total guide only:	1
Total recorded	106



# **Mammal List**

Common name	Scientific name
Canines (Canidae)	
Golden Jackal	Canis aureus
Deer, Elk, Moose (Cervid	lae)
European Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus
Porpoises (Phocoenidae)	
Harbour Porpoise	Phocoena phocoena
Rabbits, Hares (Leporida	ne)
European Hare	Lepus europaeus
Squirrels, Chipmunks, M	larmots, Prairie Dogs (Sciuridae
Eurasian Red Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris



**Total seen:**