

Bulgaria, species list and trip report, 3 to 7 January 2019

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



Bulgaria 2019



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#	DATE	LOCATIONS AND NOTES
1	3 January	Flew from the UK to Varna
2	4 January	Durankulak Lake, Ezerets Lake, Shabla Tuzla Lake, Kaliakra, Topola.
3	5 January	Sinoe (Romania), Kavarna.
4	6 January	Albena, Kamchia riverine forest, Panitsovo, Dyulino Pass in the Balkan Mountains (Stara Planina), Atanasovsko Lake, Vaya Lake, Mandra Lake, Chengene Skele.
5	7 January	Vaya Lake, Pomorie Lake, Dyulino Pass in the Balkan Mountains (Stara Planina), Beloslav Lake, Pobiti Kamani. Return to UK.



Above - Dalmatian Pelicans. Front cover - Dyulino Pass

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Days One and Two: 3 and 4 January. Arrival in Varna. Durankulak Lake, Ezerets Lake, Shabla Tuzla Lake, Kaliakra, Topola.

After an early arrival into Varna, we set off north-east towards Durankulak Lake, with a keen northerly wind accelerating as the morning began to lighten ahead of sunrise, sneaking the temperature below freezing. It was a misty morning, and combined with the wind, made for a quiet start to the day before a Marsh Harrier finally struggled into the sky. Black-necked and Little Grebes bobbed on the water, and a Black-throated Diver kept solitude in the middle. A succession of smart male Hen Harriers left their roost among the reeds and battled across the sky, while a Sparrowhawk clung disconsolately to a branch. On the water, groups of ducks hugged in close to the reeds; mainly Pochard and Tufted Duck, which were joined by Teal, Coot and Mallard, while Reed Buntings hopped through the vegetation.

As we continued around the lake towards the sand dunes that separate it from the Black Sea, we found a group of Red-breasted Merganser, while several Smew were spotted in flight, before the Pygmy Cormorants in the sky were dwarfed by a fantastic White-tailed Eagle soaring overhead.

We headed south to Ezerets, stopping to admire a roost of around 15 Long-eared Owls in a group of trees, before moving on to explore Ezerets and Shabla Tuzla Lakes. A similar assemblage of species here, joined by Whooper and Mute Swans. Large groups of Corn Buntings danced away over the fields, along with more distantly a group of five Roe Deer. A small group of Greylag Geese flew over, and a very pale Long-legged Buzzard passed silently by. Flocks of Chaffinches were joined by Bramblings, picking over the frozen ground, and a large group of Grey Partridges dashed among the stubble, one slipping and sliding as it ventured out across the road in front of us.

A little further south and we reached Kaliakra with its tall cliffs striking out south into the Black Sea. It was fairly quiet, besides the impressive site of some 200 Great Crested Grebes dotted among the waves below us, joined by the occasional Black-necked Grebe. A procession of Shags flew by, and the small, triangular dorsal fin of a Harbour Porpoise occasionally broke water.

Following a stop in Bolata, our final stop was in Topola. The cliffs here are a known breeding area for the Eagle Owl; the largest owl species in the world, coming in at a respectable 0.5 - 0.75m tall, with the largest individuals having a wingspan approaching 2m. Scanning the cliff fronts we weren't able to locate one of these heavyweights, and headed back to our hotel in Kavarna in the waning light.

Day Three: 5 January. Sinoe (Romania), Kavarna.

One of our main targets for the visit were the Red-breasted Geese that make Bulgaria their home every winter, following a long migration southwest from Siberia. The diminutive Red-breasted Goose is classified as vulnerable by IUCN, considered threatened by a combination of agricultural change, hunting installations of wind turbines, disturbance and climate change, all of which is exacerbated by an estimated population of 56,000 (although it is possible this is higher with some of the population using undetected wintering grounds). Following changes in land management in their former wintering grounds along the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan in the 1950s, the winter range shifted rapidly to the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria and Romania, with smaller populations wintering in Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Hungary.

The arrival of the geese in Bulgaria can be dependent upon weather conditions and food availability further north, and we decided to make sure we left no stone unturned in finding them, and headed north to Romania! It was only a short drive to the border and from there we hugged the Black Sea coast, past Mangalia and the city of Constanța, towards Sinoe and an area of farmland patrolled by Hen Harriers, and with several large lakes. Despite an encouraging fly past of a skein of White-fronted Geese with several Red-breasted Geese in their midst it was clear that the poor growth of winter cereals in many of the fields was providing little to entice the geese. We spent a little time birding around the reedbeds, with a White-tailed Eagle upsetting the ducks as it powerfully beat over, before we headed back south to Bulgaria.

We stopped to watch a large flock of Calandra Larks picking their way through a ploughed field by the roadside; enjoying their dark underwings as they flew in synchronisation close to the ground. We were then soon turning up a small track, after receiving a tip off about a certain winter visitor to the area, and

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quickly found what we were looking for - a very handsome male Snow Bunting. We spent some time watching him quietly as he picked along the track, in the shadow of one of the local wind turbines, seemingly unconcerned by our presence. There was just time to check out another potential owl roost; just one Long-eared Owl this time, given away by the tell-tale pellets and whitewash on the ground, before another winter night drew in.

Day Four: 6 January. Albena, Kamchia riverine forest, Panitsovo, Dyulino Pass in the Balkan Mountains (Stara Planina), Atanasovsko Lake, Vaya Lake, Mandra Lake, Chengene Skele.

This morning we set off south towards Burgas, with plenty of stops planned along the way. Our first stop was Albena to take a walk through the riparian woodlands of the Batova River. Here we were treated to fantastic views of a female Grey-headed Woodpecker, while Nuthatches called in the background. Continuing onwards, we spotted around 15 Great Egrets wading among the more flooded areas of the forest.

Passing through farmland, spotting Lapwing tentatively shuffling along the frozen ground we next visited the Kamchia Biosphere Reserve, formed of ancient riparian woodland around the floodplain of the Kamchia River, marshes and sand dunes. Walking down from the forest edge we spotted Hawfinch and Yellowhammer, before reaching the beach lapped by a calm Black Sea, where a Common Dolphin was feeding close to shore. Back towards the main road we spotted two Little Owls fluffed up on rooftops, snoozing the day away, before we head on to the Dyulino Pass. At around 440m this open area provides views over the Balkan Mountains (Stara Planina), which today were shrouded in snow.

A stop in the small village of Panitsovo and we managed to catch up with a Sombre Tit sheltering in low scrub within an orchard. Further along we found a fantastic mixed flock of finches; Hawfinch, Greenfinch, Siskin, Brambling and Chaffinch, followed by Goldfinch, moving in waves through the snowy landscape.

Upon reaching the outskirts of Burgas we headed to Atanasovsko Lake. Scanning around the fields nearby all was quite other than a Kestrel hovering intently in the sky. As we waited two Ruddy Shelduck came into land, and shortly after a large skein of White-fronted Geese was spotted coming in to land in a field in the distance. The wild goose chase was on, and we set off to try and find the flock. As luck would have it, pulling into a layby, the only possible stopping place along one of the city's main roads brought us to a perfect spot for viewing the geese as they grazed. Scanning through we found seven Red-breasted Geese in the middle of the group and revelled in finally finding these stunning birds; watching for as long as fingers and toes could bear it.

A short drive to the area between the brackish Vaya Lake and the Black Sea, south of Burgas gave us a chance to warm up. Reaching Burgas Bay we found a group of wintering White-headed Ducks out on the water, while Great Egrets kept watch on long necks among the vegetated edges. Onwards to nearby Mandra Lake, a freshwater reservoir, we found a huge raft of Dalmatian Pelicans alongside the many ducks and Grey Herons. Breeding season for these huge birds (up to 15kg of pelican!) can start as early as late-January and many of the birds were already showing the orange-red flush in their bill pouch that characterises their courtship period.

We continued south to a small bay near Chengene Skele where a number of waders were spotted along with a Curlew, which was heard but never seen. Grey Plover, Redshank, Greenshank, Little Ringed Plover and Dunlin picked along the shore, while a Snipe sat trancelike. On the water were Cormorants and Goosander, with Little Grebe and Black-necked Grebe in the shelter of a small channel. On a nearby sandbank we found a good number of Pallas's among the Black-headed, Yellow-legged and Common Gulls; again, many were well into developing the black hood of the summer season.

Day Five: 7 January. Vaya Lake, Pomorie Lake, Dyulino Pass in the Balkan Mountains (Stara Planina), Beloslav Lake, Pobiti Kamani. Return to UK.

It was a given today that we would return to look again for the Red-breasted Geese, which were presumably roosting somewhere around one of the lakes overnight. Reaching a viewpoint over Atanasovsko Lake, the first few skeins took to the skies in their strung out v-formations, before to some

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unknown cue, we were treated to the magnificent site and sound of thousands of geese streaming out of their roost, as the sky gradually graded through pinks into blue.

Reaching our spot from yesterday we were greeted by the site of some 4,000 geese, along with a large flock of swans. Within the flock, we picked out four Lesser White-fronted Geese, along with around 100 Red-breasted Geese. As we watched, more small groups flew in, with the Red-breasted Geese tending to fly in a tighter formation, and with the new arrivals there were now some 300 of these colourful birds present.

After our success with the geese we headed down towards the Poda Protected Area, finding a good mix of species in the sheltered bay including Red-breasted Merganser, Gadwall and Pintail, along with a group of seven Scaup and a female Smew. The wetlands were well-watched by Marsh Harriers, and a group of 30 Spoonbill flew by, ahead of a large flock of Shelduck.

Starting our journey north towards Varna, we stopped at Pomorie Lake, its curative muds undisturbed at this time of year. Good numbers of wintering ducks were bobbing on the waves in an increasingly icy wind, and a couple of Black Redstarts were spotted on posts.

Soon we were headed back for the Dyulino Pass, spotting more finches, Crested Lark, Mistle Thrush and Raven, along with a Middle Spotted Woodpecker with its bouncing flight. Returning to the main road we spotted another winter visitor - a Great Grey Shrike on wires, being given a wide berth by the ubiquitous Starlings and Corn Buntings.

Nearing Varna, we headed to Beloslav Lake, a Goshawk charging out of woodland straight in front of us as we drove. The lake here was partly iced over, but there were still plenty of wildfowl present, including Shoveler, which we hadn't seen up until now, along with huge numbers of grouchy-looking Grey Herons.

Our last visit was to the captivating site of Pobiti Kamini with its 'stone forest'. This is an area of inland sand dunes with naturally-formed stone columns that offer a unique landscape, and as such is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. There is no full agreement as to the origin of these columns, but it may be that they are as a result of ancient methane seepages when the area was covered in shallow seas. However they were formed, a visit to this fascinating area provided the perfect end to a winter's visit to Bulgaria, and following some time walking amongst the pillars, we headed back to Varna airport for our flight home.

Thank you to Minko for showing us places old and new at a very different time of year!

**Laurie Jackson, Wildlife Travel.
January 2019.**

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Above - Pobiti Kamani. Middle - Black-necked Grebes; Snow Bunting. Bottom - Geese flock.

BULGARIA 2019: some highlights

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME
BIRDS	
Family Anatidae (Ducks, Geese and Swans)	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
Lesser White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser erythropus</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Red-breasted Goose	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Smew	<i>Mergellus abellus</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>
Family Phasianinae (Partridges and Pheasants)	
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Family Gaviidae (Divers)	
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
Family Podicipedidae (Grebes)	
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Family Pelecanidae (Pelicans)	
White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>
Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>
Family Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants)	
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
(Mediterranean) Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis desmarestii</i>
Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>
Family Ardeidae (Hérons)	
Great Egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Family Threskiornithidae (Ibises)	
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Family Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles and Vultures)	
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>

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ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Family Falconidae (Falcons)	
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Family Rallidae (Rails and Crakes)	
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Family Charadriidae (Plovers)	
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Family Scolopacidae (Sandpipers)	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>
Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Family Laridae (Gulls)	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cacchianus</i>
Pallas's Gull	<i>Larus ichthyaetus</i>
Family Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)	
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Family Strigidae (Owls)	
Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>
Family Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)	
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Family Picidae (Woodpeckers)	
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>
Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>
Middle-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
Family Alaudidae (Larks)	
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>
Family Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla (alba) alba</i>
Family Troglodytidae (Wrens)	
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Family Muscicapidae (Flycatchers and Chats)	
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Family Turdidae (Thrushes)	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>

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ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Family Paridae (Tits)	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Sombre Tit	<i>Poecile lugubris</i>
Family Sittidae (Nuthatches)	
Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Family Laniidae (Shrikes)	
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
Family Corvidae (Crows)	
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Family Sturnidae (Starlings)	
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Family Passeridae (Sparrows)	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Family Fringillidae (Finches)	
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Family Emberizidae (Buntings)	
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME
MAMMALS	
Carnivores	
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
Cetaceans	
Black Sea Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphinus ponticus</i>
Black Sea Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena relicta</i>
Deer	
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>