

WILDLIFE TRAVEL

24th June to 1st July 2025 (8 days)

BULGARIA

mountain butterflies and wild flowers

"The number of flowers and butterflies was wonderful"

"All guides and leaders were excellent"

Bulgaria 2016

Exploring the mountains of western Bulgaria, home to endemic plants, abundant butterflies and peaceful monasteries.

We will start our holiday in the western Rhodopes, where the rounded, pine-covered hills are occasionally cut by streams and rivers running through deep gorges. Heading west, the Rhodope mountains reach their highest point with the massifs of Rila and Pirin, cloaked in ancient conifer forests, leading on to alpine meadows that conceal a dazzling array of colourful wild flowers, and rock screens higher up.

The mountains are home to **many local specialities**: with a little searching, flowers such as *Lilium jankae*, Bulgarian Columbine *Aquilegia aurea*, Red Avens *Geum coccineum*, Rila Primrose *Primula deorum*, Balkan Butterwort *Pinguicula balcanica* and the beautiful Orpheus Flower *Haberlea rhodopensis* could all be expected, along with beautiful pine forests including trees as old as 1,000 years.

The **butterfly fauna** is equally rich, and we will be hoping to find the impressive Apollo, Balkan Copper and Balkan Fritillary, along with a mind-boggling variety of ringlets and graylings, blues and hairstreaks, coppers and skippers, as well as some wonderful day-flying moths.

For the bird enthusiast, the highlight will no doubt be time spent in the stunning Trigrad Gorge, looking for the beautiful Wallcreeper that nests in cracks on the rock face here. We will also keep our eyes open for Balkan Chamois grazing on the high mountain slopes, Common Rosefinch, Sombre Tit, Black Woodpecker and Nutcracker.

We will also visit the famous **Rila Monastery**, the second biggest monastic complex in the Balkans.



Price

£1985

Single Room Supplement

£140

Full board

- Day 1** flight to Sofia
- Day 2** Trigrad Gorge
- Day 3** Trigrad area
- Day 4** Trigrad area
- Day 5** transfer to Pirin
- Day 6** Pirin
- Day 7** Rila
- Day 8** return to UK

Leaders

Mike Symes
and local guides

Group size

min 4, max 14

mountain flowers,
butterflies,
wildlife and scenery



ITINERARY

Please note that the itinerary may be changed to suit the weather or other practicalities or at the discretion of the leaders.

Day 1 Our flight takes us to Sofia, from where we travel south-east to the Western Rhodopes, stopping along the way for our first taster of the Bulgarian countryside. o/n Devin.

Days 2-3 We will spend two days exploring the Western Rhodopes, with its colourful meadows and woodlands. More than 2,000 species of plants have been recorded here, of which more than 90 are endemic to the Balkans, including *Viola rhodopaea* and *Geum rhodopaeum*, and a bewildering variety of saxifrages and campanulas, dianthus and astragaluses.

Chief amongst the area's attractions is the fantastic **Trigrad Gorge**. Here the Trigrad river has carved out 3km of gorge, flowing beneath near-vertical marble cliffs some 300 metres high - in places the two sides of the gorge are just 100 metres apart. For the birders amongst us, Trigrad Gorge is famous as the home to nesting **Wallcreeper**, and we will pay particular attention to finding this amazing bird as it feeds across the rock faces. The same habitat is home to the equally impressive *Haberlea rhodopensis*, a locally-endemic relative of ramonda and the more familiar African violets, which grows on the damp, shaded cliffs, alongside *Saxifraga sempervivum* and *Trachelium rumelianum*.

Higher up, we will explore the flower-rich meadows, home to orchids including Bug Orchid *Anacamptis coriophora*, Heart-flowered Marsh-orchid *Dactylorhiza cordigera* and Burnt-tip Orchid *Orchis ustulata*. We also hope to find *Sideritis scardica*, more familiar as the key ingredient in 'mountain tea' throughout the Balkans.

Lower down we will spend some time in the pine forests, where we hope to find Crested Tit, Black Woodpecker, Honey Buzzard and Firecrest. Black Redstart nest in the villages, Dipper will be bobbing on the streams while Corncrake will be singing their strange rasping song from nearby meadows, also haunted by Common Rosefinch, Red-backed Shrike, Whinchat and Black-headed Bunting. o/n Devin.

Days 4-6 Today we bid farewell to Trigrad and drive west towards the high mountains. We will spend our time here exploring the two massifs of Pirin and Rila, the latter the highest mountain in the Balkans. Amongst wooded areas we will hope to encounter noisy groups of Nutcracker, whilst in open grasslands Souselik keep watch outside their burrow networks.

This is a beautiful landscape of high peaks (over 2,500m), alpine meadows dotted with glacial lakes, spectacular rocky gorges, precipitous cliffs and dense forests. Some of the Macedonian pines here are estimated to be more than 1,000 years old.

The summer flowers should include many local specialities - amongst them bright red Red Avens *Geum coccineum*, dark pink Rila Primrose *Primula deorum*, stunning yellow *Lilium*



jankae and the creamy Bulgarian Columbine *Aquilegia aurea*. In the sub-alpine meadows we can hope to find a wonderful array of alpines including Balkan Butterwort *Pinguicula balcanica*, Pyrenean Gentian *Gentiana pyrenaica*, the endemic Bulgarian Sheep's-bit *Jasione bulgarica* and some of the more diminutive orchids including Small White Orchid *Pseudorchis albida* and Frivald's Gymnadenia *Gymnadenia frivaldii*.

The butterfly fauna here features the Apollo, Clouded Apollo, Mountain Small White, Balkan Copper, Higgin's Anomalous Blue, Phalakron Blue, Amanda's Blue, Cynthia's and Balkan Fritillary, Bulgarian Ringlet and many others. The birds of the mountains include Alpine Chough, Nutcracker, Hazel Grouse and various woodpeckers. Red Squirrels hide amongst the trees, while Balkan Chamois may be picked up as they graze on the mountain slopes. o/n Bansko.

Day 7 We head towards Kresna Gorge, where Griffon Vultures drift high overhead before visiting the impressive Monastery of Saint Ivan of Rila, the largest monastery in Bulgaria founded by St Ivan in the 10th century and now a UNESCO World Heritage site. Time permitting, we will also visit more mountain meadows, before making our way to our hotel. o/n Rila.

Day 8 Today we head back to Sofia airport and our flights home.

Health and fitness

On most days, we are out and about for much of the day, albeit walking a relatively slow pace and making several stops each day. We will be spending our time out in the mountains, where it is necessary to walk on rougher ground and up some **slopes**, although **none of the walking is strenuous**. Walking boots are essential.

The highest altitude we go to is about **2,200-2,400 metres**. **Please ask for advice from your doctor** if you think you will have any problems with being at these altitudes. There are likely to be steps at our hotels, with no lift, as well as up/down into the vehicle.

Accommodation, meals and transport

We will be staying at three hotels during the holiday: Devin for three nights, Bansko for three nights and Rila for one night. Exact hotels used will depend on the final group size. All rooms have en-suite facilities with bath and/or shower. Meals provided during the stay will have an emphasis on local cuisine. Lunches will be a mixture of picnics and café/restaurants. Requests for special diets can be accommodated.

Transport will be by small bus or smaller 'people carrier'-type vehicles if necessary.

Weather

The weather should be spring like, between 10 and 20 degrees. We hope for dry weather, but rain, wind or cold weather and even snow are always a possibility at this time of year.



Leaders

Our leader for this trip is **Mike Symes**. Mike is an excellent all round naturalist and professional ecologist who has worked for Devon Wildlife Trust for more than 10 years. He is an experienced Wildlife Travel leader, who has led more than 20 of our holidays in recent years from his home county of Devon, to Tanzania. Our local guides are from **Neophron** who have guided our previous trips and we are very pleased to be travelling with them again.

Group Travel

The group flight is with Easyjet from London Gatwick.

24th June depart London Gatwick 07.20, arrive Sofia 12.25
1st July depart Sofia 13.20, arrive London Gatwick 14.45

Bulgaria is two hours ahead of the UK.

Passport and Entry Requirements

Your passport must be issued less than 10 years before the date you enter the country and valid for at least 3 months after the day you plan to leave.

If you hold a British passport, you are able to travel to the Schengen area (including Estonia) for up to 90 days in total in any 180-day period without a visa.

From 'mid 2025' (exact date yet to be confirmed), UK passport holders will need to apply for the ETIAS European Travel Authorisation to visit Schengen countries. This must be applied for online prior to travel. Once granted, your ETIAS will be valid for 3 years.

For up-to-date information, check www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/bulgaria

TO BOOK

Contact us to check availability and reserve a place. Complete the Booking Form and send to Sunvil Holidays (CAA-ATOL Licence 808, ABTA V6218), our tour operator, with your deposit. All details about booking are given in the Booking Pack.

DEPOSIT £650 PER PERSON, BALANCE DUE BY 25/03/2025 SEE GENERAL INFORMATION LEAFLET ON HOW TO BOOK

INCLUDED: Return flight to Sofia from Gatwick. Local transport as specified in itinerary, including entry fees. Seven nights' accommodation, all meals (lunch day 1 to breakfast day 8). Services of leaders.

NOT INCLUDED: Refreshments. Gratuities. Insurance. Entry to optional tourist sites. Covid tests and associated costs.

WILDLIFE TRAVEL

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Photos: front (clockwise from top): Rila Monastery, Eastern Large Heath, Rhodopean Lily *Lilium rhodopeum*, Balkan Copper, Red-backed Shrike. **Page 2** (from left): Tufted Marbled Skipper, Black Vanilla Orchid *Gymnadenia rzelicani*, Souslik. **Page 3** (from left): Scarce Copper, Bulgarian Columbine *Aquilegia aurea*, Pirin scenery.

A trip report from our 2019 holiday to the mountains of Bulgaria can be found on our website.