

FIELD REPORT BIRDING IN ANCIENT BULGARIA MAY 3–19, 2025

Leaders: Mark Brazil & Mayumi Brazil, with local leader Minko Madzharov

Day 1. Sunday, May 4, 2025. Sofia Area.

Our Birding in Ancient Bulgaria tour began with an extra, optional morning of birding, as all of us had arrived safely on 3 May. We met our local guide Minko Madzharov this morning and set off with him as our driver guide at 09:00, after breakfast. For our trip we had a Ford Transit van with three rows of seats and plenty of luggage space. We spent the morning in the area of Aldomirovsko Marsh northwest of Sofia. This dried out marshy area was very productive despite the reed bed being partly burnt. We also watched the fields, hedgerows, and the low bush-covered hillsides nearby. There we encountered the first of many White Storks for the trip and found an amazing nine species of raptors including good views of several Montagu's Harrier, Western Marsh Harrier, Short-toed Eagle, and even Red-footed Falcon. We became acquainted with several species that were to become familiar daily seen or heard birds of the entire trip: Common Woodpigeon, Common Cuckoo,



Bob, Mary Lou, Art, Minko & Mayumi in Sofia © Mark Brazil

Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo* was our first tautonym of the trip), Barn Swallow, and Western House Martin.

After a local lunch at the Green World Restaurant (where we

encountered our first European Goldfinch) we drove back to our hotel in Sofia.



Western Marsh Harrier © Art Cimento

After a relaxing post-lunch break, we set off in the late afternoon for the official start of our tour. We took a short walking tour of downtown Sofia, seeing the classical architecture, passing the cathedral and various government buildings, and viewing some of the underground remains of the Roman city Serdika, discovered when the city's subway system was being built. We also added Alpine and Common swifts to our avian list, along with Common Starling and Eurasian Blackbird. Our afternoon's excursion ended with our welcome dinner consisting of traditional Bulgarian dishes at a characterful downtown restaurant (Pod Lipite) after which we returned to our hotel.

Distance covered today: 111 km (69 mi)
Overnight at Hotel Jasmin, Sofia.

Day 2. Monday, May 5, 2025. Vitosha Mountains then the National Museum of History, Sofia.

After breakfast we left our hotel at 08:30 to drive up into the Vitosha Mountains to spend the morning hiking trails near the ski resort there. At our first stop we encountered Eurasian Jay, Willow Tit, Common Chiffchaff, Long-tailed Tit, and had rewarding views of the delightful



and diminutive Common Firecrest. At our next stop we found several Pallid Swifts, had excellent views of several Spotted Nutcrackers, heard Eurasian Wren singing (it was to remain one of the few "heard-only" birds of the trip), and watched several distinctive Ring Ouzels. We also added European Robin, Black Redstart, Dunnock, Common Chaffinch, Common Crossbill, and Yellowhammer to our growing list.



Ring Ouzel © Art Cimento

Thracian Treasure in the National Museum of History © Mark Brazil

After lunch at the ski chalet, we drove down into Sofia and spent a very enjoyable and educational hour and a half with curator Rositsa Ivanova of the National Museum of History, who showed us the highlights of this imposing museum and gave us an overview of 8,000 years of Bulgaria's history throughout its impressive archaeological finds. We also encountered our first Mistle Thrush and Song Thrush of the trip in the grounds here before returning to our accommodation to freshen up before dinner.

Distance covered today: 74 km (69 mi)

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Jasmin, Sofia.

Day 3. Tuesday, May 6, 2025. From Sofia to Yagodina in the Western Rhodope Mountains.



White Stork on nest in Stamboliyski
© Art Cimento

After breakfast we loaded up our van and set off eastwards with Minko at the wheel. Much of the journey at first was along the highway with views of the lush green countryside, scattered apple trees in blossom, and the snow-capped Rilla Mountains to the south. Along the way we became acquainted with the common crow of Bulgaria — Hooded Crow, and saw Common Kestrel and several hirundines. After leaving the highway and heading southwards towards the mountains, we paused in Stamboliyski village to admire an enormous White Stork nest atop a church steeple. The old, multi-tiered nest had completely overwhelmed and hidden the church

cross! In the basement of the nest was a colony of busily chattering House Sparrows and Spanish Sparrows. This combination of storks and sparrows was to become a familiar feature of our trip. Another roadside stop gave us good views of Red-backed Shrike (Bulgaria's commonest shrike species), several

European Red-rumped Swallows, and a remarkably lucky sighting of a



Balkan specialty—in the form of Semicollared Flycatcher. Mixed forest further on gave us more views of Common Firecrest, excellent views of Crested Tit, another Ring Ousel, and more Common Crossbills. The final part of our journey was through the spectacular Buynovo Gorge, where we found our first White-throated Dipper and Common Raven.



View of Yagodina Village © Mark Brazil

Yagodina is a pleasant and peaceful village, and our hotel was right in the middle of the village with easy access to several quiet roads and tracks. After checking in we set off to wander in the village. There we found familiar swifts, crows, and hirundines, found a Great Tit nesting in the letterbox of the building next to our hotel, and found our first Whinchat, European Serin, and Eurasian Siskin. Although this had been partly a travel day, we had seen impressive scenery and found many species along the way, and were continuing to get to know each other

and our local guide Minko and his impressive knowledge of his country's birds, geography, culture, and history.

Distance covered today: 262 km (163 mi)
Dinner and overnight at Hotel Yagodina, Yagodina.

Day 4. Wednesday, May 7, 2025. Trigrad Gorge and Area.

Our pre-breakfast morning walk was delightful. The morning was calm and cool, and the chorus of birds singing around the village was impressive. Roe Deer were giving their long barking calls from the hillsides around us, and a distant fox called. Our surprise this morning was to hear and see a pair of European Bee-eaters passing over the valley. We had good views of Red-backed Shrike and saw and heard a host of other species. Our main target today was to visit the Trigrad Gorge, there to focus on one bird in particular—Wallcreeper. Needless to say, there were other birds too, and at our first spot we soon encountered good numbers of Alpine Swift and Pallid Swift hurtling and screaming overhead. A Gray-headed Woodpecker called, a Black Woodpecker flashed



White-throated Dipper © Art Cimento

past, there were also Common Kestrel, Common Raven, our first Eurasian Crag Martin, several White-throated Dippers, and, after much exercise for our patient muscles, good views of three Wallcreepers. The steep walls of the gorge, the home of this extraordinary species, make for tricky viewing conditions, but after several views of them in

Trigrad Gorge © Mark Brazil

flight when they showed off their bright red butterfly-like wings, we eventually caught them in the telescope and watched them as they foraged on the cliffs above us.

The very same gorge is the location of the famed Devil's Throat cave renowned in mythology as the entrance to Hades, where mythical musician Orpheus attempted to bring back his beloved Eurydice from the realm of the dead. Being so close, we could hardly pass up the opportunity to view the cave's entrance (now the exit from a tunnelled commercial walkway through part of the mountain), so we walked up the road and down to the gorge to see the impressive rush of water boring its way down into the mountain. We ate lunch at nearby Bistro Zhareloto. Then, as the weather was worsening, we set off for another nearby valley (Srednera) in search of birds and mammals. Heavy rain and hail there made the driving difficult and the birds

elusive, but more White-throated Dippers were on offer, and Mary Lou spotted a fine male Red-footed Falcon for us before we turned back to Yagodina. By the time we arrived, the weather had brightened up sufficiently for us to be tempted out on a late afternoon walk, which proved very worthwhile, with good views of Great Spotted Woodpecker, Red-backed Shrike, Coal Tit, and another Balkan specialty in the form of Sombre Tit.

Distance covered today: 75 km (47 mi)

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Yagodina, Yagodina.

Day 5. Thursday, May 8, 2025. Yagodina to Madzharovo via Perperikon.

Our pre-breakfast birding walk today gave us many now familiar species such as Red-backed Shrike, Song Thrush, Eurasian Blackbird, and European Robin, along with Eurasian Green Woodpecker, Lesser Whitethroat, and European Serin. After breakfast, we said our farewells at the hotel, loaded up the van, and set off for Madzharovo. We made a brief detour back through the impressive local gorge just below Yagodina, then up into the Trigrad Gorge for a successful hunt for Chamois, another White-throated Dipper, several Gray Wagtail, and Eurasian Crag Martin.



Not our real transport! © Mark Brazil



Black Stork © Art Cimento

Once back on track, our morning's drive took us through delightful rural scenery, with a brief stop at historical Shiroka Laka village, another stop beside the Arda River where we found Black Stork, then at one of the many countryside roadside gazebos for our picnic lunch, with Eurasian Golden Oriole calling to us from the trees around. Our stop at the ancient hilltop Thracian site of Perperikon gave us an opportunity to stretch our legs, admire the ancient settlement and fortification, and to see our first Eastern Black-eared Wheatear!



almost every stop of the journey. White Storks were particularly numerous, and in addition to the now familiar Red-backed Shrike we began to encounter Woodchat Shrike

and Lesser Gray Shrike, and saw our first

roadside Crested Lark.

Perperikon © Mark Brazil

Eastern Black-eared Wheatear © Art Cimento

Madzharovo.

At the cliffs near Haskovo we saw our first vultures, Egyptian and European Griffon, along with Short-toed Eagle and Eastern Subalpine Warbler, before completing our journey to our hotel in

After another delicious dinner, at our hotel, we strolled around town listening to Common Nightingale singing and Eurasian Scops-Owl calling. After some hunting we eventually achieved excellent views of three of the approximately eight owls that we had heard, and we returned highly satisfied from our evening excursion and ready for a good night's rest.

Distance covered today: 222 km (138 mi)

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Wolf, Madzharovo.

Day 6. Friday, May 9, 2025. The Madzharovo Area, Eastern Rhodope Mountains.

Our pre-breakfast walk this morning gave us sightings of a wide range of species, from Griffon Vulture soaring overhead to calling Common Cuckoo. We were greeted by a dawn chorus of cuckoos,



Eurasian Scops-Owl © Art Cimento

Warbler (a Balkan specialty), Eastern Orphean Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, and Eastern Subalpine Warbler. Further on, in the Dolna Kula Valley, we heard Chukar calling from the arid slopes above us, had wonderful views of European Roller, Lesser Gray Shrike, and even a Barred Warbler! On our way back we had encounters with Spotted Flycatcher and Black-headed Bunting, Minko caught a Ratsnake, and we stopped to look at some beautiful Horned Woodcock Orchids.

With the weather closing in, we opted to go through our checklist before dinner and decided that given our successes with owls last night we would take a break this evening.

nightingales, orioles, hirundines, and doves in the calm and quiet settlement that was once the hub of a thriving mining industry. European Bee-eater, Eurasian Golden Oriole, and Red-backed Shrike were daily delights, and we finally had glimpses of one or more of the many Common Nightingales singing in the town.

After breakfast we set off on our explorations of the area, stopping at the Ardha River Bridge for Black Stork, Egyptian and Griffon vultures, Booted Eagle, Black Kite, and Peregrine Falcon. At another of our stops we encountered Lesser Spotted Eagle, European Bee-eater, Woodchat Shrike, and our first Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. The Studen Kladenets Area, our main target for the day, gave us Black Stork, Egyptian Vulture, Griffon Vulture and our first Cinereous (Black) Vulture, several Short-toed Eagles and Black Kite, along with our daily tautonym — Common Buzzard. Orioles and shrikes were common, and we were fortunate with sightings of many warblers including: Olive-tree



Barred Warbler © Art Cimento

Distance covered today: 164 km (102 mi)
Dinner and overnight at Hotel Wolf, Madzharovo.

Day 7. Saturday May 10 2025.

Madzharovo to Svilengrad. As it was raining this morning, we opted not to walk around the village again and instead set off immediately after breakfast at 09:00. As light rain and mist continued in the area of Madzharovo, we visited covered sites including a gazebo and a visitor centre overlooking the river and managed to see our first Little Ringed Plover and Cirl Bunting. From the visitor centre we watched several Black Storks, saw our first Eurasian Blue Tit, and found Eastern Orphean Warbler and our first Short-toed Treecreeper. In spite of the poor weather, near the Ardha River we found Great White Egret, White-tailed Eagle, European Red-rumped Swallow, our first Rock Bunting, and several more Cirl Bunting. Lunch at the visitor centre was a heartening local hotpot dish, which helped warm us in readiness for the afternoon's birding. Our first stop was at the 'stone table' viewpoint overlooking the dramatic curve in the

Eastern Orphean Warbler © Art Cimento

Ardha River. There we had successes with 2 Cinereous Vultures, 15 Griffon Vultures, a Peregrine Falcon, our only Blue Rock-Thrush for the trip, another Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, another Rock Bunting, and an Ortolan Bunting.



European Bee-eater © Art Cimento

A brief stop in Borslavtsi Village to look at a Little Owl became an unexpected one-hour birding session, which provided us with views of Garganey, Ferruginous Duck, Eurasian Spoonbill, our first Great White and Dalmatian pelicans, European Honey Buzzard, Lesser Spotted Eagle, and a tree filled with European Bee-eaters, as well as the ever-present Corn Bunting, among others.

Our key destination for the afternoon was a conservation

centre in Levka Village. There we learned all about the tremendous and successful efforts being made to breed and reintroduce the Lesser Kestrel to Bulgaria. In addition to a great

Lesser Kestrels and also found a Red-footed Falcon, a



meeting with the local specialist at the visitor centre, we were able to see via live-feed cameras, birds on eggs in their nest boxes, while outside we saw no fewer than 20

Little Owl © Art Cimento

Lesser Spotted Eagle, and a Booted Eagle!

Lesser Kestrel © Art Cimento

Afterwards, a walk in Levka village itself gave us views of Syrian Woodpecker, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Hobby, and great views of another Balkan specialty in the form of Masked Shrike. This

delightful bird was a major target of our trip. We also found another Eastern Olivaceous Warbler.

Once we had reached the town of Svilengrad and checked in at our hotel, we walked through the park to a local restaurant for dinner.

Distance covered today: 95 km (59 mi)

Overnight at Hotel Parish, Svilengrad.

Day 8. Sunday, May 11, 2025. Svilengrad to Sozopol.

As our hotel could serve an early breakfast, we took advantage of it and were packed and ready to go by 08:00. A brief stop at Levka Reservoir gave us our first Ruddy Shelduck, Black Tern, and Squacco Heron, making it well worthwhile.



Black-headed Bunting © Art Cimento

Our next target was to look for eagles. A track near Doganovo Village proved very successful, and we found and watched repeatedly a magnificent Imperial Eagle as it hunted across the rolling hills for European Souslik (European Ground Squirrel), a much better view than of the roadside bird we had found earlier in the morning. Three Lesser Spotted Eagles, Montagu's Harrier, and several Common and Long-legged buzzards were also in the area, along with hoopoes, bee-eaters, shrikes, hirundines, and our first Isabelline Wheatear. Several Black-headed Buntings and Corn Buntings were also in the area, along with a Cirl Bunting, and, of course, several nightingales were singing!

Our picnic lunch at Strandzha Nature Park not only gave us a well-deserved break, and food, but also some exciting birding! A pair of Common Redstarts were the main stars—at least at first, but then we also found Middle Spotted Woodpecker and saw a Short-toed Treecreeper and a flock of Great White Pelicans flying overhead on migration—not bad for a lunch stop!

We continued onwards, closer to the Black Sea coast, and reached the Burgas Lakes area, in particular the Poda Visitor Centre run by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds. We spent the remainder of the afternoon there with flocks of wild Mute Swans, several Ferruginous Ducks, Black-winged Stilt, and various other shorebirds, as well as several species of tern, large numbers of both Pygmy and Great

Common Redstart © Art Cimento

cormorants, several Western Marsh Harriers, and a Red-footed Falcon. The reed beds were noisy with the
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ratchety songs of Great Reed Warbler, and, amazingly, a typically very secretive Cetti's Warbler showed itself very well indeed.

After a delightful afternoon of birding, we continued southwards and reached our hotel overlooking the old town of Sozopol and the coast of the Black Sea.

Distance covered today: 225 km (140 mi)

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Kalithea, Sozopol.

Day 9. Monday, May 12, 2025. Burgas Area.



Eurasian Penduline Tit © Art Cimento

For our pre-breakfast birding we headed south to the Alepu Marsh area. There the dawn chorus of familiar species was well under way in the woods around the marsh, but the star bird was actually in the reed beds — a fine male Eurasian Penduline Tit! Western Yellow Wagtails (of the Black-headed subspecies) were common, and we also recorded Whinchat and another Black-headed Bunting for good measure.

After breakfast we explored the Burgas Lakes area, starting at Vaya Lake and continuing to Mandrensko Lake. Here Black-headed Gull and Mediterranean Gull joined the more widespread Yellow-legged Gull, and we encountered our first flock of Greater Flamingos — once a rarity here, but now quite common in Black Sea Bulgaria.

Great Crested Grebe and Squacco Heron have now become familiar for us, and we had more views of Lesser Spotted Eagle and Middle Spotted Woodpecker. At wet fields inland we found a scattered flock of Northern Lapwings, a foraging flock of Gull-billed Terns, a European Roller, and several Northern Wheatears.

Our picnic lunch today was beside the salt museum, at Pomorie salt pans, where gusty winds made viewing (and eating) a little tricky, but with perseverance we ate and viewed a flock of Black-winged Stilts, a colony of Pied Avocets, and a mixed flock of Little Tern, Common Tern, and Sandwich Tern.

In the afternoon we explored agricultural areas and the Kableskovo Forest where European Turtle Doves were purring, and both Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Eurasian Green Woodpecker gave us grand views. A Spotted Flycatcher was a bonus, while Hawfinch revealed themselves with explosive calls and brief flight views. At Atanasovsko Lake a Gadwall and a Eurasian Oystercatcher joined the stilts and avocets, with about 2,000 Greater Flamingos busily



Greater Flamingo © Art Cimento

foraging as the backdrop. A pair of Spotted Redshanks flew past quickly, along with several Common Terns. At a small marshy area, we found a flock of Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints, but surmised that the high water levels caused by recent rains had pushed shorebird migrants further north beyond Bulgaria's border.

After another very productive birding day we drove back south towards Sozopol, passing the odd "Upside-down House" on the way.

Distance covered today: 210 km (130 mi)

Dinner and overnight at Hotel Kalithea, Sozopol.

Day 10. Tuesday, May 13, 2025. Sozopol to Kavarna.

This morning's pre-breakfast birding was to Arkutino Marsh a few minutes south of Sozopol. There we tallied 34 species, which included hearing a Water Rail, good views of a Black-crowned Night Heron, and telescope views of our second Semicollared Flycatcher for the trip!

After breakfast we packed up and set off northwards up the coast passing the Burgas lakes on our way. Our first visit was a brief cultural one—into a Thracian Tumulus. This surprisingly well-preserved and maintained mound contained a columnar core which flared out to support the domed ceiling above us. Just outside the mound we spotted a Booted Eagle, a Eurasian Jay, and a European Goldfinch.



Pomorie Thracian Tumulus © Mark Brazil

Continuing northwards we visited Goritsa Oak Forest, our planned lunch picnic spot, but given the intermittent rain of the morning and with further rain

threatening, we limited ourselves to the birds, then went off to a local restaurant (Pancho's Inn) for a very welcome local lunch. In Goritsa Forest we found a European Honey Buzzard, another Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreeper, and a Spotted Flycatcher.



Golden Figure, Varna Archaeological Museum © Mark Brazil

Our continuing northwards journey took us through central Varna, where we stopped for an hour at the impressive Varna Archaeological Museum. The imposing building, constructed in the late 1890s, was initially a girls' school, then a school, and now it houses a superb collection of artifacts excavated from the region, including an extraordinary gold horde found with human remains at a lavish burial site. With exhibits from the Thracian and Roman eras, along with more modern periods, our hour in the museum flew by, during which we perfectly dodged a downpour of rain! Next, at Baltata Forest we encountered Middle Spotted, Gray-headed, and Eurasian Green woodpeckers, along with Eurasian Blue Tit, Great Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Spotted Flycatcher, and European Robin, all of which made for a very pleasant forest walk.

With the afternoon rushing away, we made only one more brief stop, at the Balchik–Topola Cliffs, where our star bird was a roosting Eagle Owl, clearly visible in the telescope perching in a tree against the rock cliff.

Vying for our attention at the same time were Western Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard, and a surprisingly showy singing Icterine Warbler.

Soon afterwards we reached our accommodation in Kavarna and were given a warm welcome by Kosta and his son Georgi to their friendly guest house. An excellent local dinner was accompanied by an opportunity to taste the local Rakia, which was guaranteed to give a warm glow!

Distance covered today: 261 km (162 mi)
Dinner and overnight at "Our Home" guest house, Kavarna.

Day 11. Wednesday, May 14, 2025. Kavarna Area.

Around "Our Home" this morning we found some of the now familiar species of Bulgaria: Common Swift, European Bee-eater, Eurasian Golden Eagle, Common Nightingale, Black Redstart, and European Goldfinch, all helping us to feel even more at home.



Calandra Lark © Art Cimento

After breakfast we visited local areas, patches really, of the remaining Pontic Steppe habitat that cling in little stretches on the limestone close to the coast. At our first, lengthy stop we found Eurasian Hobby and Long-legged Buzzard and discovered that we were walking through a lark paradise. Woodlark, Crested Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark, and the impressively large Calandra Lark were all singing around us, and the Calandra Larks were showing off their dark underwings in their very distinctive aerial display flights. Both Northern and Isabelline wheatears joined the party, as did Tawny Pipit and our first Common Linnet. The short grass vegetation and the beautifully colorful wildflowers against occasional open patches of limestone bedrock made for a very different environmental scene, in complete contrast to the starkly architectural white wind turbines standing in ranks along the coast. We spent the remainder of the morning at Cape Kaliakra where we found our first Black-necked Grebe on the sea, distant Yelkouan Shearwater far offshore (perhaps our only autochthonym of the trip), and European Shag on the rocky coast,

as well as several migrant Willow Warblers and several flashy Pied Wheatears on territory.

Today we returned to "Our Home" for a picnic lunch under cover, before heading a little further north to visit the Sveti Nikolai Village area and steppes and the wet fields and wetlands at Shabla Tuzla lake. More shrikes and larks, along with many common birds, kept us busy, with Tawny Pipit, a trio of Rose-colored Starlings among several 100 Common Starlings, Lesser Gray Shrike, and Black-headed Bunting all being of star quality, yet the rarest bird we saw, and the rarest of the trip, was a single Laughing Dove. An immigrant pair have settled at one location in eastern Bulgaria, and today we were lucky to spot one as we were traveling through the territory!

As our trip total has already exceeded Mark and Mayumi's previous trip total, new species of birds have become increasingly difficult to find, and our conversations turned to guessing which species would remain on the "reported every day" list, or whether we would add any more tautonyms (species that have the same genus and species names, such as our daily tautonym — *Buteo buteo*). We even dabbled with discussions of group nouns — a charm of goldfinches, a murder of crows, a parliament of owls, and so on.

Although we added no new birds this afternoon at the lakes, nevertheless we had a grand time with familiar beauties such as bee-eaters, golden orioles, and Lesser Gray Shrike. When we found no fewer than five Whinchats together, Art quickly stepped in with the perfect new collective noun for the situation — a Group Chat!

Distance covered today: 108 km (67 mi)

Dinner and overnight at "Our Home" guest house, Kavarna.

Day 12. Thursday, May 15, 2025. Kavarna to Vetren.

Eurasian Blackcap, Song Thrush,



Mark, Minko, Kosta & Georgi © Mayumi Brazil

Rook; and two fly-by Bearded Reedlings. Near the Durankulak Archaeological Island site we found our first Graylag Goose and heard Little Bittern calling from the reed beds.

From our lunch stop at Yannitsa, overlooking the sea, we added Ruddy Turnstone, and then thanks to its distinctive song, we later tracked down and even had views of the Common Nightingale's cousin — Thrush Nightingale — which was a very welcome surprise. An even greater surprise awaited us as we headed northwestwards through the wheat and barley fields of rural northern Bulgaria — an adult male Little Bittern flew past and landed in the middle of one of the wheat fields!



Soon we were being welcomed by Dora Dilchev at Pelican Birding Lodge, in the sleepy village of Vetren, and in warm, calm conditions the garden was a welcoming haven in which to sit, have a pre-dinner beer, a chat, and listen and watch for birds. European Honey, Common Buzzard, and Raven flew over, and a Syrian Woodpecker was nearby along with Barn Swallow, several European Red-rumped Swallows,



We said fond farewells this morning to Georgi and Kosta after a lovely experience at their home and set off northwards for sites close to the Black Sea coast, just south of the border with Romania. At Durankulak Lake we soon recorded over 50 species, which included a gathering of Ferruginous Ducks; a Garganey; Whiskered, White-winged, and Black Terns; a flock of Glossy Ibis; various raptors including Montagu's Harrier and a dozen Red-footed Falcons; our first

Montagu's Harrier © Art Cimento

Spotted Flycatcher, Common Nightingale, Hawfinch, and European Greenfinch.

European Red-rumped Swallow © Art Cimento

Dora treated us to some of her wonderful home cooking, and we enjoyed a most pleasant evening's conversation around the dinner table.

Distance covered today: 237 km (147 mi)

Dinner and overnight at Pelican Birding Lodge, Vetren.

Day 13. Friday, May 16, 2025. The Vetren Area.



Eurasian Golden Oriole © Art Cimento

An early morning walk around the village gave us a remarkable 34 species in a very small area, with plenty of European Turtle Doves, Common Cuckoo (of course), hoopoes, bee-eaters, a good view of a Eurasian Wryneck, several Eurasian Golden Orioles, Red-backed Shrike, hirundines, and a good view of a Common Nightingale.

After a delicious buffet breakfast, 38 species were on offer at the Malak

Pres
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Marsh,
including
Graylag
Goose
with
young
goslings,
and

more than 150 Whiskered Terns nest-building at their colony on water lilies on the lake. Another Little Bittern was a welcome surprise — especially as it stood in view for us at the base of a tree, pretending that it was invisible. Dalmatian Pelican, Booted Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, and Icterine Warbler were also on the extensive menu.



Graylag Goose © Mark Brazil

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Eurasian Penduline Tit; Middle Spotted, Great Spotted, and Gray-headed woodpeckers; and plenty of Great Reed Warblers.

Dora delighted us again with her local dishes and apricot Rakia to help wash it down!

Distance covered today: 107 km (66 mi)

Dinner and overnight at Pelican Birding Lodge, Vetren.

Day 14. May 17, 2025. Dobrotitsa, Popina, Sveshtari.

Despite morning showers, our day began well with a Common Nightingale singing in full view just across the road from our lodge! Our first visit today was to a small area of steppe-like grassland at Dobrotitsa, and there too we had amazing luck with great telescope views of Little Owl, European Roller, Red-backed and



Lesser Grey Shrike © Art Cimento

Lesser Gray shrikes, Crested Lark, Western Yellow Wagtail, and Black-headed Bunting. The real star of the show, though, was completely unexpected and in a very special way became the star bird of the trip. With much talk of tautonyms and possible new birds for the trip being extremely limited and unlikely, I don't think any of us expected to add to our trip total, which was already over 200 species.

Amazingly, a rasping call led to a brief but very exciting encounter with a Corncrake, an extremely secretive summer visitor to Europe. Not only was it an exciting new species for our list, but it was to be our very last addition, and it was also a tautonym (*Crex crex*) bringing our tautonym total to a very special 22, which is not merely a nice even number but also a repdigit!

Very excited by our sighting of the elusive Corncrake, we next visited the Danube River at Popina. There we found Pied Avocet and Eurasian Oystercatcher along with Yellow-legged Gull, Little Tern, Whiskered Tern, Black Tern, White-winged Tern, Dalmatian Pelican, Booted Eagle, and Great Spotted, Lesser Spotted, and Gray-headed woodpeckers — not bad for a lunch stop! We ate lunch today at the Danube Pearl restaurant, just a stone's throw from the bank of the great river.

For our afternoon excursion we drove deeper into the countryside, to Sveshtari. There we took a guided walk into a very special Thracian burial mound. The whole site has been excavated, preserved in an air-conditioned dome and recovered with soil and vegetation. Most impressive was to see remnants of the original color decorations inside the tomb, still vibrant after thousands of years.



An elusive Corncrake, hiding in the stonework of Iona Abbey, Scotland
© Mark Brazil

Distance covered today: 192 km (119 mi)

Dinner and overnight at Pelican Birding Lodge, Vetren.

Day 15. May 18, 2025. Vetren to Sofia.

Before breakfast this morning we went on a circular walk around Vetren village for our very final dedicated birding of the trip. Although sunny, it was cool at first, but it warmed up quickly and became comfortable, tempting many birds to sing. The Common Nightingale was visible on its perch and viewed through the telescope again. A Eurasian Wryneck popped up and was also seen through the scope, then we found two more during our walk. Syrian Woodpecker, Red-backed Shrike, European Red-rumped Swallow, Eurasian Blackcap, Song Thrush, Eurasian Blackbird, Black Redstart, and European Goldfinch, as well as several others, showed themselves or sang to us as if in farewell and as a reminder of what fun we have had while ***Birding in Ancient Bulgaria.***

After a final delicious breakfast buffet prepared for us by Dora, we had to pack and say fond farewells and set off from Vetren. During the day we crossed Bulgaria by road from northeast to southwest, making stops along the way for input and output, before arriving back in Sofia in the late afternoon.

At dinner this evening we reminisced about our very enjoyable birding in a country that is barely on the radar of most international travelers, let alone birders. It was a great opportunity to be reminded about the many places we have visited and the many delightful birds that we have seen, all in the company of a safe driver, and excellent, encyclopaedic birding guide — Minko!

A special thank you to Art Cimento for taking and contributing so many great photos and making them available to the group.



Common Nightingale © Art Cimento

Thank you all for joining us. We hope that if you have enjoyed the trip, you will spread the word to your friends — I aim to run the trip again in May 2027.

Distance covered today: 430 km (267 mi)

Farewell dinner and overnight at Hotel Jasmin, Sofia.

Final group total: 205
species Heard only: 4 species
Total tautonyms: 22 species

The eBird trip Report can be found here: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/360615>