

Wintering Birds of the Balkans

Bulgaria is situated in south-eastern Europe. The country borders Romania to the north where the River Danube forms a natural boundary. The Danube rarely freezes in winter and is therefore an important area for wintering geese.

Agriculture is still undeveloped in places. It is in these areas that large numbers of geese over-winter after being forced south by poor weather. Recent tours have produced huge numbers of the internationally-threatened Red-breasted Goose with one visit producing in excess of 30,000 birds. The mild climate of the Black Sea coast is also important for swans, ducks, shorebirds, gulls and raptors.

Day 1: Fly to Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. If time allows we visit Vitosha Mountain. Species of interest using the coniferous forest in winter include Spotted Nutcracker, Common Crossbill, Goldcrest and if we are fortunate Three-toed Woodpecker. Short transfer to a hotel located at the foot of Vitosha Mountain.

Day 2: Transfer to Pomorie, a section of the Burgas lake complex including Mandra and Vaya, and a series of active saltpans which attract Caspian, Mediterranean, Little and Slender-billed Gulls. Great Black-headed Gulls are occasionally observed during the late winter months. The lake itself has Pygmy Cormorant and a selection of wildfowl. Depending on the severity of the winter, we may find Whooper and Bewick's Swans. Vaya and Mandra lakes are situated in the Burgas district. Lake Vaya is a brackish to freshwater lake connected to the Black Sea by a canal with a sluice. The lake has stands of reeds on three sides which attract Eurasian Bittern, Eurasian Penduline Tit and Bearded Reedling. Open areas of water have Dalmatian Pelicans. Ducks present include Greater Scaup and White-headed Duck. Lake Mandra is a brackish coastal lake attracting Greater White-fronted Geese, Red-breasted Merganser and Smew.

Day 3: Today we visit several areas around the coastal port of Burgas. Our first stop at an old quarry may provide us with wintering Ruddy Shelducks. The rest of the day is spent driving on roads either with open

Dates

TOUR A: Saturday February 12th – Saturday February 19th 2022

TOUR B: Saturday February 11th – Saturday February 18th 2023

Leader: Simon McLaughlin and local guides

Group size: 7

Birds: 90–110

fields or through beech woodland looking for Northern Goshawk, woodpeckers, Sombre Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch and Eurasian Treecreeper. Large flocks of European Starlings are often pursued by Peregrine Falcons. Along the coast we may find Black-necked Grebe, Black-throated Diver and large rafts of Eurasian Coots. Even during the harsh winter months the large saltpans of Burgas attract Pied Avocet, Eurasian Curlew and Northern Pintail. The pans also hold substantial numbers of Dalmatian Pelicans and occasionally wintering Great White Pelican.

Day 4: Today we leave Burgas and travel north to Kavarna for a three-night stay. Our journey takes us along the Black Sea coast. From the coastal plain north of Burgas we climb slowly through oak and beech woods to a small taverna situated in woods around Goritsa. We stop at Goritsa to look for Black, Grey-headed, Great Spotted, Middle Spotted and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers. Other woodland



Dalmatian Pelicans

Photo:
Pandion

species include Hawfinch, Eurasian Bullfinch, Brambling and Eurasian Siskin. Villages in the vicinity of Goritsa have the rather localised Syrian Woodpecker. We also check a traditional site for Eurasian Eagle Owl which are actively calling in late winter. Further north we reach Kavarna, a town adjacent to high cliffs and the cool Black Sea.

Days 5-7: Lake Shabla is situated near the border with Romania adjacent to the Black Sea. Offshore, birds include Black-throated and Red-throated Divers, Black-necked Grebe, Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser and Greater Scaup. The lake is important for Red-breasted and Greater White-fronted Geese which are usually present in their thousands. In amongst the 'common' two goose species we search for Taiga and Tundra Bean Geese, Greylag Goose and if we are fortunate Lesser White-fronted Goose. Birds of prey include Hen Harrier and Rough-legged Buzzard. Cape Kaliakra, a steppe-like grassland with adjacent cliffs, juts out into the Black Sea. Passerines are few in winter but we should find Calandra Larks and, in the gorge itself, Eurasian Eagle Owl. Offshore we have a chance of European Shag. Lake Durankulak, a brackish to freshwater coastal lagoon, will be our destination one day. There are a few reedbeds which hold Eurasian Bittern, Western Marsh Harrier and occasionally Moustached Warbler. Before reaching Durankulak we will check

fields for Red-breasted Geese. Depending on numbers of wildfowl present, we may also locate reasonable numbers of White-tailed Eagles and perhaps a hunting Northern Goshawk. We may find parties of Bohemian Waxwings and Great Grey Shrikes. Fields may have hunting Rough-legged Buzzards and, if it is mild, Short-eared Owls.

Day 8: Transfer to Varna, birding along the road, and then an internal flight back to Sofia for onward connections to London where the tour concludes.

Prices

Ground Price: £1455
Tour B: £1595 (provisional)
Single room: £90
Deposit: £150
*Air Fare:£515

This holiday is fully inclusive of flights, accommodation, meals, transport, permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

Not included: drinks, insurance, items of a personal nature.

* Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights.