

Holiday Highlights
Bulgaria
27 May – 4 June 2012

Guides: Mark Denman and Attila Steiner

Guests: Dawn Chambers, Keith Stedman, Steve & Connie Satterthwaite and Gordon Stuttard

Day 1: After an extremely early start at Gatwick we're away bang on time, leaving a nice sunny London and arriving in a very soggy Sofia! The smiling face of Attila is there to meet us, and van packed we're soon on our way out of the city towards the historic town of Tryavna in the heart of the Central Balkan National Park. Our first impromptu stop is for a splendid Long-legged Buzzard that is perched right by the road. It looks fantastic in the scopes and we're amazed when it flies from the tree and lands very close in the field near us! We find singing Ortolan and Black-headed Buntings here along with Skylarks, Red-backed Shrikes and a perched Cuckoo - what a start!

On our onward journey we see more shrikes and our first Bee-eaters on wires and fence posts and enjoy our lunch in an interesting restaurant called The Tasmanian Devil! We make another stop at a scenic viewpoint, enjoying scope views of a pair of Isabelline Wheatears, more Red-backed Shrikes amidst a beautiful soundtrack of both Skylark and the sweet singing Woodlark. Connie then points out a large flock of Starlings, and there is great excitement when they turn and reveal themselves as Rose-coloured Starlings - one of the birds we are all really hoping to see. A Peregrine is then flushed from the top of a pylon by another Long-legged Buzzard and gives us great views as it flies over our heads. The rest of our journey is in very heavy rain and cloud as we make our way up to Tryavna where we check in to our hotel, enjoy our first dinner together and complete our first check list.

Day 2: It rains all night and is still raining when we go on our pre-breakfast walk. Swifts are patrolling high above us and we see both White and Grey Wagtails as we make our way to the outskirts of the town. Lesser Whitethroat and Marsh Warbler tease us from dense cover, more obliging being Jay and a nice male Great-spotted Woodpecker. A Common Redstart sings from the top of a pine and a Black Redstart delivers his rather more scratchy offering from some nearby roof tops.

It's still pouring with rain when we leave after breakfast and we see very little in the gloom as we wind our way down the narrow mountain roads aside from the odd Corn Bunting and very soggy looking White Storks. A quick scan of a big lake reveals some Sand Martins amongst the more numerous Swallows and a few nice Whiskered Terns. Over lunch at a service station Dawn points out a couple

of Crested Larks that are playing 'dare' with passing cars, and Keith and Gordon find our first Lesser Grey Shrike that is sharing some wires with a couple of Turtle Doves.

We continue our journey towards the Black Sea, pausing to admire a field full of Storks, lots of White and at least eight Black Storks, presumably non-breeding birds that are all looking rather sorry for themselves in their muddy surroundings. The weather as we approach the second city of Varna is just terrible, its as if we are driving in a river as water cascades either side of the van, but as we leave the city and start heading north up the coast there is some respite and as we have plenty of time we're all keen to get out of the van and really get stuck into some Bulgarian birding! A Roller with a snake is very entertaining and on climbing out of the van we realise that we are surrounded by birds. A little flock of Spanish Sparrows land close by and Steve finds a nice Black-headed Bunting amongst them. There are lots of Northern and Isabelline Wheatears here and Dawn finds a beautiful Golden Oriole on the ground that looks rather out of place in this lovely Steppe grassland. We get superb views of a Hobby that flies towards us and enjoy the wonderful smell of Thyme as we walk out into this very special habitat.

The ecstatic 'buzzy' song of Calandra Lark and the shorter phrases of Short-toed Lark fill the air and we get superb views of these songsters along with several Tawny Pipits. One of our main targets here starts calling then and we get super views as a Stone Curlew flies past, and we are really pleased when Attila manages to find one of these rather strange looking birds sitting motionless in the long grass. After admiring a smart Green Toad we're soon on our way again, enjoying more colourful Rollers and Bee-eaters and stopping for a male Pied Wheatear sitting on a roadside post. Dawn then finds a female Pied Wheatear and we all enjoy great views of our third Wheatear of the day!

Our next stop is at the ruins of Cape Kaliakra where more Pied Wheatear and Black-headed Buntings are waiting to greet us. Sandwich Terns call from the bay below and as we walk into the heart of the ruins Attila finds a Spotted Flycatcher and a Barred Warbler in a little scrubby patch that is just perfect for passing passerines. We also see Cormorants and Shag here along with our first Alpine Swifts, but pride of place goes to the Bee-eaters that pose for us, filling our scopes with colour.

After enjoying a coffee and the virtuoso song of Marsh Warbler back at the van we're on our way again, making a final stop for the day at Lake Shabla. A very close Nightingale remains hidden in the dense bushes and as we make our way to a viewpoint we have to watch our step as there are lots of tiny Green Toads crossing the path. Lots of Common Terns are on a raft and we see several handsome Ferruginous Ducks close by. Whiskered Terns dance over the water and we get brief views of both Squacco Heron and Little Bittern. Great Reed Warblers

deliver their deep croaky song from the reeds and oblige us by climbing up the reeds and posing brilliantly. A Little Gull is a nice find here, and from a viewing platform nearby Keith points out a Great Egret along with five Little Egrets. The Squacco Heron from earlier shows very well from the platform, but with time marching on we head for the birding lodge at Durankulak, although we can't resist stopping to admire a Little Owl sitting on a pylon.

Day 3: Some of us are up early and enjoy a little pre-breakfast birding from the balcony of the hotel. Black-headed Buntings and Corn Buntings are singing away and we're very pleased to see that the rain of the night has cleared. Four Spoonbills in flight are nice as are a couple of distant Marsh Harriers that are quartering the reed-beds.

After breakfast we head down towards the beach and reed-beds that separate Lake Durankulak and the Black Sea. We pause en route to admire a couple of Golden Orioles and an incredibly close Roller that we manage to sneak up on, though it flies before any of us have our cameras ready! A couple of smart 'Black-headed' Yellow Wagtails are very nice and we flush four Garganey from a small roadside pool also seeing Lesser Grey Shrike here. On getting out of the van the dominant sound by far is the croaky song of Great Reed Warbler, and a quick scan reveals lots of these big warblers. There are plenty of Squacco Herons on show and we're pleased to see four Pygmy Cormorants sitting in a dead tree, and all seems calm until a passing female Marsh Harrier causes mass panic and they all take to the air! Dawn finds a Great Egret and a search of the Black Sea produces a couple of Black-necked Grebes and lots of Great Crested Grebes. Attila then sees a small falcon coming in off the sea, and we're delighted when it reveals itself as a handsome Red-footed Falcon that flies right past us - great stuff! Steve finds a male Pied Wheatear and before turning our attention to the reed-beds we also see Lesser Black-backed Gull, Black Terns, another Red Footed Falcon and three Ruff.

It's a little windy this morning which will make finding Paddyfield Warbler, our main target here, rather tricky, however Little Terns are flying up and down the beach and two powerful Gull-billed Terns fly past along with four Curlew Sandpipers. Reed Warblers and Reed Buntings are singing from the reed-beds and we get several fleeting glimpses of Paddyfield Warblers although they don't want to sit still for long in the breezy conditions. There are Tawny Pipits in the dunes and Attila spots another sixteen Pygmy Cormorants flying over the sea that head our way and join the other Pygmy's in the dead tree. A Collared Pratincole flies past and we hear a distant reeling Savi's Warbler from deep in the reed-bed, with waders on the beach here including Sanderling, Ringed and Kentish Plover and a very dark Little Stint. While watching some Caspian Gulls feeding on a dead Harbour Porpoise we're thrilled when a Golden Jackal wanders into view further up the beach, a much sought after and difficult animal to see. Walking back towards the van we see some

more Gull-billed Terns and the sunshine is encouraging a few butterflies onto the wing such as Common Blue, Eastern Bath White and Eastern Knapweed Fritillary. The Pygmy Cormorants look fantastic in the sunshine and as we make our way back to the hotel for lunch we find the Curlew Sandpipers of earlier including two beautiful summer plumaged birds, Green Sandpiper and very close views of a Squacco Heron.

After lunch at the hotel Connie points out two more Red-footed Falcons, and we've only driven a few yards when a Syrian Woodpecker lands in a tree very close by. At our first stop there are lots of Falcons hunting from the wires and we get brilliant views of both Red-footed Falcon and Hobby. New butterflies here include Knapweed and Spotted Fritillary along with Mallow Skipper, Painted Lady and the mighty Cardinal. It's great to watch the Red-footed Falcons as they hunt, hovering and suddenly diving after the many insects that are here, and we hear a Little Crake calling - and sounding for all the world like a toy dog! We identify Migrant Spreadwings and Norfolk Hawkers and are just enjoying the antics of a Stonechat family when Attila picks out a distant large raptor that proves to be our first Eagle of the holiday, an adult Lesser Spotted Eagle.

We have another brief look at Lake Shabla and are pleased to see two Slender-billed Gulls with some Black-headed Gulls, along with Pochard, Little Grebe and the same assortment of Herons that we saw yesterday. A distant Roller looks oddly out of place over the reed-bed and we enjoy the beautiful Dark Spreadwings that seem to have appeared since yesterday.

Our final stop of the afternoon is at an area where we've been told has a nesting pair of Levant Sparrowhawks. We don't have any luck with the accipiters but do get fantastic views of both Marsh Warbler and Barred Warbler - you can even see the barring which really pleases Connie as it is a bird she particularly wanted to see.

After an early dinner we're off out again in search of Eagle Owl. As we approach the spectacular gorge near Cape Kaliakra a couple of Hawfinches fly from the side of the road and perch up for us in a dead tree - most considerate! After parking the van we can't help but notice the mass of Swallows and Swifts above us including Red-rumped Swallows and the superb Alpine Swifts. A Spotted Flycatcher dances down the track in front of us and a few Starlings, both Common and Rose Coloured are flying up and down the gorge. Cuckoos are very much in evidence here as are a couple of Hobbys that patrol the ridges. Amongst the chorus of Great Reed Warblers and various frogs and toads Attila picks out the mechanical reel of a River Warbler, though it sadly doesn't respond to the 'encouragement' from Attila's phone. With the light fading fast we try playing Eagle Owl and have to laugh when a Scops Owl starts calling back! It gets really quite close but fails to reveal itself and

just as we are about to give up on the 'big' Owl Attila brilliantly spots it on the ridge and we get prolonged - if nearly dark- views of this magnificent bird. A couple of Red Foxes cross our path on the way back to the hotel and we arrive back tired but very happy after our first full day of birding in this wonderful place.

Day 4: We're heading north today up the coast but want to try again before breakfast for better views of Paddyfield Warbler. We pass several Red-footed Falcons on the wires and at the little wader pool see two Black-winged Stilts, Greenshank and a pair of Ferruginous Ducks. At the reed-beds we get amazing views of a Cuckoo that is just dying to be photographed and super views of a really close Black-necked Grebe. The usual mix of Reed, Great Reed Warbler and Reed Buntings are in evidence and we finally manage scope views of Paddyfield Warbler - at the western edge of its breeding range a very good bird to see. The Pygmy Cormorants are in the same tree and we hear Savi's Warbler again before heading back to breakfast - adding Little Ringed Plover to our day list.

After breakfast, van loaded we bid Tatyana and the Branta birding lodge farewell and start on our journey north to Burgos, leaving Hoopoe, Tawny Pipit and Red-footed Falcons on the wires by the hotel! Our first stop is at a reed-bed where we've had good views of Savi's Warbler in the past and although we can hear a couple of birds reeling they don't show themselves this morning. There is plenty to see here though and we enjoy great views of Hawfinches, Hobby and a nice perched Buzzard found by Keith. New insects here include Azure and variable Bluet and a great opportunity to photograph Europe's biggest Fritillary, the impressive Cardinal.

After some fun and games with the van in the mud we have a little walk along the coast but it's rather quiet and the only birds of note are a few Rose-coloured Starlings and a nice perched Tawny Pipit. After a quick stop for fuel (and ice cream) we make our way to our lunch stop which is by a flooded river. A couple of distant Honey Buzzards float past but it's the insects that grab our attention here and we all enjoy the beautiful Large Coppers that are on the wing along with Banded Demoiselles and a Common Clubtail. Connie then comes up trumps when she finds several Freyer's Purple Emperors that we enjoy photographing and another good find here is a single Black Hairstreak.

First stop after lunch is at a little bit of woodland where we're hoping to see Semi-collared Flycatcher. New butterflies here include Ilex Hairstreak and Silver-washed Fritillary along with Pearly Heath and Mazarine Blue, and it's not long before we spot a Semi-collared Flycatcher nest and enjoy brilliant views as both parent birds come and go, doubtless making the most of the incredible numbers of caterpillars that seem to be everywhere! Other new birds here include Short-toed Treecreeper,

Nuthatch and Woodlark and we also see Great-spotted Woodpecker, Spotted Flycatcher more Hawfinches and a couple of handsome Green Lizards.

Approaching Burgos we see lots of Stilts and Avocets on the saltpans so we decide to stop and have a quick scan before dinner. There are a few Little Stints dotted around and a very distant Black-tailed Godwit but the highlight is undoubtedly when a huge squadron of White Pelicans appears in the distance and proceeds to fly right past us, settling on the saltpans just the other side of the road, a fantastic and spectacular end to the day.

Day 5: We're going to spend the day exploring some lakes and salt-pans in the Burgos area, and even before reaching our first stop have added Night Heron and Black Kite to our list! We hear the rather monotonous song of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler as we climb out at our first location and add to our butterfly list with a splendid Large Tortoiseshell. Scanning the saltpans we find nine distant Spoonbills and a couple of smart drake Garganey amongst the more common ducks. We can hear Cetti's and Olivaceous Warblers as we take a short walk along the bank as well as the plaintive calls of some nearby Penduline Tits that eventually show really well much to the delight of Steve and Connie for whom it's a new bird. We also get great views of a male Marsh Harrier that circles above us and some of us glimpse a Caspian Tern that powers its way past us. A couple of Night Herons drift past and we find some more Garganey in the company of a little group of Teal, and Keith manages to get some great photos of another Large Tortoiseshell. A final scan reveals some more waders including a nice group of Black-tailed Godwits in summer plumage and Attila brilliantly picks out a distant Marsh Sandpiper that is hiding in a group of Redshank. Steve gets another view of Penduline Tit and we get a flypast by some White Pelicans that join the Dalmatian Pelicans that are sitting on one of the causeways.

We have to make a bit of a change of plan next as the place we want to view from is closed due to road works, but a little further along the road we get our best views yet of both White and Dalmatian Pelican as they haul out on some concrete blocks. There are lots of Pochard and Gadwall here and it's lovely to watch the assembled great Crested Grebes as they perform their wonderful courtship display.

With the sun now well and truly shining our next stop at a large inland lake is dominated initially by the large number of butterflies and dragonflies that are on the wing. Beautiful Black-veined Whites are everywhere and we see our first Eastern Fescos amongst a wide variety of Fritillaries. White-tailed Skimmer and Scarlet Darters are popular amongst the photographers but our attention is back on raptors when an adult White-tailed Eagle passes overhead and we see at least fifteen Hobbys that are chasing various hirundines - great stuff! We all see a couple

of Little Grebe but only Keith, Steve and Connie manage views of a Lesser Spotted Eagle that drifts past.

Over lunch we see Woodchat Shrike, Crested Lark and get brief views of an Olivaceous Warbler that sings its rather monotonous song from deep cover, also adding Olive Skipper to our ever growing butterfly list. From a little bridge we see a distant flock of Whiskered Terns and pick out a couple of Black Terns amongst them, scope a smart Red-footed Falcon on a nearby wire and get a great opportunity to photograph some very close Spanish Sparrows that are collecting nesting material.

As the light will now be much better we decide to check the saltpans again and end up getting some of our best sightings of the day en route! First up is a splendid Long-legged Buzzard sitting in a tree, shortly followed by flypast Little Bittern, Collared Pratincole and best of all a White Stork that has caught an enormous Whip Snake! A group of nearly fifty Black-tailed Godwits look fabulous in the scopes, as do the Spoonbills and Dalmatian Pelicans that are now much closer. A couple more Night Herons fly past and we find a distant flock of Curlew Sandpipers beyond the Common Redshank, but the Marsh Sandpiper of earlier eludes us this time.

We have a coffee next to a noisy Sandwich Tern colony and watch both them, Common and Little Terns feeding close by. Dawn finds some very cute baby Avocets and Stilts and we're pleased to see some smart adult Mediterranean Gulls here. Our final port of call for the day is curtailed by mud! Discretion being the better part after our experiences of yesterday we turn back and scan the saltpans from a distance, clocking up Great and Little Egret, some distant Pelicans and a few Marsh Harriers that are quartering the reed-beds. The hoped for Ruddy Shelduck fail to appear, but we've had a great day and head back to our hotel for dinner, all excited by our journey up into the Eastern Rhodope mountains tomorrow.

Day 6: After breakfast we load up the van and set off on our journey into the mountains, but we can't resist one last scan at the local saltpans as this will be our last chance to see birds in this type of habitat. We get great views of Penduline Tit again when a bird lands in some reeds right next to us and enjoy the assortment of Godwits, Spoonbills and wildfowl that are still here along with three Dalmatian Pelicans, although a very vocal Olivaceous Warbler proves as hard to see as ever!

Driving on through a mixture of farmland and woodland we make a brief stop where we add Twinspot and Niobe Fritillary to our butterfly list and find a lovely Ortolan Bunting singing in a dead tree. Attila points out a splendid Lesser Spotted Eagle and we get great views as it cruises past, showing all the salient ID features, and we're thrilled a little further along the road when we come across four Montagu's Harriers

that are dancing above some ploughed fields, surely one of the most elegant raptors in Europe. Dawn spots another handsome Long-legged Buzzard as we drive further, and with the sun now shining we decide to stop at a river where we had some fantastic insects two years ago. There are several Common Buzzards on the wing, but our attention is soon on dragonflies when Attila points out a magnificent Odalisque, Europe's biggest damselfly. We also see White-legged Damselfly and Small Pincertail here along with a Silver Studded Blue butterfly. Gordon then comes up trumps when he spots some movement in some dense foliage and we all manage brief views of a pair of beautiful Masked Shrike that are very mobile but rather tricky to see as they skulk in the heavily leaved trees!

We have our lunch at a lovely spot with fantastic views and pick out distant Short-toed and Lesser Spotted Eagles. Woodchat Shrikes are common here and we also see several Stonechats, Heath Fritillary and hear the rattle of a singing Cirl Bunting. We are keen to get to an Imperial Eagle territory after lunch, but have to make an impromptu stop when Attila notices huge numbers of butterflies at the side of the road. There are hundreds of Small Skippers on the road along with an assortment of fritillaries and other highlights here include a lovely Black-veined Moth and a Yellow-banded Skipper. We all see another Lesser Spotted Eagle fly past but only Dawn and Connie see a small accipiter that shoots through, but they do give a very good description of Levant Sparrowhawk! At the eagle site we find another Short-toed Eagle that is hovering in the distance and enjoy the Red-rumped Swallows and Yellow Wagtails that are coming down to drink in a nearby puddle, but it's Connie again that spots our main quarry when she points out a splendid adult Imperial Eagle that is right above our heads! We manage to get the scopes on it as it drifts away slowly, seeing the lovely golden head feathers that show really well in the afternoon sunshine - what a bird!

We have a celebratory ice cream at the petrol station, even managing to see more raptors here with three Long-legged Buzzards and a female Sparrowhawk, before moving on to splendid area of boulder and scrub known as Jerusalem. With a lovely mixture of flower meadows, scrubby bushes and rocky outcrops this is a great area for all manner of things as Dawn will testify when she has an extremely close encounter with a Legless Lizard!! We hear the 'hurdy-gurdy' song of Orphean Warbler but only manage flight views as it makes its way from one bush to another, but the butterflies are a little more obliging with Clouded Yellows, fritillaries and another Yellow-banded Skipper. A couple more Lesser Spotted Eagles are nice as is the male Levant Sparrowhawk that shoots past carrying prey, while Keith spots a pale Booted Eagle that is in the company of a couple of Common Buzzards and we also pick up a couple of distant Honey Buzzards here.

The plan now is to drive to our hotel but we can't resist stopping when we see a group of Griffon Vultures that are circling above their breeding ledges. They look absolutely fantastic as they soar effortlessly above us and we soon find another Short-toed Eagle and two very smart Egyptian Vultures that although a big bird in their own right look rather small by comparison to the mighty Griffons they share the sky with. A Golden Eagle represents our fifth eagle of the day, and of a rather more modest nature, a Lesser Spotted Fritillary, our fourth new fritillary of the day! Driving a little further we see Black-eared Wheatear from the van and Dawn spots a male Blue Rock Thrush. Making a final brief stop we hear Ortolan singing above us and enjoy a Peregrine that is dashing between the vultures, all the while enjoying breathtaking views of the towering cliffs above us down to the swollen river far beneath, a great end to another brilliant day.

Day 7: The day dawns absolutely beautiful and we're all excited to be visiting a Vulture feeding station where we're hoping to see some very special visitors from nearby Greece - the mighty Black Vulture. We've got a bit of time before we meet Marin near the feeding station and pause to look at some Griffons sitting on some high ledges, also finding a Cirl Bunting singing by the side of the road. At our first stop we watch Crag Martins patrolling the cliff face above us and see several Hawfinches that are feeding nearby. Steve and Connie find a lovely male Subalpine Warbler that delivers its scratchy song and Dawn is very pleased to see a Sombre Tit, a bird she was particularly looking forward to seeing. Driving a little further a Green Woodpecker flashes in front of the van and we pause at the edge of a mighty dam, seeing song-fighting Woodlark, a nice Black-eared Wheatear and hearing the song of Bonelli's Warbler in the trees below us.

We meet Marin and follow him up the rough track where we park our van, seeing two Black Kites as we get our things ready for the short walk to the viewing area. As we walk we see a nice Short-toed Eagle and a few Griffon Vultures that are circling over the carcasses, and on reaching the hill-top from where we set up our scopes we see lots more Griffons, four Egyptian Vultures several more Black Kites and a few Ravens that are squabbling over the free meal. Attila points out a group of distant Eleonora's Falcons that perform their spectacular aerobatic display and we can't believe it when an Ortolan Bunting lands just a few feet away and starts singing to us - a really beautiful bird that would end up being Gordon's favourite bird of the week. New butterflies here include Grizzled and Hungarian Grizzled Skippers, Dusky Meadow Brown and High Brown Fritillary.

Back at the van we have some lunch that is interrupted when Attila spots a Black Vulture amongst the more numerous Griffons. Although a little elusive at first we all eventually get great views of this visitor from across the border, noting all the different features from the Griffon Vultures it shares the skies with. Driving down the

bumpy track we get brilliant views of a couple of Rollers on wires and at river nearby we scope a Bee-eater that competes with the Rollers for most colourful bird of the day! Connie finds a Little Ringed Plover on the shingle below us and we find a couple of Black Storks amongst a large kettle of White Storks, while Keith tries to photograph the Red-rumped Swallows that are flying beneath us - pride of place here has to go to Gordon though who manages to blag a beer from some locals who are sheltering under some trees!

There is a little shelter at our next stop and in the incredibly hot afternoon sun it's a most welcome place to scan from! Black Storks cruise past and we see a pair of Egyptian Vultures over a nearby ridge, but the most interesting sighting here is of an Alpine Swift colony. We can see them swooping up under an overhanging ridge, and although a little distant it's great to watch these incredibly dashing birds as they effortlessly scythe through the air. A Honey Buzzard amongst some more Griffon Vultures gives us our best views of this enigmatic raptor yet, and we have to make an unscheduled stop to rescue a Spur-thighed Tortoise from the middle of the road! We decide to drop down to a river where we think we might get some shade from the incredibly hot sun and although a little quiet bird-wise, with only Black Stork and Griffon Vulture seen we do add to our big butterfly list with Brimstone, Eastern Baton Blue and Large White.

Our final stop of the day is at a site that Marin has told us about for Rock Nuthatch and we have no trouble finding the strange cone shaped nest high on the cliff. Unfortunately nobody is home today but we do see Blue Rock Thrush along with Short-toed and Booted Eagle to bring to an end another memorable day in the mountains.

Day 8: After yesterday it's no surprise to wake to beautiful blue skies, and after breakfast we're on our way again. We're going to spend the morning in a lovely river valley close to the hotel and we stop on the way down in a little bit of Oak woodland. Noisy Nuthatches greet us on getting out of the van and we hear several Bonelli's Warblers delivering their rather unmusical rattle from deep in the woodland. A Green Woodpecker shoots past us at high speed but only Mark and Dawn see the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker that sadly doesn't linger for the rest of the group. Far more obliging though is the Middle-spotted Woodpecker that puts on a terrific show as it moves from tree to tree, and Attila points out a dainty Wood White butterfly.

Moving on we make another stop at some bushes that were brilliant for butterflies two years ago, and we're not disappointed this time! There are dozens and dozens of fritillaries here and we find Purple-shot Copper and Southern White Admiral, but pride of place has to go to the beautiful 'Valesena' form of Silver-washed Fritillary that is actually green instead of the usual orange. From the van we get good views

of both Woodlark and Sombre Tit before parking by the river and continuing on foot. Peregrine Falcons are calling and we see them along with Kestrel and Black Storks, but it's the butterflies that command our attention in this amazing place and we encounter many hundreds of Nettle Tree Butterflies that have just emerged. There are lots of Freyer's Purple Emperors as well, and amongst the Large Tortoiseshells we find two Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells - one of the rarest European butterflies! We add Tufted Marbled Skipper to the list and Attila is very pleased to find Blue Argos here again, another of Europe's scarce butterflies. Although Keith points out a nice Long-legged Buzzard the heat is seriously affecting bird sightings so, as we are really close to the hotel we decide to go back, have a cool drink and meet up again later when hopefully it will be a little cooler!

It's still very hot at 4:00pm when we set off again in search of Olive Tree Warbler and on reaching the site we see both Woodchat and Red backed Shrikes straight away. We can hear an Olive Tree Warbler delivering its croaky song nearby but despite some 'prompting' it flies away so we go for a little walk to an area that looks great for both the 'big' warbler and scanning. A Whitethroat sings to us and Gordon finds a nice male Stonechat, but the highlight here is the discovery of a couple of entrances to Tarantula nests - gently putting a long blade of grass down one you get a real shock when there is a big tug from underneath - wow! An Olive Tree Warbler starts singing again and this time most of us get good views of this big warbler as it sings back to us, although how such a bruiser can be so difficult to see is a bit of a mystery!

Our next stop is at the magnificent towering cliffs where we stopped on our first day in the mountains and we see a pair of Peregrines as soon as we start scanning. Big numbers of Alpine Swift look fantastic against the bright blue sky, their white underparts showing really well, and we also find Black-eared Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and a beautiful perched Long-legged Buzzard down near the river below. At our final stop we're hoping to see Chukar amongst other things but start off with brilliant views of a singing Ortolan Bunting and a brief Subalpine Warbler. We get our best views of three or four Eleonora's Falcons that cut a dashing picture nearby but the star bird here is the magnificent adult Golden Eagle that Keith finds just above us that we watch soar majestically down the valley - brilliant! Amazingly then Attila finds a Chukar on a ridge - amazing because it's about three miles away!! With more great views of the Eleonora's Falcons to finish we head back to the hotel for our final dinner and review of our brilliant week in Bulgaria.

Species of the trip is shared between Long-legged Buzzard, Red-footed Falcon, Roller, Golden Oriole and Ortolan Bunting. Place of the trip is dominated by our time in the mountains and magic moments range from the amazing butterflies, Monty's Harriers, incredible flower meadows and too many other moments to mention!

Special thanks to Attila for all the driving and fantastic guiding and many thanks to everyone for their boundless enthusiasm, great spotting and sense of fun - hope to see you all again very soon.

PS Attila even managed to find us some Souslik on the way to the airport!!!

BIRDS

Black-necked Grebe
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
White Pelican
Dalmatian Pelican
Great Cormorant
Shag
Pygmy Cormorant
Little Bittern
Night Heron
Squacco Heron
Little Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Spoonbill
Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Gadwall
Garganey
Teal
Shoveler
Ferruginous Duck
Pochard
Black Vulture
Griffon Vulture
Egyptian Vulture
Honey Buzzard
Black Kite
Golden Eagle
Eastern Imperial Eagle
Lesser Spotted Eagle
Booted Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
White-tailed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Long-legged Buzzard
Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Levant Sparrowhawk
Kestrel

Red-footed Falcon
Hobby
Eleonora's Falcon
Peregrine
Chukar
Little Crake (heard)
Moorhen
Coot
Avocet
Black-winged Stilt
Stone Curlew
Collared Pratincole
Lapwing
Turnstone
Little Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Curlew Sandpiper
Little Stint
Sanderling
Redshank
Greenshank
Marsh Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper
Ruff
Black-tailed Godwit
Gannet
Black-headed Gull
Mediterranean Gull
Little Gull
Slender-billed Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Caspian Gull
Caspian Tern
Little Tern
Black Tern
Whiskered Tern
Gull-billed Tern
Sandwich Tern
Common Tern
Feral Pigeon
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Cuckoo
Eagle Owl
Scops Owl
Little Owl

Tawny Owl (heard)
Barn Owl
Swift
Hoopoe
Bee-eater
Roller
Wryneck (heard)
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Middle Spotted Woodpecker
Syrian Woodpecker
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
Green Woodpecker
Calandra Lark
Skylark
Woodlark
Crested Lark
Short-toed Lark
Crag Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Sand Martin
Tawny Pipit
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Yellow Wagtail
Robin
Nightingale
Redstart
Black Redstart
Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Pied Wheatear
Pied Wheatear
Isabelline Wheatear
Stonechat
Blue Rock Thrush
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Savi's Warbler
River Warbler (heard)
Great Reed Warbler
Reed Warbler
Marsh Warbler
Paddyfield Warbler
Cetti's Warbler

Olive -tree Warbler
Olivaceous Warbler
Barred Warbler
Barred Warbler
Orphean Warbler
Blackcap
Subalpine Warbler
Whitethroat
Lesser Whitethroat
Bonelli's Warbler
Chiff-chaff
Semi-coloured Flycatcher
Spotted Flycatcher
Bearded Tit (heard)
Long-tailed Tit
Penduline Tit
Blue Tit
Sombre Tit
Great Tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper
Red-backed Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Lesser Grey Shrike
Masked Shrike
Jay
Magpie
Raven
Rook
Hooded Crow
Jackdaw
Starling
Rosy Starling
Golden Oriole
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Bullfinch
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch
Reed Bunting
Corn Bunting
Cirl Bunting
Yellowhammer
Ortolan Bunting
Black-headed Bunting

MAMMALS

Souslik
Eastern Hedgehog
Golden Jackal
Brown Hare
Red Fox
Red Squirrel
Free-tailed Bat
Pip. sp

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Balkan Green Lizard
Marsh Frog
Edible Frog
Balkan stream Frog
Large Whip Snake
Spur-thighed Tortoise
Fire-bellied Toad (heard)
Legless Lizard
Green Toad
Green Lizard

BUTTERFLIES

Hungarian Skipper
Large Skipper
Essex Skipper
Small Skipper
Tufted Marbled Skipper
Mallow Skipper
Yellow-banded Skipper
Grizzled Skipper
Olive Skipper
Eastern Festoon
Brimstone
Clouded Yellow
Black-veined White
Large White
Small White
Orange Tip
Eastern Dappled White
Eastern Bath White
Wood White
Black Hairstreak
Sloe Hairstreak
Ilex Hairstreak
Green Hairstreak
Small Copper
Large Copper
Purple shot Copper

Sooty Copper
Blue Argus
Brown Argus
Holly Blue
Mazarine Blue
Common Blue
Eastern Baton Blue
Silver-studded Blue
Nettle Tree Butterfly
Freyer's Purple Emperor
Southern White Admiral
Comma
Painted Lady
Red Admiral
Small Tortoiseshell
Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell
Large Tortoiseshell
Cardinal
Silver-washed Fritillary
Queen of Spain Fritillary
High Brown Fritillary
Niobe Fritillary
Twin-spot Fritillary
Marbled Fritillary
Glanville Fritillary
Knapweed Fritillary
Eastern Knapweed Fritillary
Lesser Spotted Fritillary
Spotted Fritillary
Heath Fritillary
Lattice Brown
Dusky Meadow Brown
Meadow Brown
Pearly Heath
Small Heath

ODONATA

Blue tailed Damselfly
Small red-eyed Damselfly
White-legged Damselfly
Blue-eyed Damselfly
Azure Bluet
Variable Bluet
Ornate Bluet
Odalisque
Dark Spreadwing
Migrant Spreadwing
Banded Demoiselle
Blue Eyed Hawker

Norfolk Hawker
White-tailed Skimmer
Black-tailed Skimmer
Scarlet Darter
Common Clubtail
Small Pincertail
Emperor Dragonfly

MOTHS

Cinnabar
Four spotted Footman
Feathered Footman
Burnet Companion
Silver Y
Yellow Shell

White Ermine
Transparent Burnet
Hummingbird Hawkmoth
Pale Shoulder
Black-veined Moth