Tour Report

Butterflies and Birds of Bulgaria

21 - 29 June 2018

Lycaena virgaureae

Arashnia levana

Crested tit

Parnassius apollo

Compiled by: Assen Ignatov
Tour Leaders: Dr Stoyan Beshkov and Assen Ignatov with 6 participants

Day 1: Fly to Sofia; transfer to Melnik

We headed out of Sofia by minibus in the early afternoon, travelling south across the city. Our plan was for our first stop on the way to be at an excellent site for butterflies next to the Iskar reservoir. The meadow was very productive: marbled whites, skippers, black-veined white, clouded yellow, map butterfly, heaths and burnet moths but not too many birds. Greenfinch, yellowhammer and mistle thrush were the only species seen here.

We had to move on as we had one or two more stops to make, the next being after heavy rain at Kresna Gorge. This was another good stop with several butterflies, including little tiger blue and balkan marbled white, as well as ant lions, lizards and some great birds, such as masked shrike, hawfinch, crag martin and the sounds of a green woodpecker.

An hour later we checked in at the Bolyarka Hotel in Melnik, leaving a little time to freshen up before dinner.

Weather: Changeable – cloudy, sunny, stormy, heavy showers, 26 degrees.

Day 2: Butterfly & birding excursions around Melnik

We started the morning with an early walk before breakfast and were rewarded with sightings of several golden orioles, cirl bunting, long-tailed tits, singing common nightingales and red-backed shrike.

After breakfast we explored the area around Melnik, the dry sandy valley near Rozhen Monastery, and the area to the north as well. We had lunch in the hotel, as it was very hot and sunny to eat outdoors.

There were sightings of sombre tit, good view of golden orioles, corn buntings, woodchat shrikes and spotted flycatcher, as well as short-toed eagle, steppe buzzard and Eurasian sparrowhawk. There was a very quick sighting of a subalpine warbler but it was calling and singing prolifically in the area.

It was a good day for skippers, including views of Oberthu’s grizzled, and Balkan green-veined white and southern white admirals were also seen. Attractive species like marbled fritillary, Balkan marbled white and eastern rock grayling were even photographed. Dinner was at the hotel, a very pleasant evening outside in the garden.

Weather: Sunny, 24 degrees

Day 3: Butterfly & birding excursions around Melnik

On the way to Rupite and Kozhuha Hill we stopped near Harsovo Village in search of calandra larks and were lucky to have excellent views. Black-headed bunting, woodchat shrikes, linnet and red-rumped swallows were also seen.

As most of the group was keen to get closer views of Spanish sparrow and white stork, we made a quick stop in Chuchuligovo village near the Greek border but unfortunately we didn’t find any. We then had our lunch in a sheltered area.

We spent the afternoon exploring the area around the extinct volcano. We had good views of long-legged buzzard, European roller, olivaceous warbler, heard ortolan bunting and rock nuthatch, and were treated to many hunting bee-eaters. It was interesting to see a pair of little-ringred plover in such a dry place, perhaps due to the river being nearby.

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Even though the weather was not ideal today, we managed to find good numbers of mallow skipper, small white, common glider, graylings and hummingbird hawkmoth. It was good day for dragonflies and terrapins.

On the way back we checked the valley near Hotovo village, which allowed us to have a short walk at Melnik, including some wine tasting in the local ‘cave’ winery.

In late afternoon, with the weather improving, we decided to have dinner in the garden again.

Weather: Cloudy, cold and rainy, 11 degrees in the morning up to about 14 degrees in the afternoon. Unusual not just for June, but also for the hottest place in Bulgaria.

Day 4: Western Rhodope Mountains  Sunday 24 June 2018
After breakfast, we packed our suitcases into the minibus and headed east, crossing the southern part of Pirin Mountain. We made a quick stop before the pass (for apollo butterfly, photographed) and then we spent an hour at the top of the Popovi Livadi Pass. There were many European serins, goldcrests and common firecrests, and red crossbills eating minerals from the walls around. We also heard a singing male Eurasian bullfinch and a spotted nutcracker calling, and red squirrels were about, watching us.

Our next stop was near Mesta River with a few fishponds nearby, willow and poplar trees and reeds beds. We were treated to sightings of a little owl on a fence and another one on a chimney, great reed, marsh and olivaceous warblers singing, long tailed tits, Eurasian tree sparrows and black stork.

After Satovcha we had our picnic lunch amongst the singing goldfinches with more pleasant temperatures of 19 degrees.

Our last stop on the way to Trigrad was before Borino village, which proved to be a beautiful place. The meadows were rich with different species of butterflies – burnets, skippers, whites and fritillaries like knapweed, lesser spotted and heath. The most prolific were coppers – small, sooty and balkan. The brewing storm created a very romantic stop complete with butterflies, cloudy sky, a Roman bridge and dippers under it. We stopped for a few minutes to watch a corncrake in flight twice at the meadow and then made another quick stop in Trigrad Gorge to view the wallcreepers’ habitat.

Weather: Cloudy, rainy and sunny – changeable, 16 degrees.

Day 5: Western Rhodope Mountains  Monday 25 June 2018
Our first walk until midday was on the way to Yagodina village to the area above the Gorge. Yogada means strawberry and there were many wild ones in the area. Once again we had great views of crested tit and firecrest, there were calling red crossbills above us and grey-headed woodpecker knocking close by. Common chiffchaffs were singing constantly and Alpine swifts were chasing each other about. A coal tit was feeding its young nearby.

Before lunch we went butterflying east of Trigrad on the roman road and found large and dingy skippers, apollo, southern small white, holly blue, Meleager’s blue, mazarine and Amanda’s blues.

We have had our lunch in a local hut, delicious grilled chicken or trout, while there was a heavy shower outside. Once the rain stopped we drive a few kilometers north. Unfortunately we did not get to see any wallcreepers but had good view of white-throated dippers and grey wagtails, many crag martins and black redstarts.
From the crossroads at Osmanov vir we’ve walked to the protected area Chairite - a valley with many limestone cliffs. A few members of the group were lucky enough to see European pine marten crossing the road and managed to get some great photographs.

Later we had dinner next to the fireplace discussing birding and butterflying and listening to the rain.

*Weather: Changeable again - cloudy, sunny and few showers, 18 degrees.*

**Day 6: Eastern Rhodope Mountains**

**Tuesday 26 June 2018**

We started our long drive to Eastern Rhodope Mountains with a quick stop at Trigrad Gorge to look for some attractive birds. Breaking the trip, we made an hour’s stop just before Predela Pass and even though it was drizzling and cloudy we had superb views of firecrest and roosting chequered skippers, both photographed.

We stopped for lunch just after Ardino and before Karzhali. Everybody was looking forward to our next birdwatching site located almost in the centre of the town. Finally, after another stop at a petrol station we had reached our destination. We wanted to stay there as long as possible as there were colonies of breeding black-crowned night herons and little egrets. Watching from the bridge, we saw two little bitterns chasing each other and then they flew away to join the roosting pygmy cormorants. Unfortunately it started to rain very heavily so we had to cut our stay short. It was an exciting stop despite the weather!

An hour later we reached Krumovgrad, a small town in the Eastern Rhodopi Mountains located right in the middle of one of the richest biodiversity habitats in Europe.

*Weather: Mostly cloudy with a few showers, 14° - 16 degrees.*

**Day 7: Eastern Rhodope Mountains**

**Wednesday 27 June 2018**

After a 30 kilometre drive we arrived in the area of Studen Kladenetc village – a volcano site surrounded mostly by oriental oaks and bushes.

Firstly, we walked for about 20 minutes to see the local “vulture restaurant”, which is an area with approximately 30 griffon vultures roosting or flying about. Mixed among these were three black kites, a few juvenile and two adult Egyptian vultures. We also had wonderful views of two golden eagles roosting on posts and many northern ravens. Subalpine warbler and ortolan bunting were singing from the bushes. We spotted a herd of fallow deer feeding near to the roosting griffon vultures. Before we left to go back to the minibus an Eleonora’s falcon crossed above us to the north.

Our next walk was in the middle of the volcano above the village. Little tiger blues were waiting for us just in the beginning. Fallow deer, vultures, black stork and chukars were seen up close. We saw many odalisque dragonflies at a small stream coming out from the “valley of wolfs”.

We had crossed the dam at Studen Kladenetc after lunch at a spot with running water and a table. We explored the area below the dam using the old road to the small tunnel and ruins of the old bridge. It was a perfect place for butterflies and other insects; Stoyan was able to point out a lovely specimen of Kreuper’s small white. We noted a few more butterflies but it was a tortoise that got the most attention, one of about 50 years old. And the rain started again, bringing our excursion to an end.

After dinner we decided to go to the local park with the hope of seeing scops owl - and we did. There were many singing and calling birds around.

*Weather: Mostly cloudy, 17- 25 degrees.*
Day 8: Eastern Rhodope Mountains

Thursday 28 June 2018

Today was to be another day of the vultures. We drove for more than an hour to Madzharovo, a town northeast of Krumovgard. The rain was very heavy on arrival so we had wait for the weather to clear before we could continue. A few cups of coffee kept us going until we were finally able to go outside.

Later, walking just below the second griffon vulture colony in Bulgaria we saw griffon and Egyptian vultures, peregrine falcons, blue rock thrush, rock and ortolan buntings, honey buzzard and golden orioles. This was also a good place for many butterflies typically seen in Mediterranean habitats.

Lunch was in a place with amazing panoramic views and then we headed back to Dolna Kula, a village near Krumovgrad. Another good walk there allowed us to see European roller, black-eared wheatear, European bee-eaters and little tiger blue butterflies. We arranged a photograph of the group as a keepsake of a great trip and then returned to the hotel for our last dinner together.

Weather: Heavy rain in the morning, 17 - 21 degrees.

Day 9: Transfer to Sofia; fly to the UK

Friday 29 June 2018

Transfer to Sofia airport

Weather: Cloudy, 17 - 24 degrees.
## Checklist

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<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
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01305 267 994 sales@thetravellingnaturalist.com www.thetravellingnaturalist.com
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www.thetravellingnaturalist.com
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<td></td>
<td><em>Coleoptera Buprestidae</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Praying mantis</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Empusa fasciata</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Buttoned snout</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Hypena rostralis</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Bronze glandular bush-cricket</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Bradyporus dasypus</em></td>
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