

Bulgaria 2010, Winter Birding.

Contributed by Jos

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Vast flocks of Red-breasted Geese, backed up by an impressive array of other waterbirds, raptors and select specialities, the coast of the Black Sea offers some of the best winter birding in Europe. A five-day mini break, this trip combined the riches of the Durankulak area with excursions to lakes surrounding Burgas and a short trip into the Western Rhodopes mountains. To a setting sun, the evening flight of 70,000 White-fronted and Red-breasted Geese was the major highlight of the trip, all the more evocative for the Hen Harriers circling in their midst and Golden Jackals calling in the background. In weather that exceeded expectations, other memorable birds included Dalmation Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Syrian Woodpeckers and Sombre Tit. However, for all the birds, it was a mammal that truly stole the show - sunbathing outside a cave, a stunning European Wild Cat, a bonus I really did not expect.

With arrival and departure in Sofia, our itinerary took us approximately 2100 km and included a fair degree of night driving to ensure full use of the days to enjoy the birding. 12 February: flight from Vilnius to Sofia, arriving 3 p.m. local time. 510 km drive to Balchik on the Black Sea coast, stopping for an hour's birding in Brestnica village. 13 February: All day in the Durankulak area, visiting Durankulak Lake itself, Krapets, Shabla and Cape Kaliakra. 14 February: Most of the day in the Durankulak area, visiting Durankulak Lake and Krapets again. Late afternoon to Lake Varna. 15 February: All day in the Burgas area, visiting in particular Atanasovsko Lake, Poda and Lake Burgas. Evening drive to Trigrad Gorge in the mountains of the Western Rhodopes. 16 February: Morning in Trigrad Gorge. Early afternoon drive to Sofia, arriving just 20 minutes before our 2.40 p.m. departure. Daily Log 12 February. Journey Eastward. 3.30 p.m. local time, touch down in Sofia. A Common Kestrel hovered alongside the runway, the birding had begun. After picking up a hire car and traversing the potholes and rutted streets of the capital, soon we were passing through low hills and beginning a 510 km drive that would take us to the northern coasts of the Black Sea. Three hours before dark, notched up the first species of the trip - Common Buzzards widespread, a couple of Rough-legged Buzzards in their midst, then stumbled across a most excellent spot to pass an hour. Passing through the village of Brestnica, a few roadside birds persuaded me a little exploring was in order. Amongst Tree Sparrows and Chaffinch, abundant Hawfinch followed suit, a flock flitting down to feast upon spilt grain in a farmyard. Sent the car spinning up a snow covered track and turned down a dodgy looking path to the left. Fifty metres down, birds galore - in a field of otherwise snow, all feeding on a mound of rich soil and manure, finches and tits aplenty. Parked the car and admired, more Hawfinches dropping in, two Great Spotted Woodpecker on the ground, Great Tits zipping in and out, a splendid male Brambling amongst the Chaffinches. However, the real ace was still to come - ten minutes after we arrived, a chaerrr chearr from the left, in flitted a Sombre Tit. Down onto the ground it hopped, feeding between a Hawfinch and Brambling, a good bird to start the trip. Moments later, all scattered, a Sparrowhawk diving through. Onward and eastward, darkness fell and the kilometres zipped past. Bumped through more potholes in assorted villages, had two Long-eared Owls flying over in hot pursuit, plus a lone Red Fox some distance further. After navigating a maze of streets in Varna, finally our destination loomed, 10 p.m. and a very friendly host welcomed us to Balchik, base for the next three nights. Bulgarian wine and brandy served as obligatory, a little later it was to sleep, an early start planned for the next morning. 13 February. Durankulak. Pre-dawn, a lonely lane just north of Durankulak Lake. Hints of daylight, already shapes of Common Buzzards sat like stalks all around, voices of geese filled the air. We waited, soon the morning would bring the birds we had travelled to see, the Red-breasted Geese rising from roost and spilling out onto the meadows to feed. At this point it should be noted, however, I had no actual information as to numbers this year - would the counts be in the tens of thousands or, if they had remained north in Romania, mere dribs and drabs. Much depended on the severity of the winter - the ultra-mild 2007 had seen counts at an all time low, totals struggling to exceed a dozen or so birds, a colder year would bring flocks of between 10,000 to 60,000, numbers that represent the bulk of the world's population of this exquisite goose. Given 2010 was proving a cold winter across much of Europe, and Bulgaria itself had seen abnormal lows approaching minus 18 C, I had high hopes. The sun began to break the horizon, a classic day of blue skies in the making, off yonder the melody of goose song began to resound ever louder, the first stragglers began to pass over - a flock of about a thousand White-fronted Geese landing in a meadow behind us, a single Whooper Swan joining them. With the sun rising, more and more geese, the vast bulk White-fronted Geese, mostly landing amongst the earlier flock. Gaggles began to land over a brow, some hundreds at least. A Rough-legged Buzzard hovered over the meadow, a flock of 55 Calandra Larks tumbled past, dropping to feed on a sowed meadow. Then, in an arc across the sky, there they were, the first Red-breasted Geese of the day, a flock of about 60. Round they circled, pondered landing amongst the White-fronts, decided against and returned from whence they came. And then the floodgates began to open - skies full of geese, a few dozen here, a hundred there, alternating flocks of both species, but Red-breasted Geese now in numbers over a thousand, quite splendid. However, almost all began to settle over the brow, annoyingly totally out of view, views on the deck would have to wait. Feeling rather pleased with the spectacle unfolding, a Bulgarian birder arrived and asked about the numbers - good he said, but the meadows to the south of the lake supported even more, totals there amounting to approximately 60,000 White-fronted Geese and 10,000 Red-breasted Geese! A treat awaited us later in the day. In the meantime, we turned our attention of the sea, driving the couple of kilometres down to the Durankulak campsite. Immediately adjacent, some 25 Black-necked Grebes bobbed in the surf, Great Crested Grebes even more abundant and, just beyond, three Smew in the wake. Also Coots and Tufted Ducks on the sea, plus dozens of Yellow-legged and Common Gulls. Scan as much I might, no Pallas's Gull to add to the collection. In the camp grounds behind, Tree Sparrows chattered and, in tall trees a little further, the first Syrian Woodpecker of the trip. Pleasant though the beach was, now basking in a warm sun, the lure of the goose flocks beckoned, we drove to the north of Durankulak village and scanned. A meadow some kilometres distant was dark with geese, umpteen thousand straddled across an entire hillside. The hunt was on, to find a

track that might offer a vantage point. After several false turns, some ending up in boggy quagmires, others in snow lingering from the week before, we turned down towards the seaside village of Krapets. Still no geese in sight, but I supposed they were now directly north of us and meandered off that way, finding a sandy track along the seafront that took us on a cross-country rally through pools and soft sand. Stopped many a time to scan the sea, a few more Black-necked Grebes in the process, then came to an abrupt stop where the track turned into a slippery muck patch that threatened to snare the car, not an attractive proposal so far from a main road. To the one side the blue sea, to the other a plantation of conifers. Suddenly, from our enforced stop point, a mass of geese rose, circled and dropped - we had stumbled across the mass flock, they were feeding just the other side of the conifers. Through the trees we sneaked, a feast for the eyes beyond - thousands upon thousands of geese grazing, the full collection of White-fronted and Red-breasted Geese laid out before us, a few Greylags thrown in for variety. Quite splendid, occasionally spooked into the air by a passing raptor, the birds looked most majestic in the sunshine, the trip's goal achieved. Quietly retracted ourselves and rallied back down the beach track to ponder actions for the rest of the day. Briefly stopped in at Shabla, but with waters still frozen from the week before, little of note there, so decided to continue southward to Kaliakra Cape, a limestone headland famed for its migration potential and small concentrations of cliff-nesting seabirds. On route, small flocks of geese in meadows, abundant Common Buzzards, occasional Common Kestrels. However, abject depression began to set in as Kaliakra approached - in the single worst example of environmental vandalism I have yet to witness, the entire area from Shabla to Kaliakra is now a sea of wind turbines, an absolute disgrace in this locality, holding as it does significant populations of raptors, globally important concentrations of Red-breasted Geese and, most critically, one of the most intense migrations of raptors, pelicans and storks in all Europe. Right on Cape Kaliakra itself, built on the vital steppe lands that abuts the headland, a high density wind farm sits waiting to greet the spring concentrations of broad-winged birds that will arrive, flocks that on a good day can number thousands. This development must surely have violated European laws and is simply a slur on the Bulgarian nation that it was allowed to occur. Little pleasure birding here, watching Common Buzzards and Hen Harrier at the edge of the turbine fields, imagining the consequences that might befall them. Off Cape Kaliakra however, the seas were as rich as ever, populations of Cormorant and Shag sat upon the waters, gulls milled around. Beyond, heading into the deep gorge just north of the cape, a protected reserve, you could almost forget the turbines, bar the two that stood right at the head of the gorge, threatening to down any raptor making a mistake to head that way. The gorge itself though was superb, a most picturesque limestone gully that must surely buzz in migration times. Yet more Black-necked Grebes bobbed in the small harbour at its base and the possibility of Eagle Owl got me scanning the hanging cliffs and their caves and nooks. No Eagle Owl, but, in an amazing turn of luck, outside one small cave sat a European Wild Cat, a new species for me! There are no bird species in Bulgaria, in winter nor summer, that I have not seen before, so I had no expectations of any new species on this trip. Little could I have hoped to bump into one of Europe's most elusive mammals, quite sensational indeed. Enjoying the sun, there it sat, viewing the world in the valley below. Distant for photographs, but views through the telescope quite superb, eventually the animal left his vantage point and retired to a grassy patch adjacent, curling up and licking his paws. I was rather chuffed at this point and left Kaliakra in a rather better mood than when I had arrived. Taken on a mobile phone, the cat: 'was now mid-afternoon, back to Durankulak we went, the sun at a much better angle for watching the sea. A flock of 20 Little Gulls flitted in the surf, dancing above the Black-necked Grebes. I made the critical mistake of deciding some close photography would be a good idea - crouched by the sea, intent on the gulls, I had little warning …suddenly slapped in the face, I was bowled backwards by a big wave, an eye-opener if ever there was one! More of a problem though, it had also slammed straight into my camera, which promptly decided to respond by displaying a mayday 'error 99' message, before giving up the ghost and shutting down. Oops, I thought! Returned to the car, mopped it up as best I could, then left camera and lens beneath the full blast of the car's heaters, went birding. Returned some time later to find a resurgent camera, all working again, phew! Evening was approaching, I decided to walk north along the beach, viewing over the reeds all the way. Clouds of Starlings circled in, a roost of some thousands congregating, Magpies too gathered, a few dozen choosing bushes at the reeds' edge. However, the spectacle of the evening, arguably of the day, the return of the geese - to a setting sun, the skies vibrant orange, tens of thousands of geese spiralling in, dropping onto Durankulak Lake, an impressive end to an impressive day. Marsh and Hen Harriers quartered, a Golden Jackal howled in the distance, back to the car I wandered, darkness falling before I arrived.

14 February. Durankulak & Lake Varna. Durankulak, day two. New day, new location - an observation point overlooking Durankulak Lake itself, a spectacular place indeed. Still mostly frozen, the ice-free central waters were alive with geese, the full impressive flock of 70,000 or so still at roost. More than the geese though, this place was a buzz of birds - a few hundred dabbling ducks, several Smew, a male Ferruginous Duck, three Pygmy Cormorants, 55 Whooper Swans flying over, a Great White Egret rising from reeds. With the sun rising, the geese began to leave, vast flocks of White-fronted Geese leading the way, hundreds upon hundreds of Red-breasted Geese in their wake. Southward they streamed, back to the meadows favoured the day before. Raptors were already up and about, a Hen Harrier, several Marsh Harriers drifting through, an immature White-tailed Eagle lolling across the pool, settling on ice further back. By 9.00 a.m., the final Red-breasted Geese were rising and departing, the morning flight over. Turned to return to the car, looked back and four large birds flying in - Dalmatian Pelicans! Round the lake they soared, nothing taking their fancy, onward and northbound they continued. Drove up to Durankulak Lake, stopped to watch three Syrian Woodpeckers in the village, then headed back to the campsite a little further north. With the sea like a millpond, a quick scan revealed no less than 30 Black-necked Grebes and 40 Great Crested Grebes, but otherwise quiet, one Little Gull about the best of the rest. A Little Owl and an engaging Red Squirrel popped up behind, then it was off to the south, checking a random patch of scrubland just south of Durankulak - Common Buzzards everywhere, a variety of passerines, plus two Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Round at Krapets, the day of sunshine left the rally-track much easier-going, still the geese fed close to the conifers, but the surprise of the morning was another European Wild Cat, not fantastic views, it merely darted

across the track into the forest, but two in two days, quite amazing. Crested Larks ran along the beachfront. Did fancy a return to Cape Kaliakra, but simply could not stomach another morning under the turbines, so abandoned the area and decided to venture south of Balchik. On route, having already notched up over 115 Common Buzzards and five Rough-legged Buzzards, finally another target bird fell - on a pylon aside the road, completing the set, one smart Long-legged Buzzard. Our destination for the afternoon, just a couple of kilometres south of Balchik was the woodland reserve at Baltata. Adjacent to a holiday complex, this woodland is a renowned woodpecker hotspot. Not crucial visiting for a birder resident in Eastern Europe, but greed is a wonderful thing - why skip them if right on route?! However, what I had not anticipated was the woodland being totally flooded, I suppose it was snow-melt. Not fancying a paddle, we instead wandered through the holiday complex abutting the reserve. Worked wonders, soon encountered woodpeckers galore. First a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, then a Syrian, then a 'flock' of woodpeckers - where woodland met park, three Middle Spotted, two Syrian, two Great Spotted and one Green Woodpecker, all in a single clump of trees, not a bad haul. A Great White Egret strutted through the forest floodwaters, another three Green Woodpeckers frequented lawns by some holiday chalets, Baltata had been a good stop. A glance skyward, high cloud edging in, a front approaching I suspected. Couldn't see the amazing weather lasting another day. Ah well, still a few more hours to enjoy on this day. Now about 3 p.m., the decision was made to forget the evening flights at Durankulak and head down to Varna instead. The city itself is a right slum, parts of it resembling a third-world shanty town, but stretching inland, Lake Varna offered some fine birding to end the day. Access none too easy in many areas, but where we approached the lake, bird numbers were good - a minimum of 3000 Coot, several hundred Pochard, at least 400 Great Crested Grebes and upward of 50 Little Grebes. The evening's highlight, however, was the cormorant roosts - as dusk fell and cloud blotted out the sun, in they came, hundreds of Great Cormorants clambering into tree tops, at least 200 Pygmy Cormorants bunching in reeds. The day was over, back to Balchik. 14 February is a national wine festival in Bulgaria, our host was waiting for us, bottles of red and white waiting! 15 February. Burgas. Up at 5.00 a.m., the idea was to be in the Burgas area by dawn, spend the whole day birding the lakes, then drive off into the night to reach the Western Rhodopes mountains for the next morning. On waking, however, I was almost tempted to go back to sleep - the rain was absolutely hammering it down! And hammer it down it did, all the way to Burgas, the rain reducing visibility to tens of metres, flooding out large sections of road and leaving me thinking I was mad to even contemplate being out. Needless to say, no owls or other birds, but did see a Badger scurrying across the road, looking very bedraggled. Rain of such intensity just couldn't last I reasoned, and it did not - as the day dawned and our 150 km journey reached an end, the gods of birding relented and turned off the taps. No more heavy rain, but a real contrast to the days previous - gone the sunshine and 11 C, now a pitiful 5 C and heavy cloud, the temperature thereafter dropping through the day. In this gloom and dampness, so passed our first couple of pit stops - a brief pause at the Pomorie Salt pans (devoid of birds bar rather many Shelducks) and a slightly longer halt at Lake Atanasovsko (various dabbling ducks, a few waders and assorted passerines). Onward through Burgas we went, sloshed through water submerging parts of the city, past the shores of Lake Burgas and finally to Poda, our first major destination for the day. Sandwiched between Lake Mandra and the Black Sea and managed by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds, Poda is an excellent wetland famed for its breeding colonies and passage birds. Winter is pretty good too - a week before my visit, six Great Black-headed Gulls had paid a visit and an assortment of waterbirds and pelicans is near guaranteed. So we arrived, spitting with rain, but nothing too serious. A quick look round the reserve centre, a Cetti's Warbler singing adjacent, then off down the trail we went, reedbeds and pools either side. Great Cormorants had already returned to their breeding sites on old electric pylons, Pygmy Cormorants gathered in their dozens in trees and pools. A short stroll along, Grey Herons and Great White Egrets rose from reeds, then up flew a Bittern from the trackside, flying across the reeds to drop aside the Black Sea. A hundred metres along, another, then another. By the walk's end, no less than five Bitterns had had the good grace to appear, including a most co-operative bird that fed out in the open, always a treat. Rain however was beginning to return, a rather cool rain at that, it was time to dart back to the car. Offshore, a Dalmatian Pelican sailed past, twelve Red-breasted Mergansers too. For the rest of the day, generally overcast with occasional showers, the car served as a most admirable mobile shelter. Fortunately our next destination, Lake Burgas, is fringed by a road network that gives possibility to bird right the way round without venturing far from the car. Though the sub-zero temperatures of the weeks previous had seen all the wintering flocks of White-headed Ducks fleeing for lands to the south, the lake was nevertheless absolutely packed out with other birds. On the northern and eastern banks, in numbers perhaps approaching a thousand, Pygmy Cormorants were absolutely everywhere, in daytime roosts of a dozen or so here, a few dozen more on the water, the scene repeated all the way along, quite an impressive sight. Beyond them, ducks galore - some 2500 Pochards and at least 600 Smew making up the bulk, but six smart Ferruginous Duck bobbing in their midst, plus hundreds of Coots and assorted added extras. Marsh Harriers drifted by, Common Buzzards overhead, a Hen Harrier quartering adjacent, not bad birding for a wet day. At the western end of the lake, extensive flooding saw the car go sub-aquatic, traversing several hundred-metre stretches of road under water - steam rose, fortunately the engine did not gonk out. Gulls, geese, more dabbling ducks, round the lake we continued our route. By 4 p.m. though, with the temperature falling to just a single degree above freezing, sleet beginning to replace the occasional rain, we decided to call it a day. Found the local MacDonald's in Burgas town, then began the long drive westward. Out came the sun, across snow-covered plains we cruised. Crested Larks fell by the wayside. The destination for our last day's birding lay only 250 kilometres or so away, but the journey was going to take a while, bad roads ahead! 16 February. Trigrad Gorge. In mountains rising to 2000 metres, into the giddy heights of this stunning gorge we had ventured the night before, a 70 km climb through the darkness. A complete gamble - on roads steep and narrow, encrusted in ice, the slightest fall of snow would surely have trapped us, the chances of making our flight then becoming minimal. Three hours it had taken, slipping and sliding ever upward, temperatures dropping to minus 8 C - with eyes intent on the road, the labours of the night were duly rewarded, first a Red Fox picking its way across the snow and ice, then the highlight, a

grey-phase Tawny Owl perching on cables directly over the road. After a quarter hour with border police on a lonely junction, through a rock-cut tunnel we went - journey's end, the heart of Trigrad Gorge. Cliffs towered on either side, 200 m of rockface pushing in, leaving above a mere slither of sky, this night full of stars. Hoping the stars would stay put, hoping no snow would fall, there we slept - bundled up in sleeping bags, the car our cosy abode. 7.00 a.m., screeching from up above, I awoke. Peering through the frosted windows, mighty pleased I was to see a cloudless sky and not a hint of fresh snow, the gamble had paid off. The screeching continued, so out into the chilly morning I ambled, it was time to locate the culprits. Then they launched into the air, a pair of Peregrines had slept directly above, what a good camping spot we had found! Round they circled, then drifted off down the gorge, the sunlight now revealing the valley in all its glory. In the summer season, these high-altitude crags are favoured sites for Wallcreepers, Blue Rock Thrushes and Rock Buntings. In winter, I suspected not, presuming most would seek greener pastures in lower lands. For two hours, scan the rock faces I did however, admiring the views as much as actually birding. The Peregrines returned, Common Ravens gronked overhead, but as for passerines, the only birds noted amounted to a single Blackbird, two Great Tits and a pair of Bullfinches! Following the stream soon added more birds, Dippers on the bubbling waters, a Grey Wagtail on shingle, a Water Pipit on a stretch where the valley began to widen. With time edging on, and a mid-afternoon flight looming, down the valley we began our return. Numerous stops - nothing amazingly rare, but pleasant birding all the way, the highlight a Rock Sparrow in a village. It had now reached midday and we really should have got moving - Sofia was still 150 km away and our flight less than three hours distant. A last pause at the valley's bottom, a bird flock moving through - no regard to time, off I went, leaving my travel companion rather bemused I suspected. A flock of Long-tailed Tits later, plus two additional species for the trip - Dunnock and Siskin - and back I scrambled up the bank to the car. Oo er, we were now seriously late …hurtled down the lower slopes, bounced through some nondescript Bulgarian hill village, finally got to the main highway. A signpost ‘Sofia 126 km’. It was now 13.15, our plane was scheduled to leave the ground at 14.40. Needless to say, this was going to be a close run - hoping that all the rather numerous Bulgarian traffic police were asleep, I made a valiant attempt to reach the airport. Rats, hit the city limits at 14.05, still some kilometres to the airport. Skipped the compulsory refill of petrol and arrived at the airport at 14.15. Dumped the car, legged it across the terminal, it was now just 20 minutes till take-off. Check-in screens for flight LO 632 had gone blank, a lady tidying up looked rather surprised to see us. ‘Warsaw? You are too late’ came the cheery words. Our nice smiles accompanied by worried looks prompted her to the phone. A moment later, again ‘You are too late, they are already boarding’. Back to the phone, then ‘Just these two bags to check-in?’. Phew, she let us on, through security, straight onto the plane, took off moments after settling in our seats. Trip over, a grand total of 100 species of bird and six species of mammal. In those totals though, 10,000 Red-breasted Geese and more, one sunbathing European Wild Cat, I returned quite content with this little escapade. [Click HERE](#) for full species list.