

Flavour of Raptors. September 2014.

Contributed by Jos

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Red-footed Falcons, migrating White-tailed Eagles, Lesser Spotted Eagles overhead, all part of the impressive mix of raptors marking the first few days of September on my Labanoras plot. And then, upping the ante, a little excursion to Georgia in mid-September adding Pallid Harrier, Levant Sparrowhawk and Honey Buzzard to the mix.

1-15 September - Southbound Bounties. Early autumn days, a warm sunshine, gentle winds ...and at Labanoras, a splendid drift of migrants heading south ...passerines, egrets, cranes and raptors, a real buzz of birds moving through. Of particular note, the raptor passage in the period was particularly good - as September edged towards its middle, the tally included no less than seven White-tailed Eagles (the best autumn on my land so far for this species), one Osprey, several Lesser Spotted Eagles, an enormous female Goshawk, one Kestrel, a couple of Hobbies and a steady trickle of Common Buzzards and Sparrowhawks. Top of the lot, however, were Red-footed Falcons! After one a couple in August, there was another on 8th September, followed by a totally unexpected four together on the 13th! On my land, I have never seen more than one in any year before (and most years, it is zero), so I was right chuffed with this lot! Also seen, a flight of 45 Common Cranes, a pair of Great White Egrets (third record on my land) and a good movement of passerines, including Whinchats, Wheatears and Tree Pipits in the first week and a Common Redstart (also the third record on my land) on the 6th. In addition, a late flock of 12 Common Swifts also on the 6th and a Hazel Grouse flushed near my feeding station mid-month (possibly bred nearby, as a male lingered for a month back in March, but otherwise only the fourth record for my land).

19-22 September - Guns, Raptors and Rain: Batumi, Georgia. Driven by a quirk of geography, funnelled by the Black Sea to the west and the Caucasian Mountains to the east, the Batumi area of eastern Georgia sees one of the greatest raptor migrations in the World - in a short two-month period, over a million birds of prey use this bottleneck, Honey Buzzards, Steppe Buzzards and Black Kites accounting for the bulk, though no shortage of assorted eagles, harriers and hawks adding to the variety. A spectacle indeed, over a 100,000 raptors can pass overhead on a good day, flocks thermalling on the low hills or drifting south along the coast, truly a great migration. Even on a moderate day, counts of 20,000 to 30,000 are commonplace and, to add spice, regular Bee-eaters and Rollers migrate through, along with Black Storks and occasional surprises such as a flock of over 3000 Black-winged Pratincoles in September 2014. Into this mix however, a dark shadow creeps - the uncontrolled and illegal persecution of the migrating flocks. Throughout the autumn months, the Georgian countryside echoes to a relentless barrage of gun shots, the hunters targeting anything that flies with the raptors being no exception. Despite legal protection of all raptors in Georgia, there seems to be zero attempt to enforce the law and hunting continues with impunity. Remains of Honey Buzzards litter the ground, Pallid Harriers run a gauntlet, every bird is at risk ...the Georgian government should hang its head in shame. So it was, I decided to pay a short weekend visit, buoyed on by counts of over 90,000 Honey Buzzards in the preceding week, along day totals of 10,000 Black Kites, 1000 Booted Eagle and a steady stream of Crested Honey Buzzards, Pallid Harriers and numerous other goodies. My basic plan was to fly in on Friday morning, bird the Chorokhi River on the Friday, then spend the next two days savouring the glorious raptor passage in the hills above Batumi. Hmm, well it didn't quite go like that! Day One. Chorokhi River. Arriving in Batumi mid-morning and glancing up at the beautiful blue skies, I decided it would be a good idea to dedicate this first day of my trip to the Chorokhi Delta ...a move that, in hindsight, was a definite mistake! A small wetland to the immediate south of Batumi, I jumped on a local bus and all too soon was trundling over the Chorokhi River, jump out point for me. Clouds of European Bee-eaters wheeled overhead, a mass flock of Yellow-legged Gulls sat roosting on shingle banks and a quick scan of the river revealed several Great Cormorants and a single Pygmy Cormorant ... not a bad start I thought. Then the first shots, the gulls lifting into the air and two hunters emerging from the cover of bushes. Hmm, not good. Not wishing to share the river with these guys, I began walking downriver towards the small delta, further flocks of gulls visible in the distance. But depressingly, the whole Chorokhi was full of hunters - in the mere kilometre or so between the bridge and sea, at least 20 wandering along the shingle, paddling into the shallows, strolling through the bushland! I guess I was naive - I had not expected this density of hunters, and even more naive, I still wondered what they might be hunting ...surely not the European Bee-eaters, I thought. Trying to find a path avoiding the hunters, occasional Little Egrets and Cattle Egrets flew over, along at least six Purple Herons rising from sheltered pools. With a lack of obvious targets for the hunters, I was a little nervous as the herons winged across the river, the sense heightened by the regular poof poof of shotguns left and right. Further down, a shallow pool almost adjacent to the sea seemed to both hold a few birds and be free of hunters ...towards it I meandered, Red-backed Shrikes adorning shrubbery, European Bee-eaters still overhead. And at the pool, a little scatter of waders fed upon a mid-channel island - Dunlins, Ringed Plovers and Little Stints immediately apparent. As a Sociable Plover had been seen in the area the day before, I settled down to scan the pool with more care - a Kingfisher flitted in from the side, and then I was more than happy when a flock of Black-winged Pratincoles flew in, swooping around and then settling on the island. From the reeds, a hunter emerged, spaniel alongside. Oh no, I thought. Forward the hunter slowly moved, paddling into the water, the island his intention. Gun raised, a shot rang out, the waders flushed into the air. Two Black-winged Pratincoles did not. Across the water the dog trotted, two corpses retrieved to become additional victims to the senseless slaughter that blights this part of Georgia. Rather disgusted, I left the river and tracked back through the bushland to return to base. In relatively short succession, two Marsh Harriers passed over, one Pallid Harrier and one Levant Sparrowhawk. No safety for them here, I hoped they would continue south ...a mere 12 km distant, the Turkish border would offer them relative refuge. So that was enough for day one, under a rather warm sunshine, I returned to Makhinjauri, my base for the weekend. Up at the raptor counting stations, over 6000 birds had migrated over during the afternoon, an Imperial Eagle and Crested Honey Buzzard amongst them. All was set for a good couple of days to follow. Day Two. Saghalvasho Raptor Count Station. With the first raptors generally on the move from about 7.30

a.m., the plan was to walk/hitch up to Saghalvasho for about 7.00 a.m., find the observation point and then relax for the day's action ahead. At dawn however, sticking my head out of my accommodation, it was soon apparent that things were not quite as expected - dark grey skies, low cloud hanging over the hills, drizzle hanging in the air ...not exactly ideal conditions for raptor migration! Regardless, I gathered my stuff, hitched a lift up to Saghalvasho, got slightly lost by going too far, then hiked up the hill to the small plateau containing the count station. Upon the hill, already the dedicated bunch of counters were assembled - dawn to dusk from mid-August to mid-October, a revolving team log the passage, collating data and assessing the importance of this bottleneck to migrating raptors - in 2013, the tally exceeded 1,000,000 birds and, at the time of my visit, had already topped the 800,000 mark for the 2014 season. With clouds cloaking the slopes however, it sure didn't look like much would be passing on this day! Not actually raining at this point, a few birds did filter by ...a couple of Sparrowhawks, a lone Marsh Harrier and a Merlin (the only record of the season), but the thoughts of clouds of buzzards and harriers drifting by to a blue backdrop were evaporating fast! 'Never mind', said one of the guys, 'if it rains for a couple of hours, raptor frequently push through in amazing numbers afterwards'. And so we waited ...and so the weather deteriorated! Light rain pushed in from the south, soon replaced by heavy rain, wind, thunder and lightning! About 10.30, as lightning threatened the station itself, a decision was made to abandon ship, fleeing to a house just down the slope for coffee and an hour or so of enforced rest. Hallucinations suggested a slight brightening to the sky around midday, so off to the station we returned. Another Marsh Harrier winged south, a kettle of some 48 Steppe Buzzards rose over a slope to the east, the calls of Bee-eaters filled the sky above ...perhaps the weather was indeed about to change. And yes it did, but absolutely not to the better! By early afternoon, the station was being absolutely lashed by torrential rain, a mean wind shaking the shelter and torrents of water flowing across the muddy ground around. Dedicated observers to the end, the count went on ...a full-hardy Honey Buzzard passing a little later being the only bird of any note. At 3.30, after several ominous rumbles nearby, an almighty crash of thunder erupted right above the station, half of us jumping out of our skins. A split second later, while we still cowered from the thunder, we were spooked yet more ...a bolt of lightning flashing right in front of us, appearing to hit ground just a few hundred metres to our side. 'Oo, that was close!', mumbled a few. The general consensus was that it was time to forget the count for the day, but with the rain belting down with the intensity of a tropical cyclone, that was not something we could really counter at that stage. All a little bit damp, we lingered on another half an hour, then a miraculous little break saw the rain letting up a little, so off we all went, counters to their accommodation, me to the road to hitch a lift back to Makhinjauri. Day over, my notebook logged a rather unimpressive 57 raptors ...two Black Kites, two Marsh Harriers, 48 Steppe Buzzards, one Honey Buzzard, three Sparrowhawks and one Merlin! Still, after a whole day of rain, the next day should surely see an even more amazing movement of birds. Day Three. Makhinjauri & Batumi. 7.00 a.m., I didn't even bother getting out of bed ...the rain was still rattling against the window and the electric had failed due to continuing downpours and flooding! And that is how it stayed for much of the day, bands of rain driving in from the Black Sea, the hills to my east hidden by fog and rain. Absolutely no point going to the Count Station, so instead I paced the outside deck of my accommodation, House Sparrows and Chaffinches the top fare of my day. By mid-afternoon, bored of a hotel still lacking electricity and a day threatening to have been virtually birdless, I borrowed an umbrella and headed out for the beach. With plenty of abandoned buildings offering cover, the next couple of hours were actually pretty good - dozens of Swallows and Bee-eaters heading north, a steady stream of Little Gulls migrating south, plus three Marsh Harriers in-off the sea, one Arctic Skua going south and a Hobby hugging the coast. The rain, after 36 hours of near non-stop assault, finally seemed to be abating ...I even saw a little patch of blue sky open up briefly over the sea! Hmm, maybe I could even do a little 'proper' birding! Encouraged, I took a bus to the nearby Batumi city and took a walk/paddle around some scrubland near the seafront ...this turned out to be a very good move - in the bushes, on patches of grass and atop assorted rubble, there were migrants everywhere, most impressive indeed. Red-backed Shrikes by the dozen, many rather soggy, Whinchats flitting here and there, one very nice Siberian Stonechat, several Eastern Olivaceous Warblers. On lawns and gravel patches, heading a cocktail of assorted birds, at least 20 Black-eared Wheatears, a dozen or so Common Redstarts, plus quite a few White Wagtails and Yellow Wagtails. Pity I didn't come here earlier in the day, but it was sure a nice way to end the day, two Red-breasted Flycatchers and a Spotted Flycatcher rounding things off nicely. With that, and the rain returning, I wandered into Batumi city for a bite to eat ...and, surprise of the weekend, flushed a Common Quail in one of the main city centre streets! And so ended my second day, my total raptor tally amounted to three Marsh Harriers, one Steppe Buzzard and one Hobby ...a little bit short of the tens of thousands that I had been dreaming about!!! Day Four. Departure. Sod's law ...woke at dawn to see a blue sky from horizon to horizon, barely a breeze to stir the trees! And could I go up to the Count Station? Nope, had an early morning flight to catch! Ah well, did see a Montagu's Harrier on the way to the airport! And of course, it was a stunning day at the Count Station ... 55,540 raptors recorded, including 45,000 Steppe Buzzards and a smattering of other nice birds in their midst - a good mix of aquila eagles, plus goodies such as 48 Pallid Harriers and three Crested Honey Buzzards! 27-30 September. Visible Migration. Winter is surely approaching ...under late autumnal skies, passerines are on the move in numbers - over Labanoras, many thousands of Chaffinches streaming south, occasional flocks of Bramblings, Siskins and Redpolls in their midst. Also southbound, the first big movements of Great Tits and Long-tailed Tits, roving flocks moving through, hundreds an hour at peak. Soon the land shall empty ...but fortunately the season of the feeding station begins - White-backed and Grey-headed Woodpeckers are already in attendance, Middle Spots and Great Spots firmly established. Elsewhere on the land, two Moose were rather nice, one Goshawk too.

