

Batumi, Georgia - Guns, Raptors & Rain.

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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. TRIP NUMBER ONE: Rain Games: 19-22 September 2014. So it was, licking my lips at the thought of raptors galore, I decided to pay a short weekend visit to the Batumi area, 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 that day, 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, 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 hitched a lift up to Saghalvasho, then hiked up the hill to the small plateau containing the count station. Upon the hill, already the dedicated bunch of counters were assembled - but with clouds cloaking the slopes, 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! As time ticked by, 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 up to the station we returned. A 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! ++++++ TRIP NUMBER TWO: Feast of Raptors, 3-6 October 2014. With the spectacle of raptors streaming through the Batumi bottleneck over a prolonged period from mid-August to mid-October and beyond, the spectacle unfolding is an evolving kaleidoscope of different species peaking at different times, be it the hundreds of thousands of Honey Buzzards and assorted raptors in mid-September or the clouds of Steppe Buzzards and large eagles that predominate in early October. Thus, having my first attempt to witness these movements rather flummoxed by the weather two weeks earlier, the season was still young for attempt number two. In the days preceding my return on 3 October, the raptor counts went into an amazing overdrive - the heavens opened and raptors poured through in numbers never seen before, an incredible 280,000 passing on the 2 October alone, the greatest single-day count ever recorded anywhere in Eurasia! With such a peak however, I did slightly worry that they would be none left to migrate over while I was there!

Day One. Saghalvasho Raptor Count Station. All looked good as the plane touched down early morning, Northern Wheatears scattering from the runway, a Black Kite circling alongside and the weather glorious with blue skies and sun! No messing about this time, I went straight from the airport to the raptor count station at Saghalvasho and as I hiked up to the hilltop station already there were eagles overhead - a small swirl of Lesser Spotted Eagles drifting towards ridge, one Greater Spotted Eagle in their midst, a mass of Black Kites just beyond.

Two weeks earlier, the slopes had been draped in cloud on my arrival and prospects of any birds had been thin indeed. What a contrast on this day however, the hills positively sparkled in the morning sunshine and a quick scan of the horizons revealed birds in all directions, a stream of Black Kites approaching from a low ridge to the north, a light movement of Steppe Buzzards on the higher slopes to the east and Marsh Harriers sneaking past nearer the coast. Ah yes, this certainly did have the making of a good day! And so I settled down to enjoy the day, many of my fellow observers still somewhat in a state of shock by the incredible events of the day before, the skies near darkened by the sheer mass of birds they said, but for me, the passage unfolding was impressive enough ...Black Kites passing over almost constantly, Marsh Harriers and Pallid Harriers migrating through with regularity, Hobbies zipping through and also a light trickle of Honey Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles and Booted Eagles, Lesser Spotted Eagles gradually increasing as the morning ticked by. One White-tailed Eagle far to the east, several Red-footed Falcons directly overhead, then a few hours into my stint, the first event to destroy the spirits ...watching a juvenile Marsh Harrier through my scope, the sun catching the deep chocolate browns and golden head a treat, suddenly something was amiss - tumbling and spiraling

downwards, the bird was in trouble. To the ground it plummeted, a sorry sight that truly blights the experience at Batumi, the bird had been shot by hunters on the ridge to our north - a total waste of a magnificent young Marsh Harrier, its last flight seeing it fall to rot in the forests below. Hunting has apparently declined over the last decade, tales of drunken hunters sitting atop grassy knolls with kalashnikovs are no more, but the massacre continues regardless - from the count station, shots ring out from the ridges both north and south throughout the day, any bird low enough a target, from Barn Swallows and Bee-eaters up to the large eagles, nothing is safe. Though it takes the wind out of your sails to actually witness the downing of a raptor, the sheer spectacle of the mass migration is still an amazing sight and within a couple of hours of seeing this Marsh Harrier fall, movements were truly beginning to pick up - Eurasian Sparrowhawks in numbers, more Pallid Harriers and Booted Eagles, then suddenly late in the afternoon, an almighty push of birds ...Steppe Buzzards and Black Kites flooding in from the eastern skies, a good selection of eagles too. Truly a good omen for the next day, these last two hours of the day were pretty amazing - in kettles rising above the slope and in lines streaming south, it was a mass of birds right across the skyscape ...hundreds of Black Kites and 2000 Steppe Buzzards plus, richly peppered by a couple of hundred Lesser Spotted Eagles, good numbers of Great Spotted Eagles, 30 Short-toed Eagles, a few Steppe Eagles and Booted Eagles and one Imperial Eagle ... a feast for the eyes! In their midst, against a setting sun, flocks of Black Storks too, wheeling to the backdrop wooded slopes, a fine ending to the day!

Day Two. Saghalvasho Raptor Count Station. Sunny at dawn, a mere breeze across the hilltops, a perfect migration day. At Saghalvasho, large flocks of Chaffinches were winging their way south, a few Hawfinches and Crossbills too, plus the occasional Tree Pipit and Red-throated Pipit. Out to sea, a couple of flocks of Great White Egrets migrated south, as did four Ruddy Shelducks and, rather bizarrely, several large flocks of Rooks. In the skies however, the raptors we're going to steal the day ...a trickle of Marsh Harriers and Booted Eagles early on was soon to be replaced by a far heavier movement of Black Kites, a near constant stream of them funneling in from the ridge to our north to pass directly over our head, Short-toed Eagles in amongst them a treat. One of the seasoned observers said it was looking good, kites in the morning often preceded eagles in the afternoon he said. I certainly hoped so! And by midday, his prophecy seemed to be coming true ...a good stream of eagles was building, initially passing a little to the east, then directly overhead. At Batumi however, directly overhead is not always good news ...many of these birds were dangerously low and we'd already heard many shots ring out from the ridge to our rear. Rather depressingly, several flocks of Stock Doves had already passed over, each passing us only to meet the hunters moments later ...shots, then almost surely several of the birds would be no more. Lesser Spotted Eagles were already passing in numbers, then a shout went out as the first Steppe Eagle of the bird approached - a stunning bird, it came in low ...too low. Beneath our observation point it glided, flapping to gain height as it approached the ridge - a sense of gloom hit me as I realized it was going to pass right over where the hunters were sitting. Over the ridge it went, a double shot rang out, the Steppe Eagle vanished ...no mighty bird gliding out the other side of the ridge. Depressing, totally depressing. Fortunately, very few further shots were heard through the afternoon, the hunters seemed to have left. So it was, in peace and amazement, a memorable afternoon unfolded ...non-stop action, eagles galore, and clouds and clouds of Steppe Buzzards! Over our heads, over the ridges to the east, in the valleys either side, raptors, raptors, raptors!!! In a frantic race to count and identify, it was one moment standing in awe at the sight of 21,500 Steppe Buzzards streaming by, then skipping from eagle to eagle the next moment, separating Greater Spotted Eagles from the hundreds of Lesser Spotted Eagles passing. In great wheeling flocks, hundreds of Black Kites too. As the birds streamed south, no less than eight Imperial Eagles picked out of the flocks, plus almost 30 Steppe Eagles, many dozens of Short-toed Eagles, plenty of Booted Eagles and, an added bonus, one Griffon Vulture too. Truly a fantastic few hours to savour. And then, as the afternoon edged to its end, cloud built on the hills and migration came to a grinding halt. A weather front was approaching, spits of rain threatened and the day was over. Most superb it had been …bar the downing of the Steppe Eagle seconds after it had cruised over, a sad image that will also remain with me for quite a while. Day Three. Batumi Port & Botanical Garden.

As per the forecast, it was a gloomy and overcast start to the day, a light drizzle adding to the joy. No point in heading to the raptor stations, so instead I turned my attentions to the passerines in the area. With this in mind, the weather was in fact perfect - passerine migrants heading south along the Black Sea coastline would have been grounded by the overnight rain and the potential existed for a rather good day. Near Batumi Port, with the city as a backdrop and a Feris wheel towering above, a scrubby little patch of wasteland poking out into the Black Sea has a reputation for attracting a far greater selection of birds than first appearances would suggest. So it was, umbrella at the ready and camera tucked away, I arrived for a little exploration, fortunately my arrival coinciding with a break in the drizzle. The patch, barely the size of a half football pitch, was absolutely crawling with Bluethroats - most impressive, flitting and chasing, hopping along the tracks that dissected the scrub, ten'a'penny Bluethroats, truly a sight to dispel the otherwise drab tones of the morning. Alongside, a dozen and more stunning Siberian Stonechats atop dripping stalks, a Red-throated Pipit wandering around a big puddle and, all looking a little soggy, one Red-backed Shrike, two Red-breasted Flycatchers, one Spotted Flycatcher, a bunch of Northern Wheatears and several Common Redstarts. Quite a productive spell, I also added one Hobby, an Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, a Common Quail (flushed) and found a Kingfisher dazzled beneath a nearby bus shelter window ...I placed the latter bird on a pile of rocks in the shelter of a bush and was pleased to see to see it finally perking up a half hour later, one lucky bird. Offshore, an ominous bank of darkness and rain was slowly creeping in, spits of rain were already in the air and, as I wandered over to inspect a flock of Northern Wheatears, in it came ...I darted over to the seafront to find shelter and down came the rain, one Black-necked Grebe off the beach, a pile of Little Gulls meandering around, one Common Snipe zigzagging off into the distance ...a few minutes of this and then, under rain that showed little hint of easing, I retreated back to the road, hopped upon a bus and all too soon was back in my accommodation. By the look of the sky, I did not really expect any change for the remainder of the day, but a little after midday, I was rather surprised to see shafts of brightness cutting through the clouds, the rain was over! I still

saw little point of going up to the raptor stations, but there was still one rather nice bird that I could potentially try to find ...Kruper's Nuthatch. Not abundant on the Georgian coast, they are nonetheless fairly reliable in the Batumi Botanical Gardens, a well-wooded slither of landscaped territory along the coast just north of Makhinjauri. Almost accidentally I got onto a minibus that was going exactly to the gardens, so just a few minutes after leaving my accommodation I was in prime habitat for the nuthatch. Entry into the gardens is a 'hefty' eight lari (3.6 euros), so being a stingy git, I thought I would first check the groves of pine that border a lane running up a hill adjacent to the gardens ...ten minutes later, I was in the midst of a bird flock - Great Tits working from branch to branch, Spotted Flycatchers flying little sorties, two rather nice Short-toed Treecreepers running up the trunks of the gnarled pines. And then, a flit of a small bird and there he was, one super Kruper's Nuthatch busying himself on a horizontal branch just below me. A mere few minutes and then he vanished into the trees beyond, one brief relocation and that was it, bird gone. For the remainder of the afternoon, I continued up the hill, flocks of European Bee-eaters ever-present, one Syrian Woodpecker in an orchard. Overhead, European Sparrowhawks, a Hobby and a couple of Steppe Buzzards passed over, a very light raptor migration was again beginning. Scanning up to the hills above the count stations, small flocks of Steppe Buzzards were rising above the hills, a couple of Lesser Spotted Eagles too, but quite content with the action the previous day, I decided against the hike up to the stations. Instead, I took to the road, changing accommodation and finding a place close to the airport, I would again have an early morning departure. 6 October. Departure. Still and sunny, I had just an hour or two to kill before my flight ...taking a slight gamble with timing, I decided on a little stroll along the river as my final finale to my Georgian adventures for this season - one mighty Greater Spotted Eagle was pleasant, so too a Hobby, but otherwise the last birds of my trip were those of the waterside - a couple of Little Egrets, several Grey Herons, two Common Sandpipers, one Kingfisher. And then, that was that, aboard my plane and into the air, a few short hours later back to work and thinking about the next trip.