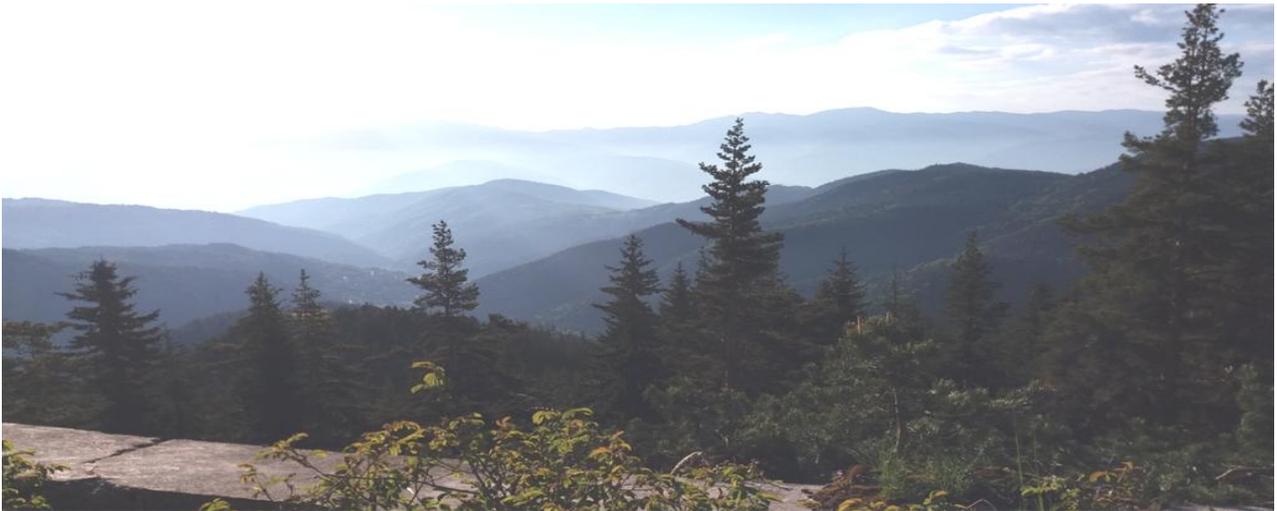


Bulgaria: Mountains and Forests

May 26-30th 2019



Foreword:

Report compiled by Ed.O'Hara with images by Comghal McQuillan and Ed.O'Hara

Having had such a brilliant trip in May 2018, Comghal and I decided to return to Bulgaria but this time put the emphasis on the mountains and forests for several 'lifers' that we were both seeking. Once again we had no hesitation in using the same guiding company as we did in 2018 [www. Neophrontours.bg](http://www.Neophrontours.bg).

Sunday 26th May: Dublin - Burgas

After a four hour flight with Aer Lingus from Dublin , we arrived at 22:30 local time. Our guide for the four day trip was there to meet us, Simeon Gigov of *Neophron Tours.bg* .

Simeon told us of a nearby site for a 'lifer' for Comghal, so we headed there to see if we could get even a glimpse of the bird. We arrived at the site and could hear our target bird calling but it took ten minutes of searching the trees before we saw it. However our views surpassed even our best expectations, not only did we see one **Scops Owl**, we saw a pair of birds. What a fantastic start to the trip and we had barely arrived in the country. The hotel beckoned and a good night's sleep.



SCOPS OWL PAIR

Monday 27th May: Burgas - Sakar Hills - Madzharovo Weather Sunny 25C

Although the trip was essentially for the forests and mountains, we did one stop on our way out of Burgas at the lake for a quick look at some water birds. You just cannot go to the Burgas area without looking at the Pelicans, they are such an iconic bird for this area. Several other birds were seen as well which will be detailed at the end of report.



RED-BACKED SHRIKE

The trip proper began as we headed southwest on a 200 mile drive through the Sakar Hills towards Madzharovo, birding as we drove along. As we approached the Sakar Hills we had already seen several species from the car, **Lesser Grey Shrike, Red-backed Shrike, Black-headed Bunting, Woodchat Shrike, Eurasian Hoopoe, Black Kite, Honey Buzzard, Booted Eagle, Yellow Wagtail** and **Turtle Dove**.

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Monday 27th May: Burgas - Sakar Hills - Madzharovo Weather Sunny 25C [Continued]

Our first stop was an area of the Sakar Hills where Simeon had seen Eastern Imperial Eagle on several occasions, unfortunately it didn't appear when we were there, but still several birds did, **Isabelline Wheatear**, **Olive-tree Warbler**, **Lesser Spotted Eagle**, **Common Buzzard**, **Honey Buzzard**, **Raven**, **Common Kestrel**, **Short-toed Eagle**, **Turtle Dove** and **European Serin**.

We now headed towards the Eastern Rhodope Mountains and, as was going to be the norm for the trip, stopping along the way,

as we observed birds from the car. One such bird was **Montagu's Harrier** quartering the field along the roadway,



ISABELLINE WHEATEAR juvenile

joined by its mate, so we stopped to have a look. The male bird had a very worn and shabby tail, the female looking much tidier.

We stopped for lunch at a roadside café and checked some of our pics for id purposes, as one bird vexed us but finally decided it was a **Honey Buzzard**.



SHORT-TOED EAGLE



We were by now heading to the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, with three more stops to do before we reached our final destination of Madzharovo. The first stop was a lush area of riverine swamp and trees; it was here Simeon thought was the best spot to see our next target, **Levant Sparrowhawk** and he was right as within fifteen minutes we saw a fantastic male bird over our heads hunting along the river.

Also seen in the walk along the river were, **European Roller**, **European Bee-eater**, **Green Woodpecker** and **Willow Tit**.

Having failed at our first stop for Eastern Imperial Eagle, Simeon drove up to a communications tower to scan a large area of countryside for the bird, but once again we had no luck, but we did find an **Eastern Orphean Warbler** in the bushes at the tower.



LEVANT SPARROWHAWK

Driving towards our third and final stop before Madzharovo, Simeon stopped in an area where he knew there was a pair of **Eastern Imperial Eagles** and sure enough he found one resting in a tree. Although quite distant, it was clearly one of the pair. At last we had seen it!!

The next stop was quite a revelation; it was the site of a re-introduction area for the **Lesser Kestrel** a bird in serious decline throughout Europe, so it was good to see such positive action being done to halt the decline of the species. We saw at least 20 birds so hopefully it will be a success.

Also at the site were the ubiquitous **Spanish Sparrow**.

The day was getting on and we had still to get to our hotel and do some evening birding around Madzharovo. Arriving at the hotel we checked in and headed out in the evening sunshine to see what else we could pick up at the end of this wonderful days birding.

Well it didn't take long for the trip tally to rise with

the following birds observed; **Griffon Vulture**, **Egyptian Vulture**, **Western Rock Nuthatch**, **Hawfinch**, **Girl Bunting**, **Grey Wagtail**, **White Wagtail**, **Golden Oriole**, **Levant Sparrowhawk**, **Black Stork**, **Black-eared Wheatear** and **Raven**.



LESSER KESTREL

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Tuesday 28th May: Madzharovo -Trigard Gorge- Batak Weather Sunny 27C

An early start today leaving at 06:30, and we did some birding around the area for an hour before setting off on a five hour drive to the Trigard Gorge in the Western Rhodope Mountains.

Birds seen were **Golden Oriole, Hawfinch, Subalpine Warbler, Girl Bunting, Common Crossbill, Crested Tit Griffon Vulture, White Wagtail, Grey Wagtail and Red-rumped Swallow.**

As we travelled towards the gorge we picked up a **Little Owl** sitting on a roof of a house in one of the many villages we passed through.



LITTLE OWL



WALLCREEPER

Stopping at several locations on the way, we eventually arrived at the gorge at 13:00. Unbelievable, because we know how tricky this bird can be, a male

Wallcreeper was sitting on the rockface opposite where we were parked. This bird breeds on sheer cliff faces at 1000-3000m altitude and lives in such inaccessible sites that it is very hard to see during the breeding season, so we were especially glad



WALLCREEPER

to see this bird. It is one of the iconic birds in anyone's list of birds to be seen in Bulgaria. Photographing this bird proved extremely difficult due to its small size and perfect camouflage against the rockface in addition to its 'jizz', constantly moving along the face. The lighting in the gorge doesn't help either, going from very bright to very dark as the sun appears and disappears.

A fantastic bird and the first bird on both our 'life'lists and thankfully we got it after such a tiresome drive. Leaving the site we saw **Black-bellied Dipper** near the gorge. Lunch was calling and we went to a local café to celebrate.



LESSER WHITETHROAT

After lunch we searched a nearby forest for another of Comghal's targets and, after a walk along a track, we eventually saw it; **Lesser Whitethroat** singing from a bush overlooking a ravine. Also calling was a **Firecrest** in a pine tree; tricky to see but eventually it came out to gave good views.

We also picked up **Blue Rock Thrush** before leaving on our two hour drive to our accommodation in the Western Rhodope Mountains. We arrived at our hotel at 19:30 for some well earned rest, having spent most of the day travelling .



FIRECREST

Bulgaria: Mountains and Forests

May 26-30th 2019

Wednesday 29th May: Batak - Western Rhodope Mountains - Kalotina Weather Sunny/Cloudy 27C

We rose at 05:30 for another long day in the 'saddle' but what a start! An unexpected 'lifer' for both of us in the hotel car park. As we loaded our cases into the car Simeon heard what he thought was a **Common Rosefinch** and indeed he was correct; for after ten minutes searching, it appeared in bushes next to the car park, a superb male. Apparently they are slowly spreading westwards. Serendipity!!!



COMMON ROSEFINCH



SPOTTED NUTCRACKER

After one hour's driving we reached a logging road and slowly made our way up the road climbing steadily until we reached a viewpoint from which we could see an entire valley lit by the early morning sunshine, a truly wonderful view. Simeon heard the distinct sound of a **Spotted Nutcracker** and after a few minutes trekking through the forest we had clear views of the bird. A 'lifer' for both of us.

We now proceeded towards Mount Rila and higher elevation for more targets on our list. In a village we saw **Syrian Woodpecker**

as we passed through, along with several other birds we had already noted. As the road rose through the trees we began to pick up some new birds for the trip: **Siskin, Goldcrest, Nuthatch, Dunnock, Tree Pipit, Willow Tit, Whinchat, Northern Wheatear, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Great Tit, Greenfinch, Chaffinch and Bullfinch**; many of which we find at home at much lower elevation than is the case in Bulgaria. However there were two birds in particular that I wanted to see, one being **Ring Ouzel** alpestris, which we did find beside a ski-lift. Unfortunately we never got within 100m of this very wary bird, but still a fantastic bird with its 'fish-scale' breast plumage.



RING OUZEL alpestris

The final target of the day was another 'lifer' for both of us and, as we drove up one mountain road and down another for over an hour, I thought we were going to 'dip' on this species; but almost as were about to give up, two birds were found at the road edge, getting grit for their gizzards, **Hazel Grouse**.



HAZEL GROUSE



NORTHERN WHEATEAR

Bulgaria: Mountains and Forests

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Thursday 30th May: Katolina- Serbian Border- Burgas Airport Weather Sunny/Cloudy 27C

The final day of four intensive days birding and the greatest distance covered going from one end of the country to the other. The main target today was Rock Partridge which we dipped on but on a hill near the Serbian border we found one excellent substitute in **Corncrake**, the bird at times being only a metre away! The bird was once very common in Ireland but now there are only a few pairs on islands off the west coast. Other birds at this site were **Alpine Chough**, **Cuckoo**, **Ortolan Bunting**, **Rock Bunting** and **Yellowhammer**. It was a long slog up the hill but worth it for the views of the Corncrake alone and now we proceeded to our final birding spot, an old pristine beech forest, two hours drive away.

The main targets were the **Red-breasted Flycatcher** which we did see and the White-backed Woodpecker which we didn't. Other notable 'dips' were Pygmy Owl and Three-toed Woodpecker. However as we say, looking for rare/difficult birds is '*the triumph of hope over reality*'.

Last bird of the trip was **Semi-collared Flycatcher** in the Beech forest. We then began the five hour drive to Burgas to get our 23:00 flight to Dublin.

SUMMARY:

Once more we were blessed with almost perfect weather, two four day trips to Bulgaria in May 2018 and May 2019 and mostly sunny with some clouds.

Once again Neophron Tours were excellent hosts and Simeon Gigov an exceptional guide and birder, leading us for four intensive days of birding; driving for hours on end looking for our targets and finding and locating birds. Birders know it is difficult to turn up at any site and expect to see everything on your list; it just doesn't work like that. Therefore we are grateful to Simeon for the many target birds he did find as well as his company, always pleasant and eager to help. 1600 km travelled in four days, we flew home for a rest !!!!!

Once again no hesitation in recommending Neophron Tours for guiding purposes.

Ed.O'Hara, Lurgan, N.Ireland 3/6/19

CMcQuillan, Lurgan, N.Ireland 3/6/19



CORNCRAKE



RED-BRESTED FLYCATCHER



C. McQuillan



Ed.O'Hara



SCOPS OWL

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List of Birds seen during stay in Bulgaria 26-30th May 2019

English Name	Latin Name	Area	Notes
1 Duck, Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	Burgas Lake	
2 Duck, Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Burgas Lake	
3 Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	Burgas Lake	
4 Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	Burgas Lake	
5 Grebe, Great Crested	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Burgas Lake	
6 Grebe, Little	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	Burgas Lake	
7 Pelican, Dalmatian	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>	Burgas Lake	
8 Pelican, Great White	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>	Burgas Lake	
9 Cormorant, Pygmy	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>	Burgas Lake	
10 Egret, Little	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Burgas Lake	Several seen
11 Heron, Grey	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	All Areas	Several seen
12 Heron, Night	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Burgas Lake	One bird seen
13 Stork, Black	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	Madzharovo	Several birds in area
14 Stork, White	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	All Areas	Common in mountain villages
15 Buzzard, Common	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	All Areas	Commonest raptor
16 Buzzard, Honey	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
17 Buzzard, Long-legged	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
18 Eagle, Booted	<i>Aquila pennata</i>	All Areas	Several seen
19 Eagle, Imperial Eastern	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	Sakar Hills	One bird seen
20 Eagle, Short-toed	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	Sakar Hills	One bird seen
21 Eagle, Spotted Lesser	<i>Aquila pomarina</i>	Sakar Hills	One bird seen
22 Harrier, Marsh	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
23 Harrier, Montagu's	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
24 Kite, Black	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	Burgas Lake	One bird seen
25 Sparrowhawk, Levant	<i>Accipiter brevipes</i>	Sakar Hills	One bird seen
26 Vulture, Egyptian	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Madzharovo	Two birds
27 Vulture, Eurasian Griffon	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Madzharovo	Several seen
28 Falcon, Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
29 Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	Batak	One bird seen
30 Kestrel, Common	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
31 Kestrel, Lesser	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	Levka	Several seen
32 Grouse, Hazel	<i>Bonasia bonasia</i>	Rila	Two birds seen
33 Crane, Corn	<i>Crex crex</i>	Gorno	One bird seen
34 Coot, Eurasian	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Burgas Lake	One bird seen
35 Moorhen, Common	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Burgas Lake	One bird seen
36 Lapwing, Northern	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Motorway	Several seen
37 Gull, Yellow-legged	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	Burgas Lake	Several seen
38 Tern, Caspian	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	Saraffovo	Two birds seen
39 Tern, Common	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Saraffovo	Several seen
40 Dove, Collared	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	All Areas	Several seen
41 Dove, Turtle	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	All Areas	Several seen
42 Pigeon, Wood	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
43 Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
44 Owl, Little	<i>Athene noctua</i>	Kardzhali	One bird seen
45 Owl, Scops	<i>Otus scops</i>	Saraffovo	Two birds seen
46 Swift, Alpine	<i>Apus melba</i>	Madzharovo	Several seen
47 Swift, Common	<i>Apus apus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
48 Swift, Pallid	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
49 Kingfisher, Common	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	Trigard	One bird seen
50 Bee-eater, European	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	Sakar Hills	Several seen
51 Roller, European	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
52 Hoopoe, Eurasian	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
53 Woodpecker, Great Spotted	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen



Pygmy

Cormorant



Bee-eater



Pallid Swift

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54	Woodpecker, Green	<i>Picus viridis</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
55	Woodpecker, Syrian	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
56	Lark, Crested	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	All Areas	Several seen
57	Lark, Wood	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	Rila	One bird seen
58	Martin, Crag Eurasian	<i>Hirundo rupestris</i>	All Areas	Several seen
59	Martin, House	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	All Areas	Several seen
60	Swallow, Barn	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	All Areas	Several seen
61	Swallow, Red-rumped	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	All Areas	Several seen
62	Pipit, Tree	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	Rila	One bird seen
63	Wagtail, White	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	All Areas	Several seen
64	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava feldegg</i>	All Areas	Several seen
65	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
66	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	All Areas	Several seen
67	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus cinclus</i>	Trigard	One bird seen
68	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Rila	One bird seen
69	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	Rila	One bird seen
70	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	All Areas	Several seen
71	Ouzel, Ring	<i>Turdus torquatus alpestris</i>	Rila	One bird seen
72	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	All Areas	Several seen
73	Thrush, Blue Rock	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
74	Thrush, Mistle	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
75	Thrush, Song	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	All Areas	Several seen
76	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	All Areas	Several seen
77	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	All Areas	Several seen
78	Warbler, Marsh	<i>Acrocephalus palustris</i>	Saravovo	One bird seen
79	Warbler, Olivaceous E.	<i>Hippolais pallida</i>	All Areas	Several seen
80	Warbler, Olive-tree	<i>Hippolais olivetorum</i>	Sakar Hills	One bird seen
81	Warbler, Orphee Eastern	<i>Sylvia crassirostris</i>	Sakar Hills	One bird seen
82	Warbler, Reed Great	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	Saravovo	One bird seen
83	Warbler, Subalpine	<i>Sylvia albistrata</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
84	Whitethroat, Common	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	All Areas	Several seen
85	Whitethroat, Lesser	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
86	Flycatcher, Red-breasted	<i>Ficedula parva</i>	Balkan Mts	One bird seen
87	Flycatcher, Semi-collared	<i>Ficedula semitorquata</i>	Balkan Mts	One bird seen
88	Flycatcher, Spotted	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	All Areas	Several seen
89	Redstart, Black	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	All Areas	Several seen
90	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula sardus</i>	Rila	Several seen
91	Stonechat, Eurasian	<i>Sax.torquatus rubicola</i>	Rila	One bird seen
92	Wheatear, Black-eared [E]	<i>Denanthe hispanica</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen beside
93	Wheatear, Isabelline	<i>Denanthe isabellina</i>	All Areas	Several seen
94	Wheatear, Northern	<i>Denanthe oenanthe</i>	Rila	Several seen
95	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	Rila	Several seen
96	Tit, Blue	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	Rila	Several seen
97	Tit, Coal	<i>Parus ater</i>	Rila	Several seen
98	Tit, Crested	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	Rila	Several seen
99	Tit, Great	<i>Parus major</i>	Rila	Several seen
100	Tit, Long-tailed [EE]	<i>Aegithalos cau. tephronotus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
101	Tit, Marsh	<i>Poecile palustris dresseri</i>	Rila	Several seen
102	Tit, Sombre	<i>Parus lugubris</i>	Rila	Several seen
103	Tit, Willow	<i>Poecile montanus kleinschmidti</i>	Rila	Several seen
104	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea caesia</i>	Rila	Several seen
105	Nuthatch, Rock Western	<i>Sitta neumayer</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen on
106	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	Trigard	One bird seen
107	Eur. Treecreeper [E.Europe]	<i>Certhia familiaris familiaris</i>	All Areas	Several seen
108	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
109	Shrike, Grey Lesser	<i>Lanius minor</i>	Sakar Hills	One bird seen beside road
110	Shrike, Red-backed	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	All Areas	Several seen



Tree Pipit



Red-rumped Swallow



BB Dipper



Whinchat



Willow Tit

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111	Shrike, Woodchat	<i>Lanius senator senator</i>	All Areas	Several seen
112	Chough, Alpine	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>	Vratsa	One bird
113	Crow, Hooded	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	All Areas	Several seen
114	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	All Areas	Several seen
115	Jay	<i>Garrulus gl. atricapulus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
116	Maggie	<i>Pica pica</i>	All Areas	Several seen
117	Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	All Areas	Several seen
118	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	All Areas	Several seen
119	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	Sofia	Several seen
120	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	All Areas	Several seen
121	Sparrow, House	<i>Passer domesticus indicus</i>	All Areas	Several seen
122	Sparrow, Spanish	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	All Areas	Many seen
123	Sparrow, Tree	<i>Passer montanus</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
124	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	All Areas	Several seen
125	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	All Areas	Several seen
126	Crossbill, Common	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	All Areas	Several seen
127	Finch, Gold	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	All Areas	Several seen
128	Finch, Green	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	All Areas	Several seen
129	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coc.</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
130	Linnet, Common	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	All Areas	Several seen
131	Rosefinch, Common	<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>	Batak	One bird seen
132	Serin, European	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	Vratsa	One bird
133	Siskin	<i>Carduelis pinus</i>	Vratsa	One bird
134	Bunting, Black-headed	<i>Emberiza melanocephala</i>	All Areas	Several seen
135	Bunting, Cirl	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	Madzharovo	One bird seen
136	Bunting, Corn	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	All Areas	Several seen
137	Bunting, Ortolan	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>	Vratsa	Several seen
138	Bunting, Rock	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	Vratsa	One bird
139	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Vratsa	Several seen



Nutcracker



Ortolan Bunting



Yellow hammer



PRISTINE BEECH FOREST



EASTERN ORPHEAN WARBLER



CRESTED TIT



SOMBRE TIT