

SOUTH-WEST BULGARIA

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INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria is an increasingly popular birding destination but it is apparent from reports on www.cloudbirders.com that most people head towards the east of the country and/or use guides. Relatively few people do solo trips in part because of the popular misconception that it is difficult to do without a guide due to language difficulties. This is actually far from the case and hopefully this report will encourage more people to go it alone and find their own birds because it is an extremely enjoyable country to bird in.

With four full days and two part days at my disposal I decided to concentrate on two areas rather than chase around covering as much ground as possible and consequently only visited two areas, the area around Sandanski towards the Greek border to the south-west of Sofia and Dragoman near the Serbian border to the west of Sofia. Whilst I missed a few species, e.g. Levant Sparrowhawk, Western Rock Nuthatch and Olive-tree Warbler, that I would have liked to have seen given that it is almost 30 years since I last saw them, all-in-all it was an extremely enjoyable trip.

LOGISTICS

Contrary to popular perception it is easy to travel around Bulgaria, sites are signposted in English or were wherever I went and I found people spoke English in hotels, restaurants and service stations. I could imagine driving through the centre of Sofia but if you drive south from the airport and immediately turn east on the E80 towards Plovdiv you quickly come to the outer ring road and can head off in any direction from here even though it's quite slow and congested. It's certainly easier than getting lost in the centre of Sofia.

I hired a car from Avis and covered just over 1000 kilometres in the time there. This cost me £36 for fuel, a fraction of the cost back in the UK.

Note when travelling south to Sandanski the E79 is initially a dual carriageway but currently becomes single carriageway from just north of Dupnica (although further dual carriageway is being built). From here it is quite slow because of the sheer volume of traffic, heading to and from Greece. By contrast the road to Dragoman is quick and the journey back to the outskirts of Sofia only took 20 minutes from Dragoman although you need to allow up to an hour from here back to the airport if you plan to go around the ring road.

Accommodation and food.

- **Sandanski:** Eros Motel. Located right by the E79 so very convenient. Booked through www.bookings.com for 54 euros for 3 nights, single occupancy. The hotel has a restaurant but I used the excellent Happy Bar and Grill a couple of hundred metres further south along the E79. Highly recommended.

- **Dragoman:** Hotel Dragoman. Just 100 metres off of the E80. Booked for 60 euros for two nights for single occupancy through www.bookings.com. Rooms better than at the Eros and you could hear a juvenile Long-eared Owl calling in the park behind the hotel at night. It has an excellent restaurant next to the hotel.

REFERENCES

- **Birding in Eastern Europe** by Gerard Gorman. I again used this as I have on other trips to eastern Europe although it does not include all the sites visited. Nevertheless highly recommended.
- **Michelin Map of Bulgaria** supplemented with maps from [googlemaps](http://googlemaps.com).
- **North Greece (Lake Kerkini) and Bulgaria 2014.** Kath & Mick Claydon.
http://www.cloudbirders.com/tripreport/repository/CLAYDON_BulgariaGreece_0506_2014.pdf
- **Birding around Melnik, SW Bulgaria, 16-17th April 2005:** Alexander Georgiev.
<http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/bulgaria/bul7/melnik-bulgaria-05.htm>

SITES

Sandanski area.

Sandanski makes a good base because it's positioned centrally between Kresna Gorge and Melnik and as such gives you greater flexibility than staying in Kresna or Melnik.

South of Sandanski

Please note that there are major road works going on around the junction with the Melnik road so directions are likely to change slightly in the near future.

- **Damyantsa.** A small village a few kilometres south of Sandanski to the west of the E79. Turn right off of the E79 and head towards the village turning right at the T-junction. Go through the village and then turn right at the end of the road into an area of fields and scrub. I spent a few hours here on my first evening and saw Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Red-backed Shrike and Black-headed Bunting but nothing that was not common elsewhere.
- **Struma River.** A kilometre south of the Damyantsa turn, turn right onto the 109 towards Petrich. (Note in May 2015 all traffic for Kulata and the Greek border was being diverted this way). After a couple of kilometres there is a long bridge over the river and immediately before the bridge there is a turning on the left. I birded along the river early one morning and again briefly at dusk. In addition to the species mentioned above for Damyantsa I saw Little Ringed Plover, Nightjar, Golden Oriole, Cirl Bunting and Black Redstart along with a number of commoner species. There are also some fishponds between the river and the E79 but I could not find any obvious access to them in a short attempt.
- **Rupite.** Continue over the bridge across the Struma River and through a small village. Rupite is an area of hot springs signposted to the left of the road a couple of kilometres further on. After turning off the main road drive down the side road ignoring the first track on the left. A couple of kilometres further on the track splits, keep right and it takes you to a parking area by the hot springs. Other than Long-legged Buzzard I saw few birds on the cliffs to the right but others have seen Eleanora's Falcon, Blue Rock Thrush and Western Rock Nuthatch. I did however see a fabulous Beech Marten being mobbed by magpies. Straight out from the parking area is short

grassland that it presumably great for pipits and wagtails on migration while over to the left is a reed-fringed ditch with Great Reed Warbler and lots of Marsh Frogs and Northern Water Voles..

- **Melnik** . Melnik is covered in **Birding in Eastern Europe**. It lies 12 kilometres east of the E79 and is clearly signposted as the area is a tourist destination due to the impressive sandstone pyramids and Rozhen Monastery which lie to the east of the town. Birding Melnik is pretty much a case of just exploring likely areas but some of the areas I checked are as follows.
 1. After the first 'village' along the road there is a reedy area to the left of the road. This produced Great Reed & Cetti's Warbler and a nice hepatic Cuckoo. I didn't explore the grassy hills on the left but they certainly held Nightingale and Golden Oriole and would probably be worth exploring for Sylvia warblers.
 2. Beyond the second village there is a long right hand bend and when it swings back left again a small building on the right of the road with a track immediately after it that leads towards a gorge. Walking this track produced Red-backed Shrike, Golden Oriole, Nightingale, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Calandra Lark. The gorge looked good for Olive-Tree Warbler.
 3. Further up the road there is a right hand turn and immediately after it a grassy hillside with a vineyard. On the opposite side of the road a track leads off downhill towards a shallow sandy gorge. The top end of this track produced Woodchat Shrike, Eastern Orphean Warbler and numerous Black-headed Buntings along with other commoner species. I didn't go as far as the gorge but suspect this was Claydon's site for Olive-Tree Warbler.
 4. After the next village there is a right hand turn to Harsovo. I stopped about a kilometre down here and explored a track on the right hand side. A ten minute stop produced a family party of Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers. I also walked a short way down a track immediately opposite the junction which looked good but was quite disturbed when I was there.
 5. Continuing up the main road I went through Melnik and made several stops between Melnik and Rozhen Monastery. Good birds here included Alpine Swift, Blue Rock Thrush and Hawfinch and I heard what was probably a Grey-headed Woodpecker. Others have seen Black-eared Wheatears here.
- **Kresna Gorge**. Kresna Gorge is also covered in Birding in Eastern Europe but is a frustrating site as it is difficult to cover with the E79 the main route from Sofia down into northern Greece running through the gorge. Most of the birding is done from pull-outs along the road including two diversions around the two tunnels that you pass through in the gorge. I did however find an accessible site at the south end of the gorge away from the heavy traffic.
 1. Pull-outs. Stopping and scanning from any of the pull-outs along the road is worthwhile and the best way of scanning for raptors, I saw a minimum of 16 Griffon Vultures, Honey-buzzard, Peregrine and a probable Levant Sparrowhawk. Although the view of the latter was too brief to be certain Kresna is a known-site for Levants. Passerines included Blue Rock Thrush, Black-eared Wheatear, Red-rumped Swallow, Crag Martin, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Cirl Bunting and a probable Rock Bunting at the north end of the gorge.
 2. Tunnels. There are two tunnels running through the gorge and both have roads running around them. Although both are used extensively by white-water rafters they do provide an opportunity to bird away from the main road and are worth short stops.
 3. Stara Kresna. Heading south through the gorge at the southern end of the gorge you pass through a small village and shortly afterwards there is a turn on the left signposted to Oshtava although it goes to the small village of Stara Kresna first. Take this turn, cross the river and railway and follow it for roughly 5 kilometres at which point there is an open area

on the right where you can park off of the road. At this point park up and walk up the road for a kilometre or so exploring both sides of the road. The rocky hillsides look excellent. Subalpine Warblers are common, I saw at least two Sombre Tits here, and other species include Woodchat and Red-backed Shrikes, Woodlark, Cirl Bunting and a silhouetted wheatear that was presumably Black-eared. I also heard a partridge calling from the rocky slopes but couldn't pin it down although it didn't sound like Rock Partridge which does occur. I only had an hour or so here one morning and the sun had only just started to hit the slopes as I left. I suspect I would have seen quite a lot of the species listed for the gorge had I stayed here for longer.

Dragoman

Dragoman lies c.30 kilometres north-west of Sofia along the E80 to Belgrade in Serbia. The nearby Dragoman Marsh is the largest karst wetland in Europe, http://mapcarta.com/Dragoman_Marsh. It is not covered in **Birding in Eastern Europe** but a lot of Bulgarian companies seem to include it on their short tours around Sofia. The main birding areas around Dragoman are as follows.

- **Dragoman Marsh.** From Hotel Dragoman return to the E80 and turn left, pass a service station and ignore the first turning on the right. Take the second right hand turning and follow it down to a T-junction. Turn left here and follow the road for several hundred metres to a crossroads of sorts (note on returning to Hotel Dragoman do not return to the E80 down the slip road but go back under the E80 and turn left). The right hand turn takes you to Dragoman Marsh after a couple of kilometres. At the start of the marsh is a parking area just before a stream. Park here and cross the stream and take the track on the right which leads to a boardwalk and a tower hide overlooking some of the pools. The boardwalk continues on for a couple of hundred metres but unfortunately is in a state of disrepair and you cannot get into the centre of the marsh as you would like to. Returning to the car either walk or drive along the road skirting the marsh. There are open areas all along the road and although it does sound like it is better earlier in spring when migration is in full tilt it was still a good location to bird in late May. See the checklist for details of the birds seen here.
- **Hills north of Dragoman Marsh.** Unfortunately I only had one short window of good weather so only so only spent an hour or so walking the hillsides north of the marsh but had I gone higher I suspect that I would have seen wheatears, Blue Rock Thrush etc. Others have seen Sombre Tit here. On the grassy slopes I did see Lesser Grey, Woodchat & Red-backed Shrikes, Woodlark, Tawny Pipit, Ortolan and Black-headed Bunting and heard Quail. The higher elevation gives you distant views of pools not visible from the road or tower.
- **Aldomirovtsi Marsh.** Another marsh to the south of Dragoman. Take the E80 south-east towards Sofia. After leaving Dragoman take the track on the right hand side just before the second bridge over the road. If you miss it you can turn left just after the bridge but it can be difficult in heavy traffic. Follow the track round and cross over the bridge and the marsh is straight ahead to the left of the track. There are two watch towers on the right of the track but it's just as easy to view from the road. During my visit at least this was the better of the two marshes with far closer views of most species and additional species including Little Crake. Both marshes are supposed to be good for Little Bittern judging from the signs but I didn't see or hear any. Beyond the marsh the track bears right and takes you up into a scrubby area with what appear to be disused

buildings and I did drive up here one evening but the sound of gunfire, I think there is a military training ground nearby, encouraged me to leave quickly.

- **Hotel Dragoman.** Immediately behind the hotel is a small park containing a children's play area. In the middle of the park is a small clump of conifers with a few more trees on the opposite side of the park. I had a terrific juvenile Long-eared Owl in the park along with an adult.
- **E80 towards Serbian border.** I had a quick drive along the main road to check what the habitat was like but didn't stop due to the heavy rain. In the first 10 kilometres or so there was mainly coniferous forest which might be worth a stop if you had time.
- **Areas to the west of Dragoman.** I drove a couple of roads west of Dragoman, in part to kill time in heavy rain, and in part to see if I could find any plains etc for sousliks, wheatears, rollers etc but everywhere I found was a mixture of farmland and woodland. I did see Lesser Grey and Red-backed Shrikes, Turtle Dove, Nightingale etc.
- **Hills south of Dragoman.** There are some rocky hills along the E80 just south of Dragoman. A quick stop here produced Ortolan Bunting.

ITINERARY

- 21st** Early afternoon arrival in Sofia, took E80 east to the outer ring road and then headed south-west around the ring road and then south on the E79. The ring road and the E79 south of Dupnica were shown going but finally arrived in Sandanski after a couple of short stops late afternoon. After checking into the Eros Motel headed out and birded Damyanitza and the first six kilometres of the road to Melnik before returning to motel.
- 22nd** Dawn at Struma River crossing on the road towards Petric and then spent the remainder of the morning at various stops along the road towards Melnik and on towards Rozhen Monastery. Returned to Sandanski for lunch and a rest in the heat of the day. Went out late afternoon and spent afternoon and evening at Rupite before heading towards Melnik and spotlighting from Rozhen Monastery back towards the main road.
- 23rd** Early morning along the Melnik road before returning to Rupite, Struma River and back to Sandanski for lunch. Late afternoon headed north into Kresna Gorge then east towards Oshtava stopping in montane habitat between the E79 and Stara Kresna.
- 24th** Dawn at Stara Kresna again followed by a couple of stops in Kresna Gorge and then drove onto Dragoman via Sofia. Checked into hotel for a couple of hours rest and on heading out again greeted by a series of storms and heavy rain which rather impacted on birding. Birded both Dragoman and Aldomirovtso Marshes before returning to hotel for night.
- 25th** Morning birding both Dragoman and Aldomirovtso Marshes in intermittent heavy rain followed by a 30 km circular route looking for suitable habitat for sousliks without success. Returned to hotel for lunch before heading back out in a break in the weather when birded the hillside north of Dragoman Marsh. The rain returned and I spent an hour or two checking areas to the west of Dragoman before returning to Aldomirovtso Marsh. Returned to the hotel to find a young Long-eared Owl calling somewhere behind the hotel.
- 26th** The rain had cleared so headed to Dragoman Marsh to find it shrouded in thick fog so returned to Aldomirovtso Marsh instead, followed by birding a hillside south of Dragoman and a back road south-west of Dragoman. Returned to the hotel and checked out the park behind the hotel where I found a young Long-eared Owl accompanied by an adult. A nice ending to the trip. I headed back to the hotel and drove back to Sofia for the return flight.

MAMMALS

Red Fox	Melnik: a cub seen on the second evening while spotlighting on the side road to Harsovo plus a sandy-coloured adult near Melnik the following morning. Dragoman Marsh: at least three separate adults plus a 4 th heard on the limestone hills north of the marsh on the second afternoon.
Beech Marten	Rupite: one late afternoon being mobbed by 12+ magpies as it tried to make its way across a rocky hillside.
Badger	Aldomirovtsi Marsh: equally unexpected one mid-morning disturbed as it fed on numerous snails on the road.
Northern Water Vole	Rupite: two in the ditch adjacent to the railway.
Brown Hare	One Aldomirovtsi Marsh.

BIRDS

A total of 105 species were seen or heard, 'birds of note' included.

Bittern	Two seen and at least two booming at Aldomirovtsi Marsh, two booming Dragoman Marsh.
Squacco Heron	One Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Purple Heron	Common Dragoman Marsh, two Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Great White Egret	Small numbers Aldomirovtsi and Dragoman Marshes.
White Stork	Two Damyanitsa, one Rupite and 12 Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Black Stork	One Rupite.
Garganey	5+ Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Ferruginous Duck	Common Aldomirovtsi and Dragoman Marshes.
Griffon Vulture	At least 16 Kresna Gorge.
Marsh Harrier	Common Dragoman and Aldomirovtsi Marshes, up to 12 in the air together at the latter.
Montagu's Harrier	Male along E79 heading south to Blagoevgrad.
Long-legged Buzzard	One Rupite. Another on the journey north along the E79 towards Sofia.
Honey Buzzard	1+ Kresna Gorge.
Peregrine	One Kresna Gorge.
Quail	Heard in fields around Dragoman and Aldomirovtsi Marshes.
Little Crake	Female Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Black Tern	Three Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Turtle Dove	Common Melnik, also seen Stara Kresna and west of Dragoman.
Cuckoo	Widespread including a hepatic individual at Melnik.
Long-eared Owl	An adult and a fabulous juvenile in the small park behind the Hotel Dragoman.
Alpine Swift	Common Melnik.
Pallid Swift	5+ Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Hoopoe	Surprisingly only heard at Stara Kresna.
Bee-eater	Widespread, often giving great views.
Syrian Woodpecker	Two Damyanitsa, also seen at Melnik and at the north end of Kresna Gorge.
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Melnik: three along the side road to Harsovo.
Crested Lark	Widespread
Woodlark	4+ on slopes north of Dragoman Marsh, also heard at Stara Kresna.

Calandra Lark	Two along road to Melnik.
Crag Martin	Common Kresna Gorge and Melnik.
Red-rumped Swallow	Widespread and common.
Tawny Pipit	One on hillside above Dragoman Marsh.
Yellow (Black-headed) Wagtail	10+ Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Dipper	One Kresna Gorge.
Nightingale	Amazingly common singing throughout the day and often out in the open on exposed branches. Very different to the current situation in the UK.
Black Redstart	Female on bridge over Struma River.
Black-eared Wheatear	One Kresna Gorge.
Whinchat	One on hillside above Dragoman Marsh.
Blue Rock Thrush	One Melnik and two Kresna Gorge.
Eastern Orphean Warbler	One along road to Melnik.
Subalpine Warbler	5+ Stara Kresna.
Great Reed Warbler	Common Rupite, in small marsh at start of road to Melnik, and Dragoman and Aldomirovtsi Marshes.
Marsh Warbler	2+ Dragoman Marsh. Heard Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Savi's Warbler	4+ seen Dragoman Marsh, one Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	Widespread, seen at Damyanitsa, Struma River, Rupite, Kresna Gorge and Dragoman and Aldomirovtsi Marshes.
Sombre Tit	2+ Stara Kresna
Red-backed Shrike	Widespread, seen at Damyanitsa, Melnik, Stara Kresna, Dragoman Marsh including hillsides above marsh, and west of Dragoman.
Woodchat Shrike	Two Melnik and two on hillside above Dragoman Marsh.
Lesser Grey Shrike	One on hillside above Dragoman Marsh and 3+ west of Dragoman.
Rose-coloured Starling	Up to 100 came in to roost in Aldomirovtsi Marsh on both evenings.
Golden Oriole	Common, seen at Struma River, Melnik, Stara Kresna, Kresna Gorge and Dragoman Marsh.
Hawfinch	One Melnik
Ortolan Bunting	Single males Stara Kresna, on hillside above Dragoman Marsh and along road just south of Dragoman.
Cirl Bunting	One Struma River, one Kresna Gorge, two Stara Kresna.
Black-headed Bunting	Two Damyanitsa, common Melnik, also seen Rupite, Stara Kresna and Dragoman Marsh.
Rock Bunting	Probable Kresna Gorge.
Spanish Sparrow	Small numbers Damyanitsa and Melnik.

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Nomenclature follows Kwet: **European Reptile and Amphibian Guide**

Agile Frog	A probable on the road at Melnik at night with tadpoles presumed to be this species nearby the following morning.
Marsh Frog	Abundant Rupite and Aldomirovtsi Marsh.
Hermann's Tortoise	One Rupite and two Melnik.
Balkan Wall Lizard	2+ Melnik
Eastern Green Lizard	1+ on hills above Dragoman Marsh