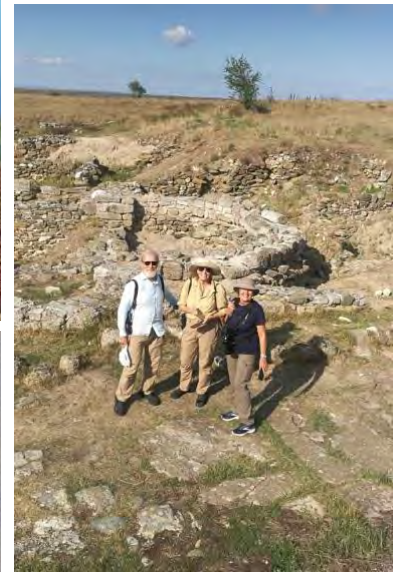
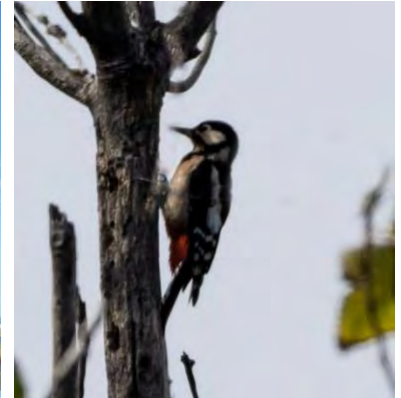


# Romania & Bulgaria: Black Sea Coast Migration

## Sept. 15-24, 2023 | by Gerard Gorman



**With guide, Gerard Gorman, and participants: Naturalist Journeys group leader Gerard, with co-guide Dimiter and Collete, Amnon and Kate**



This first Naturalist Journey's trip to Romania and Bulgaria saw us explore two fascinating and friendly countries. Many of the people we met and the places we visited were simply incredible, the wildlife habitats impressive and the landscapes and seascapes inspirational. We travelled in a southerly direction, often closely following the coast of the Black Sea. We visited grassy plains, salt marshes, lagoons, lakes, rocky headlands, sandy beaches, and leafy woodlands. We also stopped at historical locations hailing from Thracian, Greek, Roman, Turkish and other cultures. Our journey took us along the so-called *Via Pontica*, Europe's eastern bird migration flyway. We recorded 151 bird species and there were many highlights amongst them. We saw 12 species of wildfowl, 20 shorebirds, 7 gulls, 11 birds of prey, 6 corvids and 8 woodpeckers. Outstanding sightings included 100s of Great White Pelicans fishing in unison, 1000s of feeding Greater Flamingos, hordes of colorful European Bee-eaters, and a remarkable figure of 155 Pallas's Gulls on one day. Balkan bird specialties included Dalmatian Pelican, Levant Sparrowhawk, Long-legged Buzzard and Yelkouan Shearwater.



Favorite cultural stops were the Greco-Roman ruins at Histria and Cape Kaliakra, the Venetian fort at Enisala and the Thracian mound at Pomorie. Our accommodations were well-located, in ideal places for our itinerary. At mealtimes we invariably dined on local cuisine – healthy salads, traditional soups, lots of fresh fish and authentic yogurt. Furthermore, the weather was kind, warm and sunny throughout.

### **Fri., Sept. 15**                      **Romania | Bucharest | Baia**

We all met at 1.30pm at Bucharest airport and after brief introductions we set off for the east of Romania, our destination being the Dobrudja region along the coast of the Black Sea. After negotiating busy traffic in the city, we took a fairly new highway towards Constanta. We crossed two branches of the mighty River Danube over impressive bridges. At a stop for fuel and refreshments, we had good looks at Rooks, Hooded Crows and Eurasian Magpies. Large flocks of Yellow-legged Gulls and Rooks were resting and feeding in fields. As we passed through a farmland area we saw several raptors – Eurasian Kestrels, Eurasian Marsh-Harriers, Common Buzzards and a single Lesser Spotted Eagle. Flocks of Barn Swallows were moving through, too. Other roadside birds included a male Ring-necked Pheasant, Common Woodpigeons and Eurasian Collared Doves. Just before Constanta we turned north. After a few miles, we pulled over to get photos of a Eurasian Kestrel on an electricity pylon. We arrived at our family-run guesthouse, by a farm in a rural area typified by vast crop fields, at around 6.30pm. After dinner, we discussed our plans for the next day and retired for the night full of anticipation.

### **Sat., Sept. 16**                      **Baia | Jurilovca | Lake Sinoe | Enisala | Lake Babadag** **Babadag**

We had breakfast at 7.15am and at 8am set off for our first full day of birding. A Black Redstart was singing from a rooftop at our accommodation and there were many Rooks, Eurasian Jackdaws and Eurasian Magpies around the yard and an adjacent granary. We went towards Lake Sinoe, a vast coastal lagoon much of which is part of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve. We had panoramic views over this wetland from a ridge just outside the village of Jurilovca. The wetland below us was packed with birds. A flock of Glossy Ibis flew by, and we watched our first Pygmy Cormorants (we'd see many more in the coming days) and around twenty Whiskered Terns. We saw many species of wildfowl - Red-crested Pochards, two Common Pochards, about ten Northern Pintails, a Gadwall, a Eurasian Wigeon and a Garganey, the latter a really handsome little duck. In the late morning hundreds of Graylag Geese started to fly in, some "honking" right over our heads, to the water. We witnessed a wonderful display by Great White Pelicans. A couple of hundred of these birds had been resting on the far side of the lake but when a few others flew in and started fishing on "our" side of the lake, the distant mass began to



move and fly in to join the others. Eventually, we estimated that about 400 pelicans were working together on the water, apparently herding a shoal of fish towards the reeds, probably trying to trap them there in the shallower water. It was great to watch this behavior. We saw our first Osprey; one of four that we'd see today. In a nearby village, a female Eurasian Golden Oriole sat in clear view in a bare tree - rather unusual for this species, which often hides in the canopy. We then drove to Enisala where the ruins of a hilltop fort dominate the landscape. The fortress was built in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Genovese merchants who had the rights to navigation on this stretch of the Black Sea (at that time the sea was not cut off from this area by the sandbanks that gradually developed). The views from the hilltop over the surrounding steppe, farmland and vineyards of the Dobrogea region, and the vast Razelm lagoon, were truly splendid. Crested Larks showed well here and there were several Eurasian Kestrels, Common Buzzards and a European Honey Buzzard in the air, but the "best" bird was undoubtedly a handsome white morph Booted Eagle which flew above us and sometimes quite low by us as it hunted (this species also has a dark color form). We drove down to Lake Babadag seeing various egrets, herons and shorebirds, then into the town of Badadag itself. This town has a strong Ottoman past, and we stopped to look at the Gazi Atik Ali Pasha Mosque and minaret which date from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. We returned to our accommodation in the late afternoon after an exciting and productive day.

## **Sun., Sept. 17                      Baia | Lake Sinoe | Histria | Sinoe village**

This morning we took a farm road through vast crop fields towards another part of Lake Sinoe. On the way we saw Red-backed Shrike, White and Western Yellow Wagtails, Meadow Pipit and a group of Spanish Sparrows in a bush. Eurasian Marsh-harriers and Eurasian Kestrels were almost always in view; indeed, we'd see these raptors daily throughout our trip. The crop fields hosted large flocks of Mediterranean and Black-headed Gulls, and we were able to compare these similar species. Two Bearded Reedlings popped up in trackside reeds. On and around the lake there were more Great White Pelicans, twenty-five Dalmatian Pelicans, Common Shelducks, Northern Lapwings, Ruff, Common Snipe, Spotted and Common Redshanks, Purple and Gray Herons and Eurasian Spoonbills. There was a Gull-billed Tern, Common Terns and a dozen Caspian Terns. Several hundred gulls roosting on an island included Black-headed, Mediterranean, Caspian and an exceptional 155 (we counted them carefully) Pallas's Gulls - in many years visiting this area I have never seen more than a dozen or so. Also known as "Great Black-headed Gull" it is one of the biggest gull species in the world, with a wingspan of up to 162cm. The nearest breeding populations are on the other side of the Black Sea in southern Ukraine and Russia and is a rare vagrant to Europe proper. As we drove out of the area a Eurasian Hoopoe, spotted by Kate, was on the ground at the edge of a village. To say that this species was a popular bird would be an understatement! Collete, Amnon and Kate had all really wanted to see it and were not disappointed. Lunch was in the restaurant at the Histria archeological site.



As we dined, most of us chose local fish dishes, we watched migrating songbirds perch on a fence and come in to bathe and drink at a water feature. This was relaxing birding. There were Red-breasted and Spotted Flycatchers and Willow Warblers - the latter would be the most common warbler species we'd encounter during our travels. Histria, historically known as Histriopolis, is believed to have been founded in the 7th century BC. It was subsequently inhabited by Greeks and from the 1st to 3rd centuries AD became a Roman settlement. It was abandoned during the 7th century AD. We visited the museum and walked around the ruins. A Northern Wheatear stood on one of the walls and as we left a Little Owl called, which seemed apt as in Greek mythology this bird was associated with Athena the goddess of wisdom. This is reflected in the scientific name of this owl, *Athene noctua*. In the afternoon we stopped in the village of Istria where we saw a Syrian Woodpecker. Satiated with birds and culture, we returned to our accommodation, rested, had dinner, ran through our checklist and retired for the night.

## **Mon., Sept. 18                      Baia | Cheile Gorge | St. Dionisie Monastery | into Bulgaria at Vama Veche | Durankulak**

This morning we left our kind hosts at Baia and began our journey southwards to Bulgaria. But we were not in a rush to leave Romania just yet, we still had some places to visit. First, our route took us through a rocky gorge near the village of Cheile. We watched Eurasian Tree Sparrows in the trees here and several Eurasian Jays which landed in bushes on a cliff. A Eurasian Green Woodpecker called and then flew over. At the other end of the gorge there were European Stonechats, Willow Warblers and Red-backed Shrikes in the bushes and Black Redstarts on the rocks. As we continued European Bee-eaters were often in view, their fall migration obviously in full-swing. Our next stop was at the monastery of St. Dionisie Exiguul and St. Ephrem the New, which was located in a quite valley near the town of Târgușo. Two European Rollers were seen sitting on utility poles by the lane that led to the monastery. We were allowed to enter the chapel and although not ancient, the colorful wall and ceiling paintings within were beautiful. It was cool and peaceful inside. We chatted to a nun, who spoke good English and was very informative. There were birds here, too.

Before we left, we saw Syrian Woodpecker and Spotted and Red-breasted Flycatchers in the trees outside. On we went. We stopped for lunch in a restaurant called "Enigma" and then reached Constanta, Romania's main Black Sea port. We encountered a traffic jam around the city, owing to road works, but it did not delay us too much and we were soon heading down the coast road again. After passing through some tourist resorts, we crossed from Romania into Bulgaria at Vama Veche. A few miles over the border we turned off the road and got



to the sandy beach at Durankulak. We were right by the Black Sea now and Kate even paddled in it. Great Cormorants, Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls were on and over the sea. Now and then small hills dotted the landscape on our route. They were Thracian mounds dating from 2nd-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD (later in the week we'd visit one). We paused for gas and a coffee and heard another Syrian Woodpecker: no surprise, as this species is one of the most "urban" of Europe's woodpeckers. Before reaching our destination at Kavarna, Dimiter suggested we try a nearby grassland to look for Eurasian Thick-knees. Sure enough, due to his local knowledge, we soon found them. A group of around ten standing and sitting on the sheep-grazed ground. It was a very good bird with which to end the day. We drove to our comfortable hotel, checked in and later went out to a local restaurant for dinner. Today had mainly been a day of travelling, and we had even crossed an international frontier, but on route we had passed through some very diverse landscapes and observed a rich range of birds.

## **Tues., Sept. 19                      Kavarna | Balgarevo | Bolata | Lake Sabla**

As we left this morning Common Swifts were flying around over the town. We first went to Bolata, a protected rocky and wooded valley just off Cape Kaliakra, less than 30 minutes way. We took an easy walk on a paved road seeing both Eurasian and Levant Sparrowhawks - we were able to compare these two very similar raptor relatives. Many European Bee-eaters and Barn, Bank and Red-rumped Swallows were in the sky. We saw Eurasian Blackbirds, and heard a Water Rail and a Eurasian Moorhen but could not see these owing to some very high reeds. Further into the valley in a clearing we got better views than yesterday of a Eurasian Green Woodpecker. Three more Syrian Woodpeckers appeared, too. A Eurasian Hobby flew speedily by, chasing the swallows. After that, we headed up the coast, stopping just after the village of Tyulenovo to take photos of the Sabla lighthouse. Built by the Turks in 1856, this landmark is situated on the easternmost land point of Bulgaria and is also the oldest lighthouse in the country.

We had another relaxed and fine *a la carte* lunch in a local restaurant. We were really eating well. As we left, another Eurasian Hobby was spotted from the parking lot, this one perched on a snag – one of six of these smart falcons we'd see today. They, too, were migrating south towards Africa. We then birded Lake Sabla, another protected coastal lagoon with reedy and bushy fringes which is separated from the Black Sea by a line of sand dunes. At once we saw a line of pinkish-colored birds on the other side of the lake: our first Greater Flamingos. There were also numerous gulls and terns and egrets here. Shorebirds in patches of shallow water and on muddy and sandy edges included several Common and Little Ringed Plovers, Dunlin, Little Stint, a lone Curlew Sandpiper and a Black-bellied Plover. Sabla was clearly an important stop-over site. From a birding blind we were able to get close views of some of these as well as another new bird, a Little Gull. Truth be told, this



individual did not seem too healthy as at first it was very reluctant to fly away, though it eventually did so. We returned to Kavarna at around 5:30pm and tonight ate in the restaurant of our hotel.

### **Wed., Sept. 20                      Kavarna | Cape Kaliakra | Balgarevo | Sveti Nikola**

Today we went out pre-breakfast, to Cape Kaliakra, a narrow rocky peninsula that juts out into the sea. As we left a Little Owl watched us from a rooftop. Ornithologically, the cape is an important migration stopover on the *Via Pontica*, particularly in the fall. It is also a protected architectural site. Kaliakra, which means “beautiful cape”, is steeped in history. The first Thracian settlement here dates back to the 4th century BC. A Roman bath and tomb from the 4th century AD and medieval churches have been unearthed by archeologists. Cape Kaliakra is riddled with caves, coves and also legends. The most famous, commemorated by a huge stature, tells of forty Bulgarian maidens led by the beautiful Kaliakra who plunged from the cliffs into the sea below rather than be taken by the invading Ottomans. They braided their hair together to ensure that they did so as one. We were soon there as the cape lay just a few miles from our hotel in Kavarna. We arrived just as the sun was rising over the Black Sea - it was magnificent and memorable. Around a dozen European Shags sat on the rocky cliffs below us.

The Mediterranean/Black Sea *desmarestii* subspecies of this marine cormorant occurs here. We wandered through the ruins taking in the history, as we found stopover warblers, flycatchers and a Northern Wheatear. Across Europe Alpine Swifts are, as their name suggests, mainly birds of high mountains, but here at Kaliakra they breed on coastal cliffs. Although they had finished breeding many were still around and we had good looks at dozens, some even flying below us. A great bird here was Yelkouan Shearwater. We had outstanding views of two resting on the sea, much better than we had expected as this species is often only seen in flight, skimming low over the water far from the land. Sandwich Terns, Yellow-legged Gulls and Great Cormorants were perched on fishing net poles in the sea far below. We went back for a late breakfast and then went out again to the steppe around Balgarevo. Arguably the best find here was not a bird but a reptile - a Spur-thighed Tortoise (aka “Greek Tortoise”). We moved on and walked a track across the steppe grassland seeing Skylarks, Corn Buntings and Red-backed Shrikes. A European Honey-buzzard was seen moving down the coast but then came a real highlight. A Short-toed Snake-Eagle was spotted hanging in the air, hunting in typical fashion. It then perched on a utility-pole, but it was some way off, so we jumped in the van to drive nearer. This was a risk, but it worked, we took a sidetrack and got better views. This super sighting later took on a greater significance when Collete confirmed that this raptor was her 1000<sup>th</sup> life bird. A nearby cattle water trough was obviously attractive to thirsty birds, and we watched two European Turtle-Doves, a Eurasian Linnet and a charm of European Goldfinches coming to drink. Our final stop today was by a farm where several Crested Larks trotted about on



the ground and sat on the buildings. Close by we heard, and then saw, a Wood Lark, too. It had been another memorable day. Collete said that she wanted to get a bottle of local wine so that we could celebrate the 1000<sup>th</sup> bird milestone she had achieved today. So, we stopped in a store in Kavarna and, appropriately, she found one with an eagle on the label. Kate, too, got into the spirit of things and bought a bottle with a Bee-eater on it. All in all, it had been another fantastic day.

### **Thurs., Sept. 21 Kavarna | Balchik | Baltata Reserve | Eastern Balkan Range Lake Atanasovsko | Bourgas | Kraymorie**

We went out at 7.30 to a known spot for Eurasian Eagle-Owl on cliffs near Balchik. Unfortunately, the bird did not cooperate, but we did find other things and the morning views over the Black Sea were wonderful. A Song Thrush perched at the top of a tree and two Hawfinches flew over. A noisy male Ring-necked Pheasant proved popular. We went back for a later than usual breakfast and then checked out. We left Kavarna and moved southwards again taking the E87 coast road. Our first stop was at the Baltata Reserve near the tour resort of Albena. Here we walked a track into the woods seeing Common Chaffinches, Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Green Woodpecker. Adult and juvenile European Robins hopped out on to the track a few times, too. We had a cake and coffee break in Varna before continuing our journey. Further on we explored the edge of a village and found a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – at just 1-16 cm in length this is Europe's smallest picid, about the size of a Downy Woodpecker. We had lunch in this same village, in an excellent eatery which only served authentic local dishes. Continuing on, we left the E87 and went inland, taking country roads through the foothills of the Eastern Balkan Range. Here the settlements were clearly less affluent than those of the coast, it is likely that most tourists don't venture inland and thus the money they spend stays in the Black Sea resorts.

At one roadside stop we found a Eurasian Nuthatch moving between some old oak trees. Once again, we saw flocks of beautiful European Bee-eaters, flying overhead and sometimes perched on roadside wires. A party of Common Ravens flew over and every now and then Eurasian Jays were spotted. A White Stork in a roadside field was spotted, too. Our final birding stop was at Lake Atanasovsko at the edge of the city of Bourgas where we were greeted by over 1000 Greater Flamingos, hundreds of feeding Pied Avocets and other shorebirds, egrets, herons, Great White and Dalmatian Pelicans and a range of ducks. We then drove a short way to our next hotel, a small family-run establishment in the seaside resort of Kraymorie.



## **Fri., Sept. 22                      Kraymorie | Pomorie salt-lakes | Thracian Mound at Pomorie | Nessebar | Lake Atanasovsko**

This morning we first visited sites around Pomorie, a seaside town that historically was inextricably linked to the production of salt. At first, we explored two large reed-fringed lakes just outside town. Two Eurasian Penduline-

Tits performed well here, sitting up in the reeds and then in a bush. A Greater Whitethroat briefly perched in the same bush, too. There were many feeding Greater Flamingos and a squadron of Great White Pelicans flew over. We also saw a Common Redshank and a Common Kingfisher that flew passed us low over the water a couple of times. We then moved to the smaller ponds right by Pomorie where several shorebirds could be watched up close – Ruddy Turnstone, Ruff, Sanderling in very white winter plumage, Dunlin and tiny Little Stints. A Slender-billed Gull swimming close to the shore was our only one of the tour. Hundreds of Sandwich Terns were sitting on a line of poles in the water, so close we could see the yellow tips to their bills, along with both Pygmy and Great Cormorants. In addition to the birdlife, there was a “cultural” thing to observe here. The black mud below these shallow, very saline waters, is said to be therapeutic. Some of the locals claim that it helps rejuvenate the skin and even cures musculoskeletal problems. Indeed, as we birded a group of people were paddling into the water nearby, taking advantage of what is in effect a free, open-air spa, bathing in it and plastering it over themselves. We did not join them, though it was tempting as we would have no doubt got some amusing group photos! As midday approached, it was beginning to get hot, so we stood in the shade of the rather basic visitor center. From here we scoped the wetland which was full of birds. A Red-rumped Swallow continually flew low and close giving us our best views of this species and we saw another Penduline Tit. On another smaller basin there were Black-winged Stilts, Wood Sandpipers, two Marsh Sandpipers and several Little Gulls transitioning into winter plumage. It was fairly easy to photograph these. Just outside town we visited another fascinating cultural site, a Thracian mound dating from 2nd-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. Known locally as a “beehive” mound because of its domed shape, experts are divided as to what the structure actually was although most believe it was a tomb of a wealthy family where pagan religious rituals were also performed. It exhibits architectural elements of Roman mausoleums, but the domed shape and soil covering is typically Thracian. We then visited to the old port town of Nessebar which sits on a small peninsula in the Black Sea. There has been a settlement here for more than 3000 years, originally Thracian, in 6th century BC Greek, then Byzantine.

We had a stroll and took photos of some of the ancient walls, but it was rather busy with other sightseers, so we did not linger. As we left a lone Eared Grebe was spotted in the small harbor. Before heading back to our hotel, we stopped again at Lake Atanasovsko. The shallow saline waters were simply alive with feeding and resting birds - Green-winged Teal, Common Shelducks, Northern Shovelers, Greater Flamingos, Black-tailed Godwits and





probably more Pied Avocets than on our previous visit. We also found a new shorebird for our trip list, Common Greenshank. We counted forty-five Dalmatian Pelicans standing on platforms in the lake, an exceptional number of a species that is very rare in western Europe. When doing our checklist after dinner we agreed we had seen over 1000 Great White Pelicans today, fishing, resting and flying south in flocks.

## **Sat., Sept. 23                      Atanasovsko Banding Camp | Ropotamo Nature Reserve Lake Mandra | Kraymorie**

Before breakfast we visited a bird banding camp by Lake Atanasovsko. The dedicated volunteers here catch and band passage birds, mainly passerines, every fall and add the information collected to a national database. In the time we were there, we were shown a European Robin, a Common Redstart, three Sedge Warblers, a Eurasian Reed Warbler, male and female Eurasian Blackcaps, a Garden Warbler and a Lesser Whitethroat. We also saw our only Eurasian Moorhen of the trip, one swimming across an inlet of the lake. After an hour we went back for breakfast and after that drove south along the coast road to the Ropotamo Nature Reserve. The woodlands here, at the easternmost end of the Standzha mountains, are particularly good for woodpeckers. Indeed, we saw Black, Gray-headed and the rarest of all White-backed Woodpecker, and heard Lesser Spotted, Great Spotted and Middle-spotted. We also saw two Short-toed Treecreepers and heard Eurasian Nuthatches here. As we prepared to leave Kate spotted a deer among the trees. Soon after, it ran across the track between ahead of us and we saw that it was a Fallow Deer stag with fine antlers.

After lunch in yet another nice restaurant in the pleasant small seaside town of Chernomorets, we drove to Lake Mandra. We found a gap amongst the waterside trees and, trying not to overly disturb an angler, saw many of the now “usual suspects”. We got our best views of Great Crested Grebes and some Little Grebes. As we approached another spot to view the lake, two Tree Pipits were spotted on the track in front of us. A group of Eurasian Spoonbills were resting in the open and Purple and Gray Herons often flew by. A Water Rail called several times but would not show – typical rail behavior that we’d all experienced before! While we waited for the rail, we did see several Marsh Frogs and heard many more as they occasionally burst into a cacophony of croaking. Although it was the penultimate day of our tour, we continued to pick up new species. For example, here an immature White-tailed Eagle, Europe’s biggest bird of prey, suddenly appeared over the lakeside trees. Many of the waterbirds scattered. A little later two more marvelous eagles arrived, another immature and an adult with its complete white tail.

**Sun., Sept. 24**

**Kraymorie | Karnabat Hills | Sliven | Sofia Airport**

After breakfast we left the coast and headed inland, westwards towards Sofia, the Bulgarian capital and its airport. After an hour or so we stopped for a while in the Karnabat Hills. .... two Long-legged Buzzards and a Red Fox. At another stop, near Sliven, we came upon a Black Stork in a field. This was a great “last minute” species to add to our trip list. As we drove on, I asked everyone what their favorite birds had been during the tour. Collete said her number one was the Short-toed Snake Eagle, especially as it was the 1000<sup>th</sup> bird on her global life list! She also enjoyed the Eurasian Hoopoe, European Bee-eaters and European Goldfinches. Amnon’s favorite was the Booted Eagle that hunted around the fort of Enisala in Romania. Kate’s best birds were White-backed Woodpecker, Eurasian Hoopoe, Little Owl and also the Short-toed Snake Eagle. We all agreed that the spectacle of hundreds of Great White Pelicans fishing together at Lake Sinoe in Romania was very special. Last and certainly not least, I’d like to thank Collete, Kate, Amnon and our knowledgeable local expert Dimiter, for their help in making this original and pioneering journey to Romania and Bulgaria a success.

*Photo Credits: Coastal Saltmarsh (Gerard Gorman - GG), Great Spotted Woodpecker (Colette Dubuisson - CD), European Bee-eater (Malden Vasilev), Great White Pelicans (CD), Group (GG), Booted Eagle (CD), Black Redstart (GG), Crested Lark (GG), Various Shorebirds including Dalmatian Pelicans (CD), Eurasian Marsh-harrier (Faucouneau Colette- FC), Western Yellow Wagtail (CD), Eurasian Hoopoe (CD), White Wagtail (CD), Eurasian Thick-knee (CD), Red-breasted Flycatcher (CD), Little Gull (CD), Little Ringed Plover (CD), European Shags (CD), Short-toed Snake Eagle (CD), Sanderling (GG), Great White Pelicans (GG), Sunrise at Cape Kaliakra (GG)*