

Bulgaria in Summer

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Sofia & transfer Melnik.
- Day 2/3** Pirin Mountains from Melnik.
- Day 4/7** Pirin Mountains from Bansko.
- Day 8** Fly London.

Departs

July or August.

Focus

General natural history.

Grading

Grade A/B. Easy to moderate day walks.

Dates and Prices

See website www.naturetek.co.uk (tour code BGR0401) or our latest brochure

Highlights:

- Walks in the beautiful Pirin Mountains National Park.
- General wildlife tour focusing on butterflies, insects, birds, plants & other wildlife.
- European Bee-eater, Pallid Swift & Syrian Woodpecker among avian highlights.
- Over 80 species of butterfly possible.
- Dragonflies such as White-tailed Skimmer & Scarlet Darter.
- Visit Melnik, one of Bulgaria's most attractive villages.
- Led by expert naturalist guides.



From top: Vihren Mountain Hut, Bansko, Red-backed Shrike, Swallowtail. (images courtesy of Paul Stanbury & Shutterstock)



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Introduction

This 8-day, two centre, wildlife holiday to the mountains of Bulgaria will take you to the Pirin Mountains National Park in search Bulgaria's abundant butterfly, dragonfly, birdlife and plantlife. We start the tour in the small picturesque village of Melnik from where we will search for the fauna and flora of the dry south-western Pirin before crossing out of the rain-shadow to the town of Bansko to continue our holiday amongst the lush pine-forested slopes and alpine meadows of the north-eastern Pirin.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Sofia, transfer Melnik, Pirin Mountains

We depart London Heathrow this morning on the scheduled service of British Airways to Sofia. Upon our arrival in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, we will transfer by road for approximately 160 kilometres to Melnik, a small picturesque village at the base of Pirin Mountains. This is a pleasant drive through a landscape of rolling farmland and forests. Our journey is sure to be enlivened by our first Bulgarian birds such as White Stork, Hoopoe, Crested Lark, Red-backed Shrike, Corn Bunting or a flock of colourful Bee-eaters perched on roadside wires. If time permits there may be the opportunity for a couple of brief botanical and butterfly stops. We aim to arrive at our comfortable hotel near Melnik by early evening,



Hoopoe

our base for the first 3-nights of the tour. Melnik is a beautiful historic village (actually Bulgaria's smallest town with a population of only 800 people!) famous for its locally produced wines. Backed by the Pirin Mountains and the bizarrely weathered 'sandstone pyramids', this small town has witnessed the passage of the Thracians, Romans and Byzantines, all of which have left their mark on its unique and beautiful architecture.

Day 2

Melnik, Pirin Mountains

Today we only have around 40 kilometres to drive as we explore the volcanic Rupite region. Hot thermal springs still bubble to the surface here, the pools reaching temperatures in excess of 80°C. Rupite is a dry rocky landscape of volcanic hills dominated by the huge crater of the inactive volcano Kojuh. Once again the climate and flora are predominantly Mediterranean in character with mild winters and hot dry summers. A glance skyward may yield a passing Long-legged Buzzard, whilst closer to the ground we may find Corn and Cirl Buntings and Woodlark. Sunny weather is almost guaranteed here so we are sure

to encounter a variety of butterflies such as Tree Grayling, Great Banded Grayling, Swallowtail, Freyer's



Corn Bunting

Purple Emperor, Lattice Brown, Hungarian Glider and Russian Heath. There are also numerous other insects to look out for including three species of mantis and the curious Long-nosed Grasshopper. The sun should also bring out a range of dragonflies including *Chalcolestes parvidens*, Keeled Skimmer, Band-winged Dragonfly and Red-veined Darter.

Once again we will take a picnic lunch to enjoy in a cool shady spot and then return the short distance back to Melnik in the late afternoon for our second night in the south-western Pirin Mountains.

Day 3

Melnik, Pirin Mountains

This morning we will start our exploration of the Pirin Mountains southern slopes. The Pirin Mountains are a dramatic mountain range that lie in the south-western corner of Bulgaria, close to the border with Greece. This is a landscape of exceptional natural beauty with 100 high peaks over 2,000 metres, alpine



Black Pennant

meadows dotted with over 80 glacial lakes, forested hillsides and valleys, spectacular rocky gorges and sheer precipitous cliff faces. With such a variety of habitats and rock types (both limestone and acidic rocks are exposed here) it is not surprising to learn that this region holds a wealth of animal, insect and plant life, including both Wolf and Brown Bear, although these elusive mammals are very rarely seen! The character and habitats of the Pirin Mountains change from the dry Mediterranean habitats of the south-western slopes to the wetter pine-covered hills of the North-eastern Pirin.

Melnik lies in the south-western part of the range in the drier region within the rain-shadow. The north-eastern mountains are dominated by coniferous forests (spruce and pine) with the endemic Macedonian Pine (*Pinus peuce*) being widespread especially along the tree-line in the more granitic areas. Plant life is extremely rich and is a mixture of central European, Alpine, Balkan-mountain and Sub-Mediterranean species, 10% of which are Balkan endemics; indeed 20% of all the plants outlined in the Bulgarian Red Data Book are found in the Pirin Mountains, especially within the area protected by the National Park.

We will start our exploration of the dry rolling hills of the south-western Pirin with a visit to a series of ponds along the Struma River Valley. This area is especially good for butterflies and dragonflies, but the freshwater lakes and surroundings also hold an interesting selection of birds including Olivaceous Warbler, Hoopoe, Wryneck, White Stork, European Bee-eater and Roller. On warm sunny days butterflies are abundant and include such species as Large Copper, Lesser Fiery Copper, Little Tiger Blue, Lesser Spotted Fritillary, Chalk-hill Blue, and Krueper's Small White. Dragonflies are also numerous and include Black Pennant, Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly, *Orthetrum albistylum*, Lesser Emperor and Scarlet Darter; indeed past groups had no less than 23 species of dragonfly here!

Working our way south, we will cross over the Greek border, following the picturesque Struma River gorge to where it meets Lake Kerkini. Here we will find River Clubtail, Common Clubtail and Green Snaketail Dragonflies, while nearby marshes hold a selection of skimmers, chasers and darters. From along the dyke at the lakeside we will be able to observe a good variety of bird species too. Among those found here are Great White and Dalmatian Pelicans, Squacco, Black-crowned Night and Purple Herons, a variety of ducks and other water birds, along with Greater Flamingo.

After lunch by the shore, we will continue our exploration of the area as we search for one of the largest and most attractive dragonfly species, the Bladetail. Carrying on to the small port village of Mandraki, we will keep a look out for pipits, wagtails and other small passerines. On our way back towards the Bulgarian border, we will take a stop at



Knapweed Fritillary

the Pirinska Bistritsa River where the flood plains hold a good selection of shrikes, tits and larks, as well as a couple of rare dragonfly species, Balkan Goldenring and Yellow-spotted Emerald. Late in the afternoon we will return to our hotel near Melnik Museum town for our final night.

Day 4

Bansko, Pirin Mountains National Park

After breakfast, we begin the 120 kilometre drive to our next destination, the town of Bansko tucked into a valley on the north-eastern slopes of the Pirin range. We are now out of the rain shadow and the surrounding hillsides and mountains are clothed in lush pine forests that stretch from the valley bottoms up to the tree-line. Bansko is the gateway to the Pirin Mountains National Park. Climbing to over 2,900 metres and straddling the highest peaks in the range, this is the largest national park in all of Bulgaria and covers over 40,300 hectares.

We are sure to notice a dramatic change in scenery as we drive from Melnik to Bansko. As the mountains climb higher and higher the vegetation changes from dry scrub and patchy woodlands to more extensive deciduous forests. These gradually grade into mixed forests before we finally reach the lush pine forests of our journeys end. We are sure to make plenty of birdwatching and other wildlife stops en-route and aim to arrive early evening. There may be the opportunity to take our first walk into the surrounding forests and alpine meadows in search of birds such as Peregrine Falcon, Crag Martin and Pallid Swift, butterflies including Apollo, Ottoman Brassy Ringlet, Arran Brown and Balkan Copper and dragonflies such as Yellow-winged Darter, Downy Emerald and Scarce Emerald Damselfly.



Apollo

At the end of the afternoon we will make our way back to the town of Bansko and transfer to a comfortable hotel, our base for the next 4-nights of the tour.

Day 5

Bansko, Pirin Mountains National Park

After breakfast and an early morning stroll in the vicinity of the hotel, where we can expect to find Red-rumped Swallows, Black Redstarts and twittering Serins, we will spend the day exploring the tree-line forests and alpine meadows of the Pirin Mountains National Park. We start with the short journey to the Banderitsa Mountain Chalet at 1,800 metres above sea level from where we walk to the Vihren Mountain Chalet at 2,200 metres. The walk is not difficult and follows the road out above the tree-line and into the sub-alpine zone. The rock here is dominated by a white marble, on top of which a thin poor and patchy soil has developed over the years. Here we will visit the 'Baikusheva Mura' a Macedonian Pine thought to be the oldest tree in Bulgaria at 1,350 years old.

Pirin Mountains National Park



Backed by a myriad mountainous peaks and ridges we will continue to search the hillsides for birds and other wildlife such as Black Redstart, Nutcracker, Ring Ouzel (of the *alpestris* race), Water Pipit and Alpine Accentor. The forests here are dominated by Macedonian Pine, Bosnian Pine and Norway Spruce and although such mountain woodlands can be fairly quiet in August, careful searching could nonetheless still yield a few good species including Firecrest, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Honey Buzzard and Crested Tit. A wide variety of butterflies favour these high altitude meadows and forests. Species to look out for include Balkan Fritillary, Silky Ringlelet, Large Ringlelet, False Eros Blue, Eastern Large Heath, Olive Skipper, Dusky Grizzled Skipper and Scarce Copper plus dragonflies such as Southern Hawker, Common Hawker and Large Red Damselfly.

After a full day in the field we will return to our comfortable hotel in the town of Bansko.

Day 6

Bansko, Pirin Mountains National Park

Today we will head up into the mountains once again, this time by chairlift. After a 45 minute drive from our hotel we will take the chair lift to the Bezbog Chalet at 2,300 metres and explore the surrounding alpine meadows and pine forests. This is an especially good area for the Alpine Accentor along with Crossbill, Ring Ouzel, Black Redstart, Nutcracker and Bullfinch. Butterflies include Eastern Rock Grayling, Nicholl's Ringlelet, Ottoman Brassy Ringlelet and Eastern Large Heath whilst several high altitude ponds hold

dragonflies and Common Frogs. Flowers to look out for *Gentianella bulgarica*, *Gentiana pyrenaica*, False White Helleborine and Alpine Lovage.

If time permits we may also visit the Dobrinishte Region along the Mesta River around 25 kilometres from Bansko. This is another excellent area holding birds such as Lesser Spotted Eagle and Barred Warbler, plus a variety of butterflies including The Hermit, Great Banded Grayling and Lesser Spotted Fritillary. Late in the afternoon we will return to our hotel in Bansko for the final night of the tour.



Barred Warbler

Day 7

Bansko

For our final full day we will make our way to the world famous Rila Monastery, a UNESCO world heritage site. Set amid the forested hillsides, this 10th Century site has been rebuilt numerous times, most recently in the 1800s, and is recognised as a place of spiritual significance for many Bulgarians. Famed for its library, wood carvings and frescos, it has come a long way from the hermit's cave of its first inhabitant.

As well as learning more about the history of the area, we will be looking for birds and butterflies, as well as other wildlife that can be found around this area. Hoopoe, Woodchat and Lesser Grey Shrike are possible in the farmland near the monastery. Around Kirilova Polyana we will take a longer walk as we look out for Arran Brown, Scotch Argus, Large Ringlet and Black-veined White Butterflies, along with a variety of plants including *Rheum raponticum* and *Geum coccinium*.

Day 8

Fly London

Following an early breakfast we will leave on the long journey back to Sofia. En route we hope to stop for a short walk to stretch our legs around the start of the Kresna Gorge, by the Struma River. Part of the gorge is protected within the Tissata Reserve, a wonderfully diverse site, recently classified as an 'Important Bird Area' by Birdlife International. This rocky, river valley is covered in small trees and bushes and holds a predominantly Mediterranean flora. Grecian Juniper, Oriental Plane and Mediterranean White Oak dominate the woodlands home to such birds as Red-backed, Lesser Grey and Woodchat Shrikes, Red-rumped Swallow, Sombre Tit, Honey Buzzard and perhaps Levant Sparrowhawk. It is also an excellent area for butterflies with species to look out for including Eastern Wood White, Balkan Marbled White, Freyer's Grayling, Nettle-tree Butterfly, Sooty Copper, Knapweed Fritillary and Southern White Admiral. Dragonflies include *Cordulegaster bidentata*, *Onyhogomphus forcipatus*, Dainty Damselfly, and Scarce Chaser.

Time is not on our side today, however, and we must ensure that we arrive back at Sofia no later than 1300 hours in time to catch our early-afternoon flight to London. We are due to arrive back into London's Heathrow airport around 1600 hours.

Images courtesy of Dave Smallshire & Shutterstock

Focus

This is general natural history holiday focussing on Bulgaria's rich diversity of butterfly, dragonfly, bird and plant life. It should be noted that Bulgaria's mountain and forest birds do tend to become more difficult to find during the summer months and should birdwatching be your main reason for travelling then we would suggest you look at our Spring or Autumn tours (i.e. 90 species typically recorded in August versus 200+ in the spring!). July and August are wonderful months for butterflies and dragonflies, however, and any lack of birdlife will be more than compensated for by the huge diversity of these colourful insects.

Grading

Grade A/B - Easy to moderately strenuous. We will enjoy a series of short wildlife walks covering no more than a few miles at a time (NB: some of the footpaths can be steep and rocky in places). Any longer walks will be optional. Although we will be moving at a slow pace enjoying the wildlife as we go, we would still suggest that an average level of fitness is required to get the most out of this tour.

Weather

Mountain weather is always variable, with cloud and rain always a possibility, especially in the afternoons. However, at this time of year, the weather should be fine and sunny, with daytime temperatures ranging from 20-30°C+ in the lowlands. At high altitudes, overcast conditions can rapidly reduce temperatures, however, and here waterproofs and a warm jacket should be carried at all times.

Our daily schedule

We usually rise for breakfast around 8 am and aim to leave our hotel no later than 9 am for a full day in the field. We break the day to relax and enjoy a picnic or café lunch and aim to return to our hotel by 6pm, depending on the weather and our success in the field. This should allow a little time at the end of each day to relax, shower, and enjoy a drink before dinner. (Where possible, a pre-breakfast walk will be offered).

After dinner, for those with energy remaining, your leader will be keen to run through the wildlife seen during the day, and discuss findings with you before retiring to bed.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. Please note that hotels (and food) in Bulgaria are fairly simple so you should not expect luxurious accommodation on this tour! We will be using fairly basic, but clean and comfortable, accommodation throughout. Each room will have private facilities. Food tends to be plentiful, although it can be a little unvaried.

Extensions

For those of you wishing to see more of the city of Sofia we would be happy to arrange a couple of nights' accommodation in the Bulgarian capital at the end of the tour. Please contact us for more details.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Bulgaria. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.

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