

Bulgaria's Dragonflies

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1 Fly Sofia; transfer to Koprivshtitsa.

Day 2/3 Madzarovo.

Day 4 Pamporovo.

Day 5 Dospat.

Day 6/8 Melnik.

Day 9 Fly London.

Departs

June and July.

Focus

Dragonflies, birds and butterflies.

Grading

Grade A. This tour involves easy day walks only.

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code BGR05) or see the current Naturetrek brochure.

Highlights:

- Over 45 species of dragonfly recorded in 2013, 2014 and 2015!
- Look for Ornate Bluet & Small Pincertail along the River Topolnitza.
- Sombre Goldenring, Balkan Goldenring and Bulgarian Emerald all possible.
- Birds including Wallcreeper, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler & Black-headed Bunting.
- Up to 80 species of butterfly possible including Balkan Copper, Marbled Fritillary & Little Tiger Blue.
- Dramatic scenery of the Rhodope & Pirin Mountains.
- Led by Dave Smallshire, a trustee of the British Dragonfly Society.



From top: River Deimin Dere, Sombre Goldenring & Bladetail. Images by Dave Smallshire.



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Introduction

The focus of this 9-day tour is on the rich dragonfly fauna of central and southern Bulgaria, although the region's rich variety of birds and other wildlife will not be ignored! We will visit a variety of carefully selected wetlands, from mountain streams and bogs to lowland rivers and ponds, which host an exceptionally good range of eastern European dragonflies (up to 50 species may be on the wing). Our first night will be spent in the shadow of the towering Balkan range, in the picturesque village of Koprivshitsa. Our next venue is 155 kilometres to the south-east, well off the main tourist route in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. From here we will look for some very special dragonflies in the streams and rivers of this beautiful area. Moving westwards, via dragonfly sites in the Western Rhodope and Pirin Mountains, we will base ourselves in Melnik (Bulgaria's smallest town), from where we will travel just over the Greek border to Lake Kerkini and also explore ponds, rivers and even hot springs in the lowlands back in the Bulgarian Struma Valley. We will stop regularly during all of our journeys and enjoy a picnic lunch in the field most days.

NB. Please note that the itinerary outlined below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some reordering 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

Koprivshitsa

We will depart London Heathrow at about 0830 hours on the scheduled British Airways service to the Bulgarian capital of Sofia. On arrival in Sofia, we will transfer by road approximately 80 kilometres eastwards to the small village of Koprivshitsa, which is a World Heritage Site set in the Sredna Gora Mountains.

We will stop for refreshments on the journey and also to take in some of the local wildlife, including sites for the highly localised Ornate Bluet (*Coenagrion ornatum*). Weather permitting, we may also see Sombre Goldenring (*Cordulegaster bidentata*), as well as more familiar species such as Keeled Skimmer (*Orthetrum coerulescens*) and the ubiquitous Blue Featherleg (*Platynemis pennipes*). Our journey is sure to be enlivened by our first Bulgarian birds, which may include White Stork, Red-backed Shrike, Black-headed Bunting, or maybe an eagle or two. We aim to arrive at our comfortable hotel in Koprivshitsa by late afternoon, allowing time for a gentle evening stroll before sampling our first Bulgarian cuisine and wine.

Day 2

Madzarovo

A few members of the group will no doubt want to explore the historic town of Koprivshitsa before breakfast, to look for Dippers along the river in front of the hotel and Common Redstarts, Crossbills and Hawfinches in the riverside trees. Early morning is also the best time to appreciate the subtle plumage characteristics of the Pallid Swifts that breed in some of the buildings. After breakfast, we head south-east, soon stopping at a small reservoir and briefly then at a roadside breeding site for Isabelline Wheatear and Tawny Pipit. Bypassing Plovdiv, we will have lunch beside the tree-lined Maritsa River, where colourful Rollers, Bee-eaters and Golden Orioles may be seen. But of course it is the dragonflies that will be our main target here. Gomphids such as Small Pincertail, River Clubtail (*Gomphus flavipes*) and Green Snaketail (*Ophiogomphus cecilia*) may be found at the riverbank or feeding in the woodland glades, together with White-tailed Skimmers (*Orthetrum albistylum*), hordes of Banded Demoiselles (*Calopteryx splendens*) and other insects, including Mammoth Wasps and antlions.

During the afternoon we will stop at a small reservoir near Susam, no doubt adding a few more species to our growing list of dragonflies and butterflies. Then it's on to our hotel base in the Arda Valley - near the town of Madzarovo - for some superb wildlife viewing over the next two days.

Day 3

Madzarovo

Today we will visit the idyllic surroundings where the world's first Bulgarian Emerald (*Somatochlora borisi*) was found in 1999, almost by accident. We will visit this cool, shady, slow-flowing section of the River Deimin Dere near the Greek border where it was discovered by Dr Milen Marinov. Although its flight period may be over at the time of our visit, we will carefully check all the Balkan Emeralds (*Somatochlora meridionalis*) that also fly here just in case!

After a picnic lunch we will visit a fabulous, butterfly-rich glade near a pond and shady stream. Here we will search along the stream and woodland fringes for Western Willow Spreadwing (*Lestes viridis*), Turkish Goldenring (*Cordulegaster picta*), Eastern Spectre (*Caliaeschna microstigma*) and Balkan Emerald. The pond holds Robust Spreadwing (*Lestes dryas*), Blue-eye (*Erythromma lindeni*), Dainty Bluet (*Coenagrion scitulum*), Common Winter Damsel (*Sympecma fusca*) and several skimmers and darters. Butterflies may include Freyer's Purple Emperor, various blues and fritillaries and Yellow-banded Skipper.

Yet another small reservoir is well worth a circuit on our return to the hotel. Here spreadwings, Blue-eye, Blue-eyed Hawker (*Aeshna affinis*), Lesser Emperor (*Anax parthenope*) and Ruddy (*Sympetrum sanguineum*) and Red-veined (*Sympetrum fonscolombii*) Darters are all possible.

Day 4

Pamporovo

A stroll before breakfast may yield Syrian Woodpecker, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Sombre Tit. In the morning, we will visit Valchi Dol Valley, a superb setting for the peculiar Odalisque (*Epallage fatime*) – a damselfly that behaves rather like a darter. The stream here also holds the tiny hawk, Eastern Spectre (*Caliaeschna microstigma*) and the Balkan Emerald (*Somatochlora meridionalis*). Griffon and Egyptian Vultures and other raptors often soar overhead, while nearby rocks at the Studen Kladenetz Reservoir hold Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting and Krueper's Small White butterfly.

Moving on, we will head off west, rising higher into the Rhodope Mountains until the extensive broad-leaved forests eventually give way to conifers. We will stop enroute to search a braided river valley where Blue Chaser (*Libellula fulva*), Balkan Emerald and Blue-eyed Hawker can be found. In 2009 and 2013, the Naturetrek tour discovered Bulgarian Emerald here, the westernmost locality in the world! A walk around two nearby reservoirs should produce a good range of dragonflies, which has included Dark Spreadwing (*Lestes macrostigma*) on two recent visits. We will overnight in the mountain resort of Pamporovo.

Day 5

Dospat

The mountains of Bulgaria are the southernmost locations in the world for some otherwise northern species, such as Spearhead Bluet (*Coagrion hastulatum*), which we will hope to see this morning at highland lakes near Smolyan. Here this species rubs shoulders with Downy Emerald (*Cordulia aenea*), Four-spotted Chaser (*Libellula*

quadrifasciata) and Yellow-winged Darters (*Sympetrum flaveolum*), while Firecrests, Crested Tits, Nutcrackers and Black Woodpeckers live in the surrounding forest.

Travelling west we will pass through the magnificent Trigrad Gorge, for a delicious lunch of local trout. Returning to the deepest and narrowest part of the gorge, we will scan the nooks and crannies of the immense cliffs hopefully for a sight of the elusive Wallcreeper. Next, butterflies and orchids, rather than dragonflies, will be the focus of our attention, including such species as the magnificent Apollo, plus Chequered Skipper, Marsh Fritillary, Nettle-tree Butterfly and Poplar Admiral. After leaving the gorge we will stop at a low roadside cliff where Alpine Swifts and Crag Martins nest almost at eye level.

Continuing westwards we will visit a small stream where Europe's longest dragonfly, the Balkan Goldenring (*Cordulegaster heros*), breeds. We then spend tonight in a comfortable hotel near the town of Dospat, close to pine forest and flower-rich meadows that hold Black Woodpecker, Crested Tit, Nutcracker, Crossbill and Rock Bunting.

Day 6

Melnik

Next we continue our journey westwards along the southern flank of the Pirin mountain range before stopping at Bulgaria's largest peat bog. Passing glades of orchids our walk will take us through the conifer forest to a stream and its boggy fringes. Here we will look for Sombre Goldenring, as well as the more familiar Large Red Damselfly (*Pyrrhosoma nymphula*), Keeled Skimmer and Broad-bodied Chaser (*Libellula depressa*). We will also be looking out for Clouded Apollo among the many butterfly species taking salts or nectar from the flower-rich meadows and checking the tops of the pines for Nutcracker.

Descending out of the mountains we will walk along the tree-lined Bistritza River, which, along with adjacent marshy areas, is home to Eastern Spectre, Sombre and Balkan Goldenrings, Common Clubtail, Blue Chaser, Ruddy Darter and perhaps Yellow-spotted Emerald, which Naturetrek first discovered here in 2012.

Our final hotel lies in the foothills of the Pirin range in the picturesque and historic village of Melnik (the smallest town in Bulgaria), which is set amid strange, pyramid-shaped rock formations. A relaxing walk after dinner offers the opportunity to watch fireflies and listen for Scops Owl.

Day 7

Melnik

Today we will venture a short way over the Greek border to spend the day at Lake Kerkini National Park, which is renowned for its dragonflies as well as its wetland bird populations. The lake is set against a backdrop of high forested hills, but is actually an artificial reservoir originally dammed in 1932. It is a designated RAMSAR Site and home to one of Greece's largest breeding colonies of herons, cormorants and pelicans. Dalmatian Pelicans nest on an artificial island in the middle of the lake and are frequently seen fishing around its shores. Pygmy Cormorant, Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill and a range of egrets and herons are also common, whilst the fringing reedbeds and willows hold Great Reed Warbler and Penduline Tit. Of course the lake's rich dragonfly fauna will be a particular objective for us, and, as well as a range of species outlined above, we will make a special effort here to look for the spectacular Bladetail (*Lindenia tetraphylla*).

Day 8

Struma Valley, Melnik

An optional walk to the edge of Melnik before breakfast will be offered for those hoping to see Syrian Woodpecker, Golden Oriole, Hawfinch and Cirl and Rock Buntings, or simply to take in the rustic charm of the distinctive historic buildings.

After breakfast we will visit the hot springs at Rupite, where - in the cooler waters - Blue Chaser, River Clubtail and Red-veined Darter all occur. This area is also known for its breeding Long-legged Buzzards, regular visiting Eleonora's Falcons, large Mottled-winged Antlions (*Palpares libelloides*) and two enormous bush-crickets: the Balkan Predatory Bush-cricket (*Saga natoliae*), which itself feeds on large wart-biter bush-crickets, and the chunky *Bradyporus dasyptus*, which looks like a small armadillo forged from bronze!

After lunch in the shade of a nearby restaurant, we will make for a reservoir where Black Pennant (*Selysiothemis nigra*) usually breeds. There may also be time to look for dragonflies along the Struma River before we return to Melnik in time for some souvenir shopping and our final dinner together, taken outside while Kotschy's Geckos hunt for insects on the walls.

Day 9

London

Leaving Melnik promptly after an early breakfast will give us time to stop at the Kresna Gorge, en route to Sofia Airport. The rides through the riverside woodland teem with insect life, including a variety of dragonflies and butterflies such as Common Clubtail, Sombre Goldenring, Common Glider and Nettle-tree Butterfly, plus the delicate Thread-winged Lacewing, *Nemoptera sinuata*. We must ensure, however, that we leave in good time to get back at Sofia to catch our early-afternoon flight to London.

Grading

Grade A – easy. We will be on foot, typically around, and sometimes in, wet areas for much of each day. Occasionally we will need to negotiate some rocky or sloping ground. Sturdy, preferably waterproof footwear is therefore highly recommended. We will walk only short distances each day, and at all times move at a slow enough pace to allow full enjoyment of the wildlife as well as plenty of time for photography.

Weather

Daytime temperatures range from 25 - 35°C in the lowlands, and 15 - 25°C at high altitudes, where a jacket might be needed if you want to venture out before breakfast. Mountain weather is always variable, with cloud and rain always a possibility, especially in the afternoons, so waterproofs will be handy.

Focus

This holiday focuses on Bulgaria's rich dragonfly fauna, but we will also concentrate at times on birds, butterflies and other insects, reptiles, amphibians and plants. It is timed to provide the best range of dragonfly species in typically warm or hot conditions that provide the best opportunities to see them on the wing.

Daily schedule

We will usually have breakfast at about 0730 hours and aim to leave our hotel no later than 0830 hours for a full day in the field. We will break the day to relax and enjoy a picnic lunch and aim to return to our hotel at about 1830 hours, 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. 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. There will also be opportunities for short walks early and late in the day, for those who wish.

Optional extensions

For those of you wishing to see more of the city of Sofia we would be happy to arrange accommodation for a couple of nights in the Bulgarian capital at the end of the tour. Please call us for more details on 01962 733051.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. Please note that hotels (and food) in Bulgaria are simple in nature so you should not expect 5-star accommodation on this tour! We will be using fairly basic, but clean and comfortable, accommodation throughout, although each room will have private facilities.

Dragonfly, butterfly & bird lists

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.

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