

Winter Wildlife of Bulgaria & Romania – On the Trail of the Red-breasted Goose

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Sofia & transfer Vitosha Mountains.
Day 2/4	Pomorie & Burgas.
Day 5/6	Kavarna.
Day 7/8	Romania.
Day 9	Fly London.

Departs

January or February

Focus

Birds and other wildlife.

Grading

Grade A/B. Easy to moderate day walks only.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code BGR07) or our latest brochure

Highlights:

- Huge flocks of wintering geese, including White-fronted & Red-breasted.
- Ducks such as White-headed & Smew
- Long & Rough – legged Buzzard plus Golden & White-tailed Eagle.
- Grey-headed & Black Woodpecker possible.
- Stunning winter scenery.
- Waders and Gulls on the coast
- Possibility of Short-eared & Eagle Owl
- Led by expert naturalist guides



From top: Red-breasted Goose, Grey-headed Woodpecker & White-headed Duck. Photos courtesy of Shutterstock.



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Introduction

Each year the Black Sea and surrounding land plays host to thousands of geese, and other wildfowl, that form large overwintering flocks. The numerous coastal lakes, marshy areas and winter wheat fields provide good feeding grounds for the colder months, creating a natural spectacle as the birds move between the different sites. These are globally important sites for some species, with around 70% of the Red-breasted Goose population coming here each winter.

Starting in Sofia, we will firstly visit the Vitosha Mountains in search of Spotted Nutcracker, Red Crossbill and woodpecker. From here we will transfer to Bulgaria's Black Sea coast where we will explore the lakes and fields around Burgas where White-headed Duck, Red-crested Pochard and Smew can be found. Further north we will look for the big flocks of White-fronted and Red-breasted Geese around Kaliakra and Dourankoulak before crossing into Romania. Around Constanta we can find Black-necked Grebe in their winter plumage, as well as other ducks and grebes. The tour will finish in Bucharest.



Red-breasted Geese

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 Vitosha Mountains

We fly from London to Sofia in Bulgaria. On arrival we will make the short journey to the Vitosha Mountain range, a dome shaped massif, reaching an altitude of nearly 2,300m. Around the lower slopes we will be looking for Spotted Nutcracker, Red Crossbill, Ring Ouzel, Firecrest, Goldcrest and various woodpeckers in the spruce forests. This scenic region could well have a good dusting of snow on the peaks, creating a wintery wonderland. There may well be one or two day roaming foxes or some Red Deer around too. It's also home to a number of raptor and owl species, including Tawny, Long-eared and Tengmalm's Owl and

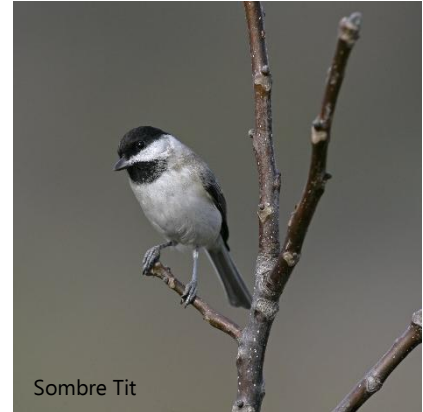
Common Kestrel, although we are would be very fortunate to encounter these. At the end of the day we will make our way to our comfortable hotel at the base of the mountain.

Day 2

Transfer to Pomorie

Today we will start with a walk in Vitosha National Park, before we make our way east, to the Black Sea coast, in a journey that is likely to take much of the day. Weather permitting, we hope to follow the more scenic mountain road along the Balkan range, where we will be looking out for, among others, Eastern Imperial Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard soaring above the forests and peaks.

As we travel eastwards we will start to notice the presence of more ponds and lakes. Where possible we will stop to scan these for wildfowl, herons and wading birds. We may also be able to stop at locations for Sombre Tit, White-backed Woodpecker, Alpine Chough, Rock Bunting or Cirl Bunting.



Sombre Tit

Once at the coast, we will make our way to Pomorie where we will be based for the next 3 nights.

Day 3

Pomorie & Burgas

A short walk from the hotel will take us to the coastal lagoons near the Salt Museum. In winter these provide safe areas for Pygmy Cormorant, Dalmatian Pelican, Smew, Bittern, White-headed Duck and Red-breasted Merganser. Waders and shorebirds are also found here, and may include Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew and Greenshank.

Pomorie Lake is highly saline and has been used for traditional salt production for centuries. It is also a source of mineral rich mud, used for cosmetics. A sand spit and created embankment separate the lake from the sea, offering a more sheltered place to rest and feed.



Smew

Nearby Lake Vaya (also known as Lake Burgas) is the largest of Bulgaria's natural lakes with an influx of mainly fresh water, although there is a channel to the sea that brings in a small amount of salt water. A protected area since the late 1990s, it is an important wintering location for around 100 bird species, including Pochard, Tufted, Ferruginous and White-headed Duck, Teal and Black-throated Diver. There are also populations of Otter, Polecat and rodents that use the lake system. The smaller mammals are an excellent food source for birds of prey, such as Hen Harrier, Kestrel, Long-legged Buzzard and possibly White-tailed Eagle. The margins consist of reedbed, woodland and fields, which provide habitat for Crested Lark, Grey Partridge, Syrian Woodpecker, Sombre Tit, Hawfinch and Cirl Bunting, among others.

Day 4

Pomorie & Burgas

We'll spend our day exploring some of the lakes and fields around the Burgas region. There are a number of protected areas, including the Mandra, Chengene Skele Bay and Foros Bay, making up a complex of



Whooper Swans

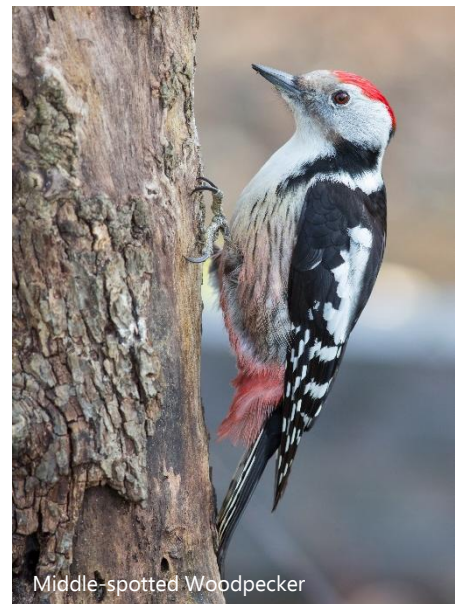
of salt water, brackish and fresh water habitats where there are a variety of endangered bird species. The hyper-salinity of some of the shallow lakes and salt pans mean that they don't freeze over, so we will be scanning the open water and banks for Pallas's Gull, Pygmy Cormorants, Great White Egret, Whooper and Bewick's Swan, as well as White-tailed Eagle. If these large birds are on the hunt we may come across flocks taking to the air in a noisy, swirling mass.

Lake Mandra (or Mandrensko) is the most southerly of the lakes around Burgas. It's around 5 miles long and approximately a mile wide. Originally brackish water, the construction of dams has turned this into a freshwater lake. Pygmy Cormorant, Dalmatian Pelican and Ferruginous Duck all winter here and will be among the birds that we will look out for.

Chengene Skele Bay is a mix of mudflats, sandy beach and dense *Phragmites* reedbeds, with nearby slopes covered in secondary growth broadleaf forests. This small bay is the estuary of the Marinka River and the only coastal mud flat in Bulgaria. We'll expect to see a similar range of species as Lake Mandra along with a number of Great White Egret. The occasional rarity infrequently turn up here and we will keep our eyes open for anything unusual. There were reports from this location of Slender-billed Curlew, now unfortunately thought to be extinct.

A visit to Foros Bay may well turn up some Black-throated Diver, Ruddy Shelduck, Slavonian and Black-necked Grebe, three species of swan, Slender-billed Gull and Marsh Harrier. A search of the reeds may produce a family of Bearded Tit or other small passerine.

Our final stop will be at the Strandzha Mountains, which are situated on the border with Turkey. Here we'll look for Great Spotted, Middle Spotted, Black and White-backed Woodpecker, although the Great and Middle Spotted are the most common. Eurasian Nuthatch, tits and Short-toed Treecreeper are possible as well.



Middle-spotted Woodpecker

Day 5

Transfer to Kavarna

Today we will be moving north, towards the town of Kavarna. En-route we will make a number of birding stops for birds. Our first stop is likely to yield a lovely mix of Brambling, Woodlark and Sombre Tit. In the oak forests we can look for Great Spotted, Middle Spotted, Lesser and Green Woodpecker as well as

Short-toed Treecreeper, listening out for their calls and drumming to guide us to their locations. As we drive we will cross the Balkan range close to where it meets the sea. Here the Albena Forest is home to Grey-headed and Black Woodpecker.

We'll arrive at our hotel in Kavarna later in the day and we'll spend the next two nights here.

Day 6

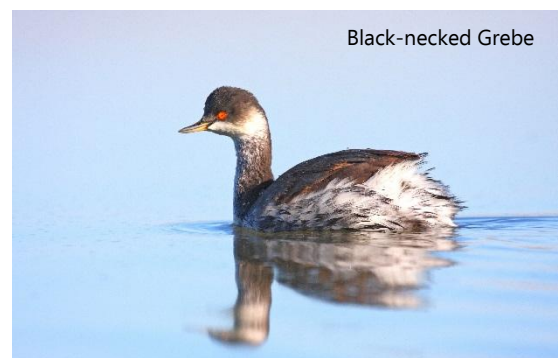
Kaliakra & Dourankoulak



At Dourankoulak a large sandy beach separated the lake from the sea, creating swaths of reedbed and open water habitat with adjacent winter wheat fields. Here over 300,000 geese, a mix of Greater White-fronted and Red-breasted, can be found. A staggering number of individual birds in one location! Red-breasted Geese are smart black, white and russet coloured birds that breed in the Russian Arctic and make a round trip of over 3,000 miles annually to spend the winter around the Black Sea. Unfortunately declining in number, they are still found in significant flocks in this region. We'll also keep our eye out for some of the rare Lesser White-fronted Geese, Long-legged and Rough-legged Buzzard, Merlin, Goldeneye, Sanderling and Knot.

Later in the day we will visit Shabla and Tuzlata Lakes for Black-necked Grebe, Pochard, Red-crested Pochard, Red-breasted Merganser, Yellow-legged and Pallas's Gull.

Although we will have seen geese further to the south, the vast bulk of the flocks tend to be found in this north-east cover of Bulgaria, so our primary focus today will be on these. A breeding steppe in summer, the winter species found around Kaliakra are also extremely interested, with Red-breasted and White-fronted Geese, Shag, Black-throated Diver, Mediterranean Gull, Short-eared Owl, Calandra and Crested Lark all frequenting the area, along with the possibility of Great and Little Bustard.



The nearby Topola Cliff often shelters Eurasian Eagle Owl and we will look for this magnificent bird towards the end of the day.

Day 7

Romania

This morning we will begin to make our way north into Romania, taking time for stops in Bulgaria for any species that we haven't yet found, before crossing the border into Romania. We are heading for the Sinoe Lake area for the next two nights.

Day 8

Romania

Today we will explore this south east corner of Romania, with its coastal lakes and lagoons and open fields. We'll keep our itinerary flexible, but locations may include some of the large lakes or nearby forests.



Long-legged Buzzard

There are good lake roosts and fields for feeding in this area, so there are often large flocks of geese around, and we'll particularly be looking out Red-breasted and Lesser White-fronted Geese.

In winter we may find hundreds of Black-necked Grebe, White-headed Duck and Smew on the lakes. There's also the possibility of Hen Harrier here. Around Lake Hustria the surrounding reed beds hide Bearded and Penduline Tit. There is

always the possibility of a rarer bird, such as Saker Falcon too!

A few mammals are found around the lakes as well, so we will keep an eye out for Golden Jackal, Brown Hare or perhaps even a Wild Cat.

Day 9

Fly London

After packing up the bus, we'll start our journey to the airport. If time allows, we'll stop further inland at the Babadag Forest where oak woodlands provide shelter for Marsh and Sombre Tit as well as Black, Lesser Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpecker, with Syrian Woodpecker also being possible in some of the nearby villages. We'll also keep an eye on the steppe lands for Rough-legged and Long-legged Buzzard, before, we must way our way towards Bucharest, the capital of Romania for our flight home.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock

Grading

This tour is graded A/B, consisting of easy to moderate day walks only, and is suitable for those of all ages, with a reasonable degree of fitness.

Focus

The main focus of this tour will be the birdlife, however we will also take time to look at other wildlife we come across.

Weather

Weather conditions early in the year are usually very cold, somewhere between -20 °C to 15°C, so warm clothing is essential. It can be windy too, so a windproof jacket and hat are advisable. There is also the possibility of rain on some days, so waterproof clothing (jacket and trousers) and footwear are also recommended.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the holiday cost, from the evening meal on Day 1 to lunch on Day 9. Lunches will either be picnic lunches or taken at small restaurants.

Accommodation will be in comfortable tourist hotels with private facilities. These will not be luxurious, but will be clean and perfectly adequate for our needs.

Regional Flights

The standard flights for this holiday are from a London airport. It is sometimes possible to fly from regional airports, although using these routes does often involve travelling out early or returning a day later in order to fit in with the group flights. Please note that flight schedules can change so please contact the Naturetrek office for further information and prices.

Extensions

Subject to availability on flights, the tour may be extended for a longer stay in Sofia before the start of the tour and in Bucharest or other parts of Romania at the end of the tour. We will gladly obtain a quotation for such extensions.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Bulgaria and Romania. 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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