



Branta Tours

Specialist in the Authentic East



Special issue: Red-breasted Goose facts
First successful satellite tracking
of Red-breasted Geese (p.34-40)

Scheduled and Custom Birding Trips in Eastern Europe & beyond

WWW.BRANTA-TOURS.COM

We are grateful for
the sponsorship from



Power from Nature
to Protect Nature

WIND ENERGY





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Contents

The Company	1
Branta Birding Lodge	2-3
Bulgaria	4-16
Wildlife Photo Tours	17
Romania & Bulgaria	18-19
Belarus	20-25
Hungary	26-27
Russia	28-29
Azerbaijan	30-31
Ural Mountains	32
Tour Info	33
Bulgaria-U.S. RBG Project	34-40
Our Team	41

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Specialist in the Authentic East



Dear Customer,

We are delighted to bring to your attention the variety of birding programmes we can offer you. We now have new destinations, which should widen your wildlife experience as we go to the wilder side of Europe and beyond.

Nature conservation is the second field of our activity. The internationally prestigious company Swarovski Optik has been our essential sponsor supporting the flourishing of the Dalmatian Pelican breeding colony in Bulgaria.

The year 2012 will celebrate the 15th anniversary of the successful long term partnership between Branta-Tours, Le Balkan Foundation and Swarovski Optik.

This project shows that with the right partners, appropriate management, and targeted financial sponsorship there is still room for this large and beautiful waterbird to not only survive but prosper on this planet we all share. Further details of the celebrations will follow in due course: www.branta-tours.com

Branta-Tours is also involved in another significant project, concerning the First successful satellite tracking of Red-breasted Geese. To learn more about the plight of this critically endangered species and its urgent conservation needs, see pages 34-40.

What follows in our brochure is an attempt to express some of what you will really experience if you join one of Branta-Tours bird watching & nature conservation programmes. We are sure that the European "East", so close yet so enigmatic, will soon become one of the most attractive nature destinations, and you have the special privilege of being among its first explorers!

Tatyana Simeonova

General Manager

Branta Tours Wildlife/Birdwatching Company

The Company

Branta-Tours, based in Durankulak (Bulgaria), is developing and operating Professional Guided Trips to observe flora and fauna, in particular birdwatching to the major top birding locations of Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Belarus, Ural, Hungary, Ukraine, Russia and Azerbaijan. Most of our scheduled tours are tailored for serious birders but we also offer General Nature Trips and Wildlife Holidays. We also focus on mammals (including marine species), dragonflies, reptiles, as well as other fascinating features on most of our trips. In addition, we are delighted to announce that Branta-Tours was recommended by *Birdwatch* readers as top-ranked tour company offering high standard of service and holiday to its customers (Birdwatch Magazine, February 2010, Issue 212).

- Our special offer: two to five day overnight trips staying at the exclusive lakeside accomodation at Branta Birding Lodge located just close to the Durankulak Lake Protected Area – the world's most important wetland habitat for the globally threatened Red-breasted Goose and many other notable ducks, waders and breeding passerines including Paddyfield Warbler.



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Our advantages:

- 1. Group size:** small group size and 4WD vehicles will allow penetrating into the best-concealed and isolated spots.
- 2. Locational content:** visits to some special environments, very comfortable & well located hotels, typical cosy guesthouses, good food and good company.
- 3. Birding locations choice:** our tours combine visits to the major top birding locations, but we also pay attention and look constantly to every possibility that can bring surprises. Thus we will increase to a maximum the number of seen species and exceed the most venturesome expectations on the bird scene.
- 4. Flexibility:** We are flexible to species you would like to see, flexible to airports (arrivals/departures), as well to the tour length. On your request we can shift the dates of our programmes and operate at any time.
- 5. Quality of observations:** Our approach is to produce high quality birdwatching in terms of duration, closeness and light conditions. We don't hesitate to offer observations of already seen species if they are involved in some special actions.
- 6. A network of collaborators:** We work together with local rangers and experts keeping us constantly informed on the current situation regarding bird species composition and movements, thus saving us valuable time in the search of rarities.
- 7. Exchange of information:** During our trips we exchange information with other birdwatchers or groups on every interesting encounter.
- 8. Professional guide-ornithologist:** Pavel Simeonov leads most of the tours personally. He is also your driver, and you will not miss the least opportunity to stop at every sight of a birdie to enrich the already abundant Bird Checklist.



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Branta Birding Lodge & Conservation Centre, overlooking Durankulak Lake and Black Sea, is located just 3 miles from the Romanian border and ideally situated for visiting many top birding locations and important sites of archaeological interest. **Premier Bulgarian Birding Lodge owned by knowledgeable birdwatchers, is open all year round (www.birdinglodge.com).**

It is a 2-storey building, of a total built-up area of 532 m², in the traditional Bulgarian architectural style. Provides five double/twin en suite rooms, three single en suite rooms, two en suite apartments with two double/twin rooms each, refreshment room (bar) and kitchen. All rooms are equipped with double glazed mosquito screened windows, air-conditioning, central heating, mini bar and TV.

There is a multi-purpose hall with 50 seats on the ground floor. On the first floor there is an exhibition hall for photos, maps and drawings and a big terrace, very good for making observations of the lake and the sky (particularly during migration and winter time).

Branta Birding Lodge is a great source of information to plan your birding trip. Your hosts, Tatyana and Pavel, are happy to accommodate you with an individually tailored programme. This is an ideal base for birders, photographers and nature

Branta Birding Lodge

lovers wishing to stay in a warm and friendly atmosphere and enjoy birdlife around Lake Durankulak and surrounding areas. It offers outstanding birdwatching opportunities for novice and professional birders, including a variety of birding excursions from Bulgarian and Romanian wetlands, along the Black Sea coast, through steppe habitats and ancient wet forests, to steep-sided gorges...

Species-specific trips are organized on request. The lodge provides transport (4WD), knowledgeable bird guides and escorts, Internet access, TV/video, Swarovski spotting scopes and binoculars. Here we will assist you with any of your electronic needs.

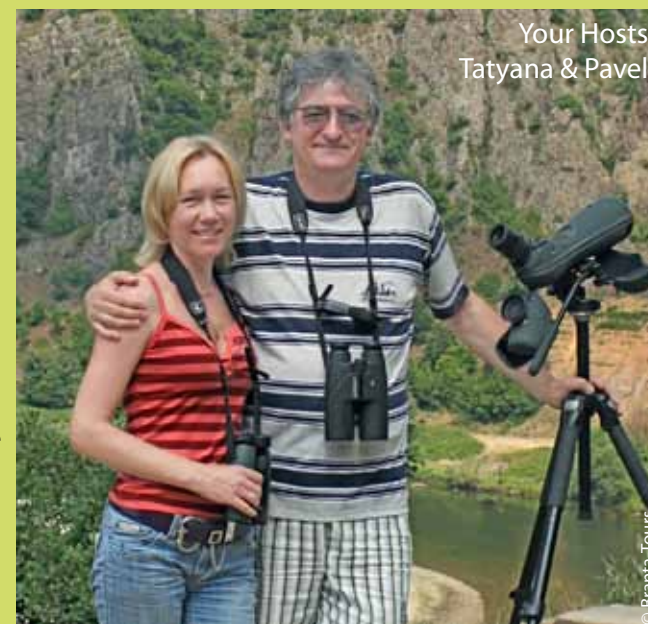
The lodge also offers General Nature Trips and Wildlife Holidays all year round including some birdwatching combined with flower, butterfly and other wildlife identification. It is aimed at people with a general interest in wildlife and could be suitable for birdwatchers and their non-birding family partners that can find beautiful mixture of activities like archaeology, history, fishing, shopping, water sports, but also learn some interesting birds, mammals and flowers.

Other benefits are, 5 minutes to endless unspoiled beaches, Dolphin watch, all kind of family entertainments and fun...

Access: Varna is an International Airport at about 1 hour drive from the Lodge.

We will collect you from the airport and are available on request.

Meals: Dinner and packed lunches can be provided by prior arrangement.



We provide comfortable and affordable accommodation at Branta Birding Lodge overlooking Durankulak Lake and Black Sea in Bulgaria. Programme may be adapted to your schedule.

Contacts: Tel.: +359 888 47 66 01 & +359 887 30 87 53; E-mail: info@branta-tours.com; www.birdinglodge.com

3 to 5 days Birding Specials

RED-BREASTED GOOSE



Branta Birding Lodge offers you the unique opportunity to visit the world wintering site of the stunning and very endangered Red-breasted Goose. Large concentrations of White-fronted Geese plus a few of the exceedingly rare Lesser White-fronted Goose also feature in the programme, plus a large array of waterfowl including divers, grebes and ducks. There is good chance of an Eagle Owl and outside possibility of Greater Black-headed Gull. Little and Pontic Gulls, *desmaresti* sub-species of Shag, Syrian Woodpecker, Calandra Lark and Bearded Tit are also on the agenda. Raptors are well represented too including White-tailed, and Spotted Eagles, Rough-legged and Long-legged Buzzards, Marsh and Hen Harriers, Merlin, Peregrine, and, with a good luck, Saker Falcon. The best time of year to see Red-breasted Geese is during the month of February.

PADDYFIELD WARBLER

The only chance to view in Europe this long distance migrant from Asia, coming to nest at the westernmost limit of its breeding range. The lake Durankulak is the breeding home to around 120 pairs of this delightful eastern melodious mimic. In May you can also see, Pygmy Cormorant, the *desmaresti* sub-species of Shag, Glossy Ibis, Purple and Squacco Herons, Little Bittern, Ferruginous Duck, Bee-eater, Roller, Hoopoe, Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes, Penduline and Bearded Tits, Balkan Wagtail, Tawny Pipit, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Red-footed Falcon, Long-legged and Honey Buzzards, Levant Sparrowhawk, Booted and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Little Crake, Moustached, Marsh, Savi's, Olive-tree, Olivaceous and Barred Warblers, Red-Rumped Swallow, Alpine Swift, Syrian Woodpecker and other unusual passerines like Rose-coloured Starling, Pied, Isabelline and Black-eared Wheatears, Ortolan, Black-headed and Corn Buntings, thousands of waders including Collared Pratincole, Stone Curlew, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Marsh, Curlew and Broad-billed Sandpipers, Temminck's Stint, Gull-billed, Caspian, Little, Sandwich and the three species of Marsh Terns, Pontic and Mediterranean Gulls, Yelkouan Shearwater etc.



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Please email to info@branta-tours.com with exact dates of travel for a firm quote (accommodation, transport and guiding cost) with an indicative bird checklist.



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Bulgaria is the highest land on the Balkans, bordering with the Danube River to the north and the beautiful Black Sea coast to the east. It is the homeland of Orpheus and Spartacus and a treasure-house of early Slavic scripts. It is also one of the most exciting birding destinations in Europe. Located at the crossroads between the North and the South, the East and the West, it provides indeed the longest checklist of species for any European tour.

Bulgaria's Black Sea coast has extraordinary bird-life all year including up to 20,000 Red-breasted Geese in winter, most exciting spring and autumn migration and numerous Eastern European breeding specialities.

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Branta Birding Lodge



Durankulak Lake

Bulgaria

Our Specialities

- The Wintering of 20–50,000 Red-breasted Geese.



Wintering geeses

- The breeding colonies of Dalmatian Pelicans, Spoonbills, Herons and Pygmy Cormorants along the Danube River.



Dalmatian Pelicans

- The impressive canyons of the Rhodope Mountains, with their cliff-nesting population of Black Storks... and the knowledge that this is the right place in Europe to see the following birds:
 - Red-necked Grebe, Yelkouan Shearwater, the desmaresti sub-species of Shag, Glossy Ibis, Purple and



Arda River Valley

Squacco Herons, White-headed Duck, Ruddy Shelduck, Red-breasted and Lesser White-fronted Geese, many raptors including 3 species of vulture, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Red-footed Falcon, Long-legged and Rough-legged Buzzards, Levant Sparrowhawk, the rufous eastern race of Buzzard (*vulpinus*) and, with luck, Saker Falcon, Eastern Imperial Eagle or Steppe Eagle, Little Crake, Bittern and Little Bittern, Bee-eater, Roller, Masked and Lesser Grey Shrikes,



Little Bittern

Sombre, Penduline and Bearded Tits, Wallcreeper, Rock Nuthatch, Balkan Wagtail, Tawny Pipit, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Paddyfield, Moustached, Olive-tree, Olivaceous, Icterine, Barred, Orphean, Sub-alpine and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers and other unusual

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passerines like Red-breasted and Eastern Semi-collared Flycatcher, Rose-coloured Starling, Jackdaw of the eastern white-collared race *soemmeringii*, Isabelline, Black-eared, Pied & Finsches Wheatears, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Ortolan, Black-headed and Rock Buntings; thousands of waders including Collared Pratincole, Kentish Plover, Marsh, Curlew and Broad-billed Sandpipers, Temmincks Stint; Gull-billed and Caspian Terns, Slender-billed, Mediterranean and Great Black-headed Gulls, etc, etc... so many species of exceptional interest to ardent birdwatchers.



Bearded Tit



Kingfisher



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THE FORTNIGHT SPRING BIRDWATCHING

Vultures, Pelicans, Wallcreeper, Paddyfield Warbler...

Dates: middle of May
14 nights, 15 birding days

Group Size: 2–10 people

Costs:

3 pax = € 1250,-

4 pax = € 1190,-

5 pax = € 1095,-

Price includes: all internal travel from /to Sofia, guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea /coffee, permit fees in all protected areas.

Price excludes: the airfares to Sofia, alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 145

Deposit: € 200

Starting Point: Sofia Airport

Walking: Easy



Calandra Lark

© Branta-Tours



Egyptian Vulture

© Photo Branta-Tours

This exciting tour to the most beautiful birding locations of Bulgaria presents a large array of South-Eastern specialities to the eager eye of the birdwatcher, among them the Paddyfield, Olive-tree, Olivaceous, Barred, Orphean, Sub-alpine and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, Masked, Woodchat and Lesser Grey Shrikes, Pallid Swift, Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Rose-coloured Starling and other unusual passerines like Rock Sparrow, Rock Nuthatch, Sombre Tit, Blue and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes, Ortolan, Black-headed and Rock Buntings. Woodpeckers are well represented too, with Syrian, White-backed, Black and Middle Spotted ones being some of the most interesting. There is a good chance of seeing Eagle Owl, Capercaillie, Chukar and Rock Partridge. The Western Rhodopes present us with major tour highlights where the exquisite Wallcreeper is seen. The impressive canyons of the Eastern Rhodope Mountains are on the top of Europe's list of locations for birds of prey, where in spring more than 20 raptor species can be seen, among them: Griffon,

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Egyptian and Black Vultures, Golden, Lesser-Spotted, Short-toed, Booted, and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Long-legged and Honey Buzzards. As an extra sight birdwatchers will see the cliff-nesting population of Black Storks and, with a good luck, Saker Falcon. Our tour also includes an excursion to the Kamchia River to explore its famous riverine forest. Strandja and Sakar Mountains, Black Sea coast and the region of South Dobrudja are some of the key locations to be visited. The steppes of Kaliakra are the favourite habitat for the Red-footed Falcon, Hoopoe, Pied, Isabelline and Finsch's Wheatears, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit, Black-headed Bunting and, especially in the evening, Stone Curlew, whilst Long-legged Buzzard breeds on the cliffs. Two rare mammals also occur there, the Marbled Polecat and Romanian Hamster and a botanical speciality of the site is the Broad-leaved Peony. Kaliakra is also an archaeological



Rock Thrush

© Branta-Tours

Bulgaria Tours



Balkan Wagtail

monument, the site of ancient dwellings and fortresses revealing more than 2500 years of human habitation. Lakes Shabla and Durankulak in the north, and Burgas and Atanasovsko in the south are major wetlands to be visited and riparian forest of Ropotamo will broaden the habitat theme. We shall finally travel up to the Srebarna Biosphere Reserve by the Danube River, for close views of Dalmatian Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis, Squacco and other herons. On our trip we will also catch views of the famous passage of migratory birds along the Via Pontica flyway such as White Pelicans, Black Storks and Raptors. Waders feature Terek, Marsh and Broad-billed Sandpipers. Ruddy Shelduck and Ferruginous Duck are among notable waterfowl. A final excursion to the Vitosha Nature Park, offers a unique opportunity to see Nutcracker, Alpine Accentor, Shore Lark and Water Pipit and, thus, bird list promises to be the longest for any European tour.

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand
info@branta-tours.com

Brief Itinerary

Day 1 : Sofia – Melnik
Day 2 : Melnik – Kresna Gorge
Day 3 : Melnik – Devin
Day 4 : Trigrad – Madjarovo
Day 5 : Eastern Rhodopes
Day 6 : Madjarovo – Sakar Mountain – Burgas
Day 7 : Pomorie and Burgas Wetlands
Day 8 : Pomorie – Kamtchia – Durankulak
Day 9 : Durankulak and Shabla Lakes
Day 10 : Durankulak – Romania
Day 11 : Kaliakra – Srebarna Biosphere Reserve
Day 12 : Srebarna – Central Balkan National Park
Day 13 : Central Balkan – Boatin Nature Reserve
Day 14 : Central Balkan – Sofia – Vitosha Nature Park
Day 15 : Vitosha – Sofia Airport



The region of Coastal Dobrudja and North Black Sea coast of Bulgaria are some of the key locations visited during our tours.

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Rock Sparrow



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TWELVE DAYS INTENSIVE BIRDING

Vultures, Pelicans, Masked Shrike, Wallcreeper, Rock Thrushes, Sombre Tit, Olive-tree, Paddyfield, Subalpine and Orphean Warblers, Wheatears, and many other south-eastern highlights (over 200 species expected).

Dates: late April/early May, middle of May & late May/early June

11 nights, 12 birding days

Group Size: 2–10 people

Costs:

3 pax = € 1,250 -

4 pax = € 1,185 -

5+ pax = € 1,085 -

Price includes: all internal travel from /to Varna, guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea /coffee, permit fees in all protected areas.

Price excludes: the airfares to Varna, alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 115

Deposit: € 200

Starting Point: Varna Airport

Walking: Easy

This outstanding birdwatching tour offers opportunities to visit most of the top birding locations in Bulgaria and to see almost all south-eastern specialities, among them the Paddyfield, Olive-tree, Olivaceous, Barred, Orphean, Sardinian, Sub-alpine



Black-eared Wheatear

© Branta-Tours

and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, Masked, Woodchat, Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes, Red-rumped Swallow, Crag and Sand Martins, three species of Swift including Pallid one, Rose-coloured Starling and other unusual passerines like Rock Nuthatch, Rock Sparrow, Sombre Tit, Isabelline, Pied, Finsch's and Black-eared Wheatears (pale and black-throated forms), Rufous-tailed and Blue Rock Thrushes, Yellowhammer, Ortolan, Corn, Reed, Black-headed, Cirl and Rock Buntings. Woodpeckers are well represented too, with Wryneck, White-backed, Syrian, Grey-headed, Lesser Spotted and Middle Spotted ones being some of the most interesting. There is a good chance of seeing or hearing Scops, Eagle and Ural Owls, Capercaillie, Chukar and Rock Partridge.

South Bulgaria Mountains: The impressive canyons of the Eastern Rhodope Mountains are on the top of Europe's list of locations for birds of prey, where in spring more than 20 raptor species can be seen, among them: Griffon, Egyptian and Black Vultures, Golden, Lesser-Spotted, Short-toed, Booted

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and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Levant Sparrowhawk, Peregrine and Hobby, Long-legged and Honey Buzzards. In addition, huge numbers of south-eastern specialities will broaden the birdlife priorities list. As an extra sight birdwatchers will see the cliff-nesting population of Black Storks as well as the delightful Wallcreeper in a picturesque mountain gorge and, with a good luck, Great Spotted Cuckoo or even Saker Falcon may be spotted. The mountain streams hold Dipper and Grey Wagtail.



Wallcreeper

© Branta-Tours

Black Sea: Our tour also includes an excursion to the Kamchia River to explore its famous riverine forest where Semi-collared Flycatcher, Icterine Warbler, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Black Woodpecker and Short-toed Treecreeper are breeding species. Coastal Strandja and Sakar Mountains, Black Sea coast and the region of Coastal Dobrudja are some of the key locations to be visited. The steppes of Kaliakra are the favourite habitat for the Red-footed Falcons, Hoopoe, Roller, Pied, Isabelline and Finsch's Wheatears, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit, Black-headed Bunting and, especially in the evening, Stone Curlew, Scops Owl and Nightjar,

Bulgaria Tours



whilst Long-legged Buzzard and Alpine Swift breed on the cliffs. Two rare mammals also occur there, the Marbled Polecat and Romanian Hamster and a botanical speciality of the site is the Broad-leaved Peony. From Cape Kaliakra Shag (Black Sea subspecies *desmarestii*), both sub-species of Yellow-legged Gull (Pontic and Steppe ones) and gatherings of East Mediterranean Shearwaters (yelkouan race) should be spotted. Kaliakra is also an archaeological monument, the site of ancient dwellings and fortresses revealing more than 2500 years of human habitation. Lakes Shabla and Durankulak in the north, and Burgas and Atanasovsko in the south are major wetlands to be visited where Penduline and Bearded Tits are among small passerines of interest. Birdlife includes particularly good representations of Gulls, Terns and Waders such as Curlew, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Dunlin, Little and Teminck's Stints, Grey, Little, Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Black-winged Stilt, Avocet, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Collared Pratincole, Slender-billed, Mediterranean, Yellow-legged and Little Gulls, Gull-billed, Caspian, Sandwich, Little, Common and Whiskered Terns. On fields surrounding the wetlands

we should see the Balkan sub-species of the Yellow Wagtail, the beautiful black-headed feldegg race, quite numerous everywhere. The riparian forest of Ropotamo will broaden the habitat theme where Little Grebe, Pygmy Cormorant, Kingfisher and Common Sandpiper are resident birds. Montagu's Harrier and White-tailed Eagle are among raptors we hope to see and an evening visit to a gorge presents chance of an Eagle Owl.

On our trip we will catch views of the famous passage of migratory birds along the Via Pontica flyway such as White Pelicans, Black Storks and Raptors. Waders feature Red-necked Phalarope, Marsh, Terek and Broad-billed Sandpipers. Arctic Skua also may be spotted in the sea where we should see three species of dolphins as they play just of the sea shore.

Danube floodplain: We shall also travel up to the Srebarna Biosphere Reserve by the Danube River, for close views of breeding Dalmatian Pelicans, Red-necked Grebe, Pygmy Cormorants, Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis, Great and Little Egrets, Squacco, Purple and other species of herons. Ruddy Shelduck, Greylag Goose, Red-crested Pochard and Ferruginous Duck are among notable breeding waterfowl.

Balkan Mountain Range: We shall finally explore the highland Boatin and Tsaritchina Biosphere reserves in the Central Balkan National Park. We visit locations where Ural, Tengmalm's and Pygmy Owls may be seen and heard calling. White-backed, Grey-headed and Black Woodpeckers, Red-breasted and Pied Flycatchers, Woodlark, Tree Pipit, Mistle Thrush, Ring Ouzel, Wood Warbler, Crested, Willow, Marsh, Blue and Coal Tits, Treecreeper, Gold and Firecrest, Bullfinch, Hawfinch, Common Crossbill and

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Nutcracker are some of the forest birds to be seen. We achieve our trip in reaching the alpine Balkan meadows where highlights such as Water Pipit, Alpine Accentor, Whinchat and Shore Lark are well represented.

Brief Itinerary

- Day 1 : Varna – Durankulak
- Day 2 : Durankulak and Shabla Lakes
- Day 3 : Durankulak – Kaliakra – Yaylata
- Day 4 : Durankulak – Pomorie
- Day 5 : Pomorie salt pans – Burgas wetlands
- Day 6 : Pomorie – Borislavtsi
- Day 7 : Eastern Rhodopes
- Day 8 : Borislavtsi – Devin
- Day 9 : Trigrad – Melnik
- Day 10 : Melnik – Kresna gorge
- Day 11 : Melnik – Sofia – Vitosha
- Day 12 : Vitosha Nature Park – Sofia airport

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand
info@branta-tours.com



Branta Tours

COMPLETE BULGARIAN CIRCUIT with excursions to Romania and Greece.

Vultures, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Pelicans, Ural Owl, Wallcreeper, Red-breasted and Semi-collared Flycatchers, Sombre Tit, Paddyfield, Orphean, Sardinian, Subalpine, Eastern Bonelli's and Olive-tree Warblers, White-backed Woodpecker, Masked Shrike, Rose-coloured Starling...

Dates: late April/early May, middle of May & late May/early June

15 nights, 16 birding days

Group Size: 2–10 people

Costs:

3 pax = €1,690 -

4 pax = €1,610 -

5+ pax = €1,525 -

Price includes: all internal travel from /to Varna (Sofia optional), guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea/coffee, permit fees in all protected areas.

Price excludes: the airfares to Varna (Sofia), alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 155

Deposit: € 200

Starting Point: Varna (Sofia optional) Airport

Walking: Easy

This outstanding birding tour presents a large array of South-Eastern specialities to the eager eye of the birdwatcher, among them the Paddyfield, Olive-tree,

Olivaceous, Barred, Orphean, Sub-alpine and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, Masked, Woodchat and Lesser Grey Shrikes, Pallid Swift, Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Rose-coloured Starling and other unusual passerines like Rock Nuthatch, Sombre Tit, Blue and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes, Ortolan, Black-headed and Rock Buntings. Woodpeckers are well represented too, with Wryneck, Syrian, White-backed, Black, Middle Spotted, Lesser Spotted and Grey-headed ones being some of the most interesting – by way of a small sample. There is a good chance of seeing Scops and Eagle Owls, Capercaillie, Chukar and Rock



Black Stork

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Black-headed Bunting

Partridge. We shall also explore the highland Boatin and Tsaritchina Biosphere reserves in the Central Balkan National Park. We visit locations where Ural, Tengmalm's and Pygmy Owls may be seen and heard calling. White-backed, Grey-headed and Black Woodpeckers, Red-breasted and Pied Flycatchers, Woodlark, Tree Pipit, Mistle Thrush, Ring Ouzel, Wood Warbler, Crested, Willow, Marsh, Blue and Coal Tits, Treecreeper, Gold and Firecrest, Bullfinch, Hawfinch, Common Crossbill and Nutcracker are some of the forest birds to be seen. We climb ever upwards until the track expires in reaching the alpine Balkan meadows where highlights such as Water Pipit, Alpine Accentor, Whinchat and Shore Lark are well represented. The Western Rhodopes present us with major tour highlights where the exquisite Wallcreeper is seen. The impressive canyons of the Eastern Rhodope Mountains are on the top of Europe's list of locations for birds of prey, where in spring more than 20 raptor species can be seen, among them: Griffon, Egyptian and Black Vultures, Golden, Lesser-Spotted, Short-toed, Booted, and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Long-legged and Honey Buzzards. The Eastern

Bulgaria Tours



Roller

Rhodopes offer unique opportunity to see the cliff-nesting population of Black Storks and, with a good luck, Saker Falcon. As an extra sight birdwatchers will visit the Northern Greece and the Romanian section of Coastal Dobrudja region. We explore the most exciting birding locations along the Romanian Black Sea coast, including the southern part of the Danube Delta, with a stop-off en route at the unique Hagieni forest where we will look for White-tailed and Booted Eagles, Long-legged Buzzard, Levant Sparrowhawk, Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Thrush Nightingale and other Eastern-European speciality woodland birds. Our tour also includes an excursion to the Kamchia River to explore its famous riverine forest. Strandja and Sakar Mountains, Black Sea coast and the region of South Dobrudja are some of the key locations to be visited. The steppes of Kaliakra are the favourite habitat for the Red-footed Falcon, Hoopoe, Pied, Isabelline and Finsch's Wheatears, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit, Black-headed Bunting and, especially in the evening, Stone Curlew, whilst

Long-legged Buzzard breeds on the cliffs. We shall travel up to the Srebarna Biosphere Reserve by the Danube River, for close views of Dalmatian Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis, Squacco and other herons. Ruddy Shelduck and Ferruginous Duck are among notable waterfowl. On our trip we will catch views of the famous passage of migratory birds along the Via Pontica flyway such as White Pelicans, Black Storks and Raptors. Waders feature Terek, Marsh and Broad-billed Sandpipers. One day excursion to the Vitosha Nature Park will offer a good opportunity to see Nutcracker, Alpine Accentor, Shore Lark and Water Pipit (over 220 species expected)..



Masked Shrike

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand
info@branta-tours.com

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Hoopoe

Brief Itinerary

- Day 1 : Varna – Durankulak
- Day 2 : Durankulak and Shabla Lakes
- Day 3 : Durankulak – Romania
- Day 4 : Yaylata – Kaliakra – Srebarna
- Day 5 : Srebarna – Central Balkan National Park
- Day 6 : Central Balkan – Sofia (Vitosha Nature Park)
- Day 7 : Sofia – Melnik
- Day 8 : Melnik – Kresna
- Day 9 : Melnik – Greece (Lake Kirkini)
- Day 10 : Melnik – Devin
- Day 11 : Trigrad – Madjarovo
- Day 12 : Eastern Rhodopes
- Day 13 : Madjarovo – Sakar Mountain – Burgas
- Day 14 : Pomorie and Burgas Wetlands
- Day 15 : Pomorie – Kamtchia – Durankulak
- Day 16 : Durankulak – Varna Airport



Branta Tours

AUTUMN AND SPRING MIGRATION Via Pontica flyway

Dates: late August to late September/early October;
early April to early May

7 nights, 8 birding days

Group Size: 2–12 people

Costs:

3 pax = € 780,-

4 pax = € 755,-

5+pax = € 695,-

Price includes: all internal travel from /to Varna, guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea /coffee, permit fees in all protected areas.

Price excludes: the airfares to Varna, alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 75

Deposit: € 100

Starting Point: Varna Airport

Walking: Easy

Description: This exciting tour to the western coastal zone of the Black Sea features one of the most pronounced movements of migratory birds occurring in Europe. The famed passage of raptors and storks over the Bosphorus is fed by a concentrated corridor of birds funnelling along the Bulgarian coast (known as the 'Via Pontica' flyway).

Some local breeding birds will have departed the area, but numerous small passerines, waders and



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waterfowl are moving down from their northern breeding grounds.

Our tour catches the migration at its peak, when countless thousands of raptors, storks, pelicans, waders and small passerines ensure a day to day action-filled experience. Located at the crossroads between east and west the checklist of species promises to be one of the longest – and most exotic – for any European tour.

Short-toed, Booted, Imperial, Spotted and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Steppe, Long-legged and Honey Buzzards, four species of Harrier, Levant Sparrowhawk, Saker and Red-footed Falcons are among the large cast of appetising raptors – lots of opportunity to hone your ID skills. White and Black Storks, Dalmatian and White Pelicans also soar overhead, while Pygmy Cormorant, Great Egret, Squacco and other herons, Bittern and Little Bittern, Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis and Crane are some of the highlights of wetlands visited. Yelkouan Shearwater and *desmaresti* sub-species of Shag, Gull-billed, Caspian, Little, Sandwich and three species of marsh terns, Mediterranean, Caspian,

Little and Slender-billed Gulls can also be spotted. Just about anything is possible on the wader front – Temminck's Stint, Red-necked Phalarope, Marsh, Terek and Broad-billed Sandpipers are regular – and small passerines often pass through in droves, among them Red-throated Pipit and Red-breasted Flycatcher; Ruddy Shelduck and Ferruginous Duck are notable wildfowl.

But the tour isn't just about birds. We shall also try to find mammals (including three marine species). We may also encounter amphibians and reptiles – Eastern Spadefoot (toad), Stripe-necked Terrapin, Balkan Wall Lizard, Reddish Whip, Leopard and Four-lined Snakes – and late wild flowers will doubtless inspire interest.

We visit some of the most important wetlands in Europe, unspoiled dunes and beaches, pristine steppe habitats and wooded valleys, at a time when visitors are few and the azure blue waters of the Black Sea may be enjoyed in the warmth of early autumn sunshine.

Brief Itinerary

Day 1 : Varna – Durankulak

Day 2 : Durankulak and Shabla Lakes

Day 3 : Durankulak – Romania

Day 4 : Yaylata – Kaliakra

Day 5 : Durankulak – Burgas

Day 6 : Burgas and Pomorie Wetlands

Day 7 : Ropotamo Wetlands – Strandja Nature Park

Day 8 : Pomorie – Kamchia – Varna

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand

info@branta-tours.com

Bulgaria Tours

WINTER TOUR

Bulgaria: overwintering Red-breasted geese and other waterfowl, plus mammals by night

Dates: end of January/early February, middle of February & late February/early March

6 nights, 7 birding days

Group Size: 2–10

Cost: € 710

Price includes: all internal travel from /to Varna, guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea/coffee.

Price excludes: the airfares to Varna, alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 65

Deposit: € 100

Starting Point: Varna Airport



Rough-legged Buzzard



Red-breasted geese

Description: The spectacle of many thousands of overwintering Red-breasted Geese is the central theme to this exclusive winter tour to the western coastal zone of the Black Sea. Large concentrations of White-fronts plus a few of the exceedingly rare Lesser White-fronted Geese and Dalmatian Pelicans in breeding plumage are present, plus a large array of waterfowl including divers, grebes and ducks (Smew, White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks). If your appetite isn't already wetted how about a follow up cast that includes Pygmy Cormorant and Bittern plus several notable raptors: White-tailed, and Spotted Eagles, Merlin, Rough-legged and Long-legged Buzzards. There is good chance of an Eagle Owl and outside possibility of Pallas's Gull. Woodpeckers are well represented (Grey-headed, Black, Syrian and Middle Spotted), and if the weather permits, we shall also travel up to the Strandja Nature Park, for close views of White-backed one, other passerines including Bearded Tit, Crested and Calandra Larks, Great Grey Shrike and Pine Bunting. For a winter tour the overall bird list is outstanding.

Branta Tours



Lakes Durankulak and Shabla in the north, and Bourgas and Atanasovsko in the south are principal wetlands visited, with the steppes of Cape Kaliakra and riparian forests of Kamchia broadening the habitat theme. Mammals are also on the agenda, searched for after dark aided by powerful spotlight. Jackal, Raccoon Dog, Marbled and Steppe Polecats are our main targets, all being relatively common.

Brief Itinerary

Day 1 : Varna – Durankulak

Day 2 : Durankulak and Shabla Lakes

Day 3 : Durankulak – Romanian Wetlands

Day 4 : Black Sea coast (Bolata and Kaliakra reserve)

Day 5 : Durankulak – Kamchia – Burgas

Day 6 : Burgas Wetlands – Strandja

Day 7 : Burgas – Pomorie saltpans – Varna airport

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand

info@branta-tours.com





Branta Tours

SPRING BIRDING TRIP – BULGARIA

Dates: late April/early May, middle of May & late May/early June

7 nights, 8 birding days

Group Size: 2–12 people

Costs:

2 pax = € 795,-

4 pax = € 750,-

5+ pax = € 695,-

Price includes: all internal travel from /to Varna, guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea /coffee, permit fees in all protected areas.

Price excludes: the airfares to Varna, alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 75

Deposit: € 100

Starting Point: Varna Airport

Walking: Easy



Spring is the best period for all birders, bird lovers and listers. During this time you can see almost all south-eastern specialities including Dalmatian and White Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorant, Ruddy Shelduck, the desmaresti sub-species of Shag, Glossy Ibis, Purple and Squacco Herons, Little and Great Bittern, 20 species of Raptors (including Levant Sparrowhawk, Red-footed Falcon, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Booted, Lesser Spotted and Short-toed Eagles), Bee-eaters, Rollers, Masked, Woodchat and Lesser Grey Shrikes, Penduline, Sombre and Bearded Tits, Balkan Wagtail, Tawny Pipit, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Paddyfield, Moustached, Olive-tree, Olivaceous, Icterine, Barred, Orphean and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers as well as many other unusual passerines like the Eastern Semi-collared Flycatcher, Rose-col-

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oured Starlings, Pied, Isabelline and Black-eared Wheatears, Ortolan, Black-headed, Cirl and Rock Buntings, thousands of waders including Collared Pratincole, Stone Curlew, Kentish Plover, Terek, Marsh, Curlew and Broad-billed Sandpipers, Temminck's Stint, Gull-billed Tern, Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls, Yelkouan Shearwater, etc, etc...

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand
info@branta-tours.com

Brief Itinerary

Day 1 : Varna – Durankulak

Day 2 : Durankulak and Shabla Lakes

Day 3 : Durankulak – Romania

Day 4 : Yaylata – Kaliakra

Day 5 : Durankulak – Burgas

Day 6 : Burgas and Pomorie Salt pans

Day 7 : Burgas Wetlands

Day 8 : Burgas – Varna airport



Bulgaria Tours

BULGARIA:

BALKAN WILDLIFE BONANZA – FEATURING SPRING BIRDLIFE AND BROWN BEARS

Dates: late March/early April,
middle of April & late April/early May

9 nights, 10 days

Group Size: 2–12 people

Costs:

2 pax = € 1190,-

4 pax = € 1095,-

5+ pax = € 945,-

Price includes: all internal travel from Varna to Sofia, guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea /coffee, permit fees in all protected areas.

Price excludes: the airfares, alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 95

Deposit: € 200

Starting Point: Varna Airport

Walking: Easy

Description: This newly designed spring event contains one of the most attractive and extensive wildlife packages we have ever offered. Led by Pavel Simeonov, your dedicated specialist in Bulgaria, eventful experiences are guaranteed throughout. Birding interests are catered for at every turn, from wetland destinations along the Black Sea coast, through steppe habitats and ancient forests, to steep-



Balkan Chamois

sided gorges in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. Bird list includes White Pelican, Pygmy Cormorant, Ruddy Shelduck, Ferruginous Duck, Chukar, 20 raptor species, 5 Wheatear species, Roller, Bee-eater, Citrine Wagtail, Wallcreeper, Rock Nuthatch, Sombre Tit, Semi-collared Flycatcher and Nutcracker – by way of a small sample (over 200 species expected).

During this trip Branta-Tours is according high importance to finding mammals, Brown Bear (viewed from a hide at a private reserve), Balkan Chamois, Jackal, Steppe and Marbled Polecats being top of this tour list, with European Sauslik and three species of Dolphins in support. Reptiles and amphibians also feature, including Stripe-necked Terrapin.

The tour opens with visits to Lakes Shabla and Durankulak in the north, plus steppe habitats at Kaliakra and Yailata. Ancient forest on the Kamchia River is visited en route to our next base near Bourgas, where Lake Atanosovsko – Bulgaria's top birding site – is explored. In the Eastern Rhodopes we are based near a vulture feeding station and, during two nights

Branta Tours



at Devin, we explore the beautiful Trigrad Gorge and haunts of Brown Bears. A final night is spent in the heart of the Vitosha mountain just south of Sofia, the Bulgarian capital.

Brief itinerary

Day 1 : Varna – Durankulak

Day 2 : Durankulak and Shabla Lakes

Day 3 : Durankulak – Kaliakra – Burgas

Day 4 : Burgas Wetlands and Pomorie Salt pans

Day 5 : Burgas – Madjarovo

Day 6 : Eastern Rhodopes

Day 7 : Madjarovo – Devin

Day 8 : Devin – Trigrad – Melnik

Day 9 : Melnik – Sofia – Vitosha Nature Park

Day 10 : Vitosha – Sofia airport

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand

info@branta-tours.com



Brown Bear



Branta Tours

NINE-DAY NATURE TOUR

Including South-western Bulgarian mountain ranges and surrounding areas



Spoonwing Lacewing (*Nemoptera sinuata*)

Dates: late May/early June,
middle of June & late June/early July
8 nights, 9 days

Group Size: 2–12 people

Costs:

2 pax = € 995

4 pax = € 830

6+ pax = € 795

Price includes: all internal travel from /to Sofia, guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea /coffee, permit fees in all protected areas.

Price excludes: the airfares to Sofia, alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 75

Deposit: € 100

Starting Point: Sofia Airport

Walking: Easy

This exciting nature trip to the most beautiful Bulgarian mountains includes some general birdwatching combined with flower, butterfly and other wildlife identification. This tour is aimed at people with a general interest in wildlife and could be suitable for birdwatchers and their non-birding partners that can find beautiful mixture of activities like archaeology, history, shopping, but also learn some interesting birds. During this trip we also focus on mammals (including Brown Bear), dragonflies, reptiles, as well as other fascinating features. Different species of orchids and many other seasonal alpine flowers also feature, including Narcissus-Flowered Anemone, Globe-flower and several Balkan endemics. Led by Pavel Simeonov, your dedicated specialist in Bulgaria, eventful experiences are guaranteed throughout.



Fire Salamander

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand
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Green Lizzard



Wild Orchid

Brief Itinerary

Day 1 : Sofia – Melnik

Day 2 : Melnik – Kresna Gorge

Day 3 : Melnik – Bansko

Days 4–5: Pirin National Park

Day 6 : Bansko – Devin

Day 7 : Devin – Trigrad Gorge

Day 8 : Devin – Rila Monastery – Sofia

Day 9 : Vitosha Nature Park – Sofia airport

Wildlife Photo Tours

Branta Tours



COMPLEMENT YOUR TRIP WITH OUR EXCLUSIVE PHOTOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITIES

Why not combine your bird-watching trip with the opportunity to visit our exclusive permanent and mobile hides to take advantage of the unique chance for 'in field' photography that we are able to offer. This trip can be tailored to meet your personal requirements and as Branta-Tours has so much to offer all year round you can join us at any time.

Our Photographic Tours:

Bulgarian Black Sea Tour – one week
Southern Bulgarian Mountain Tour – one week
Bulgaria & Romania – Combined Tour – 15 days
Bulgaria – Central Balkan Tour – 6 days
Bulgaria – Winter Photo Tour – 8 days
Belarus Photographic Tour – 10 days
Azerbaijan – Greater Caucasus Tour – 12 days
Azerbaijan – Shirvan National Park – 8 days
Central Siberia Photo Tour – 12 days

For more information, please, contact us:
info@branta-tours.com



Eastern Rock Nuthatch



Red-breasted geese



Caucasian Black Grouse



Rose-coloured Starling



Greater Sand Plover



Branta Tours

BULGARIA – ROMANIA COMBINED TOUR Early Spring Birding on the Via Pontica flyway

Pelicans, Raptors, Waders and Red-throated Pipit...

Dates: late March/early April, middle of April & late April/early May

10 nights, 11 birding days

Group Size: 2–12 people

Costs:

2 pax = €1,390,-

4 pax = €1,295,-

5+ pax = €1199,-

Price includes: all internal travel from /to Varna, guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea /coffee, permit fees in all protected areas.

Price excludes: the airfares to Varna, alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 75

Deposit: € 100

Starting Point: Varna Airport

Walking: Easy

This outstanding trans-boundary birdwatching tour combines visits to the most exciting birding locations along the Bulgarian and Romanian Black Sea coast, including the immense Danube Delta.

Our itinerary starts with an excursion to the Srebarna Biosphere Reserve by the Danube River in Bulgaria,



for close views of breeding Dalmatian Pelicans, Spoonbills, Red-necked Grebes, Syrian Woodpeckers, Bearded and Penduline Tits.

Bulgarian coastal lakes Shabla and Durankulak in the south and Romanian brackish lagoons Sinoe, Zmeica and Istria in the north, will be the major hot spots to be visited where many Eastern specialties such as White Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Glossy Ibis, Squacco and other herons, Bittern and Little Bittern, Ferruginous Ducks, Red-crested Pochard and Ruddy Shelducks, should be seen. Waders feature Marsh, Curlew and Broad-billed Sandpipers, Temminck's Stint, Kentish Plover, Red-necked Phalarope, Black-winged Stilt, Collared Pratincole, Gull-billed, Caspian, Little, Sandwich and the three species of Marsh Terns, Mediterranean, Yellow-legged, Caspian, Little and Slender-billed Gulls and, with luck, Pallas's Gull can be spotted.

We shall also explore the last remnants of the Pontic steppe of the vast Dobrudja region, comprising both Bulgarian and Romanian sections. The areas hold

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Long-legged Buzzard, Red-Rumped Swallow, Rock Thrush, Lesser Grey Shrike, Hoopoe, Roller, Bee-eater, Pied and Isabelline Wheatears, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit, Ortolan and Black-headed Buntings and, especially in the evening, Stone Curlew. Two rare mammals occur there, the Steppe Polecat and Romanian Hamster and a botanical speciality of the steppe is the Broad-leaved Peony.



The splendid sea-cliffs of Cape Kaliakra and surrounding areas hold the desmaresti sub-species of Shag, Pied and Black-eared Wheatears, Barred Warblers, alongside Eagle Owl, and Alpine Swift. The 70-m high cliffs make an excellent vantage point for Yelkouan Shearwater and Dolphin watching, whilst the abrupt westward turn of the coast here results in concentrations of migrating birds.

On our trip we will catch views of the famous passage of migratory birds along the Via Pontica flyway, when

Bulgaria & Romania Tours

countless thousands of storks, pelicans, waders and passerines including several very interesting species of Wagtail, among which the beautiful Black-headed Feldegg Race and the delightful Citrine Wagtail, whilst many notable Raptors like Lesser Spotted, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Honey and Steppe Buzzards, four species of Harriers, Hobby and Red-footed Falcons, Levant Sparrowhawks and many others ensure a day to day action-filled experience. In addition to species already seen we may add the exceedingly beautiful Red-throated Pipit.

We shall finally travel up to the immense Danube Delta to explore its beautiful Mourighiol area where we may turn up Little Crane, Corncrake, Avocets, Golden Plover, Dotterel, Marsh and, with luck, Terek Sandpiper, with a stop-off en route at the unique Babadag forest where we will look for White-tailed and Booted Eagles, Levant Sparrowhawk, Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Sombre Tit, Thrush Nightingale, Red-breasted Flycatcher and other Eastern-European



speciality woodland birds.

We will spend the last three days of our trip for a leisurely exploration of the magical Danube Delta, including visits to spectacular Black Sea peninsulas, stunning endless lagoons, beautiful sandy beaches and outstanding wetland habitats – the kingdom of Dalmatian and White Pelicans, White-tailed Eagles, Pygmy Cormorants, Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis, huge numbers of egrets, herons, various terns, gulls and waders...

Our cosy guesthouse located just in the heart of the Delta is the most exotic accommodation we have ever offered. Local people provide us with fresh vegetables and fish and our cook is happy to offer you the best traditional specialties you've probably never tasted. From our base we explore Lakes Rosu, Puiu and Erenciuc and make a day trip along the Danube River. We also visit the famous Sfintu Gheorghe, Canalul Turcesc, Meleaua Sahalin, Cap Roh and the unique Black Sea island of Sahalin.

We also explore the Sea shore looking for Great Black-headed Gull and other top highlights. So large and attractive a site in such a strategic position can also turn up surprises and, if you are lucky a Saker Falcon and Demoiselle Crane can be seen. Located at the

Branta Tours



crossroads between east and west, north and south the checklist of species threatens to be one of the longest – and most exotic – for any European tour.

* It has never been easier to reach Bulgaria and Romania as British Airways now flies direct to Varna and Bucarest. It is also possible to fly to Sofia or Burgas. For this we take an extra charge of EUR 50 to cover the tour leader's travel expenses.

Brief Itinerary

- Day 1 : Varna – Durankulak
- Day 2 : Durankulak and Shabla Lakes
- Day 3 : Yaylata – Kaliakra
- Day 4 : Durankulak – Vadu – Istria – Tulcea
- Day 5 : Tulcea – Babadag forest – Mourighiol
- Day 6 : Tulcea – Danube Delta – Sfintu Gheorghe
- Day 7 : Lakes Rosu, Puiu – Island of Sahalin
- Day 8 : Cap Roh – Meleaua Sahalin – Lake Erenciuc
- Day 9 : Danube River – Tulcea
- Day 10 : Tulcea – Srebarna Biosphere Reserve
- Day 11 : Srebarna – Durankulak
- Day 12 : Durankulak – Varna airport

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand
info@branta-tours.com



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BELARUS – GENERAL INFORMATION

Belarus is characterised by the largest tracts of raised pine bogs in Europe. This extensive tundra-like ecosystem is the favourite habitat for many waders such as Terek, Marsh and Green Sandpipers, Whimbrel, Curlew, Golden and Ringed Plovers, Black-tailed Godwit, Greenshank, Snipe, Great Snipe, Redshank, Spotted Redshank and Ruff, and we may just turn Temminck's Stint and Jack Snipe. The area also produces Great Grey Shrike, Meadow Pipit and Citrine Wagtail, whilst the edges surrounding the pine bogs are typical breeding place for Osprey, Golden and Short-toed Eagles.

Large protected areas such as Pripyatsky National Park, Sporovo fen mire, Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve and Kozjany Landscape Reserve are some of the key locations to be visited, where Great Grey, Short-eared, Ural, Tengmalm's and Pygmy Owls are resident birds. The adjacent semi-open areas hold Merlin, Hobby, Honey Buzzard, Corn Crake, Wryneck, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Golden Oriole and Fieldfare. Small passerines include Scarlet Rosefinch, Thrush Nightingale, Yellowhammer, Red-backed Shrike, Whinchat, Wood Lark, Lesser Whitethroat, Barred, Icterine, Grasshopper, River and Blyth's Reed Warblers.

We visit some of the most important glacial lakes with floating islands of veg-



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etation to watch breeding Black-throated Diver, Crested and Black-necked Grebes, Whooper Swan, Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Common and Little Gulls, Black, Whiskered and White-winged Terns, Osprey and White-tailed Eagle. Surrounding reed stands produce views of Great Bittern, Spotted and Little Crakes, Bearded Tit, Savi's, Sedge and Great Reed Warblers. We also explore the impressive mature mixed forests dominated by spruce, birch and aspen, where Red-breasted and Collared Flycatchers, Treecreeper, Greenish and Wood Warblers,

Willow and Crested Tits are among small breeding passerines of interest. Woodpeckers are well represented too, among them: Three-toed, White-backed, Black, Middle-spotted and Grey-headed ones. Birdlife includes also Black Stork, Hazel Grouse, Redwing, Tree Pipit and Golden Oriole.

Our major destination will be the Pripyatsky National Park, in the south. The Pripyat River is no doubt the Amazon of Europe. The endless water-covered areas of the Pripyat floodplain hold thousands of waterbirds, among them Terek and Marsh Sandpipers, Great Snipe, Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Bittern, Black



Great Grey Owl

© Branta-Tours

Belarus Tours

Stork and three species of marsh terns. The best-known symbol of unspoiled Byelorussian nature is the Aquatic Warbler. More than 60 percent of the world population of the species breed in the Byelorussian wetlands of Polesie.

Open meadows and mires are excellent hunting grounds for various raptors breeding in neighbouring floodplains and forests, such as White-tailed, Short-toed, Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Great Grey and Short-eared Owls.

During our stay in the Pripyat we visit the well known Turov meadow, being one of the most exciting birding locations in Belarus. The unique natural conditions of this area since long turned it into a huge breeding habitat, where birds are too numerous to list. Terek and Marsh Sandpipers use sand strips crisscrossing the meadow for breeding, whilst adjacent fishponds produce views of Ferruginous Duck, Smew and five species of grebe, including Red-necked and Black-necked ones. Old-time floodplain forests feature Capercaillie, Woodcock, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Black Stork, Eagle Owl, Roller, Redwing, Collared Flycatcher and the delightful Azure Tit that is most numerous in Polesian oak-woods.



Azure Tit

Branta Tours



Wolves

But the tour isn't just about birds. We may also see mammals including all major carnivores, among them Wolf, Brown Bear and Lynx.

Pine Marten, Raccoon Dog and European Mink are among smaller predators, whilst European Bison, Elk and Beaver are quite common in the whole area.

We may also encounter many butterflies, dragonflies, amphibians and reptiles – and wild flowers including orchids will doubtless inspire interest.



Great Snipe



Branta Tours

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BIRDING IN BELARUS

Ural, Eagle, Tengmalm's, Pygmy and Great Grey Owls, White-tailed, Golden, Short-toed, Spotted and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Merlin, Whoper Swan, Black-throated Diver, Smew, Goldeneye, Ferruginous Duck, Crane, Spotted Redshank, Whimbrel, Terek and Marsh Sandpipers, Temminck's Stint, Ringed and Golden Plovers, Great Snipe, Little Gull, Corncrake, Capercaillie, Black and Hazel Grouses, Barred, Greenish, Icterine, Aquatic, Savi's, Grasshopper, River and Blyth's Reed Warblers, Common Crossbill, Red-backed and Great Grey Shrikes, Bluethroat, Thrush Nightingale, Scarlet Rosefinch, Redwing, Nutcracker, Three-toed, Black, Grey-headed, Middle Spotted and White-backed Woodpeckers, Red-breasted and Collared Flycatchers, Azure and Crested Tits, Citrine Wagtail and many other Eastern highlights.



Terek Sandpiper

© Branta-Tours



© Branta-Tours

Pripyatsky National Park

Dates: middle of May
7 nights, 8 birding days

Group Size: 5–10 people

Costs:

5–7 pax = € 1,249

8–12 pax = € 1,195

Price includes: all internal travel from /to Minsk, guiding, accommodation, all meals, mineral water and fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea /coffee, permit fees in all protected areas.

Price excludes: the airfares to Minsk, alcoholic beverages and tips, mandatory travel insurance.

Single room supplement: € 95

Deposit: € 200

Starting Point: Minsk Airport

Walking: Easy

Day 1: Minsk – Pripyatsky National Park

On your arrival, you will be met by a local representative of Branta-Tours and drive South (160 miles) to our first major destination – the Pripyatsky National Park. The Pripyat valley is one of the few places in Europe where signal species like Terek Sandpiper and Azure Tit breed in large numbers. Stop off on route to explore several top birding areas where we expect to see three species of harrier, Curlew, Hoopoe, etc. Diner and first night at Doroshev natural zone, where we will spend two days in a very comfortable base, just on the bank of Pripyat river.

Belarus Tours



Three-toed Woodpecker

Day 2: Pripyatsky National Park

After breakfast, we walk along the River to see several Eastern highlights, including Terek Sandpiper, marsh terns, White-tailed Eagle, Barred Warbler, Scarlet Rosefinch, Bluethroat and Thrush Nightingale. Then make a 3 hours boat excursion to explore one of the best protected wildlife areas in Europe. During our trip we visit locations where Azure Tit is a regular breeding bird. We also keep an eye on the sky where we expect to see Greater Spotted Eagle. Further on we visit several small islands where we look for Grey-headed, White-backed and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers. Collared and Pied Flycatchers, Red-backed Shrike, River, Sedge and Garden Warblers are among common breeding passerines of interest. Dinner and second night at Doroshev.

Days 3-4 : Pripyatsky National Park – Turov fen mires

Next two days we explore the endless water meadows of Pripyat floodplain and the well-known Turov open fen mires. The untouched natural conditions of this vast area, attract large numbers of breeding birds too numerous to list. The spectacle of hundreds of thousands of herons, cormorants, gulls, terns, waders, and ducks alone truly makes this a Birdfair! The mire is home to many interesting passerines including the globally threatened Aquatic Warbler. Primeval wet oak forests feature Hazel Grouse, Capercaillie, Woodcock, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Black Stork, Eagle and Great Grey Owls, Roller, Collared Flycatcher, Redwing and the delightful Azure Tit. Over a meadow by the Pripyat river, more than 30 male Great Snipes gather to perform their majestic display. The open meadows and mires are also excellent hunting grounds for various breeding raptors, such as White-tailed, Short-toed, Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles, and Great Grey and Short-eared Owls.



White-winged Black Tern

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Bluethroat



River Warbler



European Beaver



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Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve

© Branta-Tours

Days 5: Pripyat – Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve

After breakfast, we drive North (5 hours) to the village of Domzheritsy situated in the hearts of Berezinsky



Ural Owl

© Branta-Tours

Biosphere Reserve, that has received a Diploma of the European Council. In the evening we visit a location where Ural Owl is a common breeding bird. Dinner and overnight stay at a high-standard well located hotel just a few minutes from the reserve.

Day 6: Berezina River – Sporovo fen mires

Today we will travel west to explore the open fen mires, which unique ecosystem is limited to only several places in the world. Sedges dominate vegetation on these wetlands. The area holds many rare species including the globally threatened Aquatic Warbler. Here we will stay for 2 nights at a typical cosy Byelorussian village home. People in Belarus have healthy appetites and you are sure to enjoy delicious local traditional cuisine and a generous hospitality.



Aquatic Warbler

© Branta-Tours



Elk

© Branta-Tours



Hazelhen

© Branta-Tours

Belarus Tours



Birding in Belarus



Iris sibirica

Day 7: Sporovo fen mires

The forest close to our base holds several breeding pairs of Great Grey Owl and we hope we can admire this magnificent majestic owl.

The mire is home to many rare bird species, including Crane, Short-eared Owl, Corncrake and Citrine Wagtail.



Corncrake

Day 8: Sporovo – Minsk Airport

After breakfast we will travel back to Minsk Airport for the return flight.



Turov fen mires

Branta Tours



White-backed Woodpecker



Citrine Wagtail



Branta Tours

HUNGARY IN OCTOBER - The Fest of Cranes (8 days, seven nights)



This small group tour offers a deep insight into the autumn birdlife of Hungary. October is a period when transients and wintering birds, some late summer visitors and resident species can all be found in the same areas for a few weeks offering an extraordinary birding experience. The tour covers four of Hungary's national parks.



Dotterel

Made by Csaba Borkóczi

The Hungarian steppe or the so called „puszta” is home to one of the largest Great Bustard populations in Europe, but gatherings of Dotterels and Stone-curlews are also worth mentioning. All the wetlands are in turmoil in October: thousands of shorebirds, waterfowl and gulls blend into a gigantic, feathery mass, among them Ferruginous Duck, Lesser White-fronted Goose, Caspian Gull, Pygmy Cormorant, Spoonbill and occasionally Red-breasted Goose. Hortobágy and the southern fishponds of the Hungarian Great Plain are the staging areas of the biggest gatherings of Common Cranes in the world. Reedbeds surrounding these wetlands are noisy from the flocks of Bearded Reedlings, Penduline Tits but some late Moustached Warblers are also still present. Sakers, Eastern Imperial and White-tailed Eagles, Long-legged Buzzards and Rough-legged Buzzards cruise in the autumn sky while the members of the nightshift include Long-eared, Short-eared, Little, Barn, Ural and Eagle Owls. Several woodpeckers, such as the Black, Middle Spotted, Syrian, Green, Grey and White-backed ones are also on the menu.

Group size: 4-8

Walking: Easy to moderate

Accommodation: In comfortable double and triple rooms. The hotels are as close to the birding areas as possible to reduce extra travelling.

Price: 760 € - Base: 7-8 people

6 pax: 785 €

5 pax: 800 €

4 pax: 840 €

Specialist in the Authentic East

Price includes:

Accommodation

Breakfast on days 2-8

Packed lunch on days 2-8

Drinks: Mineral water, fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea/coffee;

Transportation by minibus

All excursions and guidance

Price excludes:

Lunch on day 1

Dinners

Alcoholic drinks and tips

Transport to and from Hungary

Single room supplement

Itinerary

Day 1 - Arrival

Meeting the English speaking local guides at Budapest airport and transfer to Forster Castle near the village of Bugyi. The castle is surrounded by an ancient park inhabited by several passerines including Hawfinch. Hopefully we will find our first Syrian Woodpeckers here.

Overnight: Forster Castle near Bugyi

Day 2 – Kiskunsag National Park 1

After breakfast we explore the vast alkaline steppes of the Upper Kiskunsag looking for Great Bustards and flocks of geese. A certain site is very good for Stone-curlews, where sometimes a few dozen assemble before departing for the South, also keeping

Hungary Tours

an eye out for soaring raptors overhead. Later on we stop off on route to visit the bird ringing center near Lake Kolon and its extensive reedbed. Moustached Warbler, Bearded Reedling, Penduline Tit and Wren are among small passerines that we are looking for. We spend the night near the lake in a friendly hotel, which is famous for its local specialties and wines.

Overnight: Hotel Vino, Izsák

Day 3 – Kiskunsag National Park 2

Today we wake up earlier than usual. The first stop is a large fishpond system, called Lake Csaj. Pygmy Cormorants, Ferruginous Ducks, Spoonbills, Great White Egrets, Caspian Gulls, White-tailed Eagles are rather common. Ducks and Geese are quite numerous too. Bearded Tits form noisy flocks in the reeds, alongside Penduline Tit are less conspicuous but still easy to find. Drained pond units host a phenomenal range of migrating shorebirds - far too numerous to list. Water Pipits also feature among the regular autumn visitors of these muddy surfaces. We spend the early afternoon at Bűdös-szék, which is pristine alkaline swamp teeming with shorebirds. Before dusk we reach Lake Fehér near Szeged and make a stop right at that point where thousands of Common Cranes coming from their feeding grounds start descending to their traditional roosting site.

Overnight: Halászcserda near Lake Fehér

Day 4 – Körös-Maros National Park

Today we are looking for several notable raptors, including Saker Falcon, Imperial Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard, alongside some early Rough-legged Buzzards and Merlins also feature on the vast steppes

around. Short-eared, Long-eared and Little Owls are also on the agenda. In the afternoon we visit the Great Bustard Sanctuary near Dévaványa, where injured bustards are being cured and the survivors of damaged nests raised. We also take a short walk in the nearby steppes looking for further raptors.

Overnight: The hotel of Körös-Maros National Park, Dévaványa.

Day 5 – Hortobágy National Park

The morning program includes the moulting site of Dotterels on a pasture of the Hortobágy National Park, where these beautiful birds can be observed from a very close range. After that we visit the Hortobágy Fishponds. Here we take a small train, which goes all across the ponds and carries us to the largest one called Kondás. This is one of the best stop-over places for all kind of shorebirds and waterfowl including the exceedingly rare Lesser White-fronted Geese. White-tailed Eagle is also a regular visitor of the area. Here we achieve our quest in the Hungarian Great Plain and head to the northern hills.



Made by Csaba Barkóczy

Lesser White-fronted Goose

Branta Tours



Overnight: Hotel Síkfőkút, Noszvaj

Day 6-7 Bükk National Park

Today we explore the Bükk hills covered with deciduous forests with beech and oak trees. The place is rich in woodpeckers: Black, Green, Grey-headed and Middle Spotted ones are fairly common but there are several reliable sites for White-backed Woodpecker too. We also look for Hawfinch, Mistle Thrush, Marsh and Willow Tits, while the rocky outcrops are favourite habitat for Rock Bunting, Alpine Accentors and even the delightful Wallcreeper. Usually the two latter species arrive in late October so if we are lucky we can find the earliest ones. In the evening of day 6 we visit an old stone mine with a resident Eagle Owl pair, while the other evening is going to be spent in searching for Ural and Tawny Owls.

Overnight: Hotel Síkfőkút, Noszvaj

Day 8 – A short birding in the morning and after saying farewell to the fabulous forests and hills we travel back to the airport.



Branta Tours

RUSSIA – CENTRAL SIBERIA

This trip to the middle Taiga region is an opportunity to explore a place where Nature is still "Natural".

The central theme of our trip is the River Yenisei (4,092 km) – one of the seventh greatest rivers in the world, here as much as two kilometers wide. Yenisei is considered as the demarcation line between the west – and east Palaearctic zoogeographic zone.



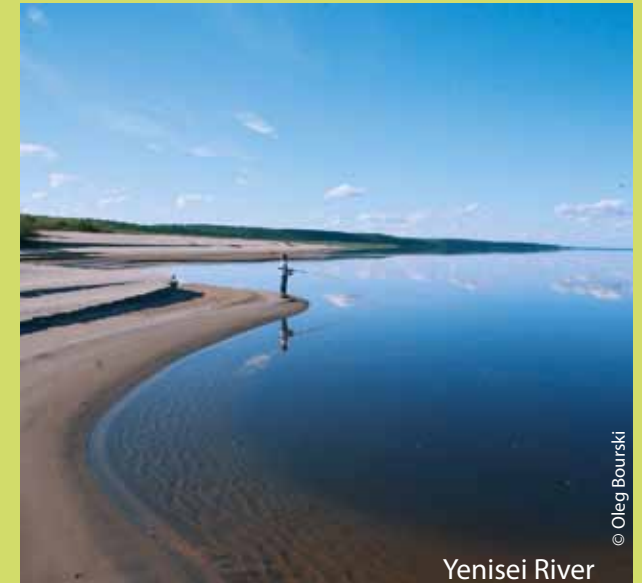
But it is really the birds that capture the essence of the taiga: *Crested Honey-Buzzard* and *Lesser Sparrowhawk* hunting along the shores and the forests alive with the songs of: *Siberian Rubythroat*, *Rufous-tailed* and *Siberian Blue Robins*, *Red-flanked*

Bluetail, *Siberian Accentor*, *Siberian*, *White's*, *Blyth's*, *Eye-browed* and *Dark-throated Thrushes*, *Richard's* and *Olive-backed Pipits*, *Arctic*, *Greenish*, *Yellow-browed*, *Dusky*, *Pallas's*, *Pallas's Grasshopper*, *Lanceolated* and *Blyth's Reed Warblers*, *Rustic*, *Pine*, *Yellow-browed*, *Yellow-breasted*, *Chesnat*, *Pallas's Reed* and *Little Buntings*, *Brown Shrike*, *Red-breasted*, *Siberian*, *Brown* and *Mugimaki Flycatchers*, *Scarlet*, *Long-tailed* and *Pallas's Rosefinches*, *Grey Bullfinch* and many other Siberian highlights including *Terek Sandpiper*, *Swinhoe's* and *Pintail Snipes*, *Siberian Jay* etc.

But good things come with effort, i.e. this is not your back garden or a place with highrise hotels, smart restaurants or busy roads. Indeed, you are going to explore one of the most remote places of the Planet. So many kilometers from the closest city, so many kilometers from the nearest road or airfield... The place you are based is surrounded for thousands of kilometers by Natural Taiga, where only Wolverine, Bear and Sable roam.

Specialist in the Authentic East

This simple life comes with sauna, delicious fresh food (including fish from Yenisei River) and remarkable hospitality. Electricity is available by a generator to allow you to charge batteries etc... We are equipped with satellite telephones and full-duplex radio station, which permits two way simultaneous communications. The permanent staff of Mirnoe Field Station also includes a GP doctor.



Russia Tours

Dates: early June, late June
11 days, 10 nights

Group Size: 5–12 people

Price: €2,750 (Base: 8-12 people)

Costs:

5 pax = € 2,989

6 pax = € 2,890

7 pax = € 2,785

Price includes: B & B accommodation in twin bedded wooden cabins at Mirnoe field station; B & B in twin en suite rooms at Krasnoyarsk hotel; Ten nights dinner; Packed lunches except for days 1 and last; Drinks: mineral water, fizzy drinks including Coca Cola, tea/coffee;



Siberian Rubythroat

© Branta-Tours

Internal flights (Moscow-Krasnoyarsk-Moscow and Krasnoyarsk-Bor-Krasnoyarsk); All excursions plus transfers by boat or hovercraft in Central Siberia; Guidance.

Price excludes: Lunch on days 1 & last; Alcoholic drinks and tips; Transport to and from Russia; Single room supplements in Krasnoyarsk, visas and health insurance.

Starting Point: Domodedovo Airport (Moscow)

Walking: Easy

Advantages:

Our base – The settlement at Mirnoe survives because of the field station of the Russian Academy of Science whose research has continued for 35 years and provides the bases for our knowledge of this region.

Professional ornitologist – We have direct access to the advice and knowledge of Oleg Bourski – a well known avian ecologist speaking fluent English who accumulated over 35 years of direct studies at Mirnoe Biological Station, Central Siberia.

The real naturalness and wilderness of the site – Central Siberia is one of the most attractive nature destinations visited by almost no other wildlife tour companies. Many people run “Nature Tours” but only a few tours go to sites where the Nature is still Natural and Wild. Until now there is almost no information about Central Siberia where the wildlife starts at your doorstep.

Accommodation: Accommodation is in traditional wooden cabins with beds for two people or family, well heated by large wood-burning stoves.

Branta Tours



Sable

© Oleg Bourski

Brief Itinerary:

Day 1: Travel to Krasnoyarsk via Moscow.

Day 2: Arrive Krasnoyarsk. Visit to Stolbi Nature Park. Stay overnight.

Day 3: Travel by plane to Bor. Continue to Central Siberian Zapovednik by hovercraft. Overnight.

Days 4-8: Investigation of Middle Taiga region. The first week of June presents us with numerous species of migrating waders and waterfowl; those begin to move downriver from the last week of May. The forest passerines begin to arrive from first week of June until third week (the last arrival is Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler).

Day 9: Depart for Bor. Visit to surrounding areas. Flight to Krasnoyarsk. Overnight.

Day 10: Flight back to Moscow and onwards.

Detailed day-by-day programme on demand
info@branta-tours.com



Branta Tours

AZERBAIJAN – The easiest place to find the most difficult Western Palearctic breeding species!

Güldenstädt's Redstart, Caucasian Snowcock, Great Rosefinch, Caucasian Black Grouse, Caucasian Chiffchaff, Greater Sand Plover, Persian Wheatear, Mongolian Finch, with an outstanding possibility of Shikra, and many other enigmatic species in support, including: Radde's Accentor, See-see Partridge, Little



View from our high-level base in Greater Caucasus

Swift, Crimson-winged Finch, Upcher's Warbler, Bimaculated Lark, Grey-necked Bunting, Red-fronted Serin, all 4 vultures, Striated Scops Owl, Black Francolin, Imperial Eagle, White-tailed Plover, Eastern and Western Rock Nuthatches, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Ménétries's Warbler, Levant, Green Warbler, Snowfinch, Grey-headed Gallinule, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Finsch's, Pied & Isabeline Wheatears, Caspian Tit, Asia Minor Twite, Red-breasted and Semi-collared Flycatchers, and many others...

9 nights, 10 birding days

Dates:
late May/early June

Starting point: Baku Airport

Tour Guides:

Pavel Simeonov and experienced local escorts

Group Size: Limited to 10 participants + Tour leader

Cost per person:

€ 1695 - Base: 3–4 Pax

€ 1625 - Base: 5–6 Pax

€ 1499 - Base: 7 Pax +

Single room supplement: € 120

At the south-eastern corner of Western Palearctic, on the western edge of the Caspian Sea and the

Specialist in the Authentic East



slopes of the Greater Caucasus lies a country still widely unknown to Western European birdwatchers. Surrounding it are four other countries, namely; Russian Federation, Georgia, Armenia and Iran.



Great Rosefinch



Güldenstädt's Redstart

Azerbaijan Tours

BIRDING IN AZERBAIJAN

Only one-ninth the size of Turkey, it produces as many excellent birding opportunities with far less effort required. It's the best place to see displaying **Caucasian Snowcocks** in their natural environment. Together with Caucasian Black Grouse, Great Rosefinch and Caucasian Chiffchaff, it is endemic to the Caucasus Mountains where it breeds at altitudes from 2000-4000m on bare stony mountains.



Caucasian Chiffchaff

The tour opens with 4-day exploration of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, the Azeri isolated enclave wedged between Armenia, Iran and Turkey. Known as the land of Noah, it shares no land border with Azerbaijan and the only access is by airplane. Regular internal flights from Baku easily connect Nakhchivan with the main land. Several unusual bird species listed for Azerbaijan can only be observed here, including Persian Wheatear, Mongolian Finch, Hubara Bustard, See-see Partridge, Radde's Accentor, Upcher's Warbler, Grey-necked Bunting etc...

The second part of the trip is dedicated to Shah-



Grey-necked Bunting

dagh National Park, in the north-eastern corner of Azerbaijan close to the Russian border. It offers the most fantastic scenery around featuring the vibrant green meadows and snow covered peaks of the Greater Caucasus, where we expect to find the following additional highlights, providing us with rare photographic opportunities: Caspian Snowcock, Caspian Tit, Red-breasted & Semi-collared Flycatchers, Rosy Starling, Pallas's Gull, Lesser Kestrel, Laughing Dove, Rufous Bush Robin, Shore & Lesser Short-toed Larks, etc., by way of a small sample (over 180 species expected).



Crimson-winged Finch

Branta Tours



The wildlife around is represented by several notable species of mammals that we also look for, including Goitered gazelle, East Caucasian Tur, Transcaucasian Mouflon, Caspian Seal, Marbled Polecat and, with good luck, we may just see the Jungle cat. Persian Leopard, which is probably extinct from the country, has been found here too.



White-throated Robin

* This tour can be modified by canceling some days depending on participants' wishes, i.e. instead of starting the tour with Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic; we can replace it with four days exploration of the enigmatic Talysh Mountains to the south, where we will look for Crimson-winged Finches, White-throated Robin, Bimaculated Lark and many other mouth watering highlights. We will accordingly keep the last part of the trip for the Greater Caucasus. It is also possible to operate the tour along the route back, i.e. instead of heading to the south after arriving in Baku; we can start first to the north and the first birding location to be Greater Caucasus !

Contact: info@branta-tours.com



Branta Tours

URAL MOUNTAINS

Branta Tours is now giving you the chance to visit the famed Ural Mountains for those Eastern Palearctic specialties you could once only dream of

More hills than real mountains, they sit at the edge of the Western Palearctic and give unrivalled opportunities for some very special birding.

The tour will concentrate on such mouth watering species such as Black Throated Accentor, Siberian Rubythroat, Long Tailed Rosefinch, Azure Tit, Pallas Grasshopper Warbler, Pin tailed Snipe, Oriental Cuckoo, Oriental Turtle Dove, Olive Backed Pipit, Whites and Black Throated Thrushes, with an outstanding possibility of Pechora Pipit and Siberian Accentor.

The Urals though have so much more to offer with a host other great birds in this underwatched and undiscovered area:

Owls abound with Great Grey, Northern Hawk, Tengmalms, Ural and Pygmy on offer and then there are the waders with Terek Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, Great Snipe, Dotterel all breeding.

Raptor specialties include with Spotted and Golden Eagles and there are a host of warblers with Arctic, Booted, Lanceolated, Pallas's, Yellow Browed and Greenish.

Buntings include Pine, Little, Yellow Browed, Rustic, Lapland and Pine Grosbeak, Two Barred, Common and Parrot Crossbill. We could go on so please look at our web site for the full possibilities.



Long-tailed Rosefinch

Ural Tours

Dates: 20-30 June (11 days, 9 nights)

Starting point: Ekaterinbourg Airport

Tour Guides: Pavel Simeonov and experienced local escorts

Group size: Limited to 12 participants + Tour leader

Cost: 1,690 Euro per person (not including flights), based on 10 to 12 participants.

Be one of the few western birders to experience this brilliant opportunity and help add to what an astonishing list is of must see birds.

* We will be pleased to send you a bird checklist and day-by-day programme just after receiving the required deposit.

Trip deposit of EUR 200 is required at least two months before departure.

Payment: Payment has to be made in either Euro or British Pound and should be made by bank transfer.

Air Travel: This is entirely optional leaving you completely free to make personally your flight reservations and to pursue your travel arrangements to Ekaterinbourg with an airline company or your own travel agent.

Please ask for details regarding flight schedule to and from Ekaterinbourg: info@branta-tours.com

Tour Info

ACCOMMODATION

Our accommodation has been chosen so that it is ideally situated for the birding spots that we shall visit. The type of accommodation will vary according to the locational context.

For all Bulgarian tours we provide single, double or twin-bedded rooms with en suite facilities in attractive private establishments, charming family hotels and cosy local guesthouses rated to 3-star quality. We also offer comfortable and affordable accommodation at Branta Birding Lodge, owned by Branta-Tours and overlooking Durankulak Lake and Black Sea.

Accommodation for other Eastern countries consists of very comfortable, well-located hotels and typical congenial and clean village homes. Bathroom facilities are usually in a shared base but far superior to what one should expect in these countries.

Meals will be taken at folk-taverns and national restaurants, which offer delicious local specialities and traditional pan-European cuisine.



Bearded Vulture

ETHICAL POLICY

Tour participants who behave in an unreasonable or offensive manner likely to upset or insult other members of the tour group, the guides, or other parties, or who commit any illegal act, may be dismissed from the tour without recourse to any refund or further assistance from Branta-Tours. This is to ensure good atmosphere for all people involved.

AIR TRAVEL

This is entirely optional leaving you completely free to make personally your flight reservations and to pursue your travel arrangements with an airline company or your own travel agent. Please contact us if you would like further clarification.

BRANTA-TOURS BOOKING POLICY

Deposits

We require up to Euro 200 per person deposit to reserve your tour on each trip. Deposits are due at time of reservation.

Method of payment: Please make your payments in Euro by using PayPal or Bank Transfer to:
DSK Bank PLC (Bulgaria)
Beneficiary: "Branta-Tours" EOOD
BANK: DSK Bank PLC, City of Dobrich (Bulgaria)
IBAN: BG84STSA93000011708806
BIC Code (SWIFT): STSABGSF

* Please visit your own bank in your home country with a printed copy of our booking form to make your payment. For this, please visit the following link:
www.branta-tours.com/booking_form.php

Branta Tours



FULL PAYMENTS

Full payment is due 60 days before your trip starts.

CANCELLATIONS

Most trips require a minimum group size of two people to be run at the listed price. If we must cancel a trip due to too few people, your money will be refunded or applied toward another trip, whichever you desire.

Should you find it necessary to cancel, your deposit and any payments will be refunded with notification to us at least 60 days prior to departure. With 40-59 days notice of cancellation, all but your deposit will be refunded. With less than 40 days notice, 50 percent of your trip price is not refundable. We recommend that you obtain travel insurance including trip cancellation and medical emergency.

For more information: info@branta-tours.com



European Suslick



Bulgaria-U.S. Red-breasted Goose Project

FIRST SUCCESSFUL SATELLITE TRACKING OF RED-BREASTED GEESE (*BRANTA RUFICOLLIS*)

Knowledge, Conservation Applications, Challenges and Preliminary Results

Pavel Simeonov¹ and Earl Possardt²

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²U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Division of International
Conservation; Earl_Possardt@fws.gov



Fig. 1. Photo of „Teddy“.

Teddy is a robust male Red-breasted Goose captured on Feb 16, 2012 in a cereal field near Durankulak, North-East Bulgaria. Upon release Teddy flew strongly to a nearby flock of RBG, vocalizing, landing for a second and then clearly, leading the flock to a “safer” nearby location. He was fitted with a 30 g satellite transmitter ID # 105757, plastic red ring with white numbering inscription 02 on the right leg and metal ring 5-54822 on the left leg. Teddy has been named after Theodore Roosevelt who was responsible for starting the National Wildlife Refuge System in the USA in 1903.

Introduction

The Bulgaria-U.S. Red-breasted Goose Project is a partnership between Le Balkan-Bulgaria Foundation, Branta-Tours and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service - Division of International Conservation with an overall goal of facilitating greater conservation action by National governments, NGOs and stakeholders with interests or management responsibilities for the Red-breasted Goose (www.redbreastedgoose.org).

This satellite telemetry study is conducted to determine movements and behaviour on wintering grounds and during migration, to better understand foraging and roosting behaviours of the species, to unravel the secrets of its mysterious flyway and to identify the threats on stop-over sites.

The project

The Bulgaria-U.S. project, registered by the Argos Center under the number 04897, aims to increase knowledge of RBG movements and behaviour to better inform management and policy for conservation of this critically endangered species especially concerning issues of hunting and public activities in protected areas.

The objectives of the Bulgaria-U.S. Red-breasted Goose Project are:

- To increase knowledge of movements and behaviour on wintering grounds and migration routes, also to identify threats and investigate feeding ecology at stop over sites.
- To facilitate greater synergy, national and international cooperation among partners and stakeholders, and to implement priority actions identified in the Action Plan developed by the International

Red-Breasted Goose Working Group.

- To facilitate agreements with large cooperatives, agricultural companies and farmers in the Coastal Dobrudja region, and implement agri-environmental measures suitable for foraging geese.
- To raise public awareness to promote conservation action.

Preliminary results and challenges

During February 2012 the Bulgarian field team (Le Balkan Foundation and Branta-Tours) successfully captured three Red-breasted Geese in north-east Bulgaria and fitted them, for the first time, with Argos/solar/GPS satellite transmitters in order to monitor their movements on wintering grounds in Bulgaria and Romania and during their migration northeast to breeding grounds in the Russian tundra.

Note: Le Balkan-Bulgaria Foundation first attempted to place satellite transmitters on Red-breasted Geese in 1997 in the frame of Bulgarian-French Programme called “Branta-Migration”, approved and registered by “Argos Global Processing Centre” under the number 01746, but this was unsuccessful because of transmitter failures at the time.

On February 11, 2012, the Bulgarian field team captured a young Red-breasted Goose near Shabla (north-east Bulgaria) to which a harness with 22 g Argos/GPS satellite transmitter was fitted. As the bird weighed 900 g the transmitter represented 2.4% of the body weight. On February 12 the young bird named Mini was successfully released in the vicinity of a large flock of Red-breasted Geese.



Red-breasted Geese



Fig. 2 Photo of Mini: On February 12, 2012 the field team (Le Balkan & Branta-Tours), successfully deploys for the first time after 15 years break, a satellite transmitter on Red-breasted Goose.



Fig.3 Boris (young male) was fitted with a 30 g PTT transmitter, plastic red ring with white numbering inscription 03 on the right leg and metal ring 5-54823 on the left leg.

On February 16, 2012, Teddy and Boris (two male Red-breasted Geese) were captured about 3 km north of Branta Conservation Center in Durankulak (www.birdinglodge.com). They were similarly fitted with 30 g satellite transmitters. As Teddy weighed 1 428 g this represented 2% or less of his body weight, while Boris weighed 1 170 g so the transmitter was 2.6% of his body weight.

Due to severe weather conditions Teddy and Boris were held for a day at Branta Conservation Center and were successfully released on Feb 18, 2012 at 08:00 am under perfect calm and sunny weather conditions. They flew beautifully and joined a large flock of Red-breasted Geese foraging near the village of Durankulak.

Here we present some current information for public outreach and education; the more refined scientific analysis for technical reports and publications will come later. The following text and maps are based on both GPS data where a movement of more than 2 km was detected between readings, as well as the most accurate Argos satellite locations (less than 1.5 km resolution). Thus, the maps are preliminary and will be subject to modifications upon final and more complete data analysis.

We encountered several challenges in capturing Red-breasted Geese and deploying satellite transmitters. First of all, Red-breasted Geese have vast areas of winter foraging habitat to choose from in north-east Bulgaria and south-east Romania (over 1 600/sq.km) and move frequently on a day to day basis reflecting weather, disturbance from hunters (both legal and illegal), farmers and the general public, and for reasons of their behaviour that thus far we do not fully under-

stand. Identifying capture sites therefore requires sound knowledge of their patterns of behaviour relative to weather, hunting and agricultural activities, together with a measure of basic luck. When fortunate to have large numbers of geese at our capture sites, flocks were occasionally scared off by human intruders, much to our disappointment. To capture the birds we relied on a proven foot-noose capture method (an ancient technique used in India) requiring experience and patience. For this we were required to obtain written permission from Bulgarian Ministry of The Environment and Water.

During the first week of attempted trapping there was a transformation from severe arctic weather, where the ground was completely frozen (we had to stick the nooses under the snow and the layer of ice) to springlike temperatures. This resulted in conditions of wet fields such that Red-breasted Goose feet became caked with mud, causing trampling of the nooses, which failed to snag their feet as intended.



Fig. 4. A flock of foraging Red-breasted Geese near Shabla



Bulgaria-U.S. Red-breasted Goose Project

As Red-breasted Geese are very suspicious of new and unusual objects in the field the nooses had to be smeared with mud by way of camouflage. Accidental capture of other birds such as common gulls created problems on occasion. A single captured gull is sufficient to alarm the geese and dissuade them from returning to the field for several hours. In one day 11 common gulls were captured in a space of 1-2 minutes!

Transmitter technology proved another challenge and we are not at the outset clear as to why we experienced poor performance from the transmitters placed on Mini and Boris. Mini's transmitter failed to

emit signals and indicated battery failure, whereas Boris' transmitter showed a very low charge.

It was hoped that Boris' battery would re-charge within the days following his release, and that his transmitter might start up again, which thus far has not happened. The likelihood of transmitter/battery failure appears to be high in both cases. Subject to good fortune a signal may one day be received once the battery is powered up by more increased sunshine.

Fortunately Teddy's transmitter has been sending high quality and frequent data which has shown us much about his movements so far, as well as foraging

and roosting behaviour along his way. For example on the winter foraging grounds, Teddy directed us to a remote inland farmland location in the Bulgarian Dobrudja, which differs from the typical and well-known coastal foraging habitat around the lakes we are already familiar with. This site was located 70 km south-west of his Durankulak release position, and 15 km inland from the city of Balchik, thereby providing a hint of the complex strategy of selective feeding of wintering RBG.

Furthermore, Teddy spent 2 weeks in Romania where his movements showed us other unknown inland areas (although often in or near existing Important

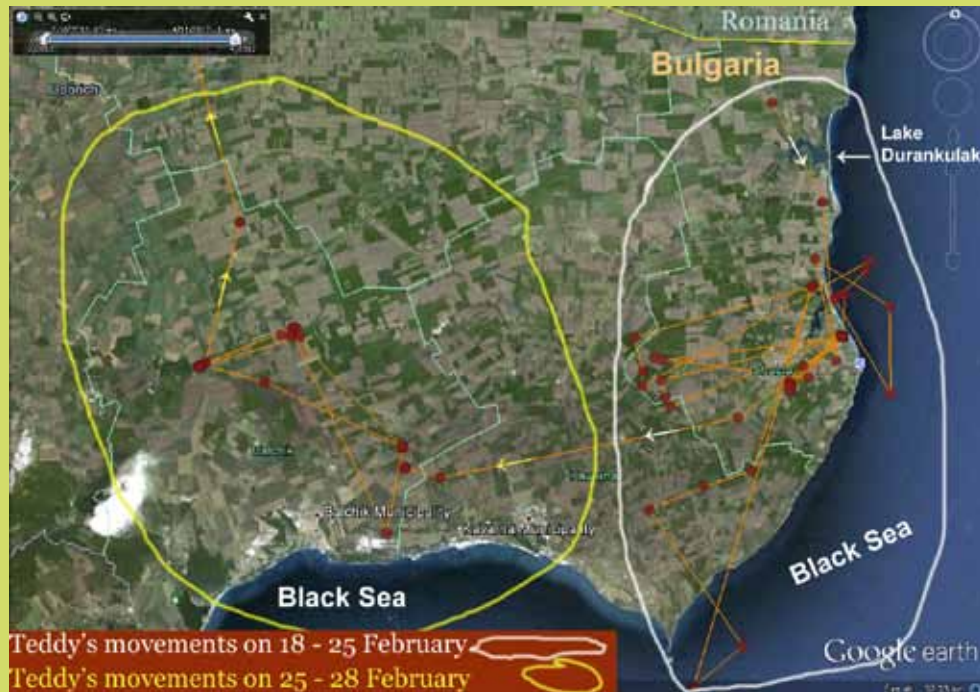


Fig. 5 Map of Teddy's Bulgarian movements



Fig. 6 Map of Teddy's Romanian movements

Red-breasted Geese



Fig.7. Map of Teddy's movements, showing locations of nearby Special Protections Areas (blue circles) and/or Important Bird Areas (yellow stars). GPS track in red circles; PTT locations in green circles. Thick yellow line shows long flight 16 – 17 March.

Bird Areas), mainly along the Danube River around Calarasi, rather than the traditional waterfowl coastal locations in the Danube Delta.

Teddy finally began his eastward migration on March 16th with a big leap: he left the Danube at 13.00, and

by 19.00 he was well over the Black Sea. Then by 13.00 the following day, exactly 24 hours later, he had completed a journey of 800 km to reach southern Ukraine. Here he visited the Priazovsky National Park, just south of the village of Botjevo on the northern shore of the

Sea of Azov that was founded by Bulgarians in the 18th century. It is worth adding that in the region of Zaporozie there is a large Bulgarian community and the village of Botevo was named after Hristo Botev, a brilliant Bulgarian poet and revolutionary who died



Bulgaria-U.S. Red-breasted Goose Project



Fig.8 Map of Teddy's movements at Lake Khanskoe



Fig. 9 Map of Manych

a heroic death in the western part of the Bulgarian Range on June 1, 1876 for the liberation of his enslaved Fatherland. So, conceivably, one of the reasons why Teddy spent another 3 days in this historic place!!

On March 20th Teddy flew 195 km across the Sea of Azov and spent 7 days at Lake Khanskoe in Russia, which turns out to be a new stopover site of great importance for the conservation of Red-breasted Geese. Here we learned of a new aspect of Teddy's diet consisting of weeping alkali grass (*Puccinellia distans*) and the halophytic plant (*Aeluropus littoralis*), in contrast to the foraging preferences of geese in wintering farmland areas (with winter wheat and maize stubble).

On March 27th Teddy made a 330 km journey eastwards and landed in the salt marshes of Vodny and Gorely Islands, located in the heart of "Rostovsky" Nature Reserve, just on the border of the Republic of Kalmykia, Russian Federation. This area is part of the Kuma-Manych depression, which is a traditional stop-over site for RBG and large numbers of other waterfowl. Sonya Rosenfeld, Institute of

Ecology and Evolution, Russian Academy of Sciences, reported that the spring hunting on geese and ducks has recently been prohibited in the regions of Rostov and Krasnodar to protect RBG, which is extraordinary news as well.

On April 2 Teddy entered Kalmykia and arrived at the protected nature reserve "Tzernie zemli" about 25 km to the South-East from his previous location in "Rostovsky" Nature Reserve. Teddy was roosting at the new site known as Bouyan Island and foraging 4 km northward in the fields near the north bank of the Kuma-Manych depression. On April 10 Teddy made his next step towards the nesting grounds heading 143 miles north-east, landing in the Sarpa Lakes - freshwater wetlands located in the north-central part of Kalmykia.

On April 16th 2012, at 04.00 in the morning, Teddy left the Sarpa lakes System and headed north-east crossing the Volga River. By 08:00, and 150 km later, he was over Akhtubinsk Airport (Astrakhan Region, Russia). Moving rapidly on he had by 12:00 reached the western corner of Kazakhstan, spending about



Red-breasted Geese

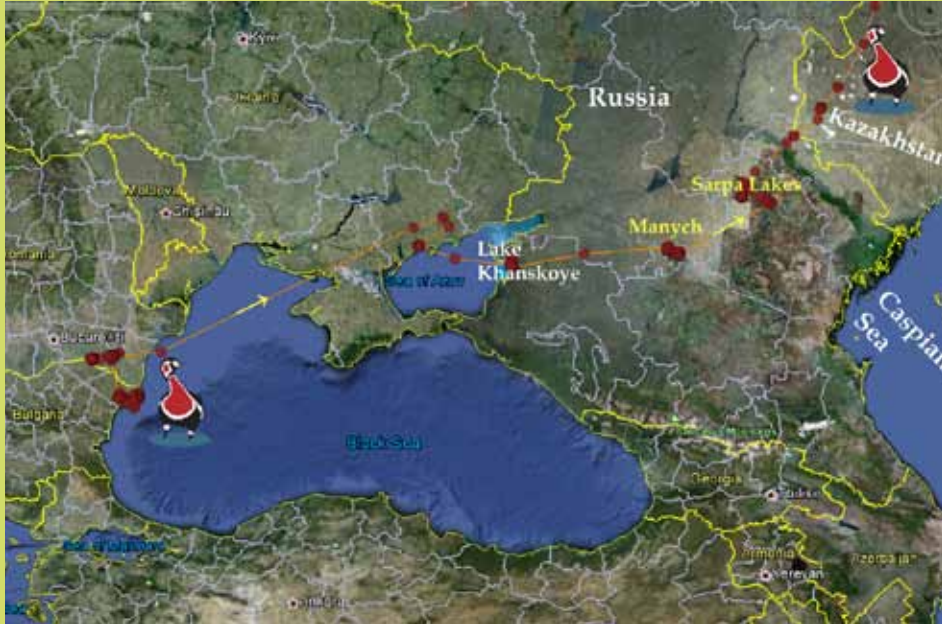


Fig. 10 Map of Sarpa lakes and West Kazakhstan

two hours on the Russian border; by 18:30 had flown a further 80 kms. inland Kazakhstan, passing over the town of Orda and, around 20:00, stopped nearby to roost: a total journey of 270 kms. At 08:00 the following morning (April 17) Teddy retraced his course, refuelling 7 km to the south of his roosting site and, by 14:00, had progressed a further 450 kms., passing surreptitiously 50 km west of the huge and well known lake Shalkar, reaching the northwestern corner of Kazakhstan at 20:00 on April 18.

As of April 19th, Teddy again crossed the Russian border and was located some 750 kms. from his previous location in the Sarpa lakes System in Russia (see fig 10).

On 13 May 2012 we received our last transmitter location from Teddy – the first Red-breasted Goose successfully tagged with satellite transmitter. The location was at 54.325N and 70.993E (North Kazakhstan).

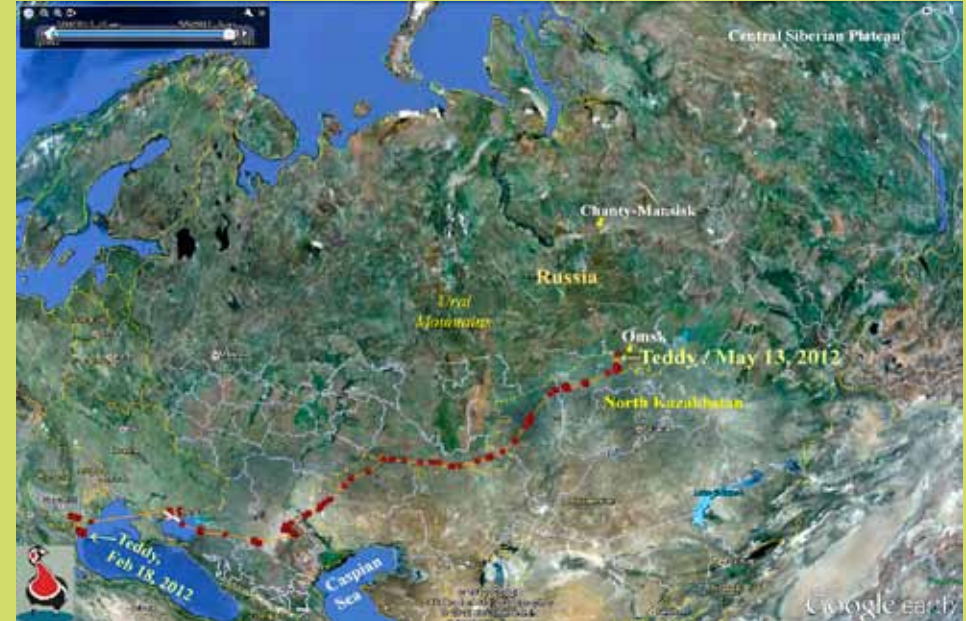


Fig. 11 Summary of Teddy's travel

TEDDY BROUGHT DOWN BY HUNTER

We are sorry to announce that Teddy was shot by a Russian hunter on 15 May 2012, in North-Kazakhstan Region, just near the Russia-Kazakhstan border, 8 km south of Ukrainka village and 180 km South-West of the City of Omsk.

During his spring return flight, Teddy covered 4,336 kms over the course of 3 months, starting in Bulgaria, and crossing Romania, Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan. The data sent from his tag has produced a wealth of new information, the details of which we are only just beginning to understand and interpret.

Some of the places Teddy used on his journey were predictable: sites designated and protected under various national and international legislations. However, some stopovers were a surprise and also a concern because the habitats there could deteriorate or hunting still occurs. The timing and duration of Teddy's movements will also in due course reveal a lot about the energetics of his migration and the need to provide sufficient secure feeding places along the route for the Red-breasted Goose population as a whole.



Bulgaria-U.S. Red-breasted Goose Project

Moreover, it is absolutely amazing that Teddy's status was resolved, and that we got a definite answer to why the transmissions stopped. The recovery of the transmitter must count as a great success in the circumstances. It is gratifying that hunter(s) turned in the transmitter and leg rings to the hunting inspectorate in Omsk, and that the Russian institutions concerned showed a willingness to cooperate. But the sad fate of Teddy might be another hint that hunting is one of the main threats responsible for the decline of the RBG population.

Although Teddy's journey came to a tragic and abrupt halt, it has already drawn broad public attention to the plight of the species and its urgent conservation needs which can lead to a more energized and expansive conservation effort in future along the entire flyway for the species (including better hunting regulation and hunter education).



Fig.12 Teddy's transmitter after its return.

Acknowledgements

Several individuals have taken special interest in this project, providing valuable information on local conditions along Teddy's northward journey: Nicu Calin provided valuable information on RBG and investigated Teddy's locations in Romania, Yuriy Andryushchenko provided information about stop-over RBG sites in Ukraine, especially at Priazovsky National Park on the northern shore of the Sea of Azov; Paul Goriup provided invaluable technical support for analyzing the satellite data and supplied us with photographs and detailed information about the Sivash National Park in the Crimean peninsula in Ukraine; Johan Mooij, Paul Goriup, David Kent and Tanyo Michev for editing the text; Yuriy Lohman for providing information on the Khanskoje Lake in Russia during Teddy's one week stay in this newly discovered stopover site; Russian botanist Vitalij Kolomijtchuk for providing the list of natural plants of Lake Khanskoje and its botanical characteristics; Sonya Rosenfeld on the feeding biology, stop-over behaviour, hunting regulations and numbers of RBG in their traditional staging place in the Kuma-Manych depression in Russia; Strahil Peev and Mini Nagendran for providing critical training and assistance with harnessing techniques, also Kiril Bedev for assistance with field releases. We especially thank the following sponsors for purchasing the satellite transmitters: Bulgaria Ministry of The Environment and Water & The Environment Protection Management Enterprise in Sofia, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service - Division of International Conservation, and Valentin Vassilev & Angel Iliev, Bulgarian farmers and owners of "Nava" Ltd and "Agroservice" Ltd. respectively.

Furthermore we especially thank the following institutions for their fruitful cooperation in clearing the circumstances of Teddy's death: Bird Ringing Centre of Russia, Ministry of Natural Resources of Omsk Region, Hunting Inspectorate in Omsk.

Finally a special thanks to the gracious hostess for the field team, Tatyana Simeonova, owner and manager of Branta-Tours Birdwatching Company whose enthusiastic encouragement, good advice and superb company made us feel really at home at the comfortable Branta Birding Lodge & Conservation centre in Durankulak that is home to not only Branta-Tours and Le Balkan Foundation, but also almost the entire world's wintering population of Red-breasted Geese.

Find out more about Bulgaria-U.S. RBG Project at www.redbreastedgoose.org



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Our Team



Pavel Simeonov is a professional musician who loves birds and specialized in birdwatching for Eastern countries. He is one of Bulgaria's leading naturalists and ornithologists, one of the Swarovski Recommended Bird Guides. Pavel speaks Bulgarian, fluent French, English and Russian. Being actively involved with conservation projects at national and international level he is able to provide a wealth of background information on wildlife matters, and indeed on cultural topics. He leads most of our tours personally. His sharp-eyed vigilance and knowledge of the best wildlife sites ensures a magical and fulfilling experience from start to finish. He has conducted numerous trips as a tour-leader throughout Bulgaria, Romania, Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Russia. Qualified as an international expert on environmental and biodiversity conservation projects he is also the founder of the Le Balkan-Bulgaria non-profit organization. He is involved in several conservation projects on globally threatened species including Red-breasted Goose and Dalmatian Pelican, mid-winter counts of water birds and many other interntional activities for the development of the eco-tourism concept. Pavel is also an enthusiastic photographer. He provides most of the photographs presented in this brochure. His good command of the Russian language is of great advantage in operating birding trips in Belarus, Russia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan.

Tatyana Simeonova is the owner and manager of the Branta-Tours Birdwatching Company.

Thanks to her numerous contacts with experts of the Council of Europe and their joint work on the territory of Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve in Belarus, Les Vosges du Nord National Park in France, Peak District National



Park in the UK, as well as her visits to several national parks in the USA aimed at studying their ecotourism development models, she has acquired a great deal of experience in this field. She spent more than 10 years of her life in the Berezinsky Biosphere Reserve in

Belarus being in charge of overseas communications and working as a group leader and interpreter. She also worked as a Consulting Assistant to the Pripiatsky National Park and Belovezhskaya Pushcha Biosphere Reserve in Belarus, in elaborating programmes on wildlife-watching tourism for foreign visitors. Her many years working in the field make her an expert in several areas. She is speaking Russian, Bulgarian, fluent English and fairly well French. Her Byelorussian nationality and a good command of the Russian language are of great advantage in organizing birdwatching trips throughout Belarus and a number of other former Soviet bloc countries.

Red-breasted Geese



Tisho Russinov is one of the leading Bulgarian ichthyologists working actually at the National Natural History Museum. He speaks Bulgarian, fluent English and Russian. He is involved in several biodiversity conservation projects in Bulgaria such as the establishment of Natura-2000 network.

Being also one of the most experienced dragonfly specialists and keen birdwatchers in the country, Tisho is developing now the Branta-Tours Dragonfly Programme and is leading most of our Wildlife Trips across the former Soviet bloc countries, including Azerbaijan, Belarus and Russia.

Jeko Spiridonov is one of the top Bulgarian birders and has an extended experience indeed in the field of Conservation Biology: He is the President of "Wilderness Fund" and Head of the Branta-Tours Mountain Programme. He is actively involved in Biological and ecological scientific studies, biodiversity inventories and monitoring; Establishment of Ecological networks; Development of nature conservation



legislation; at high position in Governmental and international nature conservation bodies – Vice-Chairman and Chairman of Steering Committee of Bern Convention. Jeko has been birding all of his life and now he is a head guide of Branta-Tours Birdwatching Company.

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