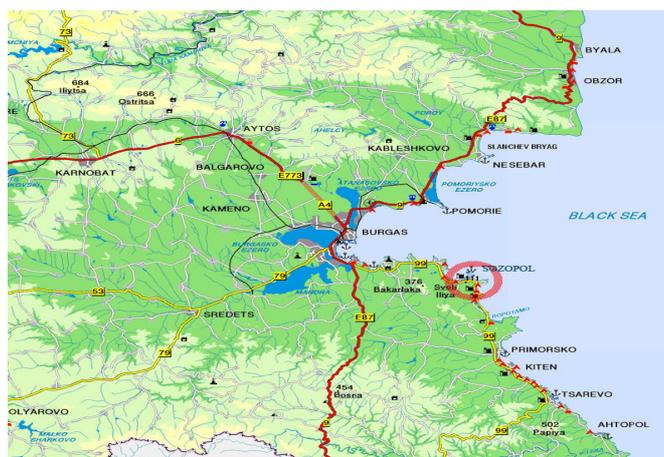


# Southern Bulgaria.

6<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> September 2008.



A combined family and birding holiday based in the Black Sea resort of Sozopol. Flights were booked with Balkan holidays flying to Burgas with Bulgarian Airways and our apartment independently via the Internet; we opted to stay at the Apolon complex, three miles out of town on the Budzaka headland. Sozopol is still a relatively low key, quiet resort, and mostly used by Bulgarian and Russian tourists, indeed we hardly saw a British tourist all week. During the first week in September the town hosts the Apolonia Arts and Film festival, so if its culture your after with your birding, this is the week to visit, with lots of events based in and around the old town. The complex we stayed in was quiet, with its own gym; free use of mountain bikes, 24-hour security, and a wonderfully cooling swimming pool. Our apartment had a balcony overlooking the Black Sea, which proved great for sea and raptor watching, it was decorated to a high European standard and contained everything one might need for a successful holiday. The owners Iain and Louise live on site, spoke English and offered an excellent level of customer service, they can be thoroughly recommended, and can be contacted via their website. <http://www.sozopolrentals.com/>

By UK standards we found Bulgaria reasonably cheap, we took a few Lev [BGL] to see us through our first few days and exchanged sterling at the banks in Sozopol, with an exchange rate of 2.4 lev to £. Friends we had spoke to had been disappointed with the standard of food in Bulgaria, however they had visited the mass tourist resorts of Golden Sands, and Sunny Beach , Restaurants in Sozopol were frequented by locals as well as tourists and we found the food excellent and good value for money. E.g., a bottle of wine, and two-course meal for two averaged 40 Lev [£15]. Recommended restaurants were all on the Ogeca Odesa at the end of the main beach road and included Beruna, Lotus, and Saint Nicole. As we were without our own transport we used the local taxis to get around, a driver recommended to us by our apartment owners was reliable and punctual; a 3mile trip into town from our apartment at Budzaka cost us 10 lev [£4].

We were told the local tap water was safe, however we chose to ignore this advice and used only bottled water. Temperatures during the week never dropped below 23 degrees Celsius, and often reached 30 degrees by midday, thus birding was best early morning and again from late afternoon, although anytime of day was good for raptors.

## **Birding sites visited.**

### Apolon Complex – Budzaka Headland.

The Budzaka area which was once a picturesque wooded headland in truth now represents a building site, in line with the rising popularity of Sozopol, villas and apartment complexes are sprouting up everywhere in the area. However get out early and pick your way through the waste

ground, building sites and patches of cover and birds will be found. The headland is said to be jumping with migrants after overnight rain, and although conditions remained clear during our visit, birding was still decent with a daily turnover of birds. As mentioned our apartment had a balcony over looking Sozopol bay, and daily watches produced small numbers of seabirds and raptors.

### Alepu Marsh

This brackish lake and reedbed lies about 5 miles south of Sozopol and was an easy taxi ride from the Budzaka and has presently escaped the development of further north. The marsh can easily be viewed from the main road, which allows elevated viewing. A track at the south end allows you to enter the reedbed, and the woodland to the south is worth a visit, whilst birding here keep an eye on the beach for gulls and terns, and the whole area acts as a fly way for raptors, herons, storks etc.

### Burgas Wetlands.



1. Lake Burgas: - This is the most central of the lakes surrounding the bleak town of Burgas, but birding was excellent with both species of Pelican, and a multitude of Wildfowl, Herons, Gulls and Terns. The eastern shore follows the main E87 coast road with several convenient pull ins.
2. Mandra Lake: - The southernmost lake, Mandra holds similar birds as Burgas Lake but in smaller numbers, we accessed the shore from Dimcevo where two small rivers drained into the lake. The surrounding countryside provided views of passage Storks and Raptors and held the expected open country birds.
3. Lake Antanasovsko: - This is a working site for salt extraction on the northern edge of Burgas, and a famous Bulgarian watch point. An official raptor-viewing platform is located north of the main E87 road, however any area of open ground will allow viewing. We spent several hours doing just that on what was a poor day for migration, however scanning to the north still produced small numbers of 11 species of raptor, both Pelicans and Storks. On a good day, usually clear after several days of rain, the number of birds passing over the area can be remarkable.
4. Poda Lagoon: - Poda was protected in 1989 as a nature conservation site managed by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB). It is of international importance and the conservation work here has been honoured by the award of the Henry Ford prize. There is a conservation centre with three terraces allowing sheltered viewing of the lagoon, reedbeds and raptors overhead. A taste of birding Poda and an overview of recent sightings can be found on the Poda Blog <http://www.bspb-poda.de/blog/>

### Ropotamo River.

An area of riverine woodland about 10 miles south of Sozopol. The area is frequented by tourists who arrive by the coach load for the hour-long river cruise, [£4], we participated and I found it very disappointing for birds. The woodland held expected species, and would be probably be better in

spring when Semi-Collared Flycatchers can be seen around the car park. A word of warning, if you do the trip independently, don't expect a guaranteed place on one of the boats, we promptly got on, then off several boats that were block booked by organised tours, and eventually had to squeeze on with a Lithuanian group, and as a consequence couldn't understand a word of the commentary!



Ropotamo River.

### **Itinerary.**

6<sup>th</sup> September. Left Newcastle at 18:20 arriving Burgas just after midnight local time. Taxi transfer arranged by Apolon complex waiting, arriving apartment 01:00.

7<sup>th</sup> September. Dragged myself out at 07:15, and birded around complex and adjacent Budzaka headland till 10:00 seeing amongst others several Red-breasted Flycatcher, Icterine Warbler, and two Thrush Nightingale. A late afternoon seawatch from balcony produced Yelkouan Shearwaters, and a Montagua's Harrier in off the sea.

8<sup>th</sup> September. A lazy day spent sunbathing at Kavatsie beach, followed by an evening walk around the Budzaka headland.

9<sup>th</sup> September. Taxi to Alepu Marsh arriving 07:30, birded woodland to south then walked elevated main road noting a good selection of Wildfowl, Herons, and Waders. From mid morning Bee-eaters were constantly calling overhead, and Herons and Terns began moving through area. Late afternoon from balcony saw Yelkouan Shearwaters, Little Gulls and Black Terns offshore.

10<sup>th</sup> September. Today I had pre arranged a big day out around Burgas with Dimiter Georgiev of Neophron Tours, the commercial arm of the [Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds \(BSPB\)/ BirdLife Bulgaria](#).

Dimiter picked me up at 08:00 and we spent the whole day birding the excellent Burgas wetland complex seeing a wide range of species, Dimiter knows the area very well and took me to some of the areas perhaps less known to visiting birders. He was a fountain of knowledge on Bulgarian birds and their conservation and had a gift for picking out incoming specs in the sky and putting a name to a raptor long before they were confirmed by closer views. He was a really nice guy, and can be recommended for any visiting birder wanting a big day out, contact him through Neophron <http://www.neophron.com/index.htm>.

11<sup>th</sup> September. Taxi to Ropotamo 09:00, birded car park area, then came the coaches and tour groups! eventually managed the boat trip that was disappointing bird wise, but very scenic. Early evening spent seawatching from balcony and sadly? checking out the loafing gulls on shoreline opposite balcony all [in my opinion] proved to be Michahellis.

12<sup>th</sup> September. The day was spent sightseeing; an early evening seawatch resulted in 10 Marsh Harrier in off the sea and over balcony.

13<sup>th</sup> September. Taxi transfer arrived on time at 13:00, for 16:20 flight, arriving Newcastle after an hours delay 19:00.

### **Species List.**

**Mute Swan.** A pair at Alepu with three young, and 4 noted at Lake Burgas.

**Shelduck.** 10 + noted Burgas wetlands.

**Mallard.** 6 Alepu, and small numbers Burgas wetlands.

**Gadwall.** 10 + Lake Burgas.

**Shoveler.** A single at Poda Lagoon.

**Teal.** 50+ Lake Burgas, with 3 at nearby Mandra.

**Garganey.** 3 noted at Atanasovsko and Poda Lagoon.

**Pochard.** 400+ counted on Lake Burgas – an impressive sight.

**Ferruginous Duck.** A single male at Lake Mandra.

**Pheasant.** Two regular near apartment, singles Burgas wetlands.

**Little Grebe.** Noted Alepu, and fairly common Burgas Lake.

**Great Crested Grebe.** Single Alepu, and 10+ noted Burgas wetlands.

**Red-necked Grebe.** 5 off Alepu beach.

**Black-necked Grebe.** 20+ off Alepu beach.

**Yelkouan Shearwater.** Noted daily especially from late afternoon in Sozopol Bay, maximum 10.

**White Pelican.** Noted only on 10<sup>th</sup> in Burgas area. 4500+ on Burgas Lake, with small groups seen at both Mandra, and Lake Antanasovsko.

**Dalmatian Pelican.** As above, noted only in Burgas area, 150+ noted on Lake Burgas, and 25+ on Lake Mandra.

**Cormorant.** Very Common.

**Pygmy Cormorant.** Noted only at Burgas Wetlands, with 5+ Lake Burgas, 10+ Mandra, and 25+ Poda Lagoon.

**Little Bittern.** A single watched well in top of reeds at Lake Alepu 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Night Heron.** 2 juveniles at Lake Burgas on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Squacco Heron.** A single at Lake Burgas.

**Little Egret.** 6 at Alepu marsh, with a further flock of 18 flying south, very common at BurgasWetlands.

**Great White Egret.** 3 at Mandra Lake on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Grey Heron.** A total of 23 noted Alepu, including a flock of 16 flying high south, 10+ in the Burgas area, and 5 at Ropotamo.

**White Stork.** Passage of this species peaks late August, thus the only flock noted was 26 south at Antanasovsko on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Black Stork.** 2 south over Mandra Lake.

**Spoonbill.** 2 at Mandra, and 36 Antanasovsko on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Honey Buzzard.** On 10<sup>th</sup>, 10 south over Lake Mandra, and 2+ over Antanasovsko. Passage peaks latter half of August, usually from 22<sup>nd</sup>.

**Black Kite.** 5 south at Antanasovsko.

**White-tailed Eagle.** Single noted, Lake Mandra.

**Lesser Spotted Eagle.** A little early for main passage, in favourable conditions in October 500-1000 in a day is not unusual. 6 noted, all south over Antanasovsko.

**Short-toed Eagle.** 8 south over Antanasovsko.

**Booted Eagle.** 4 at Antanasovsko on 10<sup>th</sup>, and a single 'in off' over apartment late afternoon on 13<sup>th</sup>.

**Marsh Harrier.** 2 Alepu, 15+ Burgas Wetlands, and a late afternoon passage of 10 over Sozopol on 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Montagu's Harrier.** Singles south over Apartment on 7<sup>th</sup>, and at Mandra Lake on 10<sup>th</sup>. Passage peaks Late August.

**Sparrowhawk.** One in off the sea, Budzaka on 13<sup>th</sup>.

**Common Buzzard.** Fairly common most areas visited, e.g. 10+ in Burgas Wetlands area. Passage peaks October.

**'Steppe' Buzzard** – ssp 'Vulpinus' – 4 'classic' birds south over Antanasovsko.

**Kestrel.** Fairly common.

**Hobby.** An adult and Juvenile noted at Kavatsie Beach on 8<sup>th</sup>.

**Water Rail.** Heard only – Alepu, and Lake Mandra.

**Little Crake.** A single heard calling near to where river flows into Lake Mandra.

**Moorhen.** Fairly common, most wetlands visited.

**Coot.** As above, however 1,000+ at Poda lagoon.

**Black-winged Stilt.** Handful noted Burgas wetlands.

**Avocet.** 200+ Burgas Wetlands, with most on saline pools at Antanasovsko.

**Little Ringed Plover.** Handful Lake Mandra, and Alepu.

**Ringed Plover.** 4 Lake Mandra on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Kentish Plover.** 10+ noted at Antanasovsko.

**Lapwing.** 2 at Alepu Marsh, the only birds noted.

**Little Stint.** 3+ Antanasovsko.

**Curlew Sandpiper.** 3's at Poda lagoon and Antanasovsko.

**Dunlin.** Noted only at Antanasovsko.

**Ruff.** 2 Poda Lagoon on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Snipe.** 15+ Alepu Marsh.

**Whimbrel.** One Poda on 10<sup>th</sup>, a scarce migrant in Burgas area.

**Spotted Redshank.** 5 Antanasovsko.

**Redshank.** 25+ Burgas Wetlands.

**Marsh Sandpiper.** 5+ Antanasovsko.

**Wood Sandpiper.** 5 Alepu Marsh, 4 Poda Lagoon.

**Common Sandpiper.** 3 noted Burgas Wetlands on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Mediterranean Gull.** Odd birds noted on seawatches from Apolon Complex, 300+ at Antanasovsko on 10<sup>th</sup> were mainly adult birds in winter plumage.

**Little Gull.** 6 off Apartment on 9<sup>th</sup>, and 20+ Lake Burgas on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Black-headed Gull.** Surprisingly, only noted at Burgas area, where common, including a count of 1200 at Lake Burgas.

**Slender-billed Gull.** 2 1<sup>st</sup> w birds Lake Antanasovsko.

**Yellow-legged Gull.** Common, a regular flock of loafing birds were scrutinised daily for 'Caspian Gull', all however in my opinion proved to be 'michahellis'. Several hundred regular off apartment at dusk.

**Caspian Tern.** 3 flew north over Alepu beach on 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Sandwich Tern.** Common offshore.

**Common Tern.** 2 off Budzaka on 8<sup>th</sup>, 14 through Alepu on 9<sup>th</sup>, and 10+ in Burgas area on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Little Tern.** 10+ Poda Lagoon.

**Whiskered Tern.** 10+ Burgas Lake, 2 Mandra Lake. All aged as Juveniles.

**Black Tern.** 20+ Burgas Lake on 10<sup>th</sup>, and up to 12 noted each evening during seawatching off apartment.

**Woodpigeon.** Small numbers noted on 10<sup>th</sup>.



Sozopol

**Collared Dove.** Fairly common.

**Kingfisher.** 2 Mandra Lake, 2 Ropotamo River.

**Bee-eater.** A constant background noise, with migration noted every day, although flocks never easy to observe as often very high in blue skies. One flock of 160+ noted south over Antanasovsko on 10<sup>th</sup> gives an indication of numbers involved.

**Hoopoe.** A single at Antanasovsko on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Grey-headed Woodpecker.** One seen well in woods at southern end of Alepu Marsh.

**Syrian Woodpecker.** Fairly common, including daily sightings around Apartment complex.

**Lesser-Spotted Woodpecker.** One in woodland near Alepu Marsh.

**Skylark.** 3 at Alepu Marsh on 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Crested Lark.** Common.

**Sand Martin.** 20+ in Burgas area on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Swallow.** Common.

**Red-rumped Swallow.** 10+ around apartment daily until 11<sup>th</sup>, when disappeared. Handful noted Burgas area on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**House Martin.** 15+ noted daily around Budzaka, and 30+ Burgas area.

**Yellow Wagtail.** 1-2 over on 5 dates from Apartment, 3 south Alepu on 9<sup>th</sup> and 5 Antanasovsko, the latter birds raced as 'feldegg'.

**Grey Wagtail.** 1 Ropotamo River on 11<sup>th</sup>.

**White Wagtail.** Common.

**Thrush Nightingale.** 2 at Budzaka on 7<sup>th</sup> were seen well enough on ground to clinch i.d, several other 'Nightingales' flushed during week remained unidentified.

**Whinchat.** A single bird at Budzaka on 7<sup>th</sup>.

**Wheatear.** Noted only on walks around Budzaka headland, max 6.

**Sedge Warbler.** A single at Poda Lagoons on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Reed Warbler.** 'Common' at Alepu Marsh.

**Great Reed Warbler.** A very showy bird at Alepu Marsh on 9<sup>th</sup>

**Icterine Warbler.** Single at Budzaka on 7<sup>th</sup>, with 2 here on 8<sup>th</sup>. Single at Alepu on 9<sup>th</sup>.



**Sozopol Sunset.**

**Lesser Whitethroat.** Common, noted most sites max 5 Budzaka.

**Whitethroat.** 4 Alepu, and a single at Budzaka.

**Chiffchaff.** A single in song Ropotamo on 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Willow Warbler.** Only two birds observed all week.

**Spotted Flycatcher.** 1 Budzaka, 3 Poda Lagoons, 5+ Ropotamo.

**Red-breasted Flycatcher.** Fairly common, noted most sites including small copse opposite Apartment, this species is very common from mid September onwards.

**Penduline Tit.** A Single at Burgas Lake on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Blue Tit.** Fairly common, noted around Budzaka daily.

**Great Tit.** Odd birds noted.

**Sombre Tit.** Single at Ropotamo.

**Nuthatch.** Single at Ropotamo on 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Golden Oriole.** 3 Budzaka on 7<sup>th</sup>, a single Mandra Lake on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Red-backed Shrike.** Common, noted daily, maximum 6 Budzaka.

**Woodchat Shrike.** A single Mandra lake on 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Jay.** Single Budzaka on 7<sup>th</sup>.

**Magpie.** Common.

**Jackdaw.** Fairly common, maximum 50 + Sozopol town centre.

**Hooded Crow.** Noted daily.

**Starling.** Common.

**House Sparrow.** Common.

**Spanish Sparrow.** Migrating flocks noted daily, max 100+ south at Alepu on 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Tree Sparrow.** 1 Lake Mandra.

**Chaffinch.** Observed daily near apartment.

**Greenfinch.** 2 Ropotamo only birds noted.

**Goldfinch.** Seen daily in small numbers, max 10.

**Corn Bunting.** 1 seen on wires near Lake Mandra on 10<sup>th</sup>.

*Chris Knox - September, 2008*