

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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BULGARIA
THE WESTERN RHODOPES, EASTERN RHODOPES
and BLACK SEA COAST
2nd – 11th June 2011

Holiday participants

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Leaders from the Neophron team

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Report by Assen Ignatov with additions by Helen Crowder.

Photos by Assen Ignatov, all taken during this holiday.

Cover photomontage – Top row: Black-headed bunting, European roller, souslik.

Middle row: Yagodina lady, wallcreeper, heart moth.

Bottom row: Hermann's tortoise, black stork, greater butterfly orchid (with diverging pollina).

Plant list by Vladimir Trifonov.

Our hosts at the Hotel Yagodina: Assen and Mariya Kukundjivi
www.yagodina-bg.com

In Krumovgrad we stayed at the Hotel Via – <http://hotelvia.free.bg/>

In Sozopol we stayed at the Kalithea Hotel – www.hotelkalithea.com/en/

On the return journey to Sofia we stayed one night in the conservation village of Koprivshitsa at Bashtina Kashta (Father's House) – www.fhhotel.info



As with all Honeyguide holidays, part of the price of this one was put towards a local conservation project. Our contribution of £40 per person went to the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds, the BirdLife partner in Bulgaria, to assist the management of the Poda Nature Protected Site which we visited during the week. The conservation contribution, by bank transfer, was supplemented by gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust and a £200 donation from the Wildlife Outreach Network, resulting in a donation to BSPB of £450.

The total amount of conservation contributions from all Honeyguide holidays since 1991, as at December 2011, is £74,329.

Bulgaria, 2nd – 11th June 2011

Day 1, 2nd June: Arrival, Sofia to Western Rhodopes

The airplane arrived a little bit late at Terminal 1 but the group was excited to be in Bulgaria for the first time as we left the airport by Opel Vivaro minibus, parked inside the airport, and were soon on our way towards the Western Rhodopes like last year.

On the motorway nearby Pazardzhik we saw a few white storks, common buzzards and kestrels. Crossing the river Maritza we pointed out some red-backed shrikes, calandra larks (on Bessapar Hills) and black-headed bunting. We drove further into the Rhodopes, with the last stop for the day, after Krichim, to watch pallid swifts, blue rock thrush, alpine swifts, red-rumped swallows, crag martins (flying around everywhere) and rock bunting. The last stops were good for few interesting plants as well, including *Juniperus excelsa*, Grecian juniper, which is in the Bulgarian Red Data Book (RDB) of endangered and protected species, and *Verbascum nobile*, noble mullein, a Balkan endemic species. And then... straight to Yagodina.

Day 2, 3rd June: Yagodina – Trigrad Gorge – Yagodina

After breakfast at 8am and a short drive to the road tunnel at Trigrad Gorge, we stood waiting for the target species – the wallcreeper. A peregrine, crag martins and alpine swifts were all seen flying over the gorge. A male wallcreeper came and gave insects to the female and we had very close views just a few metres above us. As we waited for the next coming of the wallcreeper, Vlado pointed out some plants growing from the limestone cliff, including the Rhodopes endemic *Haberlea rhodopensis* and other Balkan endemic plants like *Arenaria rhodopea*, Rhodopean sandwort (not in flower), a RDB Bulgarian endemic; *Geranium macrorrhizum*, rock cranesbill; *Geranium sanguineum*, bloody cranesbill; *Geranium robertianum*, herb Robert; *Inula aschersoniana*, inula, a Balkan endemic species; *Lamium galeobdolon*, yellow archangel; *Petasites hybridus*, butterbur; and *Valeriana montana*, a RDB species.



Above: Male wallcreeper on the right of the photo showing his dark throat patch, feeding insects to the female. This is a resident species which breeds on sheer cliffs with vegetation at 1000-3000m altitude, moving to lower levels in winter.

Right: Dipper, another resident species. This one is a juvenile with dark grey plumage, pale eye ring and bib not yet delineated.

On the way to the Museum of the Bear, walking slowly, we saw black woodpecker, alpine swifts, black redstart, wren, dipper, both white and grey wagtails and ravens.

After lunch at the Kaminata café, where a wren was singing and few tree and house sparrows watched us, we had a walk on the track to Yagodina, with not so many birds but some good flowers, including *Geranium phaeum*, dusky cranesbill; *Rhinanthus vagneri*, rattle; *Trachelium rumelianum*, throatwort, a Balkan endemic RDB species; *Veronica jaquinii*, speedwell; *Lychnis flos-cuculi*, ragged robin; *Seseli rhodopaeum*, a Bulgarian endemic RDB species; *Symphytum otomanum*, comfrey; and *Saxifraga aizoides*, yellow mountain saxifrage, a RDB species.

After an hour we understood why was it so quiet – it started raining and we decided to go back. Fortunately, while walking down, we had the idea to have a drink at the Zdravec guest house, which has good panoramic views of the valley.

Day 3, 4th June: Yagodina – Yagodina cave

On the pre-breakfast walk we watched some of the local species like hobby, raven, goldfinches, greenfinches and bullfinch. After breakfast we had an easy walk in the forest above the village, noting woodlark, goldcrest, firecrest and few orchids.

When we arrived at the Yagodina Cave, first we saw one of the really big beetles which specialise in eating snails. There were speckled wood butterflies and a family of wall lizards above the cave as well. We also saw a friendly common frog (common in high mountains in Bulgaria).

The idea was to have drink and then to go into the cave. Drinking our coffees we pointed out a very close dipper. Going out we walked slowly south, close to the Greek border. Everybody was thrilled on the way to see so many dippers, adults and juveniles, and many grey wagtails. There were many different, and some of them rare, plants around, and Vlado pointed out *Saxifraga sempervivum*, evergreen saxifrage, a Balkan endemic species; *Orchis morio ssp. picta*, green-winged orchid; *Orchis tridentata*, toothed orchid; *Neotinea ustulata*, burnt-tip orchid; *Morina persica*, prickly whorlflower; and *Neotia nidus-avis*, birdsnest orchid

Day 4, 5th June: Yagodina – on the footpath to Trigrad gorge

Today our plan was to follow a footpath from Yagodina to Trigrad Gorge, trying to hear corncrake about 3 km south-east where there are very attractive panoramic views. It was a good walk for plants, butterflies and many other insects. When we got back to the hotel we took a 4WD vehicle to the eagle-eye watchpoint located north-west from Yagodina village.

Interesting plants seen today were *Saxifraga rotundifolia*, round-leaved saxifrage; *Saxifraga stribrnyi*, a Balkan endemic RDB species; *Orchis militaris*, military orchid, a RDB species; *Corallorhiza trifida*, coralroot orchid; and *Dactylorhiza baumaniana*, marsh orchid.

Day 5, 6th June: Yagodina – Krumovgrad

A driving day today with coffee stops in Smolyan and Kardzhali. The main idea was to spend some time in the area of Dolna Kula village, just before Krumovgrad.



Left: Western rock nuthatch, a resident species associated with bare rocks in mountainous areas. It has the typical nuthatch large head, short tail and powerful bill and feet.

Right: Black stork, a shy summer visitor which breeds in swampy forests or on riverside cliffs. Unlike its white relative, bill clattering at the nest is muted and rarely used.

We started birdwatching with a good view of woodlark, stonechat, Spanish sparrows and a fishing black stork. On the cliffs before the meander of the Krumovitsa river we saw a chukar with ravens in the background. Bee-eaters and rock nuthatch were like something sweet. Good photos were

taken of a tortoise walking close to the road, and before going to the hotel we had very good views of a singing black-headed bunting, and a red-rumped swallow (*tortoise and bunting photos on front cover*). After dinner I pointed out a very close scops owl as well.

Plants noted were *Verbascum rupestre*, a Balkan endemic RDB species; *Lotus aegaeus*, Aegean birdsfoot; *Salvia sclarea*, musk sage; *Coronilla varia*, crown vetch; and *Alnus glutinosa*, alder.

Day 6, 7th June: Krumovgrad – Sozopol

Another driving day but with good stops on the way for interesting birds. And a very good start, as after 15 minutes we saw a roller trying to eat a big centipede close to the road (*photo on front cover*). Before going to the vultures' feeding place there were a few white and black storks fishing in the river and a little owl sitting on a chimney. Passing the last house it was good to see a woodchat shrike and another roller. We spent almost an hour watching Egyptian, griffon and black vultures feeding, before we headed north-east. Driving slowly on the last hill before Madzharovo a long-legged buzzard perched on a post was being mobbed by a red-backed shrike. We drove on to Madjarovo with another stop to one of the richest sites from a birdwatching point of view. We had Egyptian and griffon vultures, blue rock thrush, rock nuthatch, peregrine, black stork etc, and a raven with a chick (somebody else's) in its bill. Because of the long driving day we needed good quality species like masked shrike and olive tree-warbler, and, at Yerusalimovo village, we got them!

Plants noted today included *Echium italicum*, pale viper's bugloss; *Pistacia terrebinths*, turpentine tree; *Silene dichotoma*, catchfly; *Stachys germanica*, German woundwort; *Quercus virgiliana*, virgil oak; and *Verbascum rorripifolium*, a Balkan endemic RDB species.

Day 7, 8th June Sozopol – Burgas Lakes

After breakfast we stopped at Atanassovo Lake which was good for avocets, spoonbills, shelducks and many waders, and Burgas Lake which was good for pelicans, both Dalmatian and white, many squacco herons and a few little bitterns. Going back to Sozopol there was free time with an easy walk in the old town of Sozopol. Notable plants today included *Artemisia santonica ssp. Patens* (*A. maritima*), sea wormwood; *Phragmites australis*, common reed; and *Cionura erecta*, a member of the poisonous milkweed family.

Day 8, 9th June: Sozopol – Alepu – Ropotamo river – Marina River

After a good breakfast we journeyed south in the bus and our first stop was just beyond Sozopol at the sand dunes of Alepu Marsh where we saw black-headed yellow wagtail, larvae of antlions and a few spiders. We drove a little farther down the coast to the Ropotamo Nature Reserve, parking in the shade of mature oak, and boarded a boat for a trip down the lower section of the river Ropotamo to where it empties into the Black Sea, passing the Lion's Head rock formation on the way. It was a relaxing way to watch herons, cormorants and a few kingfishers. On the way back we had a very good view of a golden jackal watching us from the reedbed.



The European golden jackal is a member of the genus *Canis*, more closely related to the grey wolf and the coyote than to other jackals.

Numbers in the Balkans have increased owing to conservation measures, but except in protected areas the species is declining over its whole range. Bulgaria has a population estimated at around 10,000, where it is found in lowland areas with water and dense vegetation.

We had lunch under the shade of the small port for the boats, with many swallows above our heads and fish below in the water. It was good to see copulating small emperor dragonflies. Back on the bus we headed inland to the Strandzha mountain. Investigation of the butterflies revealed a cardinal, a great-banded grayling and several chequered skippers. We found some interesting, attractively-coloured mushrooms as we walked down into the Marina River Reserve but they smelt terrible. We found a nest with a green woodpecker chick.

Red cage fungus or lattice stinkhorn
Clathrus ruber.

Like other stinkhorns it arises from an 'egg' which is attached to the ground at its base by cords. As the egg ruptures, the fruiting body expands and the egg membrane remains shrivelled around its base.

The spore-bearing slime (glebra) which coats the upper inner surfaces of the spongy lattice smells like rotting meat, attracting flies and other insects which then disperse the spores.



Plants today included *Achillea clypeolata*, yellow yarrow, a Balkan endemic species; *Asplenium trichomanes*, maidenhair spleenwort; *Cistus incanus*, rockrose; *Carduus thracicus*, Thracian thistle, a Bulgarian endemic species; *Fagus orientalis*, oriental beech; *Fraxinus excelsior*, common ash; *Quercus hartwissiana*, Strandja's oak; *Fraxinus oxycarpa* (*F. angustifolia*), Caucasian or narrow-leaved ash; *Quercus polycarpa*, oriental durmast; *Rhododendron ponticum*, Pontic or Black Sea rhododendron, here in its native habitat and a RDB species; *Smilax excelsa*, greenbrier; *Tamarix tetrandra*, tamarisk, salt cedar; and *Platanthera chlorantha*, greater butterfly orchid.

Day 9, 10th June: Sozopol – Koprivshitsa

We drove north to Bourgas and then east to the conservation village of Koprivshitsa. Just before Sliven we stopped and watched a few Isabelline wheatears with a European ground squirrel or souslik (*photo on front cover*). In front of the hotel in Koprivshitsa we got two dippers chasing each other and later we found their nest under the bridge.

Day 10, 11th June: Koprivshitsa – Sofia and home

After a very early breakfast we departed to the airport at Sofia, where we said our goodbyes.



The group.

**CHECKLIST OF PLANT SPECIES OBSERVED IN THE WESTERN AND EASTERN
RHODOPES AND ALONG THE BLACK SEA COAST, BULGARIA
2nd – 11th June 2011**

RDB = Bulgarian Red Data Book of threatened or protected species.
Balk. E. Sp. = Balkan endemic species. Bulg. E. Sp. = Bulgarian endemic species.
n.i.f. =- not in flower

KRICHIM		
<i>Juniperus excelsa</i>	Grecian juniper	RDB
<i>Verbascum nobile</i>	Noble mullein	RDB Balk. E. Sp.
TRIGRAD – YAGODINA (WESTERN RHODOPES)		
<i>Inula aschershoniana</i>	Inula	Balk. E. Sp.
BESSAPARI HILLS		
<i>Achillea clypeolata</i>	Yellow yarrow	Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Aetionema saxatile</i>	Stone cress	
<i>Ajuga pyramidalis</i>	Pyramidal bugle	
<i>Alyssum stribnyi</i>		RDB Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Antyllis montana ssp jackuinii</i>	Kidney vetch	
<i>Aremonia agrimonoides</i>	Bastard agrimony	
<i>Arenaria rhodopea</i> (n.i.f.)	Rhodopean sandwort	RDB Bulg. E. Sp.
<i>Arabis nova</i>	Rock cress	RDB
<i>Astragalus angustifolius</i>	Narrow-leafed milk vetch	
<i>Campanula jordanovii</i>	Bellflower	RDB Bulg. E. Sp.
<i>Cirsium appendiculatum</i>	Balkan thistle	Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Corallorhiza trifida</i>	Coralroot orchid	
<i>Dactylorhiza baumaniana</i>	Marsh orchid	
<i>Geranium macrorrhizum</i>	Rock cranesbill	
<i>Geranium sanguineum</i>	Bloody cranesbill	
<i>Geranium robertianum</i>	Herb Robert	
<i>Geranium phaeum</i>	Dusky cranesbill	
<i>Globularia aphyllanthes</i>	Globularia	
<i>Globularia cordifolia</i>	Matted globularia	
<i>Haberlea rhodopensis</i> (preglacial relict)		RDB Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Helianthemum nummularium</i>	Common rockrose	
<i>Hypericum cerastoides</i>	St. John's wort (Rhodopean)	
<i>Inula aschersoniana</i>		Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Lamiaeum galeobdolon</i>	Yellow archangel	
<i>Lamium garganicum</i>	Dead nettle	
<i>Lonicera nigra</i>	Black-berried honeysuckle	
<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>	Ragged robin	
<i>Morina persica</i>	Prickly whorlflower	
<i>Neotia nidus-avis</i>	Birdsnest orchid	
<i>Orchis militaris</i>	Military orchid	RDB
<i>Orchis morio ssp picta</i>	Green-winged orchid	
<i>Orchis tridentata</i>	Toothed orchid	
<i>Morina persica (Orchis ustulata)</i>	Burnt-tip orchid	
<i>Ornithogalum montanum</i>	Mountain star-of-Bethlehem	
<i>Petasites hybridus</i>	Butterbur	
<i>Rhinanthus vagneri</i>	Rattle	
<i>Salvia argentea</i>	Silver sage	
<i>Saxifraga aizoides</i>	Yellow mountain saxifrage	RDB
<i>Saxifraga rotundifolia</i>	Round-leaved saxifrage	
<i>Saxifraga sempervivum</i>	Evergreen saxifrage	Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Saxifraga stribnyi</i>		RDB Balk. E. Sp.

<i>Scrophularia scopolii</i>	Figwort	
<i>Seseli rhodopaeum</i>		RDB Bulg. E. Sp.
<i>Sideritis scardica</i>	Mountain tea	Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Symphytum otomanum</i>	Comfrey	
<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i>	Wall germander	
<i>Trachelium rumelianum</i>	Throatwort	RDB Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Valeriana montana</i>		RDB
<i>Veronica jaquinii</i>	Speedwell	

EASTERN RHODOPE

<i>Alnus glutinosa</i>	Alder	
<i>Coronilla varia</i>	Crown vetch	
<i>Echium italicum</i>	Pale viper's bugloss	
<i>Lotus aegaeus</i>	Aegean birdsfoot	
<i>Pistacia terrebinthus</i>	Turpentine tree	
<i>Salvia sclarea</i>	Musk sage	
<i>Silene dichotoma</i>	Catchfly	
<i>Stachys germanica</i>	German woundwort	
<i>Quercus virgiliana</i>	Virgil oak	
<i>Verbascum rorripifolium</i>		RDB Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Verbascum ruperste</i>		RDB Balk. E. Sp.

BOURGAS LAKES

<i>Artemisia santonicum</i> ssp <i>patens</i> (<i>A. maritima</i>)	Sea wormwood	
<i>Chondrila juncea</i>	Rush skeleton-weed	
<i>Cionura erecta</i>	Cionura	
<i>Eryngium maritimum</i>	Sea holly	RDB
<i>Jurinea albicaulis</i> ssp <i>kilea</i>	Jurinea	Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Phragmites australis</i>	Common reed	
<i>Platanus orientalis</i>	Oriental plane	RDB
<i>Quercus cerris</i>	Turkish oak	
<i>Quercus frainetto</i>	Hungarian oak	
<i>Silene euxina</i>		Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Stachys maritima</i>	Sea woundwort	RDB
<i>Typha angustifolia</i>	Bullrush	

STRANDJA NATURE PARK AND ROPOTAMO RIVER COMPLEX

<i>Achillea clypeolata</i>	Yellow yarrow	Balk. E. Sp.
<i>Asplenium trichomanes</i>	Maidenhair spleenwort	
<i>Carduus thracicus</i>	Thracian thistle	Bulg. E. Sp.
<i>Cistus incanus</i>	Rockrose	
<i>Fagus orientalis</i>	Oriental beech	
<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>	Common ash	
<i>Fraxinus oxycarpa</i> (<i>F. angustifolia</i>)	Caucasian or narrow-leaved ash	
<i>Quercus hartwissiana</i>	Strandja oak	
<i>Quercus polycarpa</i>	Oriental durmast	
<i>Rhododendron ponticum</i>	Pontic rhododendron	RDB
<i>Smilax excelsa</i>	Greenbrier	
<i>Tamarix tetranrda</i>	Tamarisk, salt cedar	

