

## **Birder in a camper van - European Tour – Part Three**

### **Czech Republic**

I spent the period between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 18th July 2019 in the Czech Republic visiting a friend in Harrachov ski resort, as well as birding the Trebon wetlands and by working for on a small farm for five days.

Sightings of interest include; 18 **Red-crested Pochard**, a **Grey-headed Woodpecker**, a **Nutcracker**, three **Icterine Warblers**, one Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, a **Honey Buzzard**, 20 **Serim**, seven Red-backed Shrike, a Great Reed Warbler, 10 White Stork, a Crossbill, five Turtle Dove, a White-tailed Eagle, eight Golden Orioles, a Short-toed Treecreeper and the fourth **White-backed Woodpecker** of the year.

### **Germany** (second pass)

A brief stop off in Bavaria en route to Austria on a lovely sunny day provided me with the chance to hear a **Corncrake** for the 20<sup>th</sup> and final time of the trip.

### **Austria**

From the 18<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> of July I dog-sat Petzl near to Ramsau au Dachstein. Some of the highlights in this area were; three **Nutcracker**, two **Bearded Vulture**, a Golden Eagle, one Icterine Warbler, and two Ring Ouzel.



But the best and most entertaining birding moment in Austria occurred on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July when I took the cable car up to the Dachstein Glacier to witness the antics of 60 **Alpine Chough**. They seem to have become habituated to the mountaintop café and regularly come to scavenge from visitors. I could not resist feeding some by hand as can be seen in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yL9sQs4EiI0>



Alpine Chough

## Slovenia

31<sup>st</sup> July

I made an overnight stop in Italy, before crossing the mountains and descending into Slovenia. A **Nutcracker** flew over the van on the way to Lake Cerknika where the



main highlight came in the form of four **Black Storks** flying over. Also here; a **Cirl Bunting** up to 15 Great White Egrets, a Fieldfare, Golden Oriole, an Icterine Warbler, Whinchat, Serin, Red-backed Shrike, Yellow Wagtail and plenty of Grey Herons, some of which are Buddhists.





## Croatia

### 2<sup>nd</sup> August

Lonjsko Polje: Highlights here included; eight **Black-crowned Night Heron**, **Purple Heron**, **Collared Flycatcher**, eleven Golden Oriole, three Turtle Dove, 5 Eurasian Bee-Eaters, nesting Spoonbill, Red-backed Shrike, Great Reed Warbler, Barred Warbler, Goshawk and White-tailed Eagle.



**Black-crowned Night Heron**

## Hungary

My first **Rollers** of the trip came on August 3rd after which they became a relatively frequent sight. I arrived at the area around **Feher Fish Ponds** during the afternoon the same day, remaining until the next evening. During this time I noted; four **Ferruginous Ducks**, two **Squacco Heron**, three **Purple Heron**, seven **Black-crowned Night Heron**, a **Moustached Warbler**, two Marsh Warblers and numerous Whiskered Terns.

Driving across the plains eastwards to Romania, I made numerous stops, encountering; approximately ten **Lesser Grey Shrikes**, five **Red-footed Falcon**, four Turtle Dove, two Quail and several Woodchat Shrike.

Close to the border with Romania I began to see singles of Turtle Dove regularly, with eight counted altogether.

## Romania

Just after the border, I saw the first Black-winged Stilt of the trip feeding beside the road, which I took to signify a change in environment. That night, I spent the night at a monastery near to Arad that tolerates campervans and motor homes in their expansive car park.



That was an interesting experience as the evening prayers were broadcast at high volume through loud speakers in the car park. Once the noise had abated I joined some Dutch tourists for a wander around the tree filled courtyard. There, we discovered some Long-eared Owls, with at least eight individuals present. At dusk, they could easily be seen and heard around the car park. Van tick! In the morning, I spotted one of them roosting in the courtyard.





## Bulgaria

### 7<sup>th</sup> August

I arrived at Rusenski Nature Reserve late that evening but managed to see two **Alpine Swift**, 30 Bee-Eaters and three Red-rumped Swallows before dark.

### 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> August

## Burgas



Pygmy Cormorant

Burgas, and **Poda Nature Reserve** in particular is a particularly good spot. Despite being too early for the peak Autumn migration, the two days I spent there was really productive with; 25 **Pygmy Cormorant**, 30 **Great White Pelican**, 11 Spotted Redshank, Hoopoe, Golden Oriole, 10 Red-backed Shrike, a **Marsh Sandpiper**, a Ruddy Turnstone, (rare here), three **Collared Pratincole**, two Penduline Tit, Purple heron, Squacco, Glossy Ibis, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Barred Warbler, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Goshawk.



Collared Pratincole



Golden Oriole



Barred Warbler

### 10<sup>th</sup> August

In the Southeast of Bulgaria, after a few stops, one was particularly fortuitous, with both an **Eastern Imperial Eagle** soaring overhead and a **Syrian Woodpecker** flying across the road to perch atop a tree. Several other probables were heard calling beforehand but none of these were seen.

### Greece

Hoping for some relief from the very warm temperatures, I set off for the coastal reserve of **Limnothalassa Elous** and a night overlooking the lagoons. **Eastern Subalpine Warbler**, was present and probably nesting in the bushes, but the most interesting species were on the lagoons, with; 800 **Greater Flamingo**, one **Broad Billed Sandpiper**, several Kentish Plovers and two Stone Curlew, with Crested Lark, five Lesser Grey Shrike, and a Roller present at roadside, as well as four Black Storks which flew across in a South Easterly direction.

### 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> August

#### Kerkini Lake

The heat was unbearable but a visit to this area was a must. A **Little Crake** (van tick!) provided great views, whilst, nearby, three **Ferruginous Duck** paddled back and forth. Dotted around were at least five Pygmy Cormorant, (van tick!). There were huge



numbers of birds here, although spread across a vast area and impossible to count. Focusing on those close to the van during my two day stay, I saw a minimum of; 19 Squacco Herons, seven Purple Heron, 300 **Dalmatian Pelican**, 25 Black Stork, 100 **Glossy Ibis**, 21 Golden Oriole, a **Masked Shrike** and a Honey Buzzard.



**Masked Shrike**

Water Buffalo were also present in large numbers, somewhat giving the impression of being in the Serengeti! The photo below shows one of the many groups that inhabit the area around the lake.



**Water Buffalo**

This was the furthest South I got to on this portion of the trip. An Autumn tour of the UK seemed like a good idea at the time, but before I could do that, a lot of driving lay ahead. Another overnight stay at the monastery in Romania and an inspiring stop off in stunning Bavaria helped break up the trip.

### **Germany (third pass!)**

#### **17th August**

On the afternoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> August, I arrived in a picturesque valley just East of the Bavarian town Oberau. The highlight, without doubt, was the **Spotted Nutcrackers** with at least twelve seen, as well as Great Reed Warbler, six Red-backed Shrike and a Dipper. A video of one of the Nutcrackers trying to crack some hazelnuts can be seen on my youtube channel here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMQiqUoXk6Q>

### **England, Scotland and Wales**

I foolishly decided to visit *Great Britain* for the Autumn and so returned on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August and left again on the 11<sup>th</sup> November (Part Four!). I decided on a clockwise circuit of the island starting and ending at Dungeness Bird Observatory in Kent, taking in parts of Wales, the Lake District, the West coast of Scotland, Cairngorms, Spurn Bird Observatory and North Norfolk. The weather was terrible for almost the entire time.

### **31<sup>st</sup> August and 1<sup>st</sup> September**

#### **Strumble Head, Wales.**



I was lucky to arrive at **Strumble Head** just after a storm with strong winds veering North West. Perfect for sea watching at this site. Over two days, I witnessed more than 900 Manx Shearwaters going South close to shore. The more exciting sightings came in the guise of four **Leach's Petrels**, three **Sabine's Gulls**, two **Grey Phalarope**, and one **Balearic Shearwater**. On terra firma, **Red-billed Choughs** regularly visited the grassy cliffs and car park behind the lighthouse with between 8 and 13 present.



Red-billed Chough

3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> September

I stopped and parked overnight at Pilling Embankment, Lancashire, to see the long staying **Eastern Black-eared Wheatear**.



Eastern Black-eared Wheatear



Two more pleasant stops on my way North were RSPB Leighton Moss for very close views of waders like Curlew Sandpiper and Spotted Redshank, and the Lake District but the next notable sighting was at RSPB Mersehead with 120 returning Pink-footed Geese.

Between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of September I embarked on a mini-tour of the West Coast and the Cairngorms in the Highlands of Scotland. The most interesting birds were: four Black-throated Diver, 800 Pink-Footed Geese, 11 Goosander, two Golden Eagles, 15 Red Grouse, one Ring Ouzel, and two Slavonian Grebe.



Red Squirrel - Abernethy Forest

I stayed at Spurn Bird Observatory between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of September, too early for the glory days they later experienced, but I was happy to see a **Red-breasted Flycatcher**.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> September at Warham Fresh Marsh in Norfolk, around 1500 Pink-footed Geese came to roost. But the most unexpected sighting in Norfolk was of an Otter on a river near East Ruston, only the second time I've seen one in England.

Next was a short stop at Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> October, where the most interesting sighting was a **Yellow-browed Warbler** bouncing from a ringer's net.

At Dungeness during late October and early November, **Yellow-browed Warbler**, **Caspian Gull**, **Sabine's Gull**, and **Shore lark** were all present for varying periods, with the first three getting themselves onto the van list! A Great Grey Shrike was twitched at Bockhill near St. Margarets.



Yellow-browed Warbler



Caspian Gull





Shore Lark



Sabine's Gull





Great Grey Shrike



Merlin - female



Firecrest



Green Woodpecker - ringed at Dungeness

Between March and November 2019, I managed to see **338** bird species overall, with approximately **290** on the van list.

**Next leg:** Winter 2019/2020 - Spain, France and Portugal and hopefully Morocco if I can sort out the insurance and breakdown cover. Spring 2020 could be spent in various places in the Mediterranean TBD.