



**BULGARIA: BIRDING THE BLACK SEA
AND VITOSHA IN WINTER**

03 – 11 FEBRUARY 2024



*The striking **Red-breasted Goose** is a special of the Kavarna area.*

Bulgaria's position in southeast Europe results in a range of species that are not found further west on the continent. During winter, the country holds vast numbers of geese and other waterfowl that make use of this small area in Eastern Europe, and results in fantastic birding opportunities.

This birding tour encompasses the best of Bulgarian, and indeed Eastern European, birding during the winter months and commences in the capital city of Sofia. The first birding of our tour will be in the nearby and beautiful Vitosha Mountain National Park, where we can search for forest specials like **Spotted Nutcracker**, **Black Woodpecker**, **Northern Goshawk**, **Firecrest**, **Red (Common) Crossbill**, and a wide range of common European woodland birds like **Eurasian Blue Tit**, **Goldcrest**, and **Willow Tit**.

We will then make the journey across Bulgaria from Sofia to Pomorie, on the Black Sea coast. Along the route we will make stops to look for birds like **Golden Eagle** and **Sombre Tit**.

While in the Pomorie area we will visit the nearby salt works. The standout species here are the Near Threatened (BirdLife International) **Dalmatian Pelican** and **White-headed Duck** which is an Endangered species (BirdLife International). The salt works support many other birds, including various species of shorebirds (waders) and wintering passerines. We will visit some of the region's protected wetland sites and coastal areas while here. This area holds more interesting species with **Pallas's Gull**, **Whooper Swan**, **Tundra (Bewick's) Swan**, and **White-tailed Eagle** all possible here. While in the area, we will also visit the Strandzha Mountains on the Turkish border, which is home to the exceedingly rare (in Bulgaria) **White-backed Woodpecker**.



*We will look for the huge **Dalmatian Pelican** during the tour.*

After birding around Pomorie, we will travel north along the coast to the town of Kavarna. On the journey we will cross the Balkan mountain range and visit the Baltata National Reserve. This beautiful area is home to the striking **Grey-headed Woodpecker** and giant **Black Woodpecker**,

while additional roadside stops in vast oak forests along this route may yield more woodpecker sightings, plus **Short-toed Treecreeper**.

Once in the Kavarna area we will search for the beautiful, yet classified as Vulnerable ([BirdLife International](#)), **Red-breasted Goose** among the tens of thousands of more common **Greater White-fronted Goose**. We will also visit the picturesque [Kaliakra Nature Reserve](#) and nearby [Bolata Valley](#). This is part of Bulgaria's last remaining steppe habitat and is another key area for wintering geese, including the prized, **Red-breasted Goose**. We should also come across a variety of wintering passerines, and perhaps the stunning **Short-eared Owl**. Huge cliffs here are home to the massive **Eurasian Eagle-Owl**.

The final area we will visit in this part of the country is the vast [Durankulak Lake](#). This is a vitally important migration stopover point but is also very productive in winter. It is here that we will observe the greatest concentrations of geese so far, and hopefully add the Vulnerable ([BirdLife International](#)) **Lesser White-fronted Goose** to our list. This area is also good for birds of prey like **Long-legged Buzzard** and **Rough-legged Buzzard**. Sadly, this will bring our tour to an end and we will fly from Varna to Sofia and have one final birding session in Sofia ahead of our flights home.



*We will search for **Spotted Nutcracker** in Vitosha Mountain National Park.*

If you would like to extend your time in Eastern Europe, you could join our exciting **Azerbaijan: The Enchanting East** tour which runs immediately before this one. This stunning country, on the edge of the Western Palearctic, holds a huge range of interesting European and Asian birds. Highlights of our Azerbaijan tour include **Marbled Duck**, **Ferruginous Duck**, **Grey-headed Swamphen**, **White-tailed Lapwing**, **Black Francolin**, **Little Bustard**, **Eastern Imperial Eagle**, **Red-fronted Serin**, **Moustached Warbler**, and **White-winged Lark**.

Itinerary (9 days/8 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Sofia, birding Vitosha National Park

After your morning arrival in Sofia, we will transfer the short distance to our hotel, where we check in, relax, and enjoy a group “welcome lunch”. We will spend the afternoon exploring the foothills of Vitosha Mountain National Park. Pine-clad slopes adorn this large massif, and the specials here include **Spotted Nutcracker**, **Red** (Common) **Crossbill**, **Common Firecrest**, **Goldcrest**, **Marsh Tit**, **Willow Tit**, **Rock Dove** (real ones!), **Northern Goshawk**, and various woodpeckers, including **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and **Black Woodpecker**.

If you are unable to arrive in Sofia in the morning, please arrive the night before the tour, we will happily help book extra accommodation in the city for you.

Overnight: Vitosha Витоша, near Sofia

Day 2. Vitosha National Park, then travel Sofia to Pomorie

We will likely have an early morning walk in Vitosha National Park again, as we are staying right on the doorstep, and will look for the birds listed above, and others. Following that, we will then travel from Sofia to Pomorie on the southern Black Sea coast of Bulgaria. During the journey we will stop en route for some interesting species, possibly including **Golden Eagle**, **Black Woodpecker**, and **Sombre Tit**. On arrival in the Pomorie area, in the afternoon, we will check into our base for the next three nights and get our birding in the local area underway, providing time is available.

Overnight: Pomorie Поморие

Day 3. Birding Pomorie area

After breakfast at the hotel our birding will begin at the nearby salt works, Atanasovsko. Year-round, dozens of rare and interesting species of birds can be seen here and it is sure to be no different during our tour; a thoroughly exciting day is in the offing.

Species of greater interest during the winter season are the Near Threatened (BirdLife International) **Dalmatian Pelican** and the Endangered (BirdLife International) **White-headed Duck**. Other waterfowl found here include **Smew**, **Northern Pintail**, **Common Pochard**, **Gadwall**, **Black-necked Grebe**, **Greater Flamingo**, **Pygmy Cormorant**, **Eurasian Spoonbill**, **Eurasian Bittern**, and **Great Egret**.

Large numbers of shorebirds (waders), of a wide range of species, can also be expected, such as **Pied Avocet**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Eurasian Curlew**, **Common Greenshank**, and **Dunlin** while passerines like **Water Pipit**, **Eurasian Penduline Tit**, **Common Reed Bunting**, and **Cetti's Warbler** are also found here.

We will also visit the freshwater Lake Burgas. This is yet another superb location for wintering geese and the many thousands of **Greater White-fronted Goose** should be dotted with smaller numbers of **Red-breasted Goose**. Ducks and swans are also found here with good numbers of **Common Pochard**, **Mallard**, **Common Shelduck**, **Tufted Duck**, and **Northern Shoveler** too.

The amount of prey here makes it an excellent site for wintering birds of prey. During our visit we will keep an eye out for **Hen Harrier**, **Common Buzzard**, **Common Kestrel**, **Long-Legged Buzzard**, plus the incredibly rare **Eastern Imperial Eagle**. The lake is also another excellent place to find **Dalmatian Pelican**.

Like other lakes in the region, the margins are made up of reedbed, woodland, and open field habitats. Highlight birds found around Lake Burgas include **Grey Partridge**, **Syrian Woodpecker**, **Crested Lark**, **Common Kingfisher**, **Grey-headed Woodpecker**, **Sombre Tit**, **Calandra Lark**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, **Hawfinch**, and **Cirl Bunting**.

Overnight: Pomorie Поморие



Eastern Imperial Eagle will be a target during the tour.

Day 4. Pomorie and Burgas

After breakfast we will continue our observations in the Burgas region. We will visit the protected areas of Lake Mandra, Bay of Chengene Skele, and Foros Bay, which are inhabited by a number of locally and globally endangered species. During this day we expect to see a similar suite of species as on Day 3, together with potential specials like **Pallas's Gull**, **Whooper Swan**, **Tundra (Bewick's) Swan**, and **White-tailed Eagle**.

We will also visit the Strandzha Mountains on the Turkish border where **Eurasian Blue Tit**, **Great Tit**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, and **Marsh Tit** are all common species. The large **Black Woodpecker** is also found here but can be surprisingly elusive, given its massive size. We will also target **White-backed Woodpecker**, but these can prove difficult to find, and **Middle Spotted Woodpecker** which is more common. Other birds we

can expect to find here include **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, **Northern Raven**, **Eurasian Jay**, **Mistle Thrush**, and **Hawfinch**. These all amount to a fantastic set of top European woodland birds.

Overnight: Pomorie *Поморие*



*The highly prized **White-backed Woodpecker** is an elusive bird, but well worth the effort to find.*

Day 5. Pomorie to Kavarna

Today we transfer from Pomorie to the northern Black Sea coast and the town of Kavarna. We will cross the Stara Planina (Balkan) mountain range, which sweeps down and touches the sea in this part of its lengthy range. We will make several stops on the way where we might find **Cirl Bunting**, **Corn Bunting**, **Brambling**, **Sombre Tit**, and **Woodlark**.

We will likely stop for our lunch break at a local restaurant in the village of Goritsa. The forested hills here are cloaked in beautiful oak forests. Interesting woodland birds around here include **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Middle Spotted Woodpecker**, **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**, and **European Green Woodpecker**, plus **Short-toed Treecreeper**. The final short stop for the day, before arriving at our comfortable guesthouse in Kavarna for the next three nights, will likely be at the coastal forests of the Baltata National Reserve near Albena. Here we will search for **Grey-headed Woodpecker** and **Black Woodpecker**, depending on our sightings over the previous few days.

Overnight: Guest House Nash Dom, Kavarna *Каварна*

Day 6. Birding around Kavarna

We will have the full day available to explore this northeastern region of Bulgaria, which is the main wintering grounds for the sought-after, rather attractive, and Vulnerable ([BirdLife International](#)) **Red-breasted Goose**. These geese typically make use of the various agricultural fields in the local area where they roost and feed together with large numbers of **Greater White-fronted Goose**.



*The northeast corner of Bulgaria is Europe's top location for wintering **Red-breasted Goose**.*

We will concentrate on geese and waterfowl today as we get acquainted with the area. The scenery from the hotel is spectacular, with its glittering blue sea and the nearby rolling hills and valleys. Numerous flocks of geese can often be seen to fly or circle over the hotel as well, giving many opportunities to see these great target birds.

Overnight: Guest House Nash Dom, Kavarna Каварна

Day 7. Kavarna and Kaliakra

After breakfast we will visit the [Kaliakra Nature Reserve](#) together with the [Bolata Valley](#) and the village of Kamen Bryag. The main habitat around here is steppes, or grassy plains, interspersed with scrub and small stunted trees and is also traversed by surprisingly deep valleys. The coast is rocky, with impressive vertical cliffs of over 330 feet (100 meters) falling away into the clear depth of the Black Sea.

Here we will have more opportunities to observe **Red-breasted Goose** among the vast flocks of **Greater White-fronted Goose**. We should also see a range of common species, such as **Eurasian**

Wren, Dunnock, Great Crested Grebe, Black-headed Gull, European Shag, Great Cormorant, Great Tit, Common Kestrel, Common Buzzard, Fieldfare, and Corn Bunting.

We will also search for interesting birds that winter in the area including **Short-eared Owl, Calandra Lark, Crested Lark, Black-throated Loon (Diver), Yelkouan Shearwater, Water Pipit, Pygmy Cormorant, Hen Harrier, Rough-legged Buzzard, and Black Redstart.** After lunch we will make our final visit of the day to the Topola cliffs, where we hope to see **Eurasian Eagle-Owl.**

Overnight: Guest House Nash Dom, Kavarna Каварна



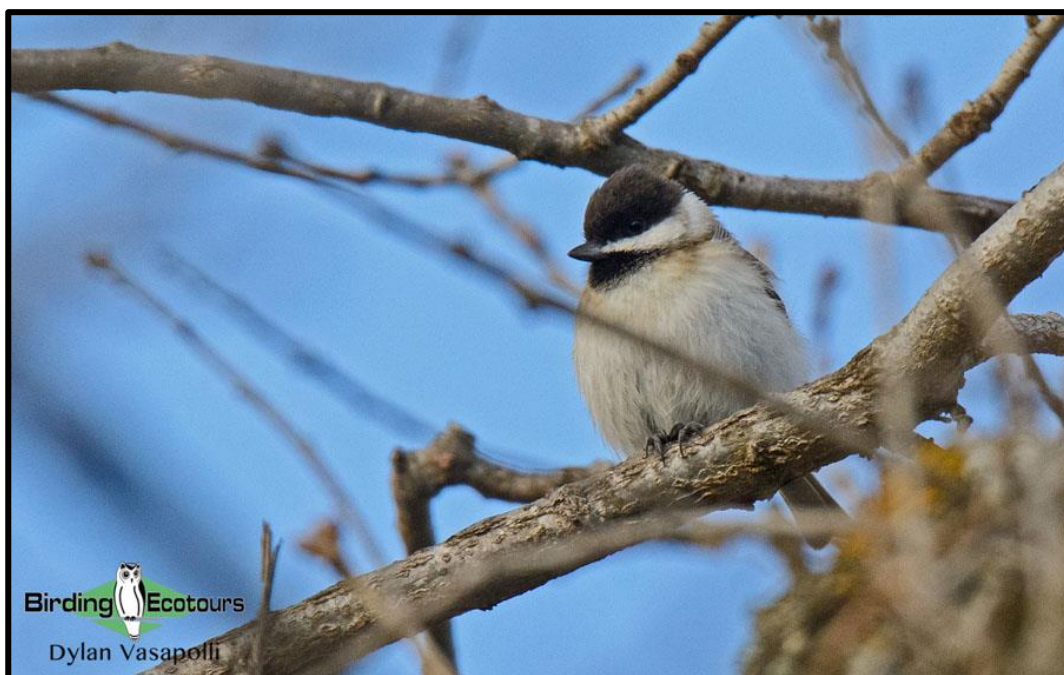
Yelkouan Shearwater may be seen along the Black Sea coast.

Day 8. Durankulak Lake and surroundings, evening flight Varna to Sofia

A trip to Durankulak Lake and its surrounding areas will take up the majority of our day. A large sandy beach separates the lake from the sea. The area is vitally important in winter with over 130 species regularly recorded here during the season. Here we will observe the greatest concentrations of **Red-breasted Goose** and **Greater White-fronted Goose** in Europe. The lake is also an excellent place to find Vulnerable (BirdLife International) **Lesser White-fronted Goose**. Other wintering waterfowl in the area include **Greylag Goose, Mute Swan, Tundra (Bewick's) Swan, Whooper Swan, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Shelduck, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Red-crested Pochard, Greater Scaup, Common Goldeneye**, and one of the best-looking ducks in the world – **Smew**.

The area is a particularly good location for birds of prey with species such as **Long-legged Buzzard**, **Rough-legged Buzzard**, **White-tailed Eagle**, **Hen Harrier**, **Western Marsh Harrier**, **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, **Common Kestrel**, **Common Buzzard**, and **Northern Goshawk** all found here.

Durankulak is also surrounded by woodlands, arable fields, and reedbeds which are home to several interesting species, including **Syrian Woodpecker**, **Grey-headed Woodpecker**, **Calandra Lark**, **Eurasian Penduline Tit**, **Black Redstart**, **Brambling**, **Hawfinch**, **Eurasian Bittern**, **Pygmy Cormorant**, **Water Rail**, **Water Pipit**, **Long-eared Owl**, **Sombre Tit**, **Great Grey Shrike**, and many others.



*The cute **Sombre Tit** is possible during this tour.*

Finally, in recent years the lake has held rare species including **Great Bustard**, **Moustached Warbler**, and **Pallas's Gull** and so there is always the chance of something unexpected to turn up while we are here, we will keep our eyes peeled!

In the evening we will take a flight from Varna back to Sofia for the last night of the tour, where we will have our final group dinner and choose our 'bird of the trip'!

Overnight: Sofia

Day 9. Sofia birding, international departure from Sofia

We will have a final morning birding session around Sofia where the city parklands might give us a few final high-quality birds like **Northern Goshawk**, **Black Woodpecker**, and a range of finches and tits.

Following lunch, we will transfer to Sofia airport, where this short but exciting tour ends, in time for your late afternoon or evening flights out of Bulgaria.

Overnight: Not included

Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, weather, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors. In addition, we sometimes must use a different international guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling. We plan to take one internal flight on this tour, subject to suitable weather conditions. Please do not book your return flights until late in the afternoon, or in the evening of the final day.

Duration: 9 days

Group Size: 6 – 8

Dates: 03 - 11 February 2024

Start: Sofia International Airport, Sofia, Bulgaria

End: Sofia International Airport, Sofia, Bulgaria

Prices: €1,975 per person sharing – based on 6 - 8 participants, which includes the domestic flight (2024)

Single Supplements: €205 (2024)

In the event of fewer than six participants signing up to the tour, there will be the option of a small surcharge to guarantee departure. The amount of the surcharge will depend on how many participants are signed up to the tour and will occur if all participants agree.

Price includes:

Internal flight (Varna to Sofia)

All accommodation (Day 1 until Day 8 as described above, or similar)

Meals (from lunch on Day 1 until lunch on Day 9)

Drinking water – please bring a refillable water bottle

Expert international tour leader

Local bird and wildlife guide fees

Birdwatching site entrance fees (e.g. nature reserves, national parks)

All ground transport and tolls/taxes while on tour, including airport pick-up and drop-off

Price excludes:

International flights to/from Sofia International Airport

Expenditures due to flight cancellations/delays or other causes beyond our control (force majeure)

Visa fees if visa required

Departure tax

Items of a personal nature, e.g. gifts, laundry, internet access, phone calls etc.

Any pre- or post-tour accommodation, meals, or birding/sightseeing excursions

Soft/alcoholic drinks

Personal travel insurance

Gratuities (please see our [tipping guidelines blog](#))

Useful information:

During our tour, your guide will be driving you in a comfortable vehicle. The tour does not require a great deal of walking or steep hiking to see the bulk of the birds, however a basic level of fitness is required including the ability to occasionally walk over rough terrain.

The weather on the Black Sea coast is likely to be cold during our tour with daytime temperatures ranging from 34 – 55°F (1 – 13°C). Nighttime temperatures are likely to be very cold, ranging from 23 – 41°F (-5 – 5°C). There is a reasonable chance of some rain during our tour and snow is expected at points, especially at the beginning and end of the tour in the Vitosha National Park area.