

Bird Photography in Bulgaria

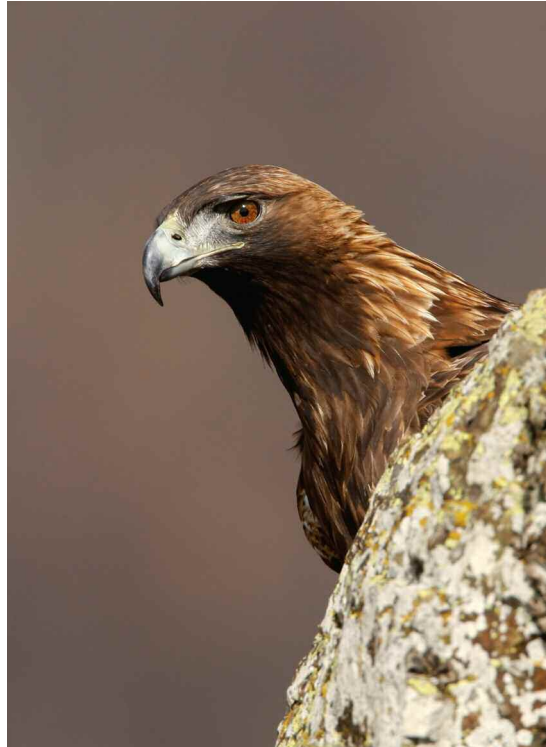
by Mike Lane FRPS

Poland was the first Eastern European country I visited to photograph birds. At that point it was the most bird rich place I had been to in Europe and I was overwhelmed with the opportunities. It was the year 2000 and when I returned home I promised myself that for the next decade or so I would explore as much of Eastern Europe as I could. I can't claim to have visited every country yet, but I have visited most from Greece in the south to Estonia in the far north. Bulgaria is the only one I have been back to repeatedly. Not only is it bird rich in species and numbers, but it is one of the few countries to have an infrastructure for wildlife photography in the form of especially built hides. As we all know there is a huge difference between the needs of bird watchers and photographers.

Bulgaria has a large range of habitats, from high mountain ranges to lakes, marshes and steppe land. The black sea coast on the east of the country also hosts the second largest migration route in Europe and the spring months can be incredible. Some of the most attractive of Europe's birds are found here. Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, Golden Orioles and Rollers. It is also one of the best places to photograph the never easy Wallcreeper and during the winter months the much declined Red-breasted Goose

It is not just the numbers of birds that make Bulgaria attractive for bird photography. The countryside is generally unspoiled, wild and open to exploration. If you see a dirt track, not only can you walk along it, but it is usually permitted to take the car too. Photography from a car window can be wonderful here.

My first visit was to the North Black Sea Coast on a package deal staying in one of the holiday resorts and simply driving out each day to explore the steppe lands, lakes and marshes that all hold so many birds. It was like Lesvos, without the crowds. Subsequent trips have been with a tour company, Spatia Wildlife, to make use of their many hides. I have done Golden Eagle with them twice. Never an easy bird to photograph - long sessions in the hide are always necessary as the photographer has to enter before first light and remain enclosed until nightfall. All told I have done eight such days in Bulgaria and got my eagle shots, as well as visiting Goshawks and Ravens. Golden Eagles are photographed in the winter months when they come down to pre-baited sites in front of one of six hides built for the purpose.





In the late winter Red-breasted Geese start to arrive in the north and this has to be one of the best places to photograph this much declined species. When it is very cold and snowy they can be approachable along with the White-fronted Geese.

At winter feeding stations, also run by Spatia, Hawfinch is a regular visitor along with four species of woodpecker and a host of tits and finches.

Spring is inevitably the best time to be there and offers the most photographic opportunities. Bee-eater colonies are numerous and from canvas hides easy birds to photograph on perches prearranged by their nesting burrows. In flight they are more challenging, but it can be done.

The highlight of my last trip in May 2010 was a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker nest that was low down in a fence post and completely out in the open, catching the sun all day. This opportunity does not occur often and we spent a great deal of time at this site. The young were still very small when we first found it, so the adults had to go inside the hole to feed them. When they emerged they would fly out directly from the hole giving at least a small chance of flight shots. There were five photographers in our group and with no need for a hide we were all able to stand just a few feet away with the birds oblivious to our presence.



A Syrian Woodpecker nest also proved easy to photograph, being equally low down and in the open. I needed to be told it was a Syrian and not a Great-spotted Woodpecker as the difference is not obvious.

Hoopoes are another spectacular bird that attract photographers and we had a perfect site where the feeding parents hovered in front of the nest hole as they fed their well grown chicks. Just two trees away was a nesting Wryneck too, but these birds are not so easy to photograph as their cryptic colouring blends into the tree so well, although they were very tame birds.

Much of the bird photography in Bulgaria centres around drinking pools and Spatia have several setups for this. In such a hot, dry country if you can provide water for birds they will visit in large numbers. Corn, Cirl, Ortolan and Black-headed Bunting are common visitors as well as many finches and even Red-backed Shrike.

On one pool close to a dirt track we spent some time photographing Little-ringed Plovers. As ever the best angle to work from was by lying on the floor in the bottom of the hide with the lens resting at ground level. This produced some lovely reflections and I watched the amazing displays as the male tried to mate with the female. This consists of the males legs being swung high in a military goose step. Unfortunately this display was always too far away for quality photography.

Every other year (don't ask me why) Rose-coloured Starling breed in Bulgaria. They are colonial nesters and there is one quarry where they breed in good numbers. You can work from the bottom of the quarry, where the birds gather in a large, noisy flock or put a hide up on the cliff top, where they are less numerous, but the back grounds are better.

I have often considered living in Bulgaria. On my first visit I remember it was possible to buy a decent house with my credit card! The open access to the land is refreshing compared to trying to photograph in the U.K. and the weather far superior. It can be cold in the winter, but not often dull and grey. The wealth of wildlife makes you realise what damage we have done here in the U.K.

I will probably never make the move and have to content myself with the fact that it is only a 3 hour flight and a number of budget airlines fly there. My favourite, Easyjet, is one of these and has a wonderful web site for booking on line and (importantly) no restrictions on the weight of hand luggage.

In June 2012 I am returning again with a trip for Focus4nature. If you would like to join me contact: www.focus4nature.co.uk

