ORIOLE BIRDING

GEORGIA
Batumi Migration Festival FAM Trip
3rd – 8th September 2018

www.oriolebirding.com   oriolebirding@gmail.com
MONDAY 3RD SEPTEMBER

Having been contacted earlier in the year by the team at the Department of Tourism in Batumi, we are privileged to have been invited to attend the annual Batumi Migration Festival in Georgia. An up-and-coming birding location, it is already famous as being one of the most intense raptor migration sites in the world, with more than one million birds passing each autumn. In addition, the country hosts a mouth-watering array of both resident and migrant species. This week will hopefully give us a taste of what the country has to offer!

Being in Spain at the time, I flew out from Barcelona airport with Turkish Airlines, stopping over briefly in Istanbul airport, before catching an early morning flight to Batumi, arriving at about 10:00. Collecting the luggage, myself and other festival attendees met with our driver for the day who took us to the Oasis Hotel in Chakvi, noting Laughing Dove and Hooded Crows on route. Settling into our luxurious hotel, there was a little time for birding before lunch, and the surrounds of the hotel held several migrant Spotted Flycatchers and a single Reed Warbler, all migrants following a spell of morning rain. Meeting the rest of our group (who had arrived a day earlier, and so had a mornings birding to enjoy such delights as Kruper’s Nuthatch, Middle-spotted Woodpecker and a flock of around 20 Golden Orioles in the nearby Botanical Gardens), we then headed out to a local guesthouse where we were invited to have lunch, enjoying an impressive spread of authentic Georgian cuisine and delicious home-made wine. From here we noted our first European Bee-eater flock; a species which would prove to be migrating in impressive numbers throughout the afternoon, totalling a conservative 600 moving south over the hills, coming low at times. From here we headed up the hill to the main Sakhalvasho raptor watchpoint, where the fun really began. On our way up we noted our first Levant’s Sparrowhawk, a juvenile cruising along the hillside. Arriving at the top of the hill we were instantly greeted by a large kettle of raptors over the far hillside, comprising of around 100 Honey Buzzards and smaller numbers of Black Kites all heading south at a steady pace. These would comprise the bulk of what was a more-or-less constant passage for the next 3 hours (though things quietened down later on). Our estimate for the period we watched was of around 2000 Honey Buzzards and around 400 Black Kites, most of which followed the main ridgeline to the east of us. This was only a small part of a day’s count total of around 12,000 Honey Buzzards! Further to these numbers, the southerly passage also featured a coupe of Booted Eagles, two male Pallid Harriers, at least 8 Montagu’s Harriers, 3 Marsh Harriers, about 17 Levant’s Sparrowhawks, 3 Hobby and a Common Kestrel. Quite a raptor fest! Further features of the soaring migration were a couple of Black Storks up with the Honey Buzzards early on and 4 White Storks later. All the interest wasn’t just up in the air however, as a very confiding (and probably tired) Short-toed Lark kept us company for most of our watch, at times walking up to and amongst our tripod legs!
Additionally, a Black Woodpecker called from the hillside below us and gave a brief flight view across the valley. A superb selection of birds! At around 6 however it was time for us to make our way back down the hill and back to the hotel. Following a varied buffet-style dinner and an enjoyable selection of talks welcoming us to the Migration Festival and explaining the overall background and purpose of the Batumi Raptor Count, we retired to bed, looking forward to what the following day would bring.

A migrant Short-toed Lark

TUESDAY 4TH SEPTEMBER
Day two in Batumi was an absolute blast, with a fantastic array of species seen, and real evidence of heavy migration both of land and soaring birds. The day started with a walk close to the hotel complex before breakfast. A Marsh Warbler was skulking in the well-manicured gardens of the hotel courtyard, but otherwise the trees and bushes here were quiet. However herons were already migrating at this early hour, with 32 Purple Herons and 3 Grey herons flying south. We walked then to the shore and made our way south towards an area of scrubby land bordering the beach. Yellow Wagtails were noted in the short weedy areas, with most birds appearing to be of the Blue-headed Wagtail subspecies, totalling about 20 in all. A juvenile Levant’s Sparrowhawk flew over the beach and out to sea, agitating the aforementioned Yellow Wagtail flock, while a Black Kite was also noted. A group of 4 Wheatears on the shingle included a single Isabelline Wheatear, its broad black tail band noted well in flight along with its uniform wing and overall sandy colouration. Reaching the end of the beach, where it met a small river entering the sea, things began to get rather lively. A flock of about 25 Short-toed Larks were feeding quietly in the area and occasionally flying up giving their distinctive chirruping ‘drit’ call. A single isolated clump of bramble held an entertaining selection of migrant birds, with around 5 Whinchat, an impressive 9 Red-backed Shrikes (all juveniles except for one adult male), 2 Barred Warblers and a pale juvenile Rose-coloured Starling all sharing the same berry-laden bush! Absolutely superb. Common Whitethroat, Willow Warbler and a brief calling Quail were also noted here, making for a very entertaining set of birds before our first coffee of the day!

After breakfast we made our way to the Chorokhi Delta area to the south of the city. On arriving we stopped briefly to purchase some water, noting a single high-flying Peregrine overhead. Entering the delta, it was clear that part of it was being used as an active military base, with signs warning of mines lining the track! However, we had permission to enter with our local guide Johanne Jansen, and so on we pressed. This large area of wet scrubby grassland was a paradise for birds, and we saw some really good stuff here. One of the first birds noted was a Lesser Grey Shrike standing sentinel on some low scrub close to where we parked the van, one of two or three in the area. This was one of those places where you end up scanning around for 30 minutes and realise you haven’t moved an all, as there are so many birds on show! A superb 2nd calendar year Pallid Harrier hunted behind us, while a low flying dark eagle perched up in some trees proved to be our first Lesser Spotted Eagle of the trip, remaining in these trees for the morning. Black Kites, Montagu’s Harriers, Booted Eagle and Levant’s Sparrowhawk were also noted, while the next raptor highlight came in the form of a
close low-flying Short-toed Eagle. Scanning the bushes here revealed a single Eurasian Sparrowhawk, a Cuckoo, Barred Warbler, Red-backed Shrike and Whinchat, as well as a Great Reed Warbler sunning itself in the company of one of the shrikes. At least 6 Rollers were ever present in the far treeline, occasionally making short flights between trees on both sides of the track. A good flock of Yellow Wagtails were mobile across the area, and for a short while came to feed near trackside puddles, revealing one of the highlights of the area; an extremely smart female Citrine Wagtail; its broad sulphur yellow supercilium and ear covert surround really striking against its grey mantle, while the broad white wing bars were very evident. A closer exploration of the wagtail flock once they settled later revealed at least 5 Citrine Wagtails of varying plumages and ages, while the same wet marshy area also held 2 Wood Sandpipers, a single Ruff, several Lapwings, a Glossy Ibis and a couple of Little Egrets for good measure. A fantastic array of birds. Reaching the beach, a scan of the sea revealed a fishing Osprey and single Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes, while the beach hosted a single Northern and Isabelline Wheatear. A really brilliant mornings birding. From here we made our way back inland, to where we would spend the rest of the day in the mountains at the Shuamta raptor watchpoint.

Some of the delights of the Chorokhi Delta

Arriving at the base of the walk up to the watchpoint, just one look up showed that the Honey Buzzard migration was looking like it would be a special one today, with 100s of birds streaming south in a long line, filling the sky between the trees we were stood under. The walk up to the watchpoint revealed a single Rock Bunting for some of the group, and as we got to the top, we set up scopes and made ourselves comfortable for watching the show. The counts from today were impressive, but just the sight of an endless stream of soaring birds stretching across as far as the eye could see was just breath-taking. Honey Buzzards were the most numerous species by far today, with birds passing for the entirety of the 4 hours were at the watchpoint, and an official count of over 21,000 birds through the day. Black Kites were interspersed throughout the flocks, with well over 1000 noted by ourselves. Variety was provided by a single Lesser Spotted Eagle, several Booted Eagles, good numbers of Steppe Buzzards (exceptional for the time of year, with an official count of 273 by the raptor watch team), both Pallid and Montagu’s Harrier and both Eurasian and Levant’s Sparrowhawks. None raptor species were represented by 3 Black Storks soaring majestically amongst the Honey Buzzards flocks, and a constant procession of bubbling Bee-eaters cruising low.
overhead, totalling several 100 during our watch. Just magical! At around 17:30 we made to pack up and walk back down the hill to the minibus, having enjoyed what must be one of nature’s greatest spectacles, and already looking forward to our next session!

Migrating Honey buzzards and Bee-eater; a daily feature!

WEDNESDAY 5TH SEPTEMBER
Today saw us spend the entire day up at the Shuamta watchpoint, where we were keen to see the commencement of the raptor migration, and also hoped that, with a positive weather forecast, we would see a good movement of birds. However, there was still time for a pre-breakfast walk around the hotel grounds and neighbouring scrubland. The walk out of the hotel was greeted with a surprise in the form of a male Nightjar which flushed from ornamental trees, collided with a window (though was unharmed) and flew off to another area of the complex. Very unexpected! Out towards the beach, a single immature Gull-billed Tern flew south, followed by 3 Sandwich Terns and then another 4 Gull-billed Terns. Arriving at the more scrubby area at the end of the beach, it was clear that many of the migrants from the day before had departed, though a group of 10 Short-toed Larks and at least 5 Yellow Wagtails remained. However, a very showy Wryneck was new for the area, often perching prominently and allowing close approach whilst feeding, which it did briefly amongst the Short-toed Lark flock! A vocal Kingfisher was seen well along the river, whilst the walk back for breakfast was enlivened by at couple of small groups of Bottlenose Dolphins surfacing close to the shore. This subspecies, Tursiops truncatus ponticus is endemic to the Black Sea, and is classified as globally endangered, so was a treat to see. Arriving back at the hotel, we enjoyed a hearty breakfast and then packed the van, to make our way to the raptor watchpoint.
Pulling up to the watchpoint, some of us opted to walk to the top, whilst others took the option of 4x4 vehicle to the top. In this first few minutes of arriving, a single large eagle passed through, which was seen both by the walking group and those at the top. The bird split opinion amongst most of the observers, but study of the images seemed to suggest that the bird was a dark adult Steppe Eagle! Our first of the trip, though a less controversial one would be appreciated! The benefit of an early morning arrival at the watchpoint was that, though numbers of birds were initially low, many of them were watched at low altitude and in good light, including Black Kites, Marsh Harriers, Honey Buzzards, Levant’s Sparrowhawks and Booted Eagles. As the day warmed up, the migration really kicked up a gear, with large numbers of Black Kites and Honey Buzzards on constant view and often forming spectacular circling flocks over the surrounding hillsides. Within the movement, both Pallid and Montagu’s Harriers were noted, with some nice views on offer, while a single Short-toed Eagle was one of the highlights. Lunch was provided for us at the watchpoint café, which allowed us to take a short break from the raptor watching, though we could still enjoy watching 100s of Honey Buzzards passing through and 100s of swirling Bee-eaters from our dining table! An additional bonus for some during lunch was an overhead Osprey. We were soon back at it afterwards, soaking in the fantastic spectacle. Whilst watching, a distinct, piercing, high-pitched call with a slight down-slu caught our ear, which on investigation proved to be that of the Mountain Chiffchaff; a speciality of Georgia and the neighbouring countries. The call was very distinctive, and brief views revealed a distinctly uniform brown chiffchaff, though we didn’t expect the species to be at such low altitudes at this time of year, so a bit of a surprise. By around 4pm, the raptor migration had eased significantly, so we packed up, having enjoyed an other fantastic day at the watchpoint.
THURSDAY 6TH SEPTEMBER
Day four saw our fantastic familiarisation trip organisers set us up with an early morning visit to the Chorokhi Delta, where we would hopefully encounter any early morning passerine arrivals, as well as the birdlife of the main delta. With a packed breakfast arranged ahead of us, we made our way towards the shingle beach area. Small numbers of Black Kites and Marsh Harriers were ever present inland over the marshes, while good views of both Montagu’s and Pallid Harriers were had. Reed and Great Reed Warblers were calling constantly from the marginal vegetation, and small parties of Yellow Wagtails moved through frequently. Two small crakes; either Little or Baillon’s Crakes flew up briefly, but unfortunately didn’t show for identification, while Red-backed Shrikes were noted in the tops of the nearby bushes. The first large pool contained a nice pair of Ferruginous Ducks along with a number of Garganey, Shoveler, Pochards and Little Grebes. Offshore, a flock of Little Terns were feeding in a tight group. Whilst watching these, Yelkouan Shearwaters were noticed distantly towards the horizon, though they were only just visible in the scope, so not the best views! Overlooking the final pools, small numbers of waders included our first Marsh Sandpipers of the trip, along with several Dunlin, Turnstone and a single Oystercatcher. A Slender-billed Gull was also noted briefly amongst the Black-headed Gulls, while a large flock of Yellow-legged Gulls included several Caspian Gulls. Walking through the thin line of scrub between the beach and the marshes was also productive, producing some nice species migrating through the area. A few Whinchat and Northern Wheatear were noted, shortly followed by a nice Booted Warbler which showed well in the low bushes close to the ground. The larger bushes held some nice species also, with Icterine Warbler, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Savi’s Warbler all noted within a frantic few minutes! Making our way back to the main track, we had a final quick scan of the marshes, and picked up a species we hoped we would see, but which Johannes had feared might be lost from the site; a Western Swamphen feeding close to the reed edge. A rare bird in Georgia, this is the only known site, with the closest breeding birds being in Turkey. A superb site with loads of potential.

Leaving here, the group visited a local restaurant for lunch and then spent the afternoon either visiting local guesthouses or raptor watching from Shuamta. The raptor migration was slower today, though still fantastic to see. Over the course of the afternoon only 2000 Honey Buzzards passed (by no means to bad for us from the UK!), along with small numbers of Black Kites, a couple of Booted Eagles, Montagu’s Harrier and several Steppe Buzzards. Bee-eaters soaring overhead in large flocks will never get boring!

Honey Buzzard and Black Kite highway!

FRIDAY 7TH SEPTEMBER
Fridays had a weather forecast which suggested a very wet day, with thunderstorms at least in the afternoon, which to start with suggested that we would need to consider todays itinerary carefully! However we needn’t have worried, as although the bad weather did occur, it held closer to the
mountains to the south and north, so we stayed dry, but benefitted from the changing weather, with today’s raptor migration being the strongest of the year so far. In fact, birds were streaming through the area even at the coast! Our morning destination was the Kolkheti Wetland to the north of Batumi, a large basin of marsh and estuary between more mountainous zones to the north and south. On getting out of the van, our scopes were quickly deployed to get onto a medium sized plover on the sand. With a bold and long buff supercilium, dark complete breast band and very leggy structure, it was clearly a Caspian Plover! A superb juvenile, with neat fine scalloping to the crown and mantle, this may prove to be the first for Georgia, or at least the first in 15 years; we are still waiting to find out! A great way to start the day.

Whilst watching the plover, it was clear that a large migration of raptors was occurring overhead, with Honey Buzzards and Black Kites forming large kettles to the north of us, and streaming along the coast over our heads. In total we noted several 1000 birds moving through the morning, along with 2 White Tailed Eagles (probably a resident pair on the marsh), Steppe Buzzards, Montagu’s Harrier, several Eurasian Sparrowhawks and a Hobby amongst the movement. Around the fringes of the lagoon we noted around 10 Little Gulls and 2 very smart juvenile Broad-billed Sandpipers in the company of 2 Dunlin, 2 Little Stints and several Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers., while a 60-strong winter plumaged flock of Little Terns contained smaller numbers of Common Terns and 2 White-winged Black Terns (an adult and a juvenile). A small flock of Yellow-legged Gulls contained amongst them a 3rd calendar year Lesser Black-backed Gull of the subspecies Heulguini, a pale mantled subspecies with an eastern distribution. Walking back to the van a small flock of Short-toed Larks flew past; a frequent site so far on this trip. From here we enjoyed a delicious lunch at a local restaurant, the location being surrounded by trees and on the edge of the Kolkheti National Park. A couple of Willow Warblers, a Garden Warbler and several Long-tailed Tits were noted in a quick scan.

This Caspian Plover was a real Georgian rarity!

From here we were keen to head to the Sakhalvasho watchpoint, seeing that the raptor migration was clearly a big one today! Throughout the drive we could see Honey Buzzards and Black Kites streaming through, often through the sun roof of the vehicle! Really amazing. Making it up to the watch, the low cloud meant that many of the passing birds of prey were forced lower into the valley, giving some really excellent views. The sheer number of birds on show was a real spectacle, with an astonishing 60,000 Honey Buzzards counted by the official Batumi Raptor Count team (they all deserve a pint after that!), along with good numbers of Black Kites, Steppe Buzzards and Marsh Harriers, while we also noted at least 40 Booted Eagles, 4 Short-toed Eagles, at least 1 Lesser Spotted Eagle and one unidentified eagle sp; an eagle fest! In addition to these highlights, several Levant’s Sparrowhawks gave some nice close flybys, as did a juvenile Pallid Harrier and a couple of Montagu’s Harriers. Such a unique and memorable experience, and one to look forward to again!
SATURDAY 8TH SEPTEMBER

Our last day with the Batumi group here in Georgia saw us attend an organised ringing session at the base of the Sakhalvasho watchpoint at dawn. Arriving at the site, we noted Tree Pipit and Yellow Wagtail calling overhead. The ringing session itself was very quiet. In fact, in two hours, we only caught three birds! However, it was very much quality over quantity! The first two birds which came out for ringing were a Spotted Flycacher and a nice juvenile Thrush Nightingale, its identity clear from its blotchily streaked breast, and also in the hand by its very short 1st primary. The third bird was a real treat. Coming back from the nets, the bird was handed over to the ringer as 'just something small, you’ll see what it is'. The ringer brought it out of the bag carefully, revealing a bright yellow supercilium and underparts and a bold white wing bar; a GREEN WARBLER! A real Georgian specialty, and one we had really hoped to see. It was a really vivid juvenile bird, and an absolute star to see. I was even fortunate enough to take it for release, getting to see it uniquely close-up before seeing it fly out back into the hillside cover.

From here, we knew that rain was forecast for some time after lunch, so we felt that we wanted to get to the raptor watchpoint as soon as possible to see what affect the weather might have on the migration. The thing with the Batumi raptor passage is that it can be very unpredictable. However, often a weather front crossing the bottleneck can have the effect of bringing large numbers of birds down to low altitude. And so, it proved! Although today wasn't as strong a passage as yesterday, the movement was arguably more spectacular, as birds really appeared to come out of nowhere from the passing storm, and really close. On arrival we could see the black storm clouds building offshore, with some rumbles of thunder in the distance. The raptor passage was good at this point, but steady. The dark clouds scudded ever closer, and crossed over the land and through the watchpoint, followed by a spell of very heavy rain. However, this was when things really kicked off. Honey Buzzards started appearing low over the watchpoint in really large numbers, with several good pulses of Black Kites interspersed. The sudden appearance of large numbers of very low flying raptors was spectacular, and great for photographic opportunities. Both Pallid and Montagu's Harriers were passing at a steady pace, and Levant’s Sparrowhawks were numerous today, with over 50 noted, along with small numbers of Eurasian Sparrowhawk. Our first eagle of the morning was almost certainly a Lesser Spotted Eagle, but views weren’t quite good enough to nail it. However as the afternoon progressed another pair of Lesser Spotted Eagles passed through to the east, offering good views. Additionally, we had nice views of 3 south-bound Short-toed Eagles in the afternoon. Booted Eagles in a good performance today also, with over 30 seen, while several Hobbies were checked carefully for a hoped-for Red-footed Falcon, though that wasn't to be. A brief distraction from the watch was a rather shrill woodpecker call coming from the hillside below us. A quick investigation revealed a Middle-spotted Woodpecker in the trees below the station! A nice surprise here. However again, the sheer volume and intensity of the raptor migration simply wowed us. A total of 18,000 Honey Buzzards were noted today, and we were there during the most intensive passage, which was a real privilege.

Male Levant Sparrowhawk

Finishing up, we made our way to the hotel where we attended some official speeches and presentations from the tourist board of Georgia, a fantastic meal and traditional Georgian music and dance by the beach, and a nice opportunity to thank everyone for what had been a very successful and enjoyable familiarisation trip to Batumi. The team have done a superb job, and we hope that we may return in the near future!