

Making a Difference

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

I am a firm believer in the gospel of ecotourism, the idea that international birding travel promotes local conservation by benefiting local economies. Those of us who attended the hugely successful ABA Conference in Quito last month witnessed this idea in impressive action: Swarovski, Tropical Birding, and the ABA teamed up to present generous checks in support of land acquisition and conservation projects conducted by local organizations.

It's not always that easy to see, though. Often when I visit a new area, I'm left wondering just how the few hundred or few thousand dollars introduced by a birding group from a wealthy country can make any real difference at all. The mechanisms that translate "our" money into "their" conservation are usually so subtle as to be invisible to those of us who fly in for a week or a month with the exotic birds of an exotic locale.

I was fortunate enough this summer to take part in a spectacular birding trip to Bulgaria, organized for members of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club by the Friends of the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds. Fifteen American birders were shown the country's avian wonders from the Rhodopi Mountains to the Black Sea marshes; rarities and Balkan specialties including Masked Shrike, Paddyfield Warbler, and Pied Wheatear joined such colorful, but more widespread, glamour birds as European Bee-eater, Eurasian Hoopoe, and European Roller on our tallies. It was, simply put, the most exciting birding I had ever experienced in Europe—*pace* the Camargue in spring!

The beauty of the Bulgarian countryside and its birds was making a dazzling difference to us birders; but were we making a difference to the habitats we so admired? I was doubtful. The Bulgarians in the fine hotels, restaurants, and stores we patronized on our tour were unfailingly friendly and helpful, but I wasn't certain that our small group and its modest expenditures were bringing the message

home that conservation pays. My conversations with the energetic and intelligent BSBP staff in Sofia nearly confirmed my fears; they told me that the principal challenge they faced was simply convincing land owners and managers that the treasures under their care were anything special at all. For social and historical reasons, they explained, few Bulgarians had developed any sense of the value of their landscape, and even fewer had the political will to protect it from the large-scale development already proceeding in the country.

It was all a bit discouraging. Our group was able to offer the BSBP some modest assistance with legal fees incurred in the struggle to force the government to comply with European Union conservation directives, but most of us, I think, left the country uncertain that our presence had had any direct effect.

Until, that is, the week after we returned to work and home in the US. In late June, a ruling of the Bulgarian Supreme Court removed protection from Strandja Natural Park, the largest habitat preserve on the Balkan Peninsula and home to a vast range of species from Somber Tit to Lesser Spotted Eagle. And then it happened: citizens took to the streets in Sofia in a successful grassroots protest of the despoliation of their own natural heritage. We cheered on from a distance, uncertain still whether we'd made a difference, but in no doubt that Bulgarians were about to make one of their own.

To learn more about birding tourism and bird conservation in Bulgaria and the Black Sea region, visit www.friendsofbspb.org.



Wallcreeper, Trigrad Gorge, Bulgaria.
Photo © Rick Wright.

Editor:

Rick Wright

Design:

Ed Rother

Production:

Bryan Patrick

Address editorial correspondence to:

Winging It

PO Box 36983

Tucson, AZ 85740-6983

Freight address:

251 East Rudasill Road

Tucson, AZ 85704-6024

winging@aba.org

(520) 544-7502

You can join the ABA, learn more about us and our programs, and access a wide range of birding links on our website:

<www.americanbirding.org>

Copyright © 2007 by the American Birding Association, Inc. All rights reserved. The opinions expressed by authors do not necessarily represent the views of this publication or of the ABA.

Winging It (ISSN #1042-511X) (USPS 003-289) is published bimonthly by the American Birding Association, Inc., 4945 N. 30th Street, Ste 200., Colorado Springs, CO 80919. Periodicals postage paid at Lebanon Junction, KY, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Winging It*, 4945 N. 30th Street, Ste. 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80919. (Individual membership: \$45 per year; includes \$12 for *Winging It* and \$33 for *Birding* magazine.) Return postage guaranteed: Send undeliverable copies and POD Forms 3579 to 4945 N. 30th Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80919-3151. For Canadian returns mail to WDS, Station A, P. O. Box 54, Windsor ON N9A 6J5. GST Registration No. R135943454. Canadian Publications Agreement No. 40033104.

- The American Birding Association aims to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.
- The American Birding Association represents the North American birding community and supports birders through publications, conferences, workshops, tours, partnerships, and networks.
- The ABA's education programs promote birding skills, ornithological knowledge, and the development of a conservation ethic.
- The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.
- ABA Sales, (800) 634-7736, supplies birders with tools, equipment, and accessories to make their birding more enjoyable.

We welcome all birders as members.