



The Eastern Rhodopes lie on the border between Greece and Bulgaria. On both sides there is a splendid, authentic and little visited landscape with a rich flora and fauna. The Bulgarian Eastern Rhodope mountains are a wild area where large numbers of birds of prey patrol the skies, wolves and jackals hide in the woodlands and scores of butterflies and wildflowers grace the meadows. The lowlands of Greece, with famous areas like Dadia, Evros and Nestos, are a birding hotspot with attractions like pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants and Spur-winged Plovers.

The guide that covers the wildflowers, birds and all other wildlife

Routes, where-to-watch-birds information and other observation tips

Insightful information on landscape and ecology

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A route to explore the Eastern Rhodopes



Here you are: one of the 18 routes that are described in the new Crossbill Guide to the Eastern Rhodopes. May it be an inspiration for a visit to this wonderful area on the border of Bulgaria and Greece! This new nature travel guidebook is the latest title in the Crossbill Guides series and is made in collaboration with New Thracian Gold – a unique project in an exceptional corner of Europe – and the Dutch organisation ARK Nature.

New Thracian Gold – Green Gold in the Eastern Rhodopes

In the Eastern Rhodopes, a land where the ancient Thracians' golden treasures are still found today, Dutch and Bulgarian experts have discovered green gold: beautiful landscapes, unique natural phenomena, wildlife preserved like nowhere else in Europe, and excellent conditions for organic agriculture. They started a project for sustainable development, which was appropriately named New Thracian Gold (NTG).

Launched in 2009, NTG is run by Bulgarian experts and supported by the Dutch environmental organisations ARK and Avalon, which have impressive experience in habitat restoration and organic farming. The project is funded by the Netherlands' largest charity, the Netherlands Postcode Lottery, which supports projects working for a fair and greener world.

NTG uniquely combines habitat restoration, ecotourism and organic farming into a single integrated approach. Locals receive technical and financial support on topics ranging from sustainable green tourism to organic farming. In remote areas challenged by land abandonment, ecotourism combined with natural resource management can play a prominent role in developing alternative economies. The reintroduction of keystone species, including large herbivores previously extinct in the region, plays a major role in reviving essential natural processes. As the traditional herding system is no longer viable, remote regions will no longer be grazed. Uncontrolled, the typical mosaic landscape, which hosts abundant biodiversity, gets overgrown and loses its characteristic flora and fauna. Restoring the grazing process can preserve the existing environment, procure food for the predator and scavenger animals and

contribute positively towards wildlife tourism... the kind of tourism that is promoted in the Crossbill Guides series.

Crossbill Guides Foundation

The Crossbill Guides Foundation aims to increase public involvement with nature conservation by showing the values of nature conservation to a larger audience. The Crossbill Guides Foundation is an independent non-profit organisation and works on a European scale. Using recent insights in communication strategies, the foundation focuses on ecotourism as a means to involve the public with nature conservation. One such conservation project is New Thracian Gold. Nature tourism plays a key role in public involvement with nature conservation. It is a positive activity in which people are open for new ideas, activities and challenges. Provided that nature tourism is controlled, it might just be the best way of creating awareness for the preservation of Europe's natural heritage.

Therefore, the Crossbill Guides Foundation produces a series of enthusiastic and insightful nature guidebooks for ecotourists about Europe's most valuable natural areas (Natura 2000): the Crossbill Guides. These books present the value of our natural heritage, show the visitor where he or she can experience nature at its best, and stress the importance of its conservation. The route on the other side of this brochure gives you a little taste of both the book, and of the Eastern Rhodopes – the project area of NTG.

www.newthraciangold.eu / www.ark.eu / www.crossbillguides.org



The New Thracian Gold project introduces free-roaming grazers that are to prevent the Eastern Rhodopes from becoming a dense and species-poor forest (top). Their ecological role is to help maintaining the characteristic open mosaic landscape with its rich flora and fauna (bottom).

Eastern Rhodopes

NESTOS, EVROS AND DADIA - BULGARIA AND GREECE



1 **Route 5: Along the Arda River**

6 HOURS – FULL DAY
50 KM

The famous vulture cliffs of Madzharovo Scenic route through mountains and with a rich birdlife on Ardas north bank



Habitats: river, scrubland, stony grasslands, cliffs, oak forest, fields, marshland
Selected species: Pink Butterfly Orchid, Jackal, Otter, White-tailed Eagle, Black Stork, Griffon Vulture, Peregrine, Golden Eagle, Western Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Sand Boa, Small Bath White, Russian Heath, Sandy Grizzled Skipper, Freyer's Purple Emperor

This scenic route takes you along the north bank of the Arda River. Some of the more famous sites of the Eastern Rhodopes are on this route, such as the breeding colony of the Griffon Vultures and the picturesque meander of the Arda River. But the route takes you beyond these places and into a broad valley with, for the region, atypical marshlands. This route is primarily of interest for its birdlife, but reptiles, butterflies and dragonflies enthusiasts will not be disappointed.

Departure point Vulture centre, Madzharovo. The centre is situated next to the bridge over the Arda River.



1 The vulture centre (actually the BSPB nature information centre; which also has a small restaurant) is a good starting point. Local English-speaking ecologists provide up to date information on the area and its species. The terrace lights in front of the centre attract many moth species like Cream-spot Tiger, Eyed and Small Elephant Hawk-moth and the impressive Giant Peacock Moth, which often rest on the vegetation near the lamps. From the vulture centre, walk to the bridge where, to the left, a trail leads down to the river. This is worth exploring, especially for the endemic Small Bath White, that flies near dried up riverbeds.

Cross the bridge and turn right to Borislavtsi.

2 After 800 metres the tarmac road crosses a dirt road. Park on the left and continue on foot. A small stream has carved a steep little valley through the rocks. The open patch of dry flowery grassland is a butterfly hotspot attracting species like Krueper's Small White, Tree Grayling, Eastern Baton Blue and Southern Festoon. The stream itself supports Yellowbellied Toad, Southern Crested Newt and Fire Salamander. Dice Snake and Grass Snake are frequent here as well. Don't forget to look up every once in a while. The vulture cliffs are nearby, so Griffon and Egyptian Vultures drift over frequently. Keep an eye out for Sombre Tit, Eastern Orphea and Barred Warblers here and at the stops ahead.

On the other side of the main road, the dirt track leads down to the Arda river, where there is a big colony of Bee-eaters. Look for Grecian Copper and Lattice Brown in the open patches between the trees.



The Arda river cuts through the volcanic rock of Madzharovo. This is perhaps the most famous place of the Eastern Rhodopes: the Arda bend with the vulture cliffs.

2 3

Continue by car in the direction of Borislavtsi and after 1 km you find a picnic table on the right side of the road.

3 This is a spectacular place, squeezed between the cliffs and the river. Check the cliffs where the Griffon Vultures, in one of the few colonies in the region, breed. Birds of prey here frequently include Egyptian Vulture, Peregrine and Golden and Booted Eagles. Other birds to look for are Black Stork, Chukar (rare), Black-eared Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Western Rock Nuthatch and Rock Bunting. On the other side, you have a good view over the river. Apart from the splendid scenery you might be lucky to spot an Otter in dusk or dawn.

Continue and take the first tarmac road to the right, which brings you down to the Arda.

4 At the river, leave your car at the information panel and continue on foot. Keep an eye out for fishing Black Stork on the pebble banks, and for Little Ringed Plover, which breeds here. Banded Demoiselles and Common Clubtail are frequent dragonflies in springtime. An early morning visit, in combination with a healthy dose of luck, may produce an encounter with the highly illusive Sand Boa, an Otter or a Jackal, all of which are seen here on a regular basis. Don't forget to check the cliffs and the sky, for similar birds may appear here as on the previous site.

Retrace your steps to the main road and turn right. After about 5 km you see a wooden gazebo on your left. Park here.

5 The reservoir in the valley is part of the Arda River, which is dammed close to Ivaylovgrad. In the area a pair of White-tailed Eagle nests – one of the rarest breeding raptors of the region. They can sometimes be seen hunting over the area although your chances are better of spotting a Black Kite, another raptor that is not common in the region. Explore the Christ's-thorn scrubland behind the gazebo which is a good site for Olive-tree Warbler, Woodchat Shrike and Subalpine Warbler. Among the butterflies, Little Tiger Blue and Sandy Grizzled Skipper often rest on stones in the grassland.

6 Continue to the village of Borislavtsi and be careful as the road is in bad condition. Drive through the village (Spanish Sparrows breed in the Stork's nests) and stop at the first bridge. Scan the marshy

grasslands that fringe the northern reservoir for Squacco Heron, Little Egret, Little Grebe, Cormorants and swans. The vegetation near the stream is worth looking for dragonflies and damselflies as Broad Darter, Common Winter Damsel, Large Red-eye and White-tailed Skimmer.

Continue over the dam and park on the left just before the next bridge. A 1½ km walk along the stream leads you to a small lake.



7 The fields on the left have Black-headed Bunting and Black-headed Wagtail. On your right, you overlook the bushy vegetation lining the stream. This is a good place for smaller songbirds and woodpeckers (Green and Syrian). The Blackthorns attract Brown Hairstreaks. The small lake at the end of the trail is fringed by marshland and reed beds. This makes this site an excellent one for Marsh Harrier, Kingfisher, Great Reed Warbler and Moorhen. Explore the grassy terrain near the lake for Pink Butterfly and Lady Orchids. Silver-studded Blue and Marsh Fritillary are so common in season that they cannot be overlooked.

Return the way you came.



Two specialists of cliffs that you are likely to see on this route: the Griffon Vulture (top) and the Blue Rock Thrush (bottom).