

**CULTURAL INSIGHTS INTO
CONSERVATION VOLUNTEER BIRD
WATCHING HOLIDAYS IN BULGARIA:
*IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT BIRDS***



**RESEARCH REPORT OF 2-YEAR-LONG
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY BY
TATYANA GARKAVAYA**

Cultural Insights into Conservation Volunteer Bird Watching Holidays in Bulgaria: It's Not Only About Birds

Research report of 2-year-long ethnographic study
by
TATYANA GARKAVAYA

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**Sofia, Bulgaria
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About the Author



TATYANA GARKAVAYA is multilingual PR/Marketing specialist, an award-winning journalist (2010) and blogger (2020, 2021) with 20 years of experience in content development in various socio-cultural environments. Her recent project is the award-winning blog Cultural Insights devoted to sustainable practices, travel and informal learning.

She has been writing since 2001 on topics ranging from sustainable living, cultural exchange, and brand storytelling. Comprehensive portfolios in 5 languages (English, Bulgarian, Russian, Ukrainian and Italian) across a variety of platforms and businesses. Learn more about her projects on Cultural Insights and LinkedIn.

Acknowledgement

We often say that volunteering is about a particular community, and this book is no different. I couldn't have done it without some special people.

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Introduction



INTRODUCTION

A collaborative guide: from people to people

This book is a collaborative guide to the authentic conservation holidays in Bulgaria focused on the protection of birds habitats. The word 'collaborative' implies that it has been compiled with interviews of over 30 participants of the conservation activities in different Bulgarian regions. And, of course, I personally participated in all the projects and tried all the digital tools I offer.

Being part of the final stage of my 2-year-long research *Mapping Sustainable Holidays in Bulgaria*, this guide is implemented in the framework of sociosemiotic ethnography and participatory action research. More details on the methodology are in [CHAPTER 1](#).

This book was partly funded by the Bulgarian Fund for Women in the framework of the Programme Gender Equality and Climate Justice 2021 implemented with the financial support of the Open Society Institute - Sofia and the Open Society Foundations.

The goal of my study was twofold – to promote the achievements of the strongest in Bulgaria volunteer network and to train the volunteers to communicate about their successes, as well as to reflect them on the CVs. The project consisted of interviews, workshops, and specially prepared articles and videos.

All the individuals who shared their experiences in this book have different social and professional backgrounds (schoolchildren, ecologists, economists, academics, and ordinary nature-lovers from all over Bulgaria). Yet they share a remarkable similarity: those people are keepers and developers of the original Bulgarian 30-year-long tradition – the preservation of birds habitats in the framework of conservation vacations.

Driven by the desire to support good causes, hundreds of volunteers every year willingly donate their holiday time to preserving birds habitats and exploring natural beauties together with like-minded companions.

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Overall, this guide presents over ten different projects related to bird watching and lots of online tools useful both for birders and nature lovers. The most salient initiatives are the two oldest Bulgarian bird-watching vacations in Pomorie ([CHAPTER 4](#)) and Burgas ([CHAPTER 2](#)), the largest Bulgarian citizen science project in Durankulak ([CHAPTER 6](#)), the original Wildlife Rescue Centre focused on extinct species reintroduction in Stara Zagora ([CHAPTER 5](#)), one bird walk in Sofia ([ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS](#)), and the nature reserve Sinite Kamani in Kotel ([ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS](#)).

How can the reader benefit from this diversity? It is wise to consider the remark of **Petar Yankov**, one of the founders of the Atanasovsko Lake Camp, academic and ornithologist: 'We don't give people fish, we teach them how to catch it' ([CHAPTER 3](#)).

From my experience, I can add - simply regard each project like a game where you can score more or less but never lose. Some of the bonuses are working for good causes with like-minded people, learning about nature, and discovering new meanings of old places.

The Islands of Hope for Birds and People

In every chapter, in their own words, the volunteers and organizers share insights into the conservation projects, which offer various comfortable options for collaborative learning for people of different ages and social backgrounds (lectures, workshops, meetings with environmentalists, conservation activities, etc.).

The presented initiatives vary in the major tasks that require about 40 per cent of the time of the volunteers. The oldest projects - the Atanasovsko Lake Camp (33 years) and the Pomorie Lake Volunteer Brigade (26 years) - focus on the reconstruction of artificial islands for pelicans and sandwich terns, respectively.

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Meanwhile, the newest one – Durankulak Bird-Ringing Camp, set up just three years ago - is devoted to bird monitoring during the autumn bird migration.

In contrast to the rest initiatives of this book, the Stara Zagora Wildlife Rescue Centre is not specialized in conservation vacations at all. However, its unique educational activities provide a rich source of positive experiences - learning and entertainment. It is due to the opportunities to interact with different wild birds on the spot.

The desire to write this book in such an unusual manner - together with my teammates - stems from my interest in bird-watching and its potential for communities. This enthusiasm is twofold - personal and professional. I live on the busiest Bulgarian birds' spot - the second largest in Europe bird migration route Via Pontica (Burgas region) - and actively participate in plenty of birding activities: from an educational Bird ID course to conservational projects. Additionally, I explore the meanings of birds for people by writing posts for my blog and preparing different communication workshops for volunteers in collaboration with environmental organizations.

My favourite tasks are related to the artificial islands for birds on Pomorie and Atanasovsko Lakes, which we seasonally reconstruct for the nesting season. Those small pieces of land are signs of hope both for birds and people. They make part of the busy international resorts but lay off the beaten track, so very few people know about their existence and purpose. Yet, it is a great pleasure to spend some time there and see the cities and life from different perspectives.

The necessity of the regular maintenance of the islands implies work at the intersection of urbanization and nature conservation. It encourages people to reconsider their role in both processes. Undoubtedly, it would be valuable for many to engage in such work from time to time.

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I intend this manual on sustainable pastimes with birds for ordinary nature-lovers who enjoy new meaningful activities and environmental professionals that deal with volunteers.

With this book I share just some of the valuable insights I gained. I also want to offer some food for thought about original sustainable pastimes useful for discovering new dimensions of life. The considerable part of my observations I expect to turn into practical methodologies in the course of my further PhD studies or other research work.

Chapters Overview

Each chapter is devoted to one conservation project, and I introduce it with the most vivid idea that expresses its essence. For the oldest Bulgarian sustainable vacation Atanasovsko Lake Camp, the central notion is **Collaborations**; the main driving force for the whole 33-year-long history. The Pomorie Lake Brigade is about **Choices** because it is the most labour-intensive project. The idea of **Names** features Stara Zagora Wildlife Rescue Centre since its team deals with many disabled birds some of which are left at the centre and named. And **Sunrises** are the striking characteristic of the Durankulak Bird-Ringing Camp, where ornithologists and volunteers follow the birds' timing to reduce the stress for the caught birds and ensure the quality of research.

I deliberately opted for plural nouns - they reflect the variability of the presented experiences. And this approach will also help bring the valuable Bulgarian collaborative practices to more people and show the diversity and flexibility of sustainable choices. So, everyone can tailor the chosen volunteer vacation according to their learning goals and social needs.

Each section finishes with '**Additional Insights**' that provide more information on other bird-related activities or useful digital tools for birding.

CHAPTER 1 Deciphering green narratives. The chapter sheds more light on the methodology (sociosemiotic ethnography and participatory action research) and the basic concepts of the analyzed volunteer conservation projects - values and storytelling. Additionally, I draw on some examples of similar community-based studies and offer an overview of the Bulgarian context and its prospects.

CHAPTER 2 Bulgarian collaborative practices: a historical overview.

The section provides insights into three authentic Bulgarian social initiatives that fueled the sustainable development of Bulgarian communities after the Liberation - the chitalisha, working brigades and the ecological movement of the 1980s. They have influenced the analyzed conservation projects that, in turn, have become genuine cultural phenomena in Bulgaria. Indeed for analyzing any cultural phenomenon, it is essential to examine its roots. **Additional Insights** offer the list of online communities focused on birding in Bulgaria: Birds in Bulgaria, Sofia birds walks and Smart Birds.

CHAPTER 3 The Atanasovsko Lake Camp: Collaborations. The section outlines the history and activities of the Atanasovsko Lake Camp by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB). It is the oldest Bulgarian bird-watching vacation that started as a scientific field study more than 30 years ago. Gradually, the initiative has become the starting point in the careers of many Bulgarian environmentalists who joined it as volunteers. **Additional Insights** cover another important citizen-science project by the BSPB – a Bird ID course.

CHAPTER 4 The Pomorie Lake Brigade: Choices. The part presents the second oldest Bulgarian bird-watching vacation - the Pomorie Lake Volunteer Brigade. Its focus is on the symbolic for Pomorie bird species - the sandwich tern – and the activities volunteers carry out to support the birds' habitat. The section features Bulgarian modern approaches to gender issues and citizen science initiatives.

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Additional Insights present a practical one-week communication workshop on online interaction and networking that I created and conducted specially for the volunteers of the Pomorie Lake Brigade.

CHAPTER 5 Stara Zagora The Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Centre: Names. The chapter focuses on the key activities of the Centre related to the reintroduction of endangered species, the healing of wounded birds and related educational activities. I cover the life of the disabled birds there drawing on my adoption experience. **Additional Insights**, based on my visit to the National Reserve Sinite Kamani, one of the main habitats of vultures in Bulgaria, will deepen one's understanding of the species restoration in Bulgaria on the example of four vulture species.

CHAPTER 6 Durankulak Bird-Ringing Camp: Sunrises. The last section of this book introduces the largest Bulgarian citizen science project - a 5-year-long study devoted to bird monitoring on Durankulak Lake. I offer an overview of typical working days at the camp where I participated in the first shift in August 2021. **Additional Insights** provide information about the two useful online tools for identification of birds by appearance (Merlin Bird ID) and sound (xeno-canto).

Cultural Insights into Conservation
Volunteer Bird Watching Holidays
in Bulgaria:

It's Not Only About Birds

TATYANA GARKAVAYA

Chapter 1 Deciphering green narratives



Introduction

In this section, I shed more light on the methodology of my research - sociosemiotic ethnography with participatory action research. Then, I introduce the concept of values as the starting point of collaboration in volunteer projects and the idea of green narratives as the groundwork for the practical implementation of participatory action research.

Additionally, I outline the Bulgarian context and future potentials for Bulgarian communities to build a shared future through concrete initiatives.

1.1 Values, Volunteering and Peer-to-peer learning

To involve in collaboration on environmental issues different social groups, it is vital to spread knowledge and integrate it with actual experiences. And for effective solving of local environmental problems, it is essential to understand dramatic differences in communication competences. Since the critical divisive factor between different social groups is often different levels of education, it makes sense to activate some uniting factors to compensate knowledge gaps of some members. Volunteer initiatives are the most comfortable ground for such collaboration.

For environmental volunteer projects, values are the main driving force. They unite different people and trigger collaboration beyond stereotypes. As a result, a more profound comprehension of others' motives and goals is due to a shared familiarity with 'narratives' that shape the reality for the collaborators.

How does it work in the context of this study? For participatory action research of a special cultural phenomenon – Bulgarian conservation vacations – it is essential to establish a feedback loop between conceptual issues and empirical investigation.

It, in turn, will allow obtaining new insights expressed in new constructed green narratives, that unite various points of view of different social groups. Yet, nothing is just meaningful in itself. Meaning is essentially a shared value (Lakoff 1988).

Obviously, symbolization, in this case, is a practical tool - it translates inherently subjective experience into an objective entity. Gradually, the subjective experience will become a collectively sharable object and reshape different contexts and world views. And communications workshops are the best framework for developing new experiences and social practices.

It is essential to perceive the texts everyone produces as the substantive equivalent of the author's productivity in the process of communication as a social exchange of thought (Kristeva 1969). And sociosemiotic ethnography is an excellent platform for environmental projects because it provides specific methodologies for helping researchers analyze the importance of the symbols people deal with. Further those observations can be turned into valuable information for making decisions for different social groups.

1.2 Sociosemiotic Ethnography

Sociosemiotic ethnography is a type of 'reflexive, critical, analytical, interpretive, and constructionist ethnography that explores how people use semiotic resources in practice' (Vanini 2007).

For this research, the method allows addressing the scope of visual communication across volunteer bird watching conservation vacations, the volunteers' motivations for participation. And, combined with the tools of participatory action research, the new knowledge helps people to expand the networks by constructing green narratives around the symbolic for the place species. A vivid illustration is the case of Pomorie Lake Brigade, whose volunteers for over two decades together with environmentalists managed to restore a colony of sandwich terns, the symbols of the lake ([CHAPTER 4](#)).

As its entry point for a discussion on these issues, this study additionally adopts the basic principles of ecological semiotics. Due to its seminal role to draw comparisons between humans and other living systems, between culture-made and life-made things, and make distinctions between different types (and levels) of sign processes (Kull, Torop 2003). As a result, ecosemiotics allows an understanding of collective sign systems.

All the analyzed projects represent a complex set of beliefs resulting from the intersection of human and bird worlds. One of the best examples is Stara Zagora Wildlife Rescue Centre, where wild birds, after living for a long time close to people, adopt some human habits and carry out some diplomatic missions participating in public events ([CHAPTER 5](#)).

As demonstrated my workshop with the volunteers of the Pomorie Lake Brigade, constructed social media narratives are powerful facilitators of interaction between different social groups ([CHAPTER 4](#)). By sharing their experiences, the participants supported their collaborators and compensated for the digital competencies of some companions.

The importance of such communication training is twofold. First, volunteers improve their communication skills by systematically informing the audience. Second, they carry out public opinion analysis that may fuel research on the support of good causes.

1.3 Participatory action research

Symptomatic of the last decade of the 20th century, the movement towards community-oriented action-research manifested itself as an effective 'bottom-up' interdisciplinary research tool (Maton et al. 2006). The emerging initiatives globally were focused on meaningful change to living conditions in local communities and the integration of multiple points of view.

This complex form of knowledge management aimed to involve different social groups and empower them by creating communities of practice and learning. Essentially, changes are achieved utilizing shared learning rather than engineered by theoretical or expert knowledge (Stein 2002).

Indeed, to avoid the emergence of the 'age ghettos', it is important to involve in modern collaborative practices people of different age and social groups.

The resulting capacity of diverse groups to simultaneously merge multiple points of view emphasizes the semiosis - creation and communication of meaning - inherent to producing knowledge that could go beyond the conventional range of 'top-down' approaches 'in the process of problem definition and problem-solving' (McIntyre-Mills et al. 2008).

In Bulgaria, participatory action research is mainly applied to higher education (Varbanova 2019) or social work with marginalized groups (The Center for the Study of Democracy 2014). In contrast, some European countries wildly use the methodologies for solving environmental problems. For example, in Sweden, participatory action research became a successful facilitating strategy of constructive discussion about envisioning forested landscapes between local stakeholders and national policy-makers (Wallin et al. 2016).

1.4 The prospects for Bulgaria

Interestingly, the oldest Bulgarian volunteer vacation Atanasovsko Lake Camp was set over 30 years ago with principles similar to participatory action research. That is, the collaboration of the general public with scientists for gathering birds' observations and improvement of birds habitats.

First, Bulgarian ornithologists invited several friends to help them by participating in seasonal field works. Then, every year the number of interested nature-lovers expanded significantly beyond the close networks ([CHAPTER 3](#)).

Thus, it is logical to attempt participatory action research with those who, in essence, have been developing effective social practices for decades. Now, they can be adapted to different regions across Bulgaria. It, in turn, will assist the post-pandemic communities regeneration across the country ([CHAPTER 2](#)). And in this process, communications training for communities is critical because it will help people of different ages and generations to learn from each other and facilitate the understanding of environmental topics linked to social issues.

Across Europe, many countries apply participatory-based projects rooted in narratives to empower communities through cultural initiatives. A vivid illustration is the positive experiences of 27 countries united by the digital platform The European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC). Their multilayer programmes support many communities.

For instance, in Poland, where many people are moving out of cities, such programmes aim to create new post-pandemic spaces in rural areas and find in challenges new opportunities (Stiftung Genshagen 2021). To advance innovation across partners, ENCC has developed the Crowdsourced Manifesto Culture for Shared, Smart, Innovative Territories 2020. The document serves as a framework for cultural diplomacy practices necessary to implement and adapt to new communities practices.

Bulgaria also has similar initiatives focused on the environmental context – Ecological Diplomacy and [Ecological Manifesto](#) by ManEco (Mitev 2019). They set the basis for sustainable living for individuals by guiding different spheres of life. Now, the projects fuel the [development of volunteers of Young Caritas Sofia](#).

Combined with the developing scientific work on Ecological Diplomacy, the impressive volunteer experiences developed within the Bulgarian conservation initiatives for decades of collective efforts can fuel many social projects and regenerate Bulgarian communities.

The concept of Ecological Diplomacy has its roots in a recently published text – the Ecological Manifesto (Mitev 2019). The document consists of practical suggestions on sustainable living and has been developed during consultation with experts from different countries.

Ecological Diplomacy may provide a new framework for the volunteers' practices of the Bulgarian conservation initiatives. It, in turn, will initiate, assist and monitor bilateral and multilateral agreements concerning environmental issues and become a significant factor of positive social change. And bird-related initiatives are a good starting point.

Bulgaria hosts 1/4 of bird species recorded in Europe – over 400 species. Naturally, activities related to interactions with birds have become the inherent feature of modern Bulgarian culture. The authentic bird watching volunteer vacations are its most vivid expression.

And, I believe that birding activities in Bulgaria are a secret weapon of the (post-) COVID urban regeneration because they are safe, enjoyable and mutually beneficial for individuals and communities.

Additionally, the initiatives have united strong communities of enthusiasts willing to collaborate, learn, support. Naturally, they may become a solid basis for new ecological community-based practices, for example, new educational programmes and tourism products.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I explained the application of the methodology of my research - sociosemiotic ethnography and participatory action research – and provided evidence of its benefits for Bulgaria.

As we will see in the following chapters, the Bulgarian ecological activists have prepared the ground for innovative democratic practices. In this context, the methodology of participatory action research is very promising for new democratic initiatives in Bulgaria.

And to achieve these ambitious objectives, the primary focus should be on communication activities. The gradual application of narrative-based communication workshops can offer a comfortable way of learning about environmental and social issues to people with different levels of knowledge united by common values.

It, in turn, will result in an effective system of knowledge management for every single community. In the context of the post-pandemic community revival, community-friendly practices developed within conservation vacations will establish vital links that will unite society with new initiatives based on equality, trust and support.

It's Not Only About Birds

Chapter 2 Bulgarian collaborative practices: a historical overview



Introduction

Bulgaria has a long-lasting tradition of collaboration in communities. At every historical period, collaborative initiatives reflect the needs of society and fulfil its practical purposes.

This chapter offers an overview of the three Bulgarian social initiatives featured by effective partnership and public engagement, from the 1860s to the present:

- the unique Bulgarian cultural phenomenon chitalishta,
- the Bulgarian Brigadier Movement
- the modern ecological initiatives.

They all evoke different feelings, but each plays a crucial role in Bulgarian history. The first one is the reason for pride and unconditionally accepted by the whole nation, the second one is rather shameful and controversial, yet the third one is most diverse and bears the feature of the first two. But each of them has influenced the Bulgarian conservation volunteer vacations introduced in the following chapters. The section concludes with a list of original online communities devoted to birding in Bulgaria.

2.1 The chitalishta in Bulgaria and life-long learning

Set up as multifunctional cultural institutions during the Bulgarian National Revival in 1856, the chitalisha have become part of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists (UNESCO). Importantly, they have preserved the very special spirit that still fuel the development of communities. The meaning of the word chitalisha is a 'reading room'.

From the very beginning, the chitalisha evolved as the most respected and trusted cultural institution in Bulgaria. It is due to their progressive and scientific spirit that embodied the genuine civil communities teaching cult, respect for the national origin, togetherness and unity in the thoughts and deeds (Marinova and Yoneva 2021).

The first chitalishta opened their doors in Svishtov, Lom and Shumen, and each of the cities boasts some unique artefacts featured learning.

The library in Svishtov community centre has more than 2000 volumes; in Lom was presented the first Bulgarian theatrical play – the adapted 'The Suffering Genoveva', and in Shumen is kept the oldest and unique Bible from the 15th century weighing 3 kg and the first Bulgarian theatrical curtain (Koleva 2018).

The 'chitalishta' is the first community establishment that ensures equal participation and access to cultural and educational services and boosts the development of social relationships and forms of interactions, preceding the formation of the Bulgarian nation.

Every village and city had their chitalisha. Their purposes depended on the geography, history and interests of communities.

The primary functions of the chitalisha

- community centre for socialization practices
- library services
- hosting the theatre, art classes, foreign languages courses and public events.

Despite some similarities to traditional schools, the chitalisha were for people of all ages, and they did not have any tests or exams; lifelong learning and enlightenment were powerful incentives.

Due to its widespread popularity, the chitalisha network expanded outside Bulgaria. The strongest spiritual centres outside the Bulgarian boundaries developed in Macedonia and Istanbul.

The Bulgarian chitalisha of the 19th century reflected the general European tendency for non-formal education and peer-to-peer learning. At the same time, a similar establishment the network of Folk high schools was emerging in Austria, Germany, France, Switzerland and Nordic countries.

For 165 years of their existence, the network of chitalisha continues to be a reliable cultural institution that preserves and develops the traditional Bulgarian values.

Their deep interconnections with the past, traditions, education, culture and charity in support of the community gain trust and guide the social change.

2.2 The Bulgarian Brigadier Movement and cultural 'colonization' of society

The first Bulgarian brigade - the youth organization Brannik - dates back to the 1940s and is associated with agricultural assistance (Vezekov 2014). It largely determined the main purposes of the future Bulgarian Brigadier Movement created to advance the planned socialist economy in the country. Groups of young people were gathered seasonally to carry out some work without payment or for small fees.

For 60 years of its existence, the state used free labour of the Brigadier Movement to build major roads and railways, dams, power plants, industrial enterprises, public buildings, and numerous afforestation projects.

Although volunteers initially met the brigadier initiative with great enthusiasm, gradually, their moods changed dramatically; later, the increasing frustration resulted in the exclusion of the brigades from society. The coercive manner of the brigades, the low qualification of the volunteer leaders, and the symbolic payment were the major demotivating factors for the participants.

The two symbolic achievements of the Bulgarian Brigades

- The most iconic urban project of the Bulgarian Brigadier Movement is the city of Dimitrovgrad in Southern Bulgaria. Nicknamed 'the young city of socialism', the city was constructed from 1947 to 1950 by 50 000 brigadiers from almost 1000 Bulgarian communities (Vezekov 2014). They worked for free. Some builders later moved to the newly-built city, settled there down and contributed to its further development.

- The most significant environmental achievements of the brigades were documented in Breznik, Pernik region. A bulletin devoted to the 35th anniversary of the brigadier movement informs that 'over 1 000 000 hectares of forest in the Breznik Forestry were created by generations of 'blue-shirt' (brigadiers) young men and women, and every year thousands of them donate their labour to agriculture' (Metodicheski builtin 1981).

Brigades' achievements for 'prescribed tourism'

Undoubtedly, the brigadier movement was one of the outstanding manifestations of public life in New Bulgaria (Dimov 1982), and the activities of the brigadiers impacted the cultural consumption patterns of many generations.

In the scope of this guide, particularly insightful are the experiences that reshaped the national space - 'prescribed leisure and tourism - as a tool of colonization of society and the construction of new objects that determined also 'the new socialist person' (Koleva 2020).

To better understand the nature of socialist tourism in Eastern Europe, it is reasonable to compare it with tourism in Western Europe. While the latter favoured the mix of pleasure and consumption, the former was featured by the tensions between the ideological prioritization of industrial production and the need for the legitimization of consumption and leisure.

Social engineering was applied for creating new types of citizens - both space and its inhabitants should be reshaped according to the ideal. It meant control over leisure and the regulation of unregulated free time (Verdery 1996). In practice, it was manifested in the regulations as to the presence of people in certain places for a certain amount of time (meetings, parades, queues, etc.).

In terms of the approved interests for travel in Bulgaria, the priority was the national past, as opposed to the appreciation of cultural otherness toward different places and peoples popular in other European countries.

Main features of tourism under socialism

- the focus on the national past and romantic nationalism;
- the dialectic for control of people's time and bodies;
- the legitimization of narratives of the regime with organized excursions;
- the reinforcement of patriotic feelings with the discoveries of Bulgarian nature;
- the prerogative sites of memory over sites of Otherness 11 (Winter 2012: 316).

They are reflected in the statute of the Bulgarian Tourist Union (1962).

2.3 Modern eco-initiatives and alternative tourism

After the decline of the Brigadier movement and the so-called passage of 1989 year, the Bulgarian cultural and tourism industries experienced unprecedented crises. They, in turn, brought 'the unknown capital', unplanned building and the 'new' tourism zoning' (Stankova 2010).

Gradually, in the first decade of the new century, agriculture and tourism in Bulgaria became among the strongest sectors in the economy along with such segments as energy, mining, metallurgy and machine building (Field listing of principal export commodities 2011).

As a result, the tourism boom has sparked vigorous public debate regarding the most sustainable ways of balancing tourism development and ecological footprint. The most vivid conceptualization of this discussion is the 'ecotourism-mass tourism' dichotomy – the two extremes of tourism development (Ivanov and Ivanova 2013). The essential distinction between them is the number of tourists and their environmental impact on the destination area.

In contrast to mass tourism defined by the traditional formula 'sea, sun, sand' in summer and ski in winter, ecotourism (Buckley, 1994) is considered more advanced.

It is due to its inherent sustainable features: the mix of appreciating and learning about the natural environment or specific elements (Weaver, 2001). Thus, ecotourism is regarded as the more acceptable and desirable choice for the development of any tourist destination. However, too persistent marketing efforts (e.g. pre exploitation) for attracting new tourists (Sirakaya et al., 1999) question its superiority.

Naturally, the controversies have contributed to the emergence of various touristic hybrid forms and new players in the tourism industry.

Ekoglasnost – a green alternative

In Bulgaria, the economic transition of the 1980s was featured by two phenomena - the ecological movement fueled by political unrest and the emergence of new environmental initiatives (e.g. Green Balkans, BSPB, etc.) that currently determine the Bulgarian cultural and ecological agendas.

With the logo 'Ecoglasnost – a green alternative', Ekoglasnost was the first national movement under the Communist government in Bulgaria (Екогласност 1989). It aimed to improve the environmental situation in Ruse, northern Bulgaria, heavily polluted by a Romanian chemical factory on the other side of the Danube in Giurgiu.

All the previous attempts to change the situation failed. Only after the emergence of Committee to Save Ruse the issue gained national interest. Subsequently, the successor of this solidarity group named itself Ekoglasnost and groups expressing their support emerged all over the country (Baumgartl 1993).

In contrast to the Ecoglasnost movement, the two emerging ecological organizations (BSPB and Green Balkans) have expanded their influence beyond environmental protests. Their functions range from environmental didactic to consultancy. For instance, Green Balkans has participated in the development of almost all documents related to the environmental legislation in Bulgaria (Green Balkans).

The main activities of Bulgarian ecological organizations:

- Biodiversity conservation;
- Habitat restoration;
- Sustainable management of natural resources;
- Improving environmental policy and legislation;
- Environmental education.

In addition, both BSPB and Green Balkans run about 20 projects as part of the European ecological network NATURA 2000. Setting up innovative for Bulgaria volunteer networks and sustainable vacations is one of the most important achievements. For over two decades, the projects have become the unique collaborative platforms that unite different generations within alternative eco friendly volunteer vacations focused on conservation activities.

Conclusions

This chapter offered a critical analysis of the three significant collaborative Bulgarian initiatives: the chitalisha, the Brigadier movement and modern environmental organizations. The examination is useful for understanding the value of the conservation volunteer projects presented in the following chapters.

A rich diversity of conservation activities involve some elements of the chitalisha and the Brigadier movement (creative workshops, lectures, creation and maintenance of artificial islands and platforms for birds). Yet, their salient feature is the focus of the activities around symbolic for each projects species and natural landmarks. In constructing specific world views, salience and meaningfulness are redefined by recurrent individual and collective interactions.

In the following chapters, I shed more light on these processes in the context of Bulgarian conservation vacations. Whichever project you choose, it is useful to complement your learning with original online resources created by Bulgarian enthusiasts and nature-lovers. Explore Additional Insights below!



Additional Insights: 3 best Bulgarian online resources for bird-watchers

1 Birds in Bulgaria www.birdsinbulgaria.org is an award-winning Bulgarian educational project for birders consisting of a website and a Facebook group. With over 400 bird species, the website offers tons of helpful information in three languages, Bulgarian, English and Spanish. It has a comprehensive guide to bird species, photos, video, recordings of birds singing, birding spots and contacts of people who can provide more information.

The complementing Facebook group Birds in Bulgaria represents a dynamic community where experienced birders and nature-lovers can discuss any matters related to bird watching. The types of enquiries may be divided into two parts, aesthetical and practical. The former helps enjoy or identify bird species on shared videos or photos, the latter is useful in dealing directly with found wounded birds and finding practical solutions for helping them.

The Birds in Bulgaria initiative was set up over 15 years ago by the photographers Simeon Simeonov and Taniu Michev, who created the 'Birds of the Balkan Peninsula', a bird guide used for all the texts of Birds in Bulgaria.

In 2008, Birds in Bulgaria got the nomination Website of the Year 2008 in the international contest 'Computer Space' in the category 'Leisure and Hobby'. The following year, the online project was awarded the most prestigious Bulgarian prize for online projects Website of the year 2009 in the category 'Education and Science' in the Public votes.

2 Sofia Bird Walks www.sofiabirdwalks.com is a unique Bulgarian initiative (a website, Facebook group and guided excursions) offering free guided bird walks in and around Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. In a radius of 30 km from Sofia, one can spot more than 270 bird species!

The founders of Sofia Bird Walks are two avid birders Strahil and Gioro. Most of their services are free of charge, yet there is an option to support the project by donating some money online.

So far, Sofia Bird Walks has organized 12 walks involving over 200 participants. The excursions are suitable for children and adults, for experienced birders and nature lovers. The guides speak English and provide participants with binoculars and field guides.

Additionally to free walks, the organizers offer interactive learning tools, membership in a subscription-based Birding Club and the first birding podcast in the country. All the materials are in Bulgarian.

From 2021, Sofia Bird Walks has expanded the geography of their excursions and offered seasonal birdwatching tours Danube Bird Walk in Ruse, Silistra and Tutrakan.

3 SmartBirds www.smartbirds.org is an application for identifying birds developed by the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds. The digital tool is user-friendly both for professionals during long-lasting monitoring and for nature enthusiasts for single-observations. The data can be recorded on the website SmartBirds or the Android application SmartBirds Pro.

In essence, SmartBirds is an electronic database that serves as an electronic notebook for a recording of observations of different species: birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and other invertebrates.

The process of sharing observations supports the conservation activities in Bulgaria. SmartBirds is available in four languages: Bulgarian, English, Albanian and Macedonian.

Chapter 3 The Conservation Camp Atanasovsko Lake: Collaborations



The Conservation Camp Atanasovsko Lake



Where: Atanasovsko Lake, Burgas.

When: August.

Key features: camping, the autumn monitoring of birds, maintenance of the islands for pelicans, birdwatching.

For whom: family-friendly.

How to subscribe: the exact dates are usually announced in July on Facebook and the website of the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB).



Introduction

The Conservation Camp Atanasovsko Lake is the oldest Bulgarian volunteer eco-vacation founded in 1988 by Bulgarian ornithologists. It all began as 3-month-long fieldwork for environmental professionals. For the first time in Bulgaria, they attempted to gather data on bird migration.

Then, ordinary nature-lovers started joining the project to help the scientists and spend time in nature. At that time, the initiative did not have any entertainment, as the case is now, just work and nature observation.

Now the format of the Camp has changed. With its one-week-long activities, the project offers its participants to experience a sustainable lifestyle by living in a tent, attending various workshops and lectures and participating in bird monitoring (the cornerstone of the Camp).

The chapter finishes with a case study about a bird-identification course, the major citizen science project by BSPB and a starting point for those interested in birding. The activities of the course and the Camp overlap, and it makes sense to combine them.

3.1 The Oldest Bulgarian Eco-vacation

'33 years ago, when we enthusiastically set up the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds, we were full of ideas, inspiration, but we did not realise precisely what we were protecting, - admitted Bulgarian ornithologist, one of the founders of BSPB Petar Yankov at the meeting with volunteers at the Atanasovsko Lake Camp 2021. - It all began taking shape when we came into contact with similar conservation organizations, like the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (the UK), and attracted different types of support. During numerous partnerships, we created the only effective formula for the protection of birds and nature in Bulgaria – the unity of like-minded people'.

The long-lasting collaborations have contributed to the Camp becoming an incubator for many Bulgarian eco-activists and environmental professionals. Usually they begin as volunteers at early age and spend time trying to explore their interests in natural topics. Those experiences are helpful for the choice of the future career.

From the first year of its existence, BSPB organized two summer research camps in natural reserves on Atanasovsko lake Camp and Madjarovo. The goal was for ornithologists to gather more information about birds in Bulgaria and their habitats.

In contrast to the partnerships with similar international organizations, where the context is determined, the formats for collaborative interactions with communities took more time. For the first years, the very few participants in the summer camps were only relatives and friends of the scientists.

The rising public curiosity for unusual for Bulgaria scientific activities gradually increased the number of participants in the Conservation Camp Atanasovsko Lake. People willingly donated their time to work in the reserve and maintain its areas for different birds. Atanasovsko Lake is part of the second largest in Europe bird migration route Via Pontica, and annually it hosts thousands of birds.

For 33 years of its existence, the Conservation Camp Atanasovsko Lake by the BSPB has become the oldest Bulgarian traditional summer volunteer vacation for nature lovers. By mixing learning, work and birding, they create a world where's everyone is equal and has to support the volunteer community and the birds' habitats.

The main purposes of the Conservation Camp Atanasovsko Lake

- support the natural reserve which hosts thousands of birds;
- raise public awareness of the challenges birds face;
- teach volunteers to collaborate through conservation activities.

3.2 Counting birds: nature is a book, and species are its alphabets

'What is the Camp about? It's a place for making interesting acquaintances, enjoying useful work, and planting seeds for learning new things', - defines the project **Nikolai Katsarov**, a volunteer participating in the Camp since 2011.

The last year over 40 participants joined the Conservation Camp Atanasovsko Lake 2021, and two-thirds were regular participants.

'Through citizen science projects, like this one, we, at the BSPB, want to show that collaborations between environmentalists and ordinary people can be mutually beneficial, - points out **Irina Mateeva**, the Coordinator of Citizens for Nature Programme.

The main activity through which the volunteers experience the birds' world is bird monitoring during the autumn migration.

'If we regard nature as a book, then the species are its alphabets, and we do not want to lose any letter, - in this way **Stoycho Stoychev**, a BSPB ornithologist whose specialization is eagles, defines the importance of the protection of species. - To protect endangered species, we should reduce the birds' mortality rate and increase their birth rate. Unfortunately, our fauna has already lost the Bearded Vulture and the Great Bustard. Now we are working on their restoration. We try to involve as many people as possible to prevent future loses'.

The protection of birds implies such measures as the reconstruction of their habitats, the insulation of pillars, the maintenance of the regular monitoring, etc. Ornithologists believe that ordinary citizens can support the environmental professionals and activate their interest in nature through citizen science tools (websites, collaborative projects, etc.).

'The experienced and the inexperienced make the same number of mistakes, the former from an abundance of confidence and the latter from a lack of experience, - wisely remarked **Stoycho**. - That is why it does not make sense to afraid mistakes in citizen science. The more observations we record, the more reliable data we have'.

3.3 The campsite for reconsidering values

During my participation at the Conservation Camp Atanasovsko Lake in August 2021, I was particularly impressed by a particular environment there based on equality and support. Somewhat utopian for our times, particularly for the idea of holidays. The project is inspired by hippie values: a love for nature, a purpose-driven life, kindness, open-mindedness and equality.

'It makes sense to embark on such an adventure and enjoy its outcomes, - believes volunteer **Teodor Trifonov**. - Because it's always easy to find what's wrong and isn't perfect in our life, but here everyone works for one great cause - to support birds, which I find worthwhile. And it's a real pleasure to work with like-minded people!'

Every day we subscribed for different team-based tasks related to supporting the Camp, and the reserve Atanasovsko Lake. Serving meals, repairing work, restoring an artificial island, building wood platforms, cutting cane, bird monitoring. These were just some of our responsibilities. In this way, for a week, everyone had an opportunity to learn something new.

While working, we learned a lot about the area and the birds that use it. We maintained an artificial island for pelicans, cleaned the area for pied avocets, planted seaweeds from Atanasovsko Lake to Pomorie Lake and helped ornithologists monitor bird migration. Some participants with wood-crafting skills repaired the roof of the camp headquarters, used as the main office, the kitchen, storehouse and for many other unrelated purposes.

'There is some magic in such events that allow to touch nature and get away from it all, - notices **Vladimir Terziev**, a volunteer from Burgas. - For me, such experiences with people on the same wavelength help me rediscover myself, reconsider my values and exchange experience with others'.

'Education is the main purpose of the project, - says **Vladimir Mladenov**, the organizer of the Camp. - In its current format, the project has existed since 1995. We create for our volunteers an environment where they can exchange experiences and educate each other. For some people the project is a big adventure with which they can try new things: camping, lecturing, working with ornithologists...'.

Yet, the conservation birding vacation is not only about birds. 'The Brigade is a special project that doesn't have any analogy due to its different activities, - thinks **Adriana Todorova**, a volunteer of the Camp since 2013. - If there's at least some interest in nature, you can develop it here with a great lecture course and practical activities. I learned a lot about the unique Atanasovsko Lake and its history'.

At the same time, she admits that one should be somewhat adventurous to enjoy camping with strangers for a week.

'I like the superb mix of fun, work and learning! It's a highly recommended experience for those who want to develop their interest in nature and enjoy trying new things, - believes volunteer **Alexander Petkov**. - Of course, camping implies some inconveniences, the conditions here aren't perfect, but the impressive experience and cool people make up for it!'.

3.4 Developing curiosity for birds

'We are all united through our love and fascination for birds, and it's very beneficial to develop this curiosity to expand the understanding of nature', - maintains **Vyara Marinova**, one of the new volunteers.

Observing birds together with ornithologists was the most favourite type of 'work' for everyone. But it wasn't possible to choose it every day because it was a kind of a privilege, an award for hard work.

There were two options – birdwatching at the Tochka and observation of birds while walking around the lake. In this way, the ornithologists taught us to observe and record our observations using proper methodologies.

'Birding is my hobby, and I am here to benefit from practical training and communication with professionals, - says volunteer **Tsonka Zeleznyakova**. - In addition to useful methods, I learned a lot about interesting projects BSPB works on'.

At this time of the year, the sky over Atanasavsko Lake is a picturesque kaleidoscope. With diverse migrating flocks, one can see many different birds – eagles, pelicans, flamingos – and learn about them from professional ornithologists.

Yet, the most long-awaited spectacle for everyone was a flock of storks, symbolic for Bulgaria birds. With the sudden yell: 'Storks!', everyone would leave their work and, with fascination, fix their gaze at the flying away birds.

The species usually migrates in hundreds or thousands of individuals maneuvering gracefully in air flows. So, every storks' flock is a new captivating performance.

It is no wonder that for 32 years the utopian beliefs of few scientists have turned into a practical project through the repetition of the same holiday framework based on a love for nature. It, in turn, fuelled the legendary vacation that unites many generations of Bulgarians through the unique experience.

Conclusions

The chapter introduced the legendary Bulgarian vacation - the Conservation Camp Atanasovsko Lake. For the three decade of its existence, the initiative has made a remarkable transition from a small scientific project to a multifaceted large-scale vacation. Yet, it has managed to unite people in an exciting research project where everyone can contribute and learn at the same time.

Collaboration has always been the key feature of the Camp and it was mainly initiated by the founders of the BSPB. Nowadays, volunteers can support the initiative by spreading information about it. Because in spite of its considerable history, the project is little known. And very little can be found about it on the internet. Yet, this type of experience that has become a good tradition is worth spreading due to its multidimensional purposes.



Additional Insights: Bird ID course by BSPB

The course Bird ID developed as part of the programme Citizens for nature by the BSPB is a great place to start for those interested in birding. Enrollment information is on the BSPB website and Facebook. The classes last from March to September and cover the spring and autumn migrations. Consequently, the participants have an opportunity to compare their observations across different seasons.

Comprised of online lectures and field trips, the course is free of charge and is held in several cities. It unites 15-20 participants of different levels of knowledge about birds. Hence this peer-to-peer component makes learning more engaging and enjoyable.

The main activities of the Bird ID course by the BSPB@

- Identifying birds by a single species and a flock;
- Distinguish birds by singing;
- Performing monitoring of birds with apps;
- Drawing of birds as a task for weekly challenges;
- Analyzing the challenges to local birds.

Additionally, I wrote articles for my blog about birds and made videos. It helps to remember more species. And it was also useful for spreading the information about the activities of our Bird ID group, Burgas. The groups in other cities also made videos about their learning experience.

Nature-lovers of different ages can experience numerous new activities: educative excursions, interactive classes, meetings with professional ornithologists, etc.. This exchange of knowledge, in turn, helps select and master the preferred areas of learning.

The primary geographic area where the participants learn about birds is their home region. Additionally, groups from different Bulgarian cities visit each other and examine the fauna in new places.

For instance, in the Burgas region, we learned about water birds. One of our field trips allowed exploring mountain birds in the natural reserve Sinite Kamani, Sliven. Overall, the Burgas Bird ID group 2021 recorded and learned about over 250 species from September to August.

Chapter 4 The Pomorie Lake Volunteer Brigade: Choices



The Pomorie Lake Volunteer Brigade



Where: Pomorie Lake, Burgas region.

When: the first week of September.

Key features: practical workshops with scientists and wets, maintenance of the islands for sandwich terns, birdwatching.

For whom: family-friendly.

How to subscribe: the exact dates are usually announced in August on Facebook and the website of [Green Balkans](#).



Introduction

The Pomorie Lake Volunteer Brigade is a part of a conservation initiative by Green Balkans. It is devoted to the restoration of the symbolic for the town sandwich terns and the support of their habitat. Since 1996, the project has been uniting nature lovers on a September vacation by Pomorie Lake.

Along with Atanasovsko Lake, Pomorie Lake is on the second largest bird migration route in Europe – Via Pontica. And to support a rich birds diversity, conservation programmes in both places imply incredible activities: interesting tasks, workshops, fieldwork devoted to the ringing of birds or exploring the habitat of bats.

The Pomorie Lake Volunteer Brigade is part of the project LIFE19 NAT/BG/000804 Life For Pomorie Lagoon. The project has an over 25-year-old tradition and represents a mix of work, learning and recreation. And they guarantee meaningful pastimes. For instance, in 2020, during a one-week bird-watching vacation on Pomorie Lake, I helped to transfer about 2 tons of sand, got a present from the local rubbish, and connected to the citizen science social movement via the iNaturalist app.

I participated in the project twice, in 2020 and 2021, and in this chapter, I present the most exciting experiences from both editions. With the case study, I introduce a communication workshop that I created specially for the volunteers aiming to improve their skills of working in the network and reflecting their volunteer experiences on the CV. Such communication sessions for volunteers are popular in many countries (Poland, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, etc.), but for Bulgaria they are novelty.

Indeed I believe that for spreading the knowledge about volunteer vacations and conservation activities, such training is very useful because it allows people from different social groups to collaborate on environmental issues and, at the same time, to improve their communication and digital skills.

4.1 The symbol of the Brigade

'It's 11.00 am, a time for a break! With what is it better to rest at this time: a croissant or a beer?', - jokingly announces another pause to the whole Brigade Stefan Ivanov, a 'volunteer-veteran' of the project with 25+ years of volunteer experience.

The offered somewhat unusual choice was met with silence by many volunteers, while others opted for sweet croissants generously distributed by Stefan. The beer was stored for another break.

Choices are the main feature at the Pomorie Lake Brigade, which is, in contrast to the rest projects of this book, is more labour-intensive. Its activities take place in the centre of a busy resort at the end of the high season when the weather calls for relaxation. So, every participant has a lot of seductions for escaping from hard work or reducing working hours.

Yet, the veteran volunteers (30 per cent of the team) have proven that it is easy to balance work and leisure time. It has become a good tradition for them to work with spades by the lake in the morning and relax with beer by the sea in the afternoon. And their example is followed by many. Despite living in different countries, every year they plan a collective holiday in Pomorie for the first week of September, the usual time of the Brigade.

Participations in the Brigade used to receive compensation. And there was a competition for the selection of the candidates. Now, there is no compensation, everything is at the expense of the volunteers. But veterans never broke the old tradition and arrive in Pomorie with their families to volunteer at the Pomorie Lake Volunteer Brigade.

Stefan Ivanov pays special attention to symbols, so it is no wonder that such a person has managed to find the future symbol for the Brigade in the litter.

'I was born on 22 April, Earth Day, so it is very symbolic and logical that I need to be constantly connected to nature and support environmental causes', - points out Stefan.

Having spotted a plastic kite in a pile of rubbish, Stefan immediately extracted it, launched it and enthusiastically proclaimed: ‘It is absolutely functional! Let it be the symbol of the 25th Brigade!’

A sustainable choice!

That impressive finding has also inspired the logo for my blog Cultural Insights – a person launching a kite. Sustainable, original and simple. Importantly, it perfectly reflects the motto of the blog – *Share Ideas & Inspire Changes*.

4.2 Half-time holidays with full-time fun

Pomorie Lake is one of the best bird-watching spots in Europe with over 250 bird species. The Brigade is a perfect opportunity to explore that ornithological diversity while working and participating in interesting events by the Brigade.

Every year they offer different activities (conservation work, workshops, lectures, exhibitions, citizen science initiatives, etc.), and everyone can tailor their holidays according to their interests.

I suggest trying as much as possible because it is a rare opportunity to acquaint oneself with modern social trends and learn from different generations. The inspiring experience at the Brigade will undoubtedly guide one's educated eco-choices for a long time after the project.

This type of holiday is more enjoyable than standard vacations because it is more eventful. To get it right, it is essential to understand the structure and principles of the Brigade. There are obligatory tasks in the morning and optional ones in the afternoon.

For instance, during four morning hours, we worked on three tasks: transferring sand from the bank of the lake to an artificial island, removing weeds by hand and collecting litter. The goal was to create for birds comfortable conditions for nesting and rest during migration.

Manual labour is the only feasible solution in nature reserves where the use of chemicals and massive machines is forbidden.

In the afternoon, we spent about three hours on educational activities: bird ringing, lectures on biodiversity of Pomorie Lake, cetaceans of the Black sea and vultures in Bulgaria, etc..

I enjoyed most a workshop about citizen science activities with the use of the iNaturalist app by **Stanimira Deleva**, a biologist, cave researcher and PhD student of the University of Costa Rica. She emphasized that citizen science is gaining popularity during the pandemic and encouraged us to join the movement.

The idea is simple: upload images of nature to special apps, like iNaturalist and get detailed information about the species. Then scientists identify the species and attribute them a label, so the authors of the images can learn a lot about the natural wonders around them.

Because of travel restrictions and quarantines, scientists cannot move freely and continue their studies. Ordinary people can support many research activities by sharing their observations.

4.3 Recording a sensation

Birdwatching is the main bonus for the participants of the Brigade. However, sometimes it is difficult to make sense of bird diversity. That is why it is great to do it with knowledgeable birders like **Nikolay Kolev**, a known Bulgarian eco-activist whose regular observations make part of studies of many Bulgarian environmental organizations (Green Balkans, the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB), etc.).

Nikolay's job in the power industry is not related to the environment. Taking nature photography and doing monitoring of different species are fascinating hobbies. But his systematic and rich observations have gained him the respect of professional ecologists and nature-lovers.

The Bulgarian eco activist was among the very first Bulgarian birders who several years ago upgraded his qualification and did the online course Bird ID by Nord University (Norway). And now, his expertise is a great help to many Bulgarian ecological initiatives. For over eight years,

he has been collecting data and contributing to such large-scale Bulgarian projects as the National birds' atlas.

And his observations are also available to the general public. With impressive well-systematized collections of birds, butterflies and plants, his encyclopedia-like Facebook account is itself a naturalist handbook. Every single species is named, so the albums are a great guide to Bulgarian natural treasures.

One of the recent images by **Nikolay** taken in September 2021 in Pomorie recorded a great knot; the photo has immediately become a true sensation in Bulgaria. The species has never been recorded previously in the country. It nests in Siberia and migrates to Australia, Southeast Asia and the Arabian peninsula. The observation has sparked numerous discussions in birdwatching groups on social media. The changes in birds migration patterns are critical natural phenomena that indicate climate crises.

4.4 Challenging gender stereotypes

The basic framework of the Brigade is developed by Green Balkans. But the management of the communication, working and some activities were co-shared with volunteers that coordinated some tasks.

The key person that facilitated communication was 19-year-old **Mina Popova**, a participant of two Brigades. A student of ecology and the protection of the environment at Plovdiv University, Mina aims to challenge stereotypes in Bulgaria and master the profession that is considered male - a reserve ranger. She learns the duties of rangers from different sides. In her hometown Plovdiv, she raises public awareness of environmental issues by volunteering with local museums and environmental NGOs.

Another key volunteer, who captured most of our activities with his camera, was **Alexander Petkov**. He studies landscape ecology and the protection of the environment in Germany but wants to work in Bulgaria because there is more natural diversity there.

Alexander participated in the Brigade for the second time and treated it as practical complementary training.

For the three days, we enjoyed ourselves by posing for a documentary made by Hobby TV about the Brigade. They filmed us from the air, land and water. In turn, we were filming them and taking selfies. **Miroslav Tonev**, a Hobby TV cameraman, who has a degree in biology, became a part of our team.

Miroslav provided us with practical advice on being productive while working in high temperatures. It is essential to have a bottle of salty water to keep water and salt balance in the body and a bottle of sweet water with a bit of sugar to keep energy and avoid tiredness. Food in the heat, in contrast, deprives of energy.

Our youngest volunteers - seven schoolchildren from Sofia - initiated the Broken Telephone game. In this way, they tried to entertain a live chain of volunteers staying in muddy water and transferring sand. But every time the game came upon a generation gap.

Having heard another phrase sent from the youngsters, some older volunteers tactfully noted that it would be better to do a foot spa in silence, otherwise the Broken Telephone risked turning from a game into a reality.

..Regardless of ages and professions, the participants treated the volunteer vacation as motivational therapy, a great opportunity to learn oneself and nature by supporting birds habitats. This experience is not about a one-time holiday, it is something one wants to make a natural part of life. In the end, the team agreed to stay in touch and repeat bird therapy next year.

Conclusions

The chapter presented various collaborative practices of the Pomorie Lake Volunteer Brigade (peer learning, conservation work, etc.).

Due to the regular upgrading and improvement of the project for over more than two decades, many activities have become practical tools for constructive engagement, improving environmental literacy and meaningful entertainment for many participants. Within the Brigade people of different ages and social groups can find the most comfortable ways of working and learning.

For the further development of the project, Green Balkans with the support of volunteers should attract more people, emphasizing the practical value of the Brigade for personal and professional development.



Additional Insights: Case study: Interactive online communication for ecological projects

Aiming to develop a practical framework for more effective collaboration, in September 2021, I organized a one-week workshop for 20 volunteers of the Pomorie Lake Volunteer Brigade. It consisted of two presentations (Interactive communication for ecological projects and Strengthening the volunteer network), a competition with prizes and daily communication activities on Facebook and Instagram.

A one-week communication challenge #рибарки2021

I named the contest #рибарки2021 - after the feathered symbol of the lake - and offered the participants to think about different links between the world of the birds and humans as well as new links which we created during our collaboration. The hashtag served as the keyword for our social media posts on Facebook and Instagram.

The main goals of the #рибарки2021 workshop:

- to introduce the volunteers to each other and facilitate networking;
- to familiarize the participants with new social trends and communication digital practices useful for dealing with environmental topics;
- to instruct the participants about the importance of using hashtags with their social media posts as the main searching tools on digital platforms;
- to raise the awareness of the general public about the achievements of the volunteers and the project itself;
- to promote the values and symbols of the Brigade;
- to help the volunteers to reflect the experience of the participation in the Brigade on the CV.

With my first presentation Interactive communication for ecological projects, I established the framework for the collaboration using the notion of informal volunteering to encourage sharing of information and supporting each other with creative ideas.

Informal volunteering is, in essence, cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). The term implies the strategic use in social action of such resources as symbols, ideas, and preferences. The reasons why I replaced the concept of 'cultural capital' with that of 'informal volunteering' had to do with the results of the previous research.

There was total unacceptance of any 'commercialization' of the volunteer work among the participants. On Facebook, many volunteers generate images with inspiring quotes that praise altruism and condemn boasting.

With my second presentation Strengthening the volunteer network, I highlighted the benefits for volunteers of communicating ecological events they are involved in and reflecting those experiences on their resumes. Equipped with the new knowledge, the volunteers agreed that it was useful to find comfortable ways of promoting good causes to involve more people and highlight the social value of the volunteer contributions. Even those participants that did not have social media accounts (about 40 per cent) curiously inquired about our daily activities.

Overall, eight volunteers participated in the #рибарка2021 game. We shared about 40 posts and reached over 500 people for one week in five countries (Bulgaria, Italy, Hungary, Turkey and Ukraine).

In the end, I chose the winners of the weekly the #рибарка2021 contest in 3 categories: the Most creative Campaign – **Maria Mitkova**, the Most Supportive Campaign – **Nikolay Kolev** and the Most Comprehensive Campaign – **Stefan Ivanov**. Each winner chose their style of communication. While Maria prepared a report of daily events, Nikolay and Stefan reflected on the highlights. For instance, the jubilee 150th stick of the new fence.

All the participants of the #рибарка2021 game got nice prizes – badges with birds and specially created anniversary magnets devoted to the symbol of the Brigade - a kite. The badges were from the shop of the Bulgarian Society of the Protection of Birds. In this way, we supported BSPB. The design of the magnet was the result of my creative collaboration with Jana Ivanova, a designer and maker of Kotlen carpets, and Yaroslava Bykova, an illustrator and puppet-maker.

I used the idea of a post stamp to highlight the valuable contribution of Stefan to the history of the Brigade. Post stamps add value to any message. Additionally, only meaningful historical events decorate stamps. And inspiring examples, like one by Stefan Ivanov, should be celebrated and reminded all the time. It is how the positive experiences are enhanced, shared and institutionalized, from the bottom to the top.

It's Not Only About Birds

Chapter 5 The Stara Zagora Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Centre: Names



The Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Centre



Where: Stara Zagora.

When: throughout the year.

Key features: guided excursions, volunteering, bird releases back into the wild after treatment.

For whom: family-friendly.

How to subscribe: guided excursions - according to the timetable of the visitor centre; bird releases – according to the planned events on Facebook and website of the Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Centre by Green Balkans.



Introduction

Established about 30 years ago, the Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Centre in Stara Zagora is one of the most original organizations in Bulgaria and Europe dealing with rare bird species. Treatment of wild birds, breeding and introduction of endangered species, development of educational ecological programmes are just some of their activities.

The Centre is a permanent home to hundreds of wild birds, and members of the general public can see that rich biodiversity during working hours. The chapter offers a glimpse into the life of the most notable feathered inhabitants – the pelican Gruyo and the raven Black Allo. Additionally, I share some details about my experience of the adoption of four birds and a subsequent visit to the centre when I unexpectedly witnessed bird operations.

The concept of names for this chapter has been chosen to highlight the dramatic difference between the 'normal' lifestyles of wild birds and a new dependent life caused by impairment. I believe by understanding the desperate conditions of wild birds in Stara Zagora, we will be able to support them, reduce the challenges that we cause and, of course, learn about them in a very interactive way. The section closes with a case study on species restoration in Bulgaria. It is based on my visit to one of the unique vulture habitats in Bulgaria - the Sinite Kamani Nature Park in Kotel.

5.1 Disabled birds on special missions

The huge pink pelican curiously walking along with the mesh in front of the entrance is the first eye-catcher every visitor spots with the very first steps to the centre. Gruyo is the most amusing and interactive creature in the centre. As a result of his encounters with poachers, he lost a part of the wing. The bird will stay at the centre forever, he needs medical observation and special treatment.

Expressing his emotions with funny sounds and movements, Gruyo busily approaches every person entering his area. The daily interaction

with volunteer Stilian Atanasov is one of the favourite activities of the bird. The pelican enjoys eating from the boy's hands and playing with him.

Stilian has been volunteering with the centre for over three years. The pelican's peer, a 17-year-old volunteer is finishing school and thinking of devoting his future career to animals. With his volunteering, he wants to support birds and, at the same time, to appeal to people to be thoughtful of the species they live by.

Gruyo is the most distinguished favourite both with the visitors of the centres and with the adopters.

In contrast, the common raven with the original name Black Allo is the least popular choice of the adoption programme. Yet, it is another original bird at the Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Centre by Green Balkans. It is due to his exceptional friendliness.

While an amazed visitor is observing Gruyo, the sudden loud greeting 'Allo!' fascinates him by its peculiar sonority. In this way, the black raven attracts one's attention and triggers a friendly conversation. The bird immediately captures the interest, and while the guest is examining him, he produces the 'Allo' sound in many different ways changing the intonation and bows.

Similarly to Black Allo, three more permanent inhabitants of the centre – the Tawny Owl Chara, the Little Owl Blaga and the Common Buzzard Misho – also love to interact with people. Despite various disabilities, the feathered hosts frequently participate in cultural events outside the centre and gladly interact with children who learn about species conservation. One of the latest special missions for the three birds took place during celebrations of International Youth Day in August 2021. In a day, they interacted with dozens of people in the city centre. Some birds even travel around Bulgaria.

With three sections – a visiting area, rehabilitation and breeding – the centre is home to over 500 wild birds of 35 species. Some of them are temporary there and after treatment will be released, while others will stay there forever due to severe injuries.

The wounds are mainly caused by electrical shock from power lines, collisions with vehicles, habitat loss, and poaching.

All the permanent inhabitants of the centre have names. Because of the constant interaction with people, the behavioural patterns of the birds have changed significantly. Birds developed a great curiosity about people's activities. And the pink pelican Gruyo is the most vivid illustration.

The key facts about bird rehabilitation at the Centre

- 1000+ - the average number of feathered patients annually received for treatment
- 30 – 40 % of them are eventually successfully returned to their natural habitats
- 4 the most extinct species at the centre: different kinds of eagles, vultures, falcons, and pelicans

'We will send some of our birds to zoos across Europe, - says **Hristina Klisurova**, PR manager and vet. - Many of our pelicans, swans, storks and falcons have already found their new homes in Bulgarian, British and Czech zoos. And some European zoos send other birds to Bulgaria in the framework of restoration programmes. In this way, international collaboration helps to reintroduce extinct species in different places'.

5.2 How I adopted 4 wild birds

After meeting the two funny birds, I inquired the staff about the four birds I had adopted on the website of the centre. And then I had an impressive guided tour around the area.

The two of my adopted birds, owls, live in cages, and two others, a stork and heron, walk around a fenced area. While the owls are very calm, the stork has quite a quarrelsome personality. The bird is often engaged in arguments with other storks or herons. The heron, in contrast, is very shy and does not like to be in the public eye. The beautiful bird with blue plumage spends most time hiding somewhere, and its occasional appearances are very brief.

The chosen birds are my favourite species, and I picked them from the list of the adoption programme. The adoption scheme is a fundraising effort to treat ill animals and carry out conservation work to preserve extinct species.

Such symbolic adoption helps to provide birds with the necessary support needed in the result of habitat loss. And it is a mutually beneficial form of engagement with wildlife too. Birds get help, and their supporters find endless enjoyment and inspiration.

Hundreds of people from different countries have participated in the adoption programme of the centre; interestingly, the first adopters were inhabitants of the local orphan's home (Stara Zagora).

The most recent adopters of the Lesser kestrel were kindergarteners from Pomorie (Burgas region) who visited the bird at the end of 2021. The children donated funds to help raise the adopted bird and named it Detelina after the kindergarten they attend.

5.3 Witnessing bird operations

At first glimpse, the centre reminds a mix of lab and zoo. There are people in medical uniforms busy helping birds in cages and enclosures. With over 120 video cameras in the cages and the area, the birds' activities are always under scrutiny.

The bird caretaker **Dimitar Todorov** starts his working day with a careful analysis of the video data. It is followed by meals preparation for all the species and construction projects devoted to building artificial nests. The latter is one of the most essential tasks in the context of breeding programmes of species reintroduction.

Breeding projects are one of the specializations of the centre. They focus on such species as Bearded Vultures, Imperial eagles, Eurasian Black Vultures, Saker Falcons and Lesser Kestrels.

Now, the British and Bulgarian experts are reintroducing the Saker Falcon. By 2018 this species had virtually disappeared from Bulgaria.

Shortly, the experts will attach video trackers on the released birds to get more information about the species and increase public awareness of these beautiful birds.

The working day in the rehabilitation section begins with the medical examination of patients or operations of injured birds delivered by people who have found them across the country. On my visit, I witnessed two operations. The first one was the amputation of a wing of a falcon. The international team of vets from Bulgaria, Russia, and Portugal spent two hours treating the bird.

That day finished with the admission of a new patient, a Marsh Harrier, delivered from Varna. He has wing joint dislocation and will spend 2-3 weeks in the bandage.

The student of veterinary **Denitsa Petkova** is one of the drivers of the process and one of the youngest and the most active helpers to the birds. She performs most operations with different teams. The girl appreciates every opportunity to help birds and learns a lot through collaboration with foreign colleagues.

According to Dr **Rusko Petrov**, the Operations manager of the Wildlife Rescue Center and vet, people often find injured birds all over the country. And many regard feeding as the first aid. Frequently such 'help' is fatal. What is important to do first is to warm the bird. Then it is essential to contact the Centre as soon as an injured bird is spotted. And the specialists will provide the necessary help.

Conclusions

The chapter outlined important activities that allow to support activities related to the restoration of endangered bird species in Bulgaria – the adoption programme and educational activities by the Wildlife Rescue Centre in Stara Zagora.

Everyone can contribute to saving the Bulgarian biodiversity by simply visiting that unique place, volunteering and raising public awareness of the activities.

To prevent future losses of species from the Bulgarian fauna, it is very useful to understand how it happens and what we can do to avoid it. To ensure a mutually beneficial dialogue with the general public and attract more volunteers, the team of the Centre, in turn, can support the volunteers by mentioning their names in the news. In the digital age, it is important for the advancement of one's career, to be mentioned in different reliable sources.

One of the most active and youngest volunteers of the centre Stilian intends to work freelance. Thus, it would be a good idea to assist the boy and reflect his activities on the website of Green Balkans. It will help establish the volunteer's leadership and draw more public attention to the activities of the organization.

Whatever your level of knowledge about birds, consider visiting the centre and prepare yourself for an unforgettable experience by getting to know unique inhabitants and their lifestyles!



Additional Insights: Species restoration: Vultures in Sinite Kamani Nature Park

'To reintroduce an extinct species to the flora requires on average 20 years because the process consists of restoring the entire ecosystem, from grass and sheep to gophers, - says **Ivelin Ivanov**, the coordinator of the project The bright future for the Black Vulture in Bulgaria. - Additionally, the slow reproduction of some birds is another important factor. Vultures usually lay one-two eggs annually, and sometimes they 'skip' the year'.

The Bright Future for the Black Vulture LIFE14 NAT/BG/649 Project is a collaborative initiative of five partners from four countries – Green Balkans – Wildlife Rescue Centre, Stara Zagora and the Fund for Wild Flora and Fauna (Bulgaria), the Vulture Conservation Foundation (the Netherlands), Junta de Extremadura (Spain) and Euronatur (Germany).

Based on the import of Black Vultures from Spain, the species restoration in Bulgaria includes improving the nesting conditions and food source, supporting local livestock breeders, and limiting threats.

In general, there are four vulture species in Bulgaria: the Cinereous or Black Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), the Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), the Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) and the Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*). They play a vital role in the sanitary of nature by cleaning up carrion and preventing the spread of infection.

In Bulgaria, the species is most often can be spotted in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, The Vratsa Balkan Nature Reserve and the Sinite Kamani Nature Park.

In the Sinite Kamani Nature Park, visitors can see vultures soaring in the sky and birds living in huge cages. The cages serve as incubators and retirement home. Some birds will be released when they grow up, others will stay in the Park due to permanent disability.

Mass slaughter of birds

The 1970-80th marked the entire extinction of the four Vulture species in Bulgaria. People of different ages were engaged in the liquidation of the birds, from children to adults.

'My father told me when he was at school, together with classmates after lessons, they gathered in groups and organized a quest for the destruction of nests of birds of prey - crows, vultures..., - maintains Ivelin Ivanov.- But the most tragic human actions for birds turned out to be the widespread use of strychnine baits distributed for free among farmers'.

Vultures are sociable birds, and when they spot food, they first gather a large company of different vultures species in a radius of 50 km and only then set about eating. It is how we lost vulture populations across the country'.

The reasons for such atrocities were stereotypes that eagles, vultures and other birds of prey attacked sheep and other cattle. However, in contrast to eagles, vultures never hunt live cattle; they prefer carrion.

The successes in the Vulture restoration in Bulgaria

The new stage of vulture reintroduction to the Bulgarian fauna began in 2009. That year Bulgarian ornithologists brought the first pair of birds to the country. To make this momentous event happen, the team had spent over ten years preparing documentation and the ecosystem (the reintroduction of gophers, sheep and development of pastures).

- **The Griffon Vulture:** With over 100 nesting pairs, the Griffon Vulture is the most popular type of vulture in Bulgaria. The population of the Griffon Vulture in Bulgaria is continuing to grow thanks to the support of European partners. In November 2021, Green Balkans received three Griffon Vultures as a donation from the Dutch zoos. After quarantine, the birds will be transported to the aviary for adaptation in the 'Sinite Kamani' Nature Park.

- **The Bearded Vulture:** The species is considered extinct from Bulgaria. For the first time, a pair of bearded vultures hatched an egg in Bulgaria in 2016. At the beginning of 2022, one of the three couples at the Stara Zagora Wildlife Rescue Centre hatched two eggs, which is a unique occurrence. Usually, the birds lay one egg a year. For 15 years, Bulgaria has been on the waiting list for importing the species for mass restoration from Spain. This time has allowed preparing the whole ecosystem.
- **The Egyptian Vulture:** With the registered 25 pairs of Egyptian Vultures, Bulgaria hosts half of the Balkan population of the species (Northern Macedonia – 12, Albania 5, and Greece – 3). In 2019, two breeding pairs for the first time for over two decades had four hatchings in Bulgaria, two of which were released in the wild. The species is being introduced in Bulgaria thanks to the Prague Zoo.
- **The Black Vulture:** It is an extinct species. Bulgaria began reintroducing the Black Vulture about two years ago. In 2021, a baby Vulture was hatched in Bulgaria for the first time in 28 years. This type of Vulture is the rarest Vulture species in Bulgaria.

Chapter 6 Durankulak Bird Ringing Camp: Sunrises



The Durankulak Bird Ringing Camp



Where: Durankulak Lake, Northeastern Bulgaria.

When: from August to October.

Key features: camping, volunteering, bird ringing.

For whom: family-friendly.

How to subscribe: the exact dates are available from July on the Durankulak Bird Ringing Camp Facebook.



Introduction

The Durankulak Bird Ringing Camp is a 5-year-old scientific study and international collaborative project. It is considered the largest citizen science project in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian side is represented by the four partners: the National Museum of Natural History and the Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research (both are by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), Balkani Wildlife Society, and Branta Birding Lodge & Conservation Centre. The international partner is Dutch bird ringer Patrick Bergkamp who provided the equipment for the research.

The project was launched in 2019. It aims to study autumn bird migration by Durankulak Lake for five years to obtain reliable insights into birds species and their migration patterns. The research station is in the northeast of Bulgaria near the town of Shabla, about 6 km from the Bulgarian-Romanian border. The camp functions from 15 August and 31 October. During this time, volunteers can subscribe for short or long shifts to assist the ornithologists.

In this chapter, I shared my volunteer experience at Durankulak 2021 in August 2021 and examples of my teammates. The provided insights show the diversity of learning opportunities in an original project where people interact with birds.

I used the idea of sunrises in this section to highlight the importance of respecting birds' timing which represents essential guidance in this study.

In contrast, to the other projects of this book, the Durankulak Bird Ringing Camp is situated quite far from populated area. Thus, special attention is to the participation of different age categories of birders, from 7 to 50+. I believe it will help future participants to make the right choice regarding their participation and life at the campsite. Additional Insights offer two useful tools for identification of birds by appearance and by sound. One of the most complex tasks for volunteers at the Camp is to record the birds' species in Latin. So, it will be very beneficial to learn at least the TOP 10 birds before coming to the Camp.

6.1 The caught birds, photo sessions and the ethics

'The bird must not be passed from hands to hands to be held by everyone. No more than two people should interact with it', - holds the Handbook of bird ringing at Durankulak 2021. All the volunteers receive the manual several weeks before coming to the place.

In this way, one of the regulations imposes limitations on the favourite for every volunteer activity – extensive contacts with the caught birds followed by a photo session of all the stages of the research, from capturing to releasing.

'We want our volunteers to understand the seriousness of the activities they participate in, so we provide them with a detailed guideline and expect them to learn all its 83 rules', - highlights the importance of the instructions Petar Shurulinkov, the coordinator of the project.

It all begins at dawn. The ornithologists with volunteers set meshes in two different places, close to the sea and the lake. To lure more birds, the teams leave on recorded bird singing.

The Handbook prescribes two catches a day, from the sunrise to 11.30 am and from 6 pm to the twilight. It is essential to stick to these timelines and never leave birds in the meshes during the hottest hours and, consequently, reduce the deaths rate of the birds.

When holding a caught bird in the palm, there is an overwhelming desire to explore it. They all are absolutely sweet! However, it is a great shock for the captured birds that may cause injuries or sudden death. Thus, the manipulations with feathered objects of study should be limited to the essential scientific manipulations. Recording the type of species, taking measurements, weighing, putting a ring with a number and releasing the bird are the main procedures. It is followed by another unwritten rule - to develop some inner ethics when dealing with captured birds.

6.2 Delayed flight

On average, in August, 200 birds are caught a day. After this, they are put in cotton bags or wooden boxes where they wait for their turn to be inspected and ringed. During the most active stage of the autumn bird migration, the number can even rise twice.

Despite the repetitive sequence of scientific activities, the processes imply a rich diversity of birds' behaviours that depend on the species. Some birds after the release, do not hurry to fly away from the palm and sit on it for a few more seconds, others, the most curious ones, after all the procedures, spend all afternoon on the nearby tree observing the process of study with other birds. And such species as herons pose a genuine threat to people.

When got caught, with a sharp beak, they aim right in the eyes of the person. The most skillful and biggest attackers during my shift were little bitters. In contrast to many other species, they never gave up attempts to free themselves and cleverly changed the tactic.

At the end of the 5-year-long study, the researcher will have a great amount of reliable data on birds species, which they can use for other research projects of nature conservation. For any new scientific data to be reliable and approved by professionals, they should be collected for 3-5 years minimum.

6.3 Women and children in the ornithological world

'The prolonged nature of our activities and the necessity to work here in field conditions seriously restrict the participation of women in the camp', - points out **Girgina Daskalova**, a school teacher and ornithologist. Usually, female birders and children spend about one week at the research station Durankulak.

In contrast, male participants may spend there several months. Girgina makes an exemption to the rule because she supports her husband, Petar Shurulinkov, in all his activities. For their 11-year-old daughter, Antonia, ornithological vacations have become an entertaining pastime.

Surprisingly, there are no women ornithologists in the Bulgarian ornithological register. The main obstacle is quite a strict requirement - before the test, to spend the whole season working at the Camp or to collect those days during several autumn migrations.

'I treat this place as a special lab for learning, - says teacher of biology **Krasimira Koleva**. - And it is very beneficial to spend here at least several days. I brought with me a 9-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old son for a weekend. I want to show them good examples of people who work with birds. We learn a lot about local birds at home. And here, they have already released several species they know'.

The other two young volunteers were teenagers and experienced birders **Michail** (11) and **Alexander** (15) **Kaharkov**. The boys had already ringed birds in similar projects in Germany and Canada. Accompanied by their father **Anton**, the young birders wisely combined beach activities with bird ringing at Durankulak 2021. Their expertise allowed them to participate in all (!) the activities at the research station, from extracting birds from the meshes to recording the data. Very few adult volunteers could boast such skills and erudition.

Just for the first five days of our shift in the middle of August, we caught and registered over 1000 birds represented by 40 species. The most frequently met were the Western Yellow Wagtail and the Eurasian Reed Warbler. While the rarest species were the Eurasian Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*), the Moustached Warbler (*Acrocephalus melanopogon*), the European Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedula hypoleuca*), the Icterine Warbler (*Hippolais icterina*), the Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*), and the Eastern Olivaceous Warbler (*Hippolais pallida*).

We learned about that diversity with the help of our most professional companion volunteer **Nayden Chakarov**, a university professor who teaches ecology in Germany. During bird ringing, he took blood samples from some species for further analysis in Germany and collected information on the genetics of different species. At the same time, he told us interesting facts about the birds that he explored from childhood.

'Due to my inspiration for birds, I spent most of my childhood and youth at such birding camps, and they still attract me due to their multidimensional nature, - maintains Nayden. - First of all, I am happy to contribute to setting up the Camp and the long-lasting establishment of the project. Second, I appreciate links with nature, and last but not least, it is useful for my scientific activity'.

Conclusions

This section outlined the specific nature of the novel for Bulgaria scientific research in ornithology. It is a good chance for Bulgarian scientists to collect important data useful for many researchers globally. For ordinary citizens, the project also promises a once-in-a-lifetime experience - learning through the interaction with birds.

The free access allows the general public to join the team of scientists for learning and volunteering. Everyone can choose the best format for such collaboration. Although the necessity of working in field conditions may seem disadvantageous for participation in the project, its benefits definitely outweigh the shortcomings. Even those who do not have any previous experience can explore a new pastime - bird watching - by volunteering. And the necessity to get up at sunrise offers an additional bonus of enjoying gorgeous views.

Whatever knowledge of the birds' world you have, it is always beneficial to expand your expertise by exchanging ideas with professional and amateur birders and check your knowledge with online resources. Explore the Additional Insights for more details!



Additional Insights 5: Two useful online tools for identifying birds

For everyone who strives for constant development of personal knowledge and skills for exploring the birds world, it is useful to regularly check one's natural observations. In this box, I present two digital tools useful for birders, nature-lovers, travellers and those who want to know what kind of birds they have encountered.

1 Merlin Bird ID www.merlin.allaboutbirds.org is a free and world-largest identifier of birds for all levels of birders by the CornellLab. The principle is simple - to identify bird species by photo uploading the image and answering only three simple questions regarding the appearance of the bird. After that, the resource will offer a list of possible matches. You can choose the most suitable one. Additionally, one can find a free field bird guide. For improving their bird identification skills, birdwatchers should explore the website www.allaboutbirds.org too. There is plenty of articles, videos, and lots of practical materials about birding.

2 xeno-canto www.xeno-canto.org is an online resource devoted to bird sounds. The collected recordings are shared on the platform with aesthetical, educational, conservational and scientific purposes. People can listen to different sounds and download or upload those sound files. At the same time, the website functions as a good drill tool. With discussions on the forums, the users can train and improve their ability to recognize birds by singing. The resource has a collection of almost 675000 recordings by over 10 000 species.

Conclusions



According to Hippocrates, nature is the best healer. And connecting its healing capabilities with another principal idea of wholeness by the Greek physician, we can treat ourselves and then expand that treatment to the community we live in.

What distinguishes human beings from other living organisms is their symbolic capacity responsible for constructing social rules and values systems and creating cultural and social frameworks. Significance and meaningfulness are defined according to particular social and cultural contexts.

Thus, we can benefit more when we explore the significance of symbolic species and make the process part of our learning and entertainment. The comfortable format of conservation holidays offers a brilliant opportunity for supporting local species and habitats. For instance, simply by maintaining artificial islands, we can learn a lot about nature and, at the same time, have a great pastime.

As shown in the presented examples, collaborative learning is a crucial component at any stage of dealing with nature and the birds world. The Bulgarian eco-activists for over three decades have already established strong volunteer networks within the conservation vacations. Those projects represent promising perspectives for community regeneration. With many components (work, learning, entertainment), meaningful collaborations all centre around important symbols that feature the places.

With the new challenges posed by the pandemic, the Bulgarian volunteer community of the conservation vacations have good chances to expand their support further. It can be done by sharing the peer-to-peer learning experiences, involving more people in the conservation projects and introducing new learning projects based on participatory research methodologies.

In turn, these approaches will empower more people who may solve different local problems with 'bottom-up' community-based approaches and disseminate studies capable of potentially influencing new decisions of the 'top-down' organizational units.

For this to happen, different social groups should contribute to developing a new cultural diplomacy framework within which the society will accept the existent achievements and negotiate new plans.

At the same time, it is essential to support volunteers as well by activating the communication process between different stakeholder groups following systematic actions:

- **For environmental organizations**, it is essential to begin mentioning the names and contributions of the volunteers in their news and during promotional events. By doing this, they will provide their supporters with priceless social capital. Those links will significantly allow the volunteers to reinforce their portfolios. Employers usually make their choice after searching the information about the person on the internet. Environmental organizations need to consider this aspect and help volunteers establish a good reputation. There is also a need for more communication workshops for volunteers that will allow them to improve their digital skills and raise environmental awareness.
- **For volunteers**, it will be very useful to develop the new skills learned during conservation vacations. One can connect them with other competencies. The special emphasis should be on networking and mutual support online and offline. In this way, the volunteer network will grow based on the qualitative nodes. It will be beneficial for the organizations to provide more networking opportunities for the volunteers. This is the most potent promotional tool for any activity.
- **For NGOs / small businesses**, it would be highly advantageous to develop more collaboration with volunteers on personal grounds. For instance, to invite them to lecture or consult the company on environmental issues. These new practices will help to reinforce the prestige of volunteering in Bulgaria. For establishing more good standards, businesses can consider going with their staff on conservation volunteer vacations to learn and rest together.

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