



# Batumi, Georgia

There are many birds to admire on a trip to Batumi. For example, look up and marvel at the vast numbers of raptors migrating overhead

**D**espite from sounding like a destination in darkest deepest Congo, Batumi is in fact a resort city on the Black Sea coast of Georgia. Situated on the western side of the country and a short Honey Buzzard flight from neighbouring Turkey to the south, Batumi has an interesting history.

Formally under the control of Russia and latterly despot warlords, it is now the playground of oligarchs hell-bent on building yet more skyscraping hotels in this city of 155,000. Its geographical positioning is also perfect for observing transiting raptors from further north and east en route to their sub-Saharan wintering quarters. Indeed, between mid-August and the end of October in excess of one million raptors pass over the bird counting stations in the mountains surrounding Batumi, making the area one of the best places in the world to observe this kind of migration.

It is interesting to note that the migration over Batumi has only come to light to the wider world within the last 10 years. The main reason for this suppression was that back then the controlling warlords banned the use of binoculars in public places!

Of course, things are very different now. The city actively invites birders and the Batumi Raptor Count work closely with the

government in spreading the conservation message among both curious locals and the, fortunately, diminishing numbers of hunters. Despite being pretty built up, with construction increasing at a rate of knots, there are still a couple of birding sites not to be missed in the city.

## Coastal strip

The first is Batumi Seaside Park, as it is locally known. It's official name is Batumi Boulevard and is right in the heart of the downtown area starting at the Batumi State University, which is peppered with restaurants and usually teeming with day-trippers. Look beyond the humanity and you will find that it is a four-mile long coastal strip, dominated by pine trees and small bushes, running alongside a very pebbly beach. During autumn migration,

you may find Red-backed Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler lurking among the more regular Greenfinches, and Blue and Great Tits. Another warbler to look out for is the Mountain Chiffchaff. Imagine a brown-and-white Chiffchaff, with a prominent supercilium and furtive behaviour, and that's your Mountain Chiffy right there!

Indeed, Batumi Boulevard is not a bad place to be after a night of bad weather as, during the autumn, passerines like Red-breasted Flycatcher can sometimes be commonplace along with the occasional migrant Nightjar that can be found resting on the branches of trees. Set your scope up along the shore looking out to sea and you may be rewarded with sightings of Pallas's Gull and Yelkouan Shearwater. As ever, don't forget to look up because with the right wind conditions, you may witness harriers coming in low off the sea – there's a high probability for a gorgeous Pallid Harrier to drift through.

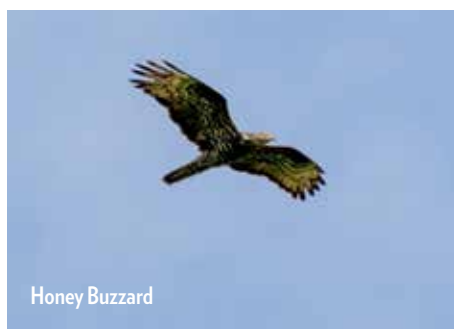


DAVID LINDO



Roller

DAVID FETTES



Honey Buzzard

DAVID LINDO



Red-backed Shrike

DAVID LINDO

There is little doubt that the best place to be urban birding in and around the city is within the mouth of the Chorokhi Delta on the south-west outskirts of the city, very close to Batumi Airport. It is generally a brilliant spot for birding and, during the autumn, it can be a very exciting place to be. There are a variety of habitats to be found around the mouth of the River Chorokhi that flows into the Black Sea, including scrub, dry and wet grassland, marshland and the coast.

### Check carefully

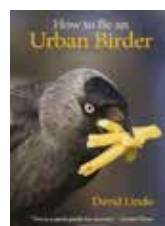
Expect anything and everything, from Booted and Barred Warblers skulking in the coastal brambles to Redstart, Red-backed Shrike, Wryneck and Rose-coloured Starling. On the shoreline, watch out for roving flocks of Short-toed Lark, waders such as Broad-billed and Terek Sandpipers, plus check the Yellow-legged Gulls for possible Heuglin's and Caspian Gulls in their midst. In the marshy areas, be on the lookout for Little Crake, while Snipe, Green Sandpiper and Glossy Ibis will be more evident. Black-necked Grebe, Garganey and Ferruginous Duck can be looked for on any stretch of open water; while around the edges could be Purple Swampphen, Purple Heron, Citrine Wagtail with Moustached and Great Reed Warblers, possible in the riparian vegetation. The general shrubby wet meadows attract parties of Rollers, pipits and resting raptors, such as Lesser Spotted Eagle. This is just a tiny selection of the birds that could be found in this area.

The main chunk of the Chorokhi Delta is

largely on military land, meaning that hunters, who are prevalent throughout Georgia, are not welcomed. The coastal part of the Delta is easy to explore, especially at the eastern end that is effectively a continuation of the Batumi beach line. But, be careful when looking through the hinterland, and stick to the roads wherever possible because there is still a slight danger of unexploded landmines. Permits to gain entry to the Chorokhi Delta can be obtained from the tourist board.

As mentioned previously, Batumi is world famous for its raptor migration. A great place to witness it within the city limits is to stand on the elevated terrace of the 'Top Station', accessible by using the Argo Cable Car. While indulging in tea and the wicked chocolate cake obtained from the ideally situated on-site café, you can enjoy views of the city and the Black Sea with the hordes of sightseers. If you look up, and the winds are right, you could witness spectacular raptor migration. Led by legions of Honey Buzzards also expect to see lots of Black Kites along with smaller numbers of Steppe Buzzards plus Levant and Eurasian Sparrowhawks. What a great way to end your stay!

David's latest book, *How To Be An Urban Birder*, is now available. Visit his website: [theurbanbirderworld.com](http://theurbanbirderworld.com)



## KEY SPECIES

### PALLID HARRIER

Once upon a time, the Pallid Harrier was a mystical bird that UK birders dreamt about seeing. Now, thanks to their range expanding westwards, Pallid Harrier sightings have increased phenomenally and it probably won't be long before they are classed as scarce migrants.

Smaller and daintier than the Hen Harrier, the Pallid was historically a denizen of the southern parts of Eastern Europe and into Central Asia, wintering in India and southeast Asia. Its flight is more graceful than the Montagu's Harrier, although, despite this, females and immature birds can be tricky to identify for the unwary. In Batumi, come September, it is more likely to be seen than the more numerous Montagu's Harriers that mostly pass through earlier in the season.



NATURE PHOTOGRAPHERS LTD/ALAMY

### DAVID SAYS

Get yourself to Batumi to wonder at the wondrous migrations – then tell all your friends to go!

### Thanks to:

- The folks at Batumi Raptor Count for the original invitation – especially Johannes Jansen.
- If you would like to support their work or volunteer contact them at [batumiraptorcount.org](http://batumiraptorcount.org)
- Department of Tourism & Resorts of Ajara Autonomous Republic – especially Tinatin Zoidze and Nino Devadze. [gobatumi.com](http://gobatumi.com)
- Additional information was supplied by Alexander Rukhaia.

## MORE ABOUT BIRDING IN BATUMI

- The people at Batumi Raptor Count would be more than happy to point you in the right direction.

Reference guides:

- Collins Bird Guide: Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney & Dan Zetterström. 