

# The Urban Birder

White-tailed Eagles and massive Long-eared Owl roosts - in the city? David Lindo just can't resist...



Love it or hate it, Facebook and other social networking sites have done a lot to break down international barriers. In an instant you can find yourself communicating with people from far-flung places around the globe – people that you would never have come across in real life. As I glance through the list of my Facebook birding friends at least 75% are still unknown to me, a few others I have got to know in a virtual sense and the tiny remainder consist of people I have actually met. One person that came through all three stages was Serbian fellow Facebooker, Dragan Simic, who sent me a message out of the blue inviting me to Belgrade for some urban birding. I paused for thought as the city was certainly on my radar. I didn't really know too much about the birds I could expect to see but I had heard a fable about an amazing winter Long-eared Owl city roost that numbered hundreds. It had all the hallmarks of a great urban birding venue. I had to investigate.

Within two months of that fateful internet conversation I was on a plane heading for the 'White City' of Belgrade. Situated on the confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers where the Pannonian Plain meets the Balkans, its location sounded magical. Having left a decidedly chilly autumnal London a couple of hours previously the first thing that struck me when I got off the plane was the heat. It was surprisingly hot. The woolly hat and long coat that I was wearing had Dragan laughing when he met me. Serves me right for not checking the weather forecasts!

Dragan is an energetic and knowledgeable man who met with an unfortunate sports accident some years ago that left him permanently on crutches. Despite his disabilities, he is still able to drive around and never once complains about his predicament even though it means that he can't walk very far. I marvel at his courage. My short visit to the city began as soon as we started the drive through the busy charismatic streets of Old Belgrade to Kalemegdan, a fairly wooded park that contains a Turkish fortress that directly overlooks the confluence of the rivers.

Despite being late in the afternoon and sharing the park with everyone, his wife and dog we did manage to see several migrant Spotted Flycatchers hawking insects, and glimpsed a few Blackcaps too. At ground level were a variety of interesting animals including some nice looking lizards and plentiful Swallowtails, a butterfly I only rarely see in Norfolk.

## BELGRADE FACTFILE

**City species list:** c270 **Best site:** Kalemegdan

Many thanks to Dragan Simic

Liga za ornitolosku akciju Srbije

■ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Liga-za-ornitolosku-akciju-Srbije/337430923064>

■ David stayed at: Beograd Art Hotel

[www.belgradeearthotel.com](http://www.belgradeearthotel.com)

■ And flew with Whizz Air: [www.wizzair.com](http://www.wizzair.com)

■ Further information about Belgrade & Serbia:

[www.serbia-travel](http://www.serbia-travel)

*A flock of over 500 Common Cranes settled between some inner city tower blocks. Wow!*

Kalemegdan is certainly under-watched and I could see this site's potential for the early rising birder. Looking east across the confluence I saw the large and heavily wooded Great War Island that was once the home of a fairly large egret colony. Thankfully, these birds have relocated themselves at a nearby riparian wood and the island now boasts a winter roost of over 2,500 Pygmy Cormorant – a target bird for many British birders. Plus there are regular sightings of urban White-tailed Eagles there. An incongruous thought, surely?

Dragan had thoughtfully booked a short boat trip around the island. The evening light began to wane as we sat on the rickety craft navigating the circumference of the island. Black-headed Gulls abounded with the larger gulls equally assigned to being either Yellow-legged, Caspian or 'another big gull'. A solitary Common Buzzard drifted through the treetops to roost in the interior of the island just after we had discovered a couple of locally scarce Little Gulls that had secreted themselves among the throngs of their Black-headed cousins feeding over the river. Several bats, probably Noctules, hunted high over the trees like large hirundines. This all sounds rather romantic and idyllic, but when I looked at the river I was shocked at the amount of filth and garbage floating downstream. There is obviously a lot of education needed in this city to teach its populace the importance of conserving their environment.

The next morning saw me on top of USCE Tower watching for visible migration on a beautiful clear morning with 30 birders. We were on this well-placed office block over 400 feet above the city with unparalleled views of the confluence and the island. From this lofty perch the city looked green and wooded. This is a newly opened observation point that promises some great birds in future watches if the previous sightings of some good raptors are anything to go by. We were unlucky and didn't see much aside from the obligatory Caspian and Yellow-legged Gulls but it was great being up there.

I really enjoyed my impromptu Belgrade visit watching the default urban birds like Rooks, that seemed to be everywhere, a few Hooded Crows, eastern race Jackdaws and plenty of chirpy House Sparrows. Had I visited during summer I could have enjoyed delights like Golden Orioles and even Bee-eaters that breed within the city. Dragan told me a fantastic recent story concerning a flock of over 500 migrating Common Cranes that settled between some inner city tower blocks. Wow!

And as for the roosting multitudes of owls, that was true too. Belgrade clearly has a lot to offer. **EW**

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BELGRADE

Long-eared Owl  
Spotted Flycatcher  
Blackcaps  
Pygmy Cormorant  
White-tailed Eagle  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Buzzard  
Little Gulls  
Caspian Gull  
Yellow-legged Gull  
Rooks  
Hooded Crow  
Common Crane  
House Sparrow  
Golden Oriole  
Jackdaws  
Bee-eaters

USCE TOWER