



Birdwatching in Batumi





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The Department of Tourism and Resorts
of Adjara Autonomous Republic

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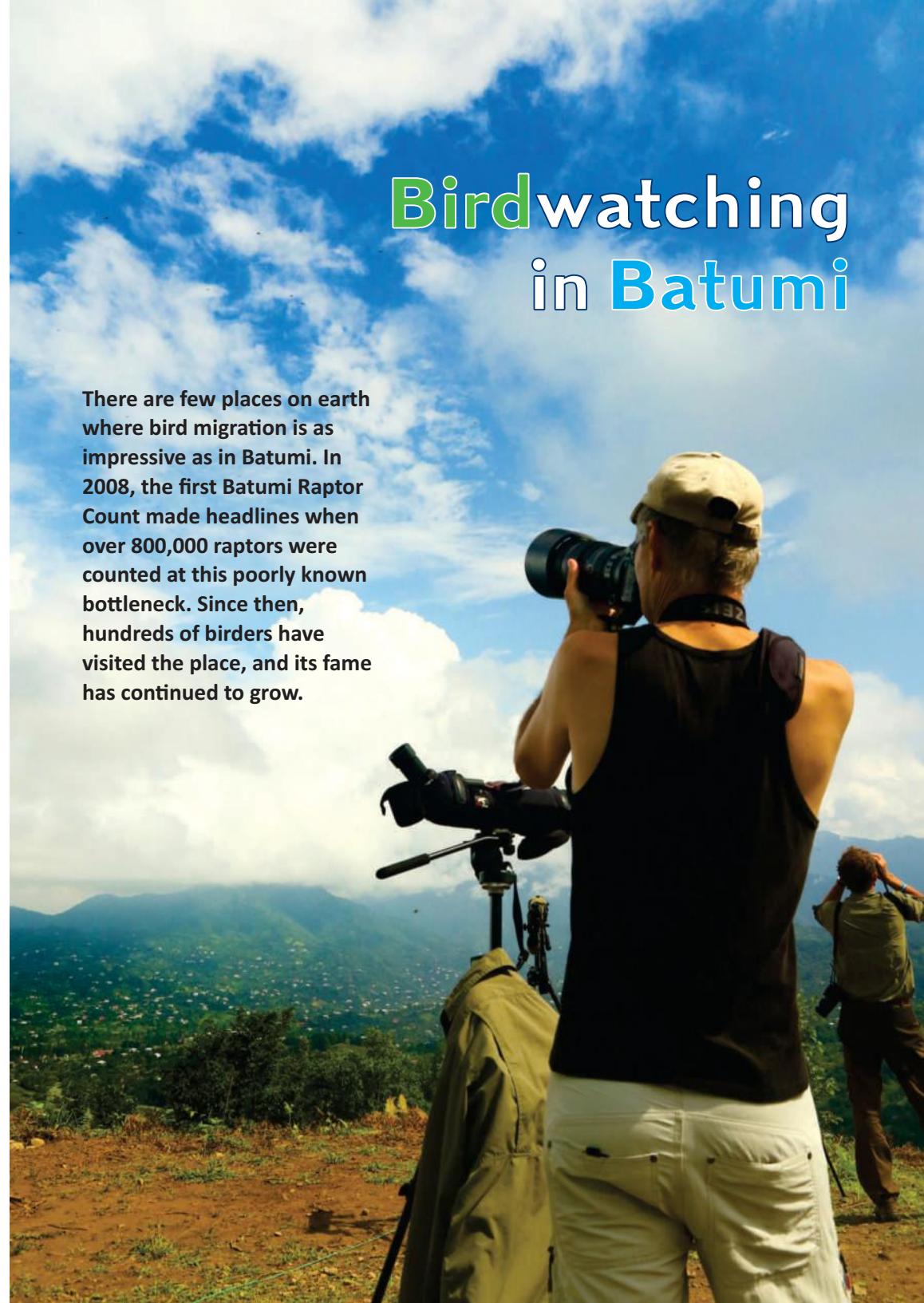


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There are few places on earth where bird migration is as impressive as in Batumi. In 2008, the first Batumi Raptor Count made headlines when over 800,000 raptors were counted at this poorly known bottleneck. Since then, hundreds of birders have visited the place, and its fame has continued to grow.



The first reason to visit Batumi is its stunning raptor migration. From late August to early October, thousands of raptors belonging to 32 species pass through a coastal strip of about 10km wide. Spring migration is equally impressive but has never been properly studied. For a detailed account of the raptor migration we invite you to visit the Batumi Raptor Count's website, but here are a few highlights which you should not miss:

1

Experience a 100,000+ raptor day. Your best chances are August 28 to September 4 (Honey-buzzard) and September 25 to October 2 (Steppe buzzard). Such top days usually occur after a period of bad weather in the bottleneck.

Enjoy the unique harrier migration. Batumi is the only place in the world where harriers migrate in large concentrations. Especially in early September, you can observe loose flocks of up to a thousand Harriers, mostly Montagu's and Marsh, but also good numbers of pallid, occasionally hen. Presumably, these come in from large roosts in the Kolkheti wetlands. Of particular interest are the dark morph Montagu's and marsh harriers which can sometimes be observed here. If you are into identification problems, then you are welcome to attend one of the BRC harrier ID sessions, held at the Batumi Birding visitor center.

2

3

Spot a crested honey buzzard. This rare migrant from Eastern Siberia is rather reliable in Batumi, peaking in the third week of September. Finding one is not easy though, because distinguishing features are often subtle and hybrids with European honey buzzards occur. However, you may be lucky to see a striking male, with its massive size and bold dark tail bar.



Marvel at the eagle migration. If you are around in late September – early October, spend some time on the Shuamta watchpoint, sometimes dubbed 'eagle mountain'. In the absence of a single predominant species, the eagle migration in Batumi is highly diverse. Booted eagle is most common, followed by lesser spotted, short-toed, steppe, greater spotted, imperial and white-tailed.

4



But Batumi is more than raptors alone. Frequent rains and thunderstorms take migrating passerines down, and the parks of Batumi can be heaving with birds. Skulking birds like Savi's warblers and corncrakes walk openly through the grass fields, looking for cover. Little bitterns end up in trees and red-breasted flycatchers in flowerpots outside restaurants. The city itself is a great place to go birding in rainy weather, and shelter with a coffee or beer is never far away.

Another must-see is the Chorokhi delta. This relatively small area is remarkably diverse in habitats and has an incredibly high turn-over of migrants. After a rainy night, the place is full of waders, terns, herons, passerines, and a long list of rarities that have turned up at the site. The total species count for the bottleneck currently stands at 235.

When to go?

The summer season is the busiest in Batumi. The Black Sea beaches draw a lot of tourists to the vibrant city of Batumi. But for birders, the high season is in autumn. From mid-August well into October, any multiple-day visit will result in good birding. In good weather, one of the watchpoints will result in visible migration of raptors, storks and other birds. If you are keen to witness one of the peak days, then you should time your visit to include the first days of September or the first days of October. The former is classically the peak migration of Honey-buzzard and Harriers (but it can be different with a couple of days), the latter is good for the steppe buzzard and eagle migration.

Spring can be very rewarding as well. A visit between the beginning of April and the end of May should result in stunning raptor migration, although numbers are not that high and constant as in autumn. You are likely to be treated with a nice diversity on a good day. Also, the migration through the area is enormous, and birds are at their finest, in breeding plumage. Imagine a fall of Black-headed buntings.

Winter birding should not be underestimated, as the southern Black-sea shores and wetlands are an important wintering area for waterfowl, divers and gulls.

Raptor watchpoint Sakhalvasho

The hilltop of Sakhalvasho is an amazing place. It offers a stunning panorama over both Batumi city and the foothills of Kobuleti. It overlooks the sea and the botanical garden on one side, and Mtrala national park on the other side. It has been Batumi Raptor Count's first count station since 2008. Its strategic location as the highest point in the landscape and exactly where the Colchis Mountains hit the sea, make this an exceptional place to watch raptors and other soaring birds migrating through the bottleneck at its narrowest point. With government support, the flattened hilltop now has a concrete shelter and platform, to serve as an excellent watchpoint. It is located within close reach of several guesthouses, but getting there requires an uphill walk of 10 to 15 minutes. Facilities on the watchpoint are basic but



include a toilet and shelter. Keep in mind that the sun can burn fiercely, while thunderstorms are frequent and can be dangerous.

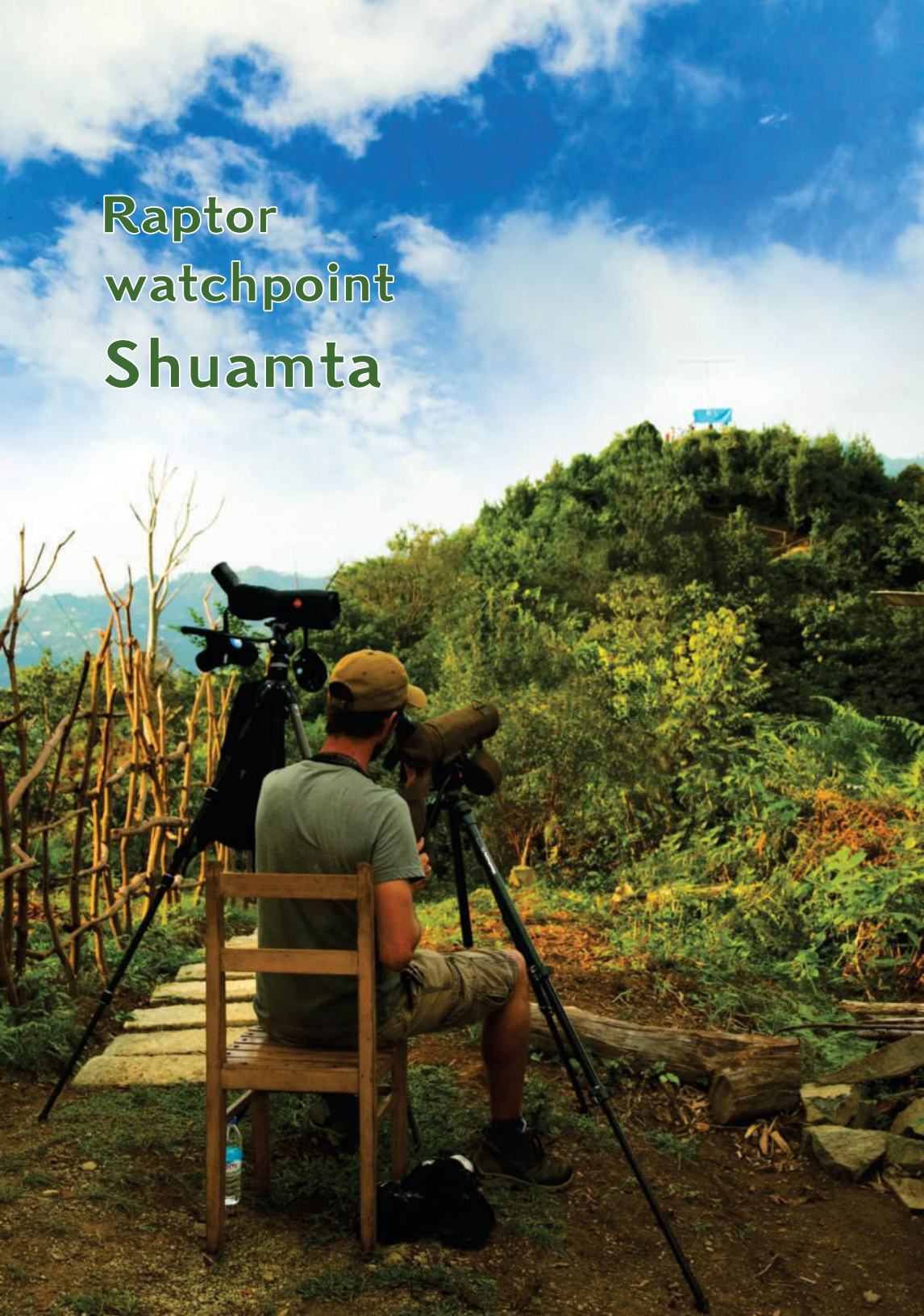
Throughout autumn, the migration here never fails to impress. In late August, the honey buzzard season starts, and most years see one or two 100,000+ days. Early in the season, it pays off to arrive around sunrise, when hundreds or thousands of harriers (mostly Montagu's and Marsh) pass through. From the second week of September onwards, the migration becomes more diverse, with more and more black kites and booted eagles joining the flocks, and Levant Sparrowhawk and Pallid Harrier adding spice to the mix. Very enjoyable are also the Bee-eaters, with thousands and thousands passing through, filling the sky with their purring sounds. You may be lucky to pick up a blue-cheeked, although this has proven easier in the nearby Chorokhi delta. And then there are the Rollers, displaying their colorful wings when flying over the count station in small flocks. The third week of September is the best time to see one of Batumi's main highlights: the Crested Honey-buzzard. This rare migrant from east Siberia passes through Batumi in small numbers, and with some luck and the assistance of skilled BRC counters, you may be able to pick one out of the never-ending streams.



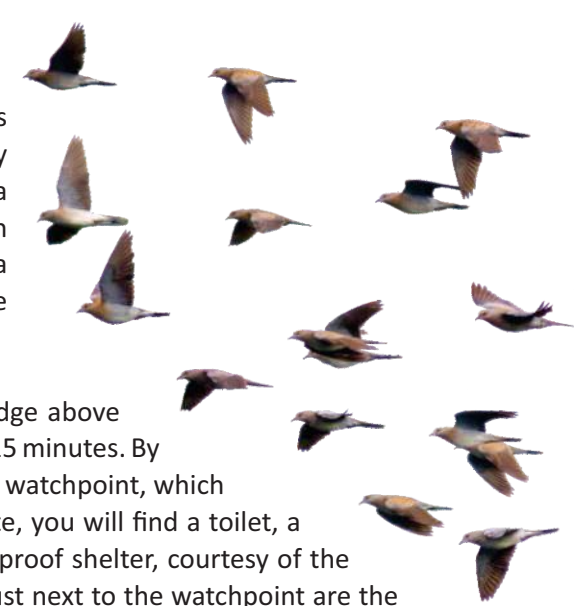
Later September brings a very different migration. There are still some honey buzzards around, mostly juveniles, and black kite and booted eagle are still numerous. But the bulk of the migration is now made up of steppe buzzards and eagles. At this time of the year, it is recommended to spend some time on the Shuamta station, which is better for those species with a more eastern migration route, but Sakhalvasho also has some specialties. Red-footed Falcon is almost exclusively seen here. Its numbers are highly unpredictable and very weather dependent, but in some years several thousand have come through on a single day.

A particularly nice aspect of the watchpoint is its social side. Here you will meet birders from all over Europe, and the raptor counters of the BRC, who are extremely skilled at picking up the elusive crested honey buzzard or determining the age and sex of an eagle. The raptor count has been taking place for almost a decennium now and has much increased our insight in the eastern Black Sea flyway.

Raptor watchpoint Shuamta



Shuamta, the Batumi Raptor Count's second count station, is remarkably different from Sakhalvasho. After a 30 minute drive over a gravel road in pretty bad condition, you arrive in a tiny village in the middle of the forested hills.



The watchpoint is situated on a ridge above the village, a walk of another 10 to 15 minutes. By 4x4 you can get much closer to the watchpoint, which reduces the walk by half. At the site, you will find a toilet, a watching platform and a lightning-proof shelter, courtesy of the Department of Tourism of Ajara. Just next to the watchpoint are the remains of an ancient monastery, of which hardly anything is visible, but it still forms a great place to pitch your tent.


The migration here is rather different from Sakhalvasho, and this is usually a better place to stand from the second part of September onwards. Many of the eagles take a more eastern route and pass over this station in greater numbers. In late September- early October, you get a pretty balanced mixture of lesser spotted, greater spotted, steppe, short-toed and imperial eagles.

Around this time you may also be lucky to experience a 100,000+ steppe buzzard day. These often form huge 'kettles' above the mountains to the east, mixed with eagles, black storks, and black kites.

When the migration calms down for a moment, you can go for a stroll in the lush forests around. Although illegal logging in the 90s has done much damage and many of the larger oriental beech trees (*Fagus Orientalis*) have been removed, the native vegetation around this place is still pretty impressive.

Trails lead towards the top of Mtirala Mountain, but many of these have become overgrown and can be hard to follow. Here you can spot white-winged, middle, lesser and greater spotted woodpecker, red-breasted flycatcher, and green warbler. And footprints of brown bear have been found even right on the count station.

Batumi Seaside parks



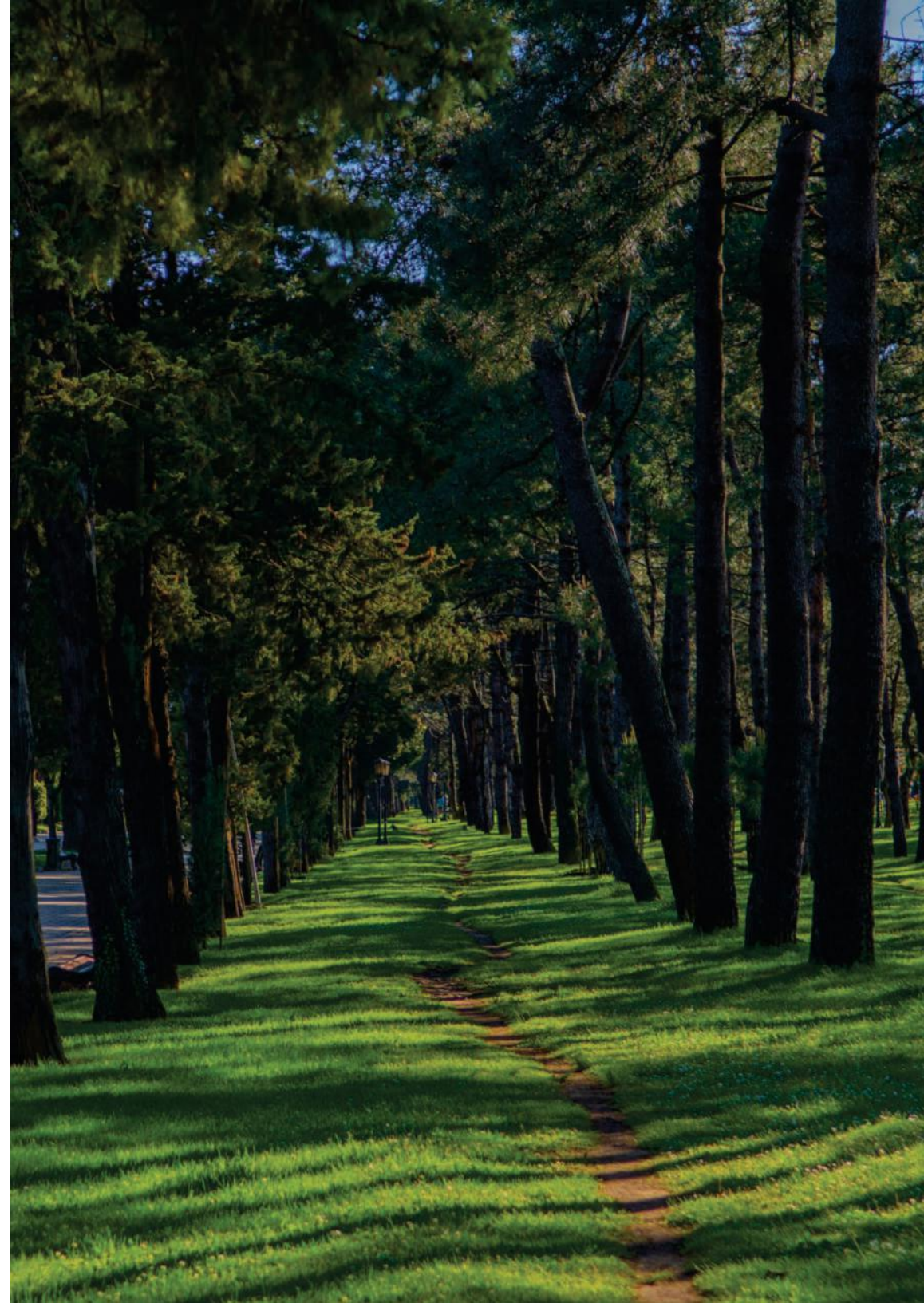
Apart from sunbathing and cocktail bars, the seacoast in and around Batumi also offers some good birding. The best areas are the Batumi boulevard park, some grassy parts of Batumi Harbor and the botanical garden. Especially on rainy days, these are good spots, because many migrants come down, and you are never far from a café when it starts pouring down.

Batumi itself has a very nice seaside boulevard and, next to it, a large grassy area that may disappear under construction in the future. The park, especially its north end, often teems with passerines, which are easy to find and observe. Red-breasted flycatchers can be superabundant, and thrush nightingales give very good views. Wrynecks, redstarts, green warblers, Caucasian chiffchaffs and spotted flycatchers are often numerous, and occasionally something rare turns up. Check the branches of the pines for sleeping nightjars and scops owls. Going further north, you will find a grassy area near the Ferris wheel. This is a really good spot for all sorts of migrants, and always worth checking even if you only have an hour or so. Typical birds here include Quail, Turtle Dove, Ortolan and Black-headed Bunting, Barred Warbler, Bluethroat, Great Reed Warbler, Savi's Warbler, Red-throated Pipit, Lesser Grey, and Red-backed Shrikes. But again, this is Batumi, and you should always be prepared for a surprise!

Because Batumi is located on a major migratory route the chances to see some rare or even vagrant species increase dramatically. High numbers of small passerines found at the seaside, the boulevard, in the city parks and in some areas around the port. The illumination attracts good numbers of birds migrating at night. Wherever you find a patch of trees or bushes along the coastline, you might encounter some splendid birds!

The most common passerine birds are Common Redstart (hundreds can be seen during a fall) and Reed Warbler. Good numbers of species such as Siberian Stonechat (especially ssp. *Variegata*), Whinchat, Northern Wheatear, Bluethroat, Sedge Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Red-backed Shrike, Ortolan Bunting... are observed regularly during the BRC project. Many so-called goodies are observed nearly every time and range throughout the entire spectrum of passerines including very approachable Wrynecks, Hoopoe, Isabelline Wheatear, Pied Wheatear, Barred Warblers, Olivaceous Warblers, Savi's Warbler, River Warblers, Paddyfield Warbler, Booted Warbler, Corn Bunting, Scarlet Rosefinch, Greater Reed Warbler, Lesser Grey Shrike ... Other records have been Stone Curlew, Short-Eared Owl, Eurasian Scops' Owl, Nightjar, lots of Quail and even one Dusky Warbler, one Yellow-browed Warbler, one Pallas Warbler and so on.

Especially after rainy nights, high amounts of passerines pause their migration and find shelter in the most absurd places. When rain continues throughout the day, also many migrating waders, ducks and seabirds can be seen easily from the shore. Observations have included the Arctic and Pomarine Skua, Yelkouan Shearwater, migrating Black-winged Pratincoles, up to 130 Red-necked Phalaropes ... In these weather conditions, rough seas often bring marine mammals close to shore as well providing good views of Common Dolphin (ssp. *ponticus*) and Harbour Porpoise.



Batumi Botanical Garden

The botanical garden is the best site near Batumi for Krueper's nuthatch. Check the pine trees along the asphalted road that leads towards the entrance of the garden, and listen out for its characteristic sound. Green Warbler and Caucasian Chiffchaff can be found.

After you have been birdwatching, you can celebrate your lifers with a fresh beer at one of the seaside cafes. This area also has some of the cleanest and most natural beaches near Batumi, which makes it a pleasant place for some relaxation. Moreover, the sea watching from one of the cafes on the beach, like those to the north of Makhinjauri train station, can be very rewarding on bad weather days.

Where the hills reach the shore, on top of the famous tunnel near Makhinjauri, Batumi's botanical garden stretches from the seaside all the way up towards raptor watchpoint Sakhalvasho. The botanical garden is well maintained with sections for every continent. It makes for a pleasant walk, and the place is good for both resident and migratory birds.



Chorokhi delta



The Chorokhi delta south of Batumi has proven to be an excellent spot for birdwatching due to its high variety in biotopes: bushes, dry & wet grassy plains, marshes, a boulder plain, the seashore... During migration season waders, terns and passerine birds proved to be the most interesting groups represented in the delta. In winter very high numbers of waterfowl can be expected in the area.

The marshes provide good views of Great Reed Warbler, Moustached Warbler, Squacco and Purple Heron (actually all the heronry you may expect), Purple Swamphen, Little Crake, Baillons Crake, Ferruginous Duck, White-winged Tern, and Whiskered Tern. Short-toed Lark, Lesser Grey Shrike, Tawny Pipit, Citrine Wagtail and small groups of Rose-coloured Starling have been but some of the interesting species regularly spotted on the delta's plains. Other fine observations included Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, Desert Wheatear, Siberian Stonechat, Caspian Stonechat (ssp. *Variegata*), Richard's and Red-throated Pipit and Calandra Lark...

At the seaside, Heuglin's, Slender-billed and Armenian Gull have been spotted joined by a good variety of tern including Little Tern, Gull-billed Tern, and Caspian Tern. Above all

this Arctic Skua was observed regularly and Yelkouan Shearwater amazed some lucky observers with splendid views from ridiculously close range.

Obviously, waders have been numerous as well, both in numbers as in diversity. Dunlin, Sanderling, Temminck's Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, Ruff and (Little-) Ringed Plover are seen often. The mudflats at the seaside are a reliable spot for Terek Sandpiper and Broad-billed Sandpiper with up to 10 individuals of either species observed in a single visit. Black-winged Pratincole visits the delta regularly, and in 2009 one day provided some lucky BRC participants with over 500 individuals of the species! One of the most extraordinary records, however, comes from Sociable Lapwing. In September 2009 a group of 20 birds was discovered flying by in the delta and later that week, another group of 11 birds was seen lingering on the rocky banks of the Chorokhi River! Quite a number of rarities have turned up in the delta already, both in spring and in autumn: a White-tailed Lapwing was first time recorded in 2012. In spring 2015 a Spur-winged plover was found. In autumn 2015 count volunteers found a stunning Black-capped Sparrow-lark.

Area under threat

All these numbers stress the importance of the area as a stopover-site for migratory birds. The delta has received the status of an IBA (important bird area) though still a lot of hunting activity is observed. In autumn tens of hunters roam the area. Regularly with casualties of birds as Black-winged Pratincole, Purple Heron, Great Bittern, Baillon's Crake...

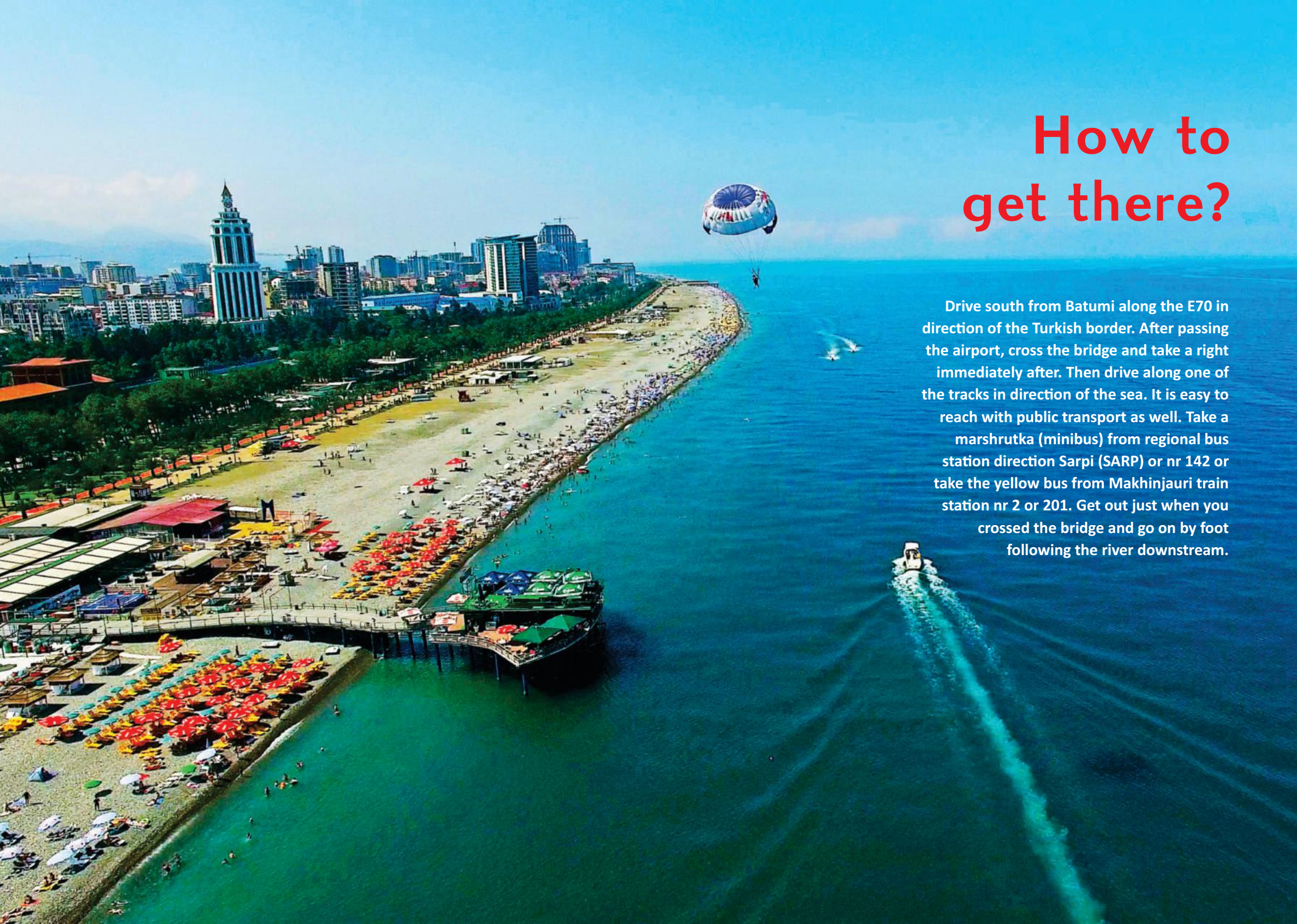
Clearly, in the perspective of observations such as the Sociable Lapwings, effective protection of waders and other birds is of the essence. The legal hunt on ducks and quail, however, is currently obscuring the actual activities going on in the delta.

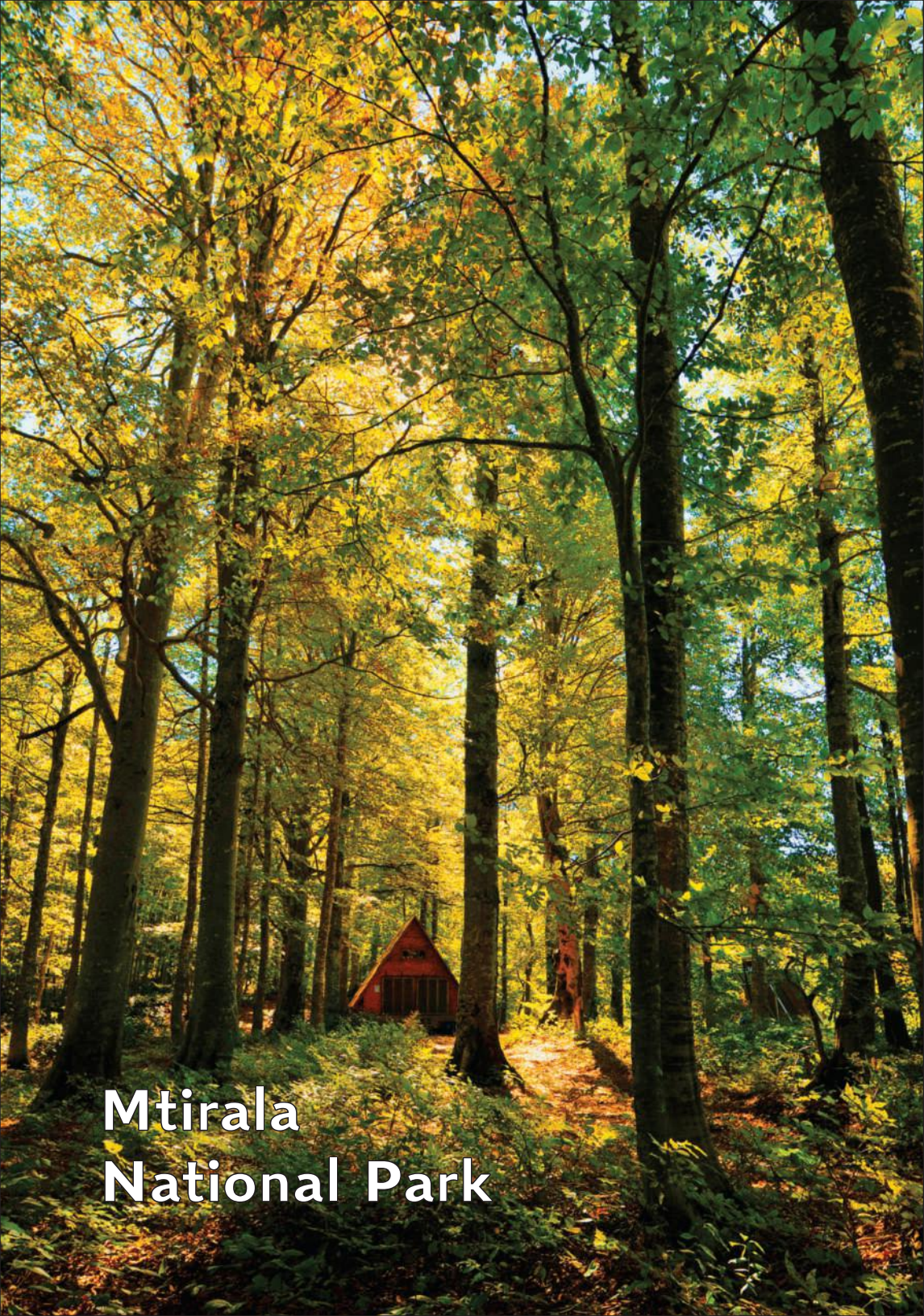


Additionally, the natural richness of the area is threatened by several other factors. There are plans to develop this area into a hotel or resort area, or a golf field. Plans are made to extend the Batumi Boulevard over the river mouth, making it the largest boulevard in the world.

How to get there?

Drive south from Batumi along the E70 in direction of the Turkish border. After passing the airport, cross the bridge and take a right immediately after. Then drive along one of the tracks in direction of the sea. It is easy to reach with public transport as well. Take a marshrutka (minibus) from regional bus station direction Sarpi (SARP) or nr 142 or take the yellow bus from Makhinjauri train station nr 2 or 201. Get out just when you crossed the bridge and go on by foot following the river downstream.





Mtirala National Park

Being situated in a Biodiversity Hotspot, the even more region-specific climate of Batumi further increases the potential to see some unique species in the area. Though most resident birds are widely distributed, a lot of regional subspecies are known. When it comes to endemics, especially plants provide botanists from all over the world a splendid time. The old grown forests of Mtirala National Park sport good forest bird species.



Mtirala literally means 'crying', which refers to the high annual rainfall in the park, exceeding 3,000mm in some parts. Here, the Lesser Caucasus mountain range is covered in lush beech and chestnut forests, with an understory of evergreen shrubs. The area is notably rich in Colchic endemics (the Colchis region is a forested strip along the East Black Sea Coast, running from East Turkey to the Russian Caucasus). Moreover, in May and late September, the mountains are covered in pink and yellow of flowering rhododendrons. This area is of the highest value for conservation as it is mainly determined by a relict Colchic flora and plays an important role in ecosystem services such as natural water resources and the prevention of erosion. The park provides nature enthusiasts with the best representation of what the natural condition of forests in the area looks like. The flora contains 16 species of endemic plants including 3 only occurring in the Adjara region. The Rhododendron vegetation is a particular highlight, whilst the Canopee is mainly characterized as either mixed broad-leaved Colchic, Chestnut or Beech forest, depending on soil type and altitude.

When it comes to wildlife, many species of (endemic) amphibians, reptiles and mammals occur in the park and the surrounding forests including Caucasian Viper and Toad, Lynx, Brown Bear ... Combined with a splendid traditional local background of the people, the park provides visitors with an example of world-class standard of nature conservation.

Greater, Middle and Little Spotted Woodpeckers are heard quite often whilst Black Woodpecker and especially White-backed Woodpecker prove harder to see. Migratory passerines can be seen foraging from tree to tree, including the common Spotted Flycatcher and Red-throated Flycatcher. Widespread residents displaying local varieties of the nominate plumage include Chaffinch, Jay and Long-tailed Tit. To a lesser extent, Tawny Owl can be heard and several records of Sombre Tit have occurred in the duration of the project. White-throated Dippers (ssp. Caucasus) are easily spotted on the large boulders lying in the mountain rivers. Whilst

exploring the mountains one would definitely see huge numbers of migrating or hunting Bee-eaters (their distinctive calls can be heard constantly in September) accompanied by some decent numbers of Roller, Crossbills, Siskin, Tawny Pipit and Ortolan Bunting.

Almost all European species of woodpecker can be found here: Greater, Middle, and Lesser Spotted, Green and Grey-headed, Black and White-backed. Late winter and early spring are the best seasons to find them. The woods also hold many red-breasted flycatchers and green warblers, while dippers and grey wagtails can be spotted along the Chakvistskali river. Of particular interest are several rare species of reptiles and amphibians that can be found inside the park: Caucasian salamander, Clark's Lizard and Caucasian viper. From March to June you should also keep your



eyes open for the Caucasian Festoon, a brightly colored butterfly which only occurs along the Eastern Black Sea coast.

In summer and early autumn, the forested mountains offer a welcome refreshment after the hot coastal lowlands. The river is always cold but excellent for swimming, particularly in a small, natural lake – which is a bit hard to find though. The small and authentic village of Chakvistavi has several restaurants that offer tasty local food and fresh drinks. You can also stay overnight in a local homestay and enjoy the quiet beauty of the mountains at night. The park offers about 15kms of trails, some of which are of moderate difficulty and involve a change of over 1000 meters of altitude, while those along the river are easy and allow a leisurely walk.

