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

Despite 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.
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.

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.

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
- Department of Tourism & Resorts of Ajara Autonomous Republic – especially Tinatin Zoidze and Nino Devadze. 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: