

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



ITALY'S APENNINES: Bears & Birds of Abruzzo NP

Monday 18th - Friday 22nd May 2015

Tour Participants: Conny Palm, Bill Elms and Chris and Pam Stafford

Leader: Chris Townend

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

White-backed Woodpecker: Seen on two different days with the best views on our last morning as a male performed beautifully in the morning sunshine.

Rock Partridge: Two birds seen very well in the nearby Velino Sirente region.

Red-footed Falcon: A feeding group of at least 15 birds on our first evening as we headed towards the Abruzzo NP entrance.

Honey Buzzard: A single bird was seen soaring just above the Difesa Forest.

Wild Boar: Almost daily encounters with the most memorable being a family group including 10 humbug piglets!

PLUS food, scenery, orchids and butterflies



This White-backed Woodpecker of the *Lilfordii* race was seen on two days

SUMMARY

The Abruzzo National Park , set in the heart of the Apennines in a protected area of around 400 Sq Km and only 2.5 hours drive from Rome. This tour is therefore perfect if you wish to extend your visit and either start or end the tour with a city break sight seeing in the wonderful city of Rome. We spent a total of 4 nights in the mountain town of Pescasseroli, in a lovely recently converted Guest House, just a stone's throw away from our main bear watching area! Sadly, this year we failed to see any bears for the first time since 2010 and strangely there were very few sightings during May, which is usually by far the best time to see bears. However, despite the disappointment of no bear sightings there was still plenty to see in Abruzzo. We enjoyed fantastic views of many other species including the Lilfordi race of White-backed Woodpecker and one of the Western Palearctic's harder to find species, the Rock Partridge. In addition to these two specialities we also saw Collared Flycatcher, Honey Buzzard, Golden Eagle a number of orchids and butterflies as well as great scenery; and of course great Italian food and wine!

Monday 18th May

Everyone met at Rome's Fiumicino airport and Chris then went to collect the minibus whilst the rest of the group relaxed and enjoyed a coffee.

We were packed and on the road by around 3pm and soon negotiating the busy Rome ring road and its associated interesting Italian school of drivers! Once away from the outskirts of the city, the habitat soon changed as we entered a lush green landscape of forested hills with small villages perched on the top. A brief stop en route allowed everyone to stretch their legs and have some lunch, but more importantly, it allowed everyone to see their first Italian Sparrows!

We headed on and soon passed Mount Velino, complete with snow capped peaks and before long we joined a minor road which passed through agricultural land. Here we were treated to a lovely group of at least 15 beautiful Red-footed Falcons hunting by the roadside and perching on nearby telegraph wires. The light was fantastic and we all watched them for a while as a group of three European Bee-Eaters flew overhead calling. A great short stop, but time was ticking so we continued our journey winding our way up into the Abruzzo National Park. It was a lovely bright, sunny evening and despite our slight delay at Rome's Fiumicino airport we had made good time, so we checked into our beautifully renovated guest house in the heart of the old town of Pescasseroli. Once settled in, we headed north up the beautiful Chiara valley to a site that is now becoming probably the most reliable place in the park to see the endemic race of European Brown Bear, the Marsican Bear.

Here we spent the evening scanning for Bears, but despite our best efforts no bears were visible, but a couple of Red Deer and a male Wild Boar started our mammal list off nicely along with a supporting cast of singing Common Cuckoos and Western Bonelli's Warblers. We then headed back into Pescasseroli and enjoyed a true feast of a meal with various local cheeses and meats and some lovely Italian puddings!

Tuesday 19th May

This morning we were up early and keen to return to our bear watching viewpoint. Once again it seemed as if it was going to be another clear and sunny day as we slowly drove the 15 minute journey. It was calm and though cold, it was surprisingly mild at 1,400M compared to previous visits. Chris (S) did very well indeed to locate a distant blob on a rock and soon had us all enjoying some great scope views of a perched immature Golden Eagle warming itself up in the early morning sunshine whilst we warmed up with a flask of coffee! Red Deer was the only mammal seen this morning but a singing Black Redstart, Western Bonelli's Warbler and the numerous Common Cuckoos were a welcome background noise before we headed off to try our luck at another nearby meadow. By now, we were all feeling the lovely warmth of the sun and the scenery was spectacular, as we watched a pair of beautiful Red-backed Shrikes that posed perfectly in the scope. A singing Corn Bunting was much appreciated and then Pam spotted a Red Fox on the distant hillside that gave a momentary panic of Wolf! A singing Woodlark was seen briefly before our stomachs began to remind us that breakfast was required! So we returned to our guesthouse and enjoyed plenty of caffeine and many other sweet Italian delights for breakfast.

After a short break, we then ventured out to the nearby Difesa Forest where we took a walk amongst the impressive dominant Beech Forest. A Common Firecrest performed exceptionally well as soon as we were out of the minibus and we then took a leisurely stroll up into the shaded forest. The birding was fairly quiet as the temperature was quite warm by now, but we soon arrived at an open meadow with a panoramic view and watched as the distant sky looked threatening in one direction, yet blue skies and sunshine in the opposite direction. We took time to enjoy the spectacular scenery as well as numerous butterflies including Dingy Skipper, Brimstone, Painted Lady and Clouded Yellow. Western Bonelli's Warblers played hide and seek in the blossoming trees and Common Redstart and Wood Warblers could be heard deep inside the forest. The highlight for many though was the Honey Buzzard that lifted out of the nearby forest in front of us and circled a couple of times before disappearing out of view. We then enjoyed a picnic lunch to the sight and sound of Cirl Buntings and Serins. After lunch, a slow drive of some weedy fields revealed some excellent views of Italian Sparrows, Tree Sparrows, Serins and a Short-toed Treecreeper on a fence post! We then returned to our guesthouse for a siesta before venturing out for another evening session searching for bears.

It was another warm, still evening and we all took our now familiar positions and carefully scanned the lush meadows below us. Pam tried her hardest by checking and double checking every vaguely bear shaped blob, but sadly once more we had to leave the site without any bear sightings. A check of the lower meadows en route to our guesthouse revealed a buck and doe Roe Deer and Wild Boar. We then returned to Pescasseroli and enjoyed another great Italian meal and wine before some well earned sleep!

Wednesday 20th May

This morning, it was our usual drill, up just after dawn and then up to the bear watchpoint. However we were distracted en route by a couple of large male Wild Boar thanks to Pam's sharp eyes and a number of Red Deer close to the roadside. At Gioia Vecchio there was more cloud cover but it was still pleasantly mild and all seemed very quiet, so after an hour of scanning and some rather strong coffee (without milk - sorry Pam!) we tried our luck at a couple of other valleys. Still no luck with bears but a singing Woodlark and a very showy Western Bonelli's Warbler were both much appreciated. A short walk in the forest near Pescasseroli was distinctly chilly as the sun had clearly not risen sufficiently yet. However, with a little perseverance we located at least three singing Wood Warblers and a rather brief call of what sounded like White-backed Woodpecker before we headed back to our guesthouse for breakfast.

After breakfast Chris (T) was keen that we returned to the meadow to check for the woodpecker that he had heard earlier in the morning. There was no obvious sight nor sound of any woodpeckers, so again we took a short walk into the now warmer Beech forest where bird activity had clearly increased. A Nuthatch and more Wood Warblers were the highlights but still no woodpeckers. We loitered a little in the meadow and enjoyed the warmth from the sunshine and then no question this time, as a calling White-backed Woodpecker flew overhead. We waited a little longer and it soon returned, this time with food and so was clearly feeding young somewhere. It was a very good flight view so we decided to leave the bird in peace and return to our guesthouse for a little siesta.

After a pleasant lunch at our guesthouse, we ventured north and out of the National Park and spent the afternoon exploring the Velino Sirente Natural Park with the key target being the very localised Rock Partridge. The park has a very different feel to Abruzzo being more rugged and less forested than the adjacent Abruzzo NP. As we slowly wound our way up various hairpin bends into Rock Partridge habitat an all too brief Golden Oriole flew across the road never to be seen again! We then arrived at our parking spot and continued on foot for around three kilometres until we reached prime Rock Partridge habitat. During the walk up we enjoyed numerous singing Common Nightingales and Common Whitethroats and then sat down overlooking a deep valley. Rock Partridge could clearly be heard calling, so now it was a just a simple case of locating one! We all carefully scanned the rocks and despite at least two or three calling birds it took a good twenty minutes or so to locate one. Everyone enjoyed some reasonable views in a scope as a bird sat very still on a rock whilst Chris (T) set everyone's scope up on the bird. Luckily it remained in situ for a good ten minutes allowing prolonged views. Then Pam spotted a great family group of Wild Boar including ten "Humbug Piglets!" It was another great spot from Pam and some fantastic views as they foraged on the steep grassy slope below us. Chris (S) particularly enjoyed the sighting as his thoughts turned to his passion for culinary delights! Red-billed Choughs called above as the sky looked rather threatening and a few raindrops appeared, so we slowly headed back down the hillside enjoying the numerous plants en route. Almost back at our vehicle, Chris (T) located a second calling Rock Partridge allowing some much closer

scope views as a bird posed beautifully on the top of a boulder. As usual though, time was passing and everyone was eager to return to Gioia Vecchio to maximise all chances of a bear sighting.

We arrived back at the viewpoint to find ourselves in the company of a small group of Italian bear enthusiasts as eager as us to witness the annual emergence of these wonderful animals. The earlier grey skies at Velino Sirente appeared to have vanished and it was another clear evening and despite the wind increasing a little, it was perfect. A Common Cuckoo was finally upgraded to the "seen" list thanks to Chris (S) and once more we all tried very hard to find a bear but frustratingly, it was not to be our night. A final check of the lower meadows produced a couple of Wild Boar including a large male that quickened the heart rate in the gloom(!) and a Brown Hare was seen running up a roadside bank before we returned to Pescasseroli for dinner. A new choice of restaurant this evening made for a pleasant change and as always, the food, wine and hospitality were first class before our heads hit the pillow with ease.

Thursday 21st May

Today was our last full day and the pressure was on to locate our elusive furry friend! Once again, we left the guest house at dawn to find it was raining. As we approached Gioia Vecchio it was immediately apparent that it was going to be a soggy morning! The wind was strong and gusty and likened more to that of good seawatching weather by Conny! The coffee and snacks eased the less favourable weather and despite the rain, visibility was still good so we all toughed it out for an hour or so and then checked a couple of our usual other spots. Unsurprisingly, sightings of wildlife were limited, so we returned to the warmth of our guesthouse and all enjoyed a pre-breakfast siesta hoping the weather would break later in the morning.

After yet another Italian feast of a breakfast along with much needed tea and coffee, we ventured back out and returned to the Difesa Forest. Here, we enjoyed a good walk on one of the main trails and before long the sunshine was out and bird activity was high. A singing Hoopoe welcomed us as it perched at the very top of a dead tree and Bullfinches and Common Redstarts were also easily seen. Further along the trail a calling Wood Warbler showed well and then Chris (T) alerted everyone to the simple but soothing song of a Collared Flycatcher. The bird was typically sang in the very tops of the Beech trees and was exceedingly restless and somewhat frustrating to get a good view of. However, with patience everyone managed a reasonable view and we continued on our trail and took time to enjoy the spectacular mountain glimpses that revealed themselves each time we passed an open area. A little further along the trail we had good views of Common Firecrest and the now familiar trill of the Wood Warbler song was almost continuous. We continued our route, passing some impressive limestone boulders and ferns in this pristine forest. Our final stop was marked by another singing male Collared Flycatcher which we watched for some time as it visited its nest. The views were much better than earlier and at eye level as this dapper black and white flycatcher busily sang and returned

to the nest with food. We then returned at a faster pace to our minibus, fuelled by the thought of lunch!

Lunch was enjoyed in the picturesque town of Barrea overlooking the beautiful Lagoa di Barrea complete with Blue Rock Thrush from the window! After lunch we watched a pair of these smart thrushes as they perched on nearby rooftops. A male Common Redstart performed exceptionally well by our minibus and a calling Wryneck refused to reveal itself. A quick check of the Lagoa added the all important waterbirds to our bird list with Mallard, Coot and a brief Great Crested Grebe. We then re-traced our route towards Pescasseroli, but making a couple of short stops to take in the hugely impressive La Camosciara mountains. Here, we carefully scanned the tops of the surrounding hillsides for Chamois but only Red Deer could be found along with a very distant soaring large falcon, most likely a Peregrine.

Once more, we then returned to our favoured bear scanning spot where, once again, we joined a number of keen Italian enthusiasts who all agreed that something "strange" was happening with the lack of bear sightings this year. We did not see any bears but had more some good views of a couple of Red Fox and a lone Wild Boar.

Friday 22nd May

Regardless of our bad luck in bear sightings, our positive group were determined to see it to the end as we returned to our usual watchpoint shortly after sunrise. Yet again, it was a perfect morning and great to be out in the wonderful Abruzzo landscape. After an hour or so of scanning, we tried a slightly different viewpoint and we all savoured the great views and enjoyed the orchids as well as a lone Glanville Fritillary before trying one last time for White-backed Woodpecker. We returned to the meadow where we had seen an adult feeding young and almost as soon as we arrived we could hear the adult calling and we soon located the bird. With a little patience, we were treated to some excellent views as a male bird showed superbly at the nest and we spent the next few minutes simply enjoying great views.

Back in Pescasseroli, we returned once more to our homely bed and breakfast and enjoyed our final breakfast before taking time to pack. We then said our goodbyes to Salvatore and slowly travelled back through the park where an inquisitive Red Fox distracted us by the roadside. The forested hillsides gradually disappeared and we were back to the motorway and the hustle and bustle of Rome. We arrived back at the airport where the tour ended and some of the group extended their stay for a city break in Rome.

Conservation Donation – Following the successful conclusion of this tour, a £120 donation from Wise Birding Holidays was made to Salviamo l'Orso: The Association for the Conservation of Marsican Bears. This is an independent group passionate about bears working working to raise awareness and ensure the Marsican Brown Bear does not become extinct. The Marsican Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos marsicanus*), with an estimated population of no more than 50 animals, is a highly threatened sub-species of the European Brown Bear and is restricted almost entirely to the wonderful Abruzzo NP in Italy. Our donation went directly to a new “**Bear Smart Community Project**” near Pettorano village, a territory between Abruzzo and the National Park of Majella. The project is focused on helping local people to co-exist with Bears through education, using electric fences and re-organising the village rubbish collecting system. Sadly, in 2014, a bear was shot just outside the village because it was visiting chicken coops, so clearly work still needs to be done in this region. More details can be found by following this link: <http://www.salviamolorso.it/?>



The beautiful Abruzzo NP



Male and female Red-footed Falcons
by tour participant Conny Palm



European Honey Buzzard



Western Bonelli's Warbler and Collared Flycatcher
by tour participant Conny Palm





The Difesa Beech Forest and Lago di Barrea





Burnt Tip Orchid and Glanville Fritillary





Rock Partridge and Wild Boar with piglets



Wise Birding Holidays Checklist:
ITALY: Abruzzo NP Checklist
Monday 18th Friday 22nd May 2015

#	BIRD SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Seen on Lago di Barrea on the 21st
2	Rock Partridge	<i>Alectoris graeca</i>	Two birds seen well in Sirente Velino Natural Park
3	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	A single bird seen on the 21st at Lago di Barrea
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Recorded on the first day only whilst travelling
5	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Excellent scope views of an imm. on our first morning in Abruzzo NP
6	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Recorded on four days
7	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	Great views of a single bird soaring closely on the 19th
8	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	A single was seen by Chris only on the 19th
9	Red-footed Falcon	<i>Falco vespertinus</i>	A wonderful group of 15 birds seen very well on the 18th
10	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Recorded at Lago di Barrea on 21st
11	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	Recorded on two days
12	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Recorded on four days
13	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Recorded on four days
14	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Recorded on two days
15	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	A familiar sound of the NP and recorded on four days
16	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	Recorded on three days
17	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	A single bird on the 21st
18	European Bee-Eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	At least 3 birds flew overhead whilst watching RF Falcons on the 18th

#	BIRD SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
19	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	A bird heard calling on the 19th
20	White-backed (Lilford's) Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos lilfordi</i>	Superb views of an adult male feeding young on 20th and 21st
21	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	Recorded on two days
22	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	Recorded on three days
23	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>	Recorded on three days
24	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Recorded on four days
25	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	Recorded on three days
26	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Recorded on three days
27	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Recorded on three days
28	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	Recorded on four days
29	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	Recorded on three days
30	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	A regular wake up call at our accommodation. Recorded on four days
31	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	Recorded on two days
32	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	Recorded on two days
33	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	Recorded on three days
34	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Recorded on four days
35	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	A pair of birds seen very well at Barrea
36	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	Recorded on four days
37	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	Recorded on two days
38	Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>	A common species in the Beech forests and recorded on three days
39	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>	A common species recorded on four days and seen very well
40	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Recorded on four days

#	BIRD SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
41	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	Recorded on three days
42	Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Recorded on four days
43	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	Recorded on the 20th
44	Collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>	Some great views of at least two males in the Difesa Forest on the 21st
45	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Recorded on four days
46	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	Recorded on two days
47	European Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	Recorded on two days
48	Marsh Tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>	Recorded on two days
49	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	Recorded on two days
50	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	A bird heard on the 20th
51	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	A bird seen and heard on the 19th
52	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	Recorded on three days
53	Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Recorded on four days
54	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Recorded on the 20th
55	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	A noisy flock was heard whilst watching Rock Partridge at Sirente Velino
56	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>	Recorded on four days
57	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Recorded on the 20th
58	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Recorded on four days
59	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	A bird seen briefly in the Sirente Velino Natural Park
60	Italian Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus italiae</i>	Many opportunities to see this distinctive species/race recorded daily
61	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	A small group seen well on the 19th
62	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	

#	BIRD SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
63	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	Recorded on two days
64	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Recorded on four days
65	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Recorded on at least one day
66	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	Recorded on three days
67	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	Recorded on two days
68	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Recorded on four days
69	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	Recorded on two days
70	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	Recorded on three days
71	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	A singing male seen on the 19th
	MAMMAL SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Recorded on three days with a max. count of 2 animals
2	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Recorded on four days including adults & piglets and a max. count of 16
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Recorded on four days with a max. count of 54 animals on the 21st
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Recorded on two days with a max. count of 3
5	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	A single animal seen on the 20th

	BUTTERFLY/ ORCHIDS	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
1	Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>	-
2	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>	-
3	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	-
4	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	-
5	Glanville Fritillary	<i>Melitaea cinxia</i>	-
6	Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podalirius</i>	-
7	Dingy Skipper	<i>Erynnis tages</i>	-
8	Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>	-
1	Lady Orchid	<i>Orchis purpurea</i>	-
2	Burnt Tip Orchid	<i>Orchis ustulata</i>	-
3	Pyramidal Orchid	<i>Anacamptis pyramidalis</i>	-

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