



Central & Northern Italy

3rd – 6th May 2013

Participants: Josh Jones and Dan Pointon

Introduction

Italy is often disregarded as a ‘birdy’ country, with the destinations of Spain to the west and both Greece and Turkey to the east readily drawing greater numbers of visitors in search of quality Mediterranean birding. But, as our trip over the Early May Bank Holiday weekend demonstrated, Italy is not a country to pass upon lightly. A combination of forested hills, green meadows and snow-capped mountains makes much of the interior of the country quite beautiful and, given the unspoilt nature of the terrain and habitats found, many bird species that are declining (or missing altogether) in the UK are still pleasantly abundant.

The Abruzzo National Park is home to a critically endangered (yet unrecognised) subspecies of Brown Bear as well as a localized race of White-backed Woodpecker (*lilfordi*) and one of Europe’s true endemics – Rock Partridge. These, along with a handful of introduced and self-sustaining bird species in the north of the country (Sacred Ibis, Northern Bobwhite, Red-billed Leiothrix and Vinous-throated Parrotbill) provided us with plenty to go at during our three-day trip though, if all went to plan, we considered our schedule doable.

Logistics

Due to our planned itinerary and unpredictable flight prices, the logistics of our trip were a little more complicated than average. Flying with Ryanair from London Stansted, we flew to Pisa on the

Friday evening, returning from Milan Bergamo to Stansted late on the Monday for a cost of £131 each. We hired a car through [Vacation Cars](#), who organized a Fiat Punto with Avis for a total of £210 including one-way fee and young drivers' surcharge. Unfortunately, Avis went on to shaft my credit card for £60, claiming it as a "fuel charge" despite us returning the car with a full tank of diesel, with the money not yet recompensed by the time of writing. Diesel is considerably cheaper in Italy than unleaded fuel, costing around €1.60 per litre thus making it very slightly cheaper than in the UK.

Admittedly we avoided large cities during rush hour, but we found Italian roads to be excellent for driving – the general lack of cars on the roads at weekends and the comparatively fast speed restrictions ensure that long distance drives go reasonably quickly. However, be prepared to have your wallets stung by toll prices – for example, the drive from Pisa to Pescasseroli during the first night robbed us of €30 and we spent an estimated €90 over the entire trip!

Resources & Acknowledgements

With the trip tailored towards a handful of specific targets, we collated a fair amount of gen before travelling. Special thanks must go to Chris Townend of [Wise Birding Holidays](#) for his help with the bears and woodpeckers in Abruzzo. Both Lars Højmark Mortensen and Gordon Beck had independently travelled to the Milan area in the few weeks prior to our visit and were on hand to offer up-to-date information on the Category C species found in the area, while John Walshe also provided excellent directions for the Leiothrix at Lucca. Further thanks must go to Julien Mazenauer and Pierre-André Crochet for information on the Bobwhite site south of Malpensa airport and Chris Batty for helping us with Rock Partridge directions, while Richard Bonser's trip reports from [April 2006](#), [May 2006](#) and [February 2009](#) were as instrumental as always.

In addition to the above, we used Luciano Ruggieri's *A Birdwatcher's Guide to Italy* which, though described elsewhere as 'excellent', we found to be somewhat vague in terms of both species to see and the site descriptions.

Finally, special thanks must go to Dan's Sat Nav for directing us around the country with exceptional accuracy. Though her pronunciation of Italian stradas ranged from questionable to downright ridiculous, the ability to direct to specific co-ordinates proved invaluable – particularly as Dan had forgotten to pack batteries for his GPS device.

Itinerary

As seems to be the norm on Western Palearctic birding trips involving Dan and myself, we managed to cover a ludicrous distance for such a short space of time – almost 2,000km to be precise!

Friday 3rd May evening flight from Stansted to Pisa. Brief touristic excursion to the Leaning Tower late evening before driving south overnight to the Abruzzo National Park.

Saturday 4th May dawn start at Gioia Vecchio watchpoint before spending the rest of the morning in the Difesa Forest, west of Pescasseroli. Early afternoon drive north to Rock Partridge site near

Aielli before returning south to Gioia Vecchio watchpoint early evening. Overnight in the car at Gioia Vecchio.

Sunday 5th May dawn start at Gioia Vecchio watchpoint before relocating to the Difesa Forest until mid-morning. Long drive (4.5 hours) north to Lucca for early afternoon before continuing north to Piemonte for early evening. Birding at Oldenico and Boschi del Ticino prior to dusk. Overnight in Vigevano.

Monday 6th May pre-dawn start at Boschi del Ticino before relocating to a site near Castano Primo mid-morning. Late morning and early afternoon spent at Brabbia Marshes prior to a drive in to the Alps north of Milan, where the mid-late afternoon spent birding along the northern ascent towards the San Marco Pass. Late evening flight back to Stansted from Bergamo.

DAILY DIARY

4th May

After an overnight drive from Pisa, we eventually arrived at the tiny village of Gioia Vecchio shortly after 04:00 to find a **Tawny Owl** calling in the churchyard. Settling down for little more than an hour's sleep, we were soon awoken by the dawn chorus and were struck by what an altogether richer (and more diverse) event it was than back home – testament to the unfortunate paucity of modern British birdlife. Most significant was the remarkable abundance of **Cuckoos** – their song was echoing around the valley as males busily zoomed about in the encroaching light. Expected Italian songsters were vocal: **Nightingales**, **Black Redstarts**, **Serins** and **Firecrests** were commonplace with the occasional burst of **Hoopoe** also greeting our ears. Unfortunately, despite the glorious morning, we didn't manage to see any Brown Bears by 07:00 – with the sun up and the temperature beginning to rise, we decided to leave and try again in the evening.

The town of Pescasseroli – a charming, rustic Italian settlement so typical of the area – was just a short drive south from Gioia Vecchio and we were soon parked up on the west side of town, adjacent to the foothills marking the beginning of the Difesa Forest – an extensive beech woodland interspersed with rolling alpine meadows. The quality of birding experienced on our walk up Pesco di Lordo complemented the idyllic scenery in which we found ourselves. Parking the car by the track at the foot of the valley at N41°47'52", E13°47'07", we soon heard calling **Wrynecks** and encountered the first of several **Red-backed Shrikes** in the more open areas. The woodland was resonating with the song of both **Western Bonelli's** and **Wood Warblers**, while **Redstarts**, **Firecrests** and **Hoopoes** were also noted along with **Spotted Flycatcher** and **Nuthatch**. The real stars, however, were the **Collared Flycatchers** – several singing males were heard at various points along the track, with one or two showing well with patience.

Despite extensive searching over the next five hours, we failed to locate any White-backed Woodpeckers up to 5km along the track from where we had parked. Though a disappointing outcome, it was difficult to feel too down in such a delightful setting – in addition to the woodland birds, the adjacent alpine meadows were littered with singing **Woodlarks**, **Wheatears**,

Yellowhammers and further **Wrynecks**, and we even managed to steal a half-hour nap in the warm morning sunshine.

Returning to Pescasseroli for a late lunch, we scored heavily in the form of freshly-baked pastries (both sweet and savoury) and enjoyed point-blank views of **Italian Sparrows** before hitting the road north with our next target in mind – it had been a tough morning with neither of our two primary objectives having shown themselves. The drive north to Aielli took no more than an hour and, by mid-afternoon, we were scanning the extensive scree slopes above the village. Fortunately it didn't take long for Dan to utter the shout I'd be hoping for, as I was rapidly becoming rather too distracted by a nearby carpet of orchids. He had been scanning the slopes when two **Rock Partridges** flew through his field of view and landed at the base of some nearby conifers; the not initially apparent, we soon located one of the birds showing well (if rather distantly) on the ground as it began to feed at the base of the tree.

Over the next hour or so, we enjoyed considerably closer views of a third **Rock Partridge** on the slopes surrounding the valley (see species notes for details) while at least two others were heard calling. A superb supporting cast of species around the slopes included a number of **Rock Thrushes**, **Red-backed Shrikes**, **Black Redstarts**, **Woodlark** and one each of **Stonechat** and **Whinchat**, while **Griffon Vultures** and **Choughs** floated about overhead and Dan also managed a single **Golden Eagle**.

With time pressing, we decided to head back south to Gioia Vecchio in order to spend the final few hours of the day searching for bears. By 19:30 a band of heavy cloud had rolled in – with rain clearly on the way and no bears showing, we decided to leave slightly before dusk and head back to Pescasseroli for some food – not before a fine **Wild Boar** gave excellent views in roadside meadows to the north of the town.

5th May

After another night in the car, it was a little depressing to be woken by the sound of heavy rain beating against the windscreen as dawn arrived. Forcing ourselves out of the car and in to the monsoon it didn't take long to get wet but, soon enough, an observant lady started to become quite animated as she pointed across the valley. Through the bins, two large brown lumps had wandered out from behind a belt of trees across the valley and, when the 'scope was trained on them, were quickly confirmed as two **Marsican Brown Bears** – a female and her (well grown) cub! Just brilliant! Though they would often disappear out of sight behind various bits of vegetation, we were able to enjoy some great (if relatively distant) views of the bears for the next 45 minutes or so and,



Orchis pauciflora above Aielli

incredibly, a third (presumed male) animal also appeared! It was fantastic to watch the three interacting; the cub inquisitive, the mother evidently nervous and the newcomer altogether more assertive and dominant. We left the watchpoint at around 07:00, with all three still on view.

Pumped full of enthusiasm following the fantastic start to the day, we headed back to Pesco di Lordo for another crack at White-backed Woodpeckers. This time we drove approximately 5km up the track from the start of the valley, stopping only when a melting snowdrift blocked the way. Alas, despite searching extensively at higher altitude than the day previous, we failed to locate any woodpeckers by mid-morning and, with a long day of driving ahead, we decided to give up on the species. A similar range of birds to those seen on Saturday were again headlined by a few singing **Collared Flycatchers**, although two female **Golden Orioles** flying over were new for the trip.

The drive north to Tuscany was a long one, punctuated only by a singing male **Western Subalpine Warbler** and **Marsican Iris** just north of Gioia Vecchio and a quick stop for fuel near Rome. Roadside birds included a **Green Woodpecker** northwest of Avezzano and the odd **Night Heron**, **Spoonbill** and **Yellow-legged Gull** along the A1. Eventually we arrived at the River Serchio in Lucca mid-afternoon and, walking along the riverside footpath, it didn't take us long to locate our first **Red-billed Leiothrix** skulking in dense scrub along the bank. Pishing seems to work very well with this species and we soon coaxed at least eight birds from the scrub; they really are inquisitive little birds and tended to sit out watching us, apparently quite bemused by our actions. Dan then located a smart male **Penduline Tit** feeding in willows along the river – the first either of us had seen outside of the UK! Several **Bee-eaters** were heard calling as they floated over, while both **Cetti's Warbler** and **Spotted Flycatcher** were also encountered in the vicinity.



Red-billed Leiothrix along the River Serchio, Lucca

Continuing north, we reached the village of Oldenico, Piemonte during the early evening. Setting up our telescopes on the riverbank just east of the cemetery, we soon located two **Sacred Ibis** flying distantly over fields as they headed to the riverside heronry to the south of the village. A further four birds were seen shortly afterwards, as was a **Squacco Heron** among the steady stream of **Night Herons**, **Cattle**, **Little** and **Great White Egrets** that were toing and froing from the colony. A male **Red-backed Shrike** performed well in scrub by the river while the fields were characterized by **Black-winged Stilts** and **Lapwings**.

With a little daylight left, we decided to head on to Boschi del Ticino on the off chance that we could see Northern Bobwhites before dark. Unfortunately, while en-route, the heavens began to open once more. Another **Sacred Ibis** was noted in roadside rice paddies between Novara and Vigevano and we also saw our only **Black-headed Gulls** of the trip here. A wander around the meadows and woodland edges at Boschi del Ticino failed to reveal any bobwhites in poor weather conditions – best birds were **Peregrine**, **Hobby** and the first **Pheasant** of the trip! Soaked through, we made our way in to Vigevano to find some accommodation and bite to eat – Dan managing to order (and subsequently demolish) a deep-fried calzone providing the evening’s amusement.

6th May

A pre-dawn start saw us back at Boschi del Ticino where, despite hacking our way through forest edges and splashing through the flooded meadows for four hours, we again drew a blank with Northern Bobwhite – in fact, no birds were even heard to sing during the time we spent on site. Fine consolation came in the form of four smart **Red-footed Falcons** (including a male) sat in dead trees above the swollen River Ticino, though they looked considerably hacked off with life in the heavily overcast and showery conditions. Also new for the trip was a singing male **Melodious Warbler**, while further birds in the area included **Golden Oriole**, **Tawny Owl**, **Sparrowhawk** and **Peregrine**. Six **Wild Boars** gave great views as they made their way across the flooded meadows early morning and, a little later on, I was left both unnerved and confused as a bush next to me suddenly grunted, shook violently and careered off deeper in to the undergrowth – it remains a mystery as to whether I had disturbed either a resting boar, or simply Dan offloading the previous evening’s calzone.

Though the bobwhites were, in Dan’s words, “rancid introduced quails”, we both felt somewhat deflated that this hard-to-see species had so far avoided us. While sat in the car wondering what to do, I suggested that we head for another site near Malpensa airport to try our luck there. Though it took some time to find the right place, it wasn’t long before we heard the distinctive song of a **Northern Bobwhite** emanating from the surrounding woodland. Dan had the fortune to almost tread on the bird and flush it and, in our subsequent search, we heard at least two further individuals, again flushing one of these from close range. After the pain of the previous evening and most of the morning, never had a Category C species generated such an emotive reaction from us both! The scrubby area also produced a **Red-backed Shrike** or two, while the adjacent reservoir held **Little** and **Great Crested Grebes**, **Coot** and plenty of hirundines. For information on how to find this site, see the species notes below.

Distinctly buoyed by our bobwhite success, we hit the road again in high spirits. Our next destination, via a bakery stop, was Palude Brabbia, a large marsh on the southwest side of Lake Varese. Accessing the marsh from the Inarzo entrance, we waded out towards the observation tower and soon heard our quarry – **Vinous-throated Parrotbills** – from deep within the phragmites. All in all, we heard and saw up to twenty individuals, though they proved restless in their movements and frightfully elusive. Altogether more confiding were a pair of **Black Woodpeckers** in the large willows along the drove beyond the bolted gate – though the species is apparently regular in winter here, we were told that is the first year that they have stayed on to breed. Further quality birds on and around the marsh included a fly-by **Ferruginous Duck**, a distant male **Red-footed Falcon**, **Purple Heron**, **Golden Oriole** and **Black Kite**.

Having connected with all of our primary targets and with much of the afternoon and evening still at our disposal, we decided to head up in the southernmost reaches of the Alps and search for Nutcrackers. Dan had identified the San Marco Pass as a promising area to try due to its relatively close proximity to Bergamo, where we were due to catch a flight back from that evening. Sure enough, once we reached suitable altitude where the road ascends through the conifer belt above the village of Albaredo, we soon located two **Nutcrackers** in roadside pine trees. Good numbers of **Crag Martins** were seen over the village itself while the odd **Redstart** could also be heard singing. All too soon, the evening was pressing and our fruitful long weekend in Italy was drawing to a close. The drive back south to Bergamo was uneventful and we arrived with plenty of time to spare before our late evening flight back to Stansted.



Alpine scenery on the San Marco Pass

Our trip clearly demonstrates that, if prepared to execute overnight drives and spend significant amounts of time on the road, combining central and northern Italy is a possibility in three days. However, both of us agreed that, if our trip hadn't been so list-orientated, we could easily have spent all of that time in Abruzzo alone!

SELECTED SPECIES NOTES

Sacred Ibis: an introduced species that is easy enough to see around the rice fields of Piemonte, particularly north of the town of Vercelli. We saw six birds (groups of four and two) distantly in flight as they headed towards the heronry along the River Sesia to the south of the village of Oldenico. We scanned from the river bank at N45°23'59", E08°23'28". From the main road in Oldenico, take the minor road east out of the village to the cemetery. Park in the cemetery car park and follow the track to the river bank and scan south – herons and egrets are constantly commuting to and from the heronry. The heronry is apparently in riverside trees and viewable from the track by walking south for up to a mile from our viewing location although, with restricted time, we settled for distant views from the co-ordinates above. A single ibis was also seen in flooded fields between Novara and Vigevano and, realistically, birds may be encountered in any of the suitable-looking fields in the region.

Rock Partridge: we observed three birds and heard at least two more on the scree slopes above Aielli, in the Province of L'Aquila. Thanks to Richard Bonser and Chris Batty for providing directions; the birds were found exactly where they recommended. If coming from Rome, turn off the A25 past Avezzano at the 'Aielli-Celano' junction. After passing through the toll booth, you reach a T-junction after a couple of hundred metres. Turn left here (i.e. the opposite way to Avezzano) and after about 500 hundred metres turn left again signed 'Aielli 6'. Follow this road, initially going under the A25 and then across a railway track, for 3km and you will reach the village of Aielli Stazione. After proceeding through the village (and ignoring any turn offs) head on for a further 2km until you reach a hairpin bend with a right-hand turn. Ignore the turn-off, veering left around this and, after about 300 metres, take the left turn on to a non-asphalt track opposite a brick bus shelter-like structure at N42°04'44", E13°35'22". Drive 4km along this track (carrying straight on at any cross roads) until you reach a gate with a cow sign and the notice 'Chi Apre-Chiuda Pascoli Custodia'. If not already open, open this gate, drive through it and continue driving uphill through a series of hairpins for a further 3.5km. We heard one partridge calling from the scree slope above the final hairpin, although we both saw and heard birds further up the track, after the left-hand bend where it leads in to a valley at N42°06'28", E13°35'34". Partridges tend to stick close to the conifer trees that sparsely populate the scree slopes here and can be surprisingly difficult to locate – plenty of patience may be required!

Northern Bobwhite: we tried unsuccessfully at the 'traditional' site of Boschi del Ticino (for directions see [Bonser's report](#)) on both Sunday evening and Monday morning – the extremely wet spring in Italy has left large expanses of the meadows and forest edges touted as hotspots for bobwhites in flood, and we suspected that any birds present would have moved elsewhere. However, we heard at least three singing males at a site WNW of Castano Primo and south of Malpensa airport. From Castano Primo, take the SP32 northwest and, after 1.5km, take the left hand turn on to a minor road at N45°33'54", E08°45'04". Take this for 1km until the road forks; keep right and continue 100m until the farmland opens up on the right-hand side and a track leads off to the right (north). Take this track around the eastern edge of the fields for 250m until you are close to an obvious raised bank. Park here and walk up on to the bank, following it north around the edge of a reservoir. At the northeast end of the reservoir (N45°33'51", E08°44'24") there are a couple of bridges leading over a flood relief channel. Walk westwards over these so that you are now on the raised bank on the north side of the reservoir but immediately south of a relief channel. Continue west for 300m to a bridge leading north over this channel. Walk north over this bridge and you will

see an open area of scrub immediately in front of you – Bobwhites can be anywhere in the scrub or adjacent woodland, and it is best to listen for their distinctive song before attempting to see one. Playback seems to work well in generating a response from the birds although they are almost impossible to see on the ground. Note that, like Quail, they tend not to flush until virtually under your feet – we eventually saw two birds in flight only.

Vinous-throated Parrotbill: this species was straightforward to find at Brabbia Marshes, and we saw at least 15 birds in the reedbed accessed the Inarzo entrance ('Site 1' in [Bonser 2009](#)) early afternoon on 6th. Most birds were located in the reeds just before the observation tower situated c.600m from the bolted door referred to in Bonser's directions – this is approximately N45°47'03", E08°42'55" and just beyond the last of the large trees along the ride. Though birds could be heard calling on arrival, playback worked extremely well in attracting them nearer to the path and we soon enjoyed excellent (but always obscured!) views as small flocks worked their way through the phragmites. Note that, as with Boschi del Ticino, the marsh was still extensively flooded with water depth approaching knee-height in some places along the ride, particularly further out towards the observation tower. As such, we strongly recommend combining shorts with a pair of crocs!

Red-billed Leiothrix: another introduced species that is easy enough to locate along the River Serchio just west of Lucca, Tuscany. To reach the site, leave the A11 at the 'Lucca Ovest' turn-off and take the road north in to town, continuing straight on over two roundabouts. After 1.5km you come to a third roundabout with a large Lidl supermarket on the left-hand side. Take the first exit at this roundabout (heading west) and continue along this straight road for 2km until you reach a bridge over the River Serchio. Just before the river (i.e. on the east side), there is a small car park just to the north of the road at N43°51'10", E10°27'02". Park here, cross the road and follow the riverside footpath south. Leiothrix can be found in the dense riverside scrub along this footpath – we enjoyed our best and most prolonged views (of up to six birds) in willows almost as far south as the main A11 road bridge. They proved extremely inquisitive and responded well to both pishing and playback, with pairs often sitting out and preening one another as well as giving their distinctly Blackcap-like song. John Walshe saw an impressive 50 birds here on a muggy day in September 2012 and thus the population must be quite large in the area.

Nutcracker: another relatively straightforward species to see in the southernmost reaches of the Alps; we enjoyed decent views of two birds on a speculative drive up the San Marco Pass. As one would expect in May, both birds were found in conifers above the deciduous tree line. The San Marco Pass is readily signposted from the town of Morbegno to the north and, although slow and winding, is pretty spectacular as it climbs through characteristic Alpine scenery. To reach a high enough altitude, continue the ascent through Albaredo village towards the pass itself – we saw a Nutcracker perched atop a tall pine by the road at N46°05'29", E09°37'02" with another seen a few hundred metres further up the valley. Note that, despite it being early May, the pass itself was actually closed for maintenance work – not only did we bypass the 'road closed' barrier, but also had to navigate around various snow drifts, mudslides and rather ominously-sized boulders that had evidently only recently tumbled on to the road in conjunction with spring melt!

Marsican Brown Bear: the churchyard at Gioia Vecchio is situated at N41°54'02", E13°43'59". Here, scan westwards across the valley to view the meadows, slopes and woodland edges where bears

may be seen anywhere. Our sightings were looking directly across the valley though they are also seen around the obvious gorge to the north. As bears can suddenly appear from anywhere (and disappear just as quickly!), continuous scanning is recommended. Early mornings and evenings are best for sightings.

TRIP LIST

1. Little Grebe
2. Great Crested Grebe
3. Cormorant
4. Grey Heron
5. Purple Heron
6. Great White Egret
7. Little Egret
8. Squacco Heron
9. Cattle Egret
10. Night Heron
11. Sacred Ibis
12. Spoonbill
13. Mute Swan
14. Gadwall
15. Mallard
16. Ferruginous Duck
17. Black Kite
18. Griffon Vulture
19. Marsh Harrier
20. Sparrowhawk
21. Buzzard
22. Golden Eagle
23. Kestrel
24. Red-footed Falcon
25. Hobby
26. Peregrine
27. Rock Partridge
28. Northern Bobwhite
29. Pheasant
30. Coot
31. Moorhen
32. Black-winged Stilt
33. Lapwing
34. Snipe
35. Yellow-legged Gull

36. Black-headed Gull
37. Rock Dove
38. Woodpigeon
39. Collared Dove
40. Cuckoo
41. Tawny Owl
42. Common Swift
43. Bee-eater
44. Hoopoe
45. Wryneck
46. Green Woodpecker
47. Great Spotted Woodpecker
48. Black Woodpecker
49. Woodlark
50. Sand Martin
51. Crag Martin
52. Swallow
53. House Martin
54. White Wagtail
55. Grey Wagtail
56. Tree Pipit
57. Firecrest
58. Wren
59. Dunnock
60. Rock Thrush
61. Blackbird
62. Song Thrush
63. Mistle Thrush
64. Cetti's Warbler
65. Sedge Warbler
66. Melodious Warbler
67. Chiffchaff
68. Wood Warbler
69. Western Bonelli's Warbler
70. Blackcap
71. Garden Warbler
72. Whitethroat
73. Subalpine Warbler
74. Spotted Flycatcher
75. Collared Flycatcher
76. Robin
77. Nightingale
78. Black Redstart
79. Common Redstart
80. Whinchat

81. Stonechat
82. Northern Wheatear
83. Vinous-throated Parrotbill
84. Red-billed Leiothrix
85. Long-tailed Tit
86. Marsh Tit
87. Coal Tit
88. Great Tit
89. Blue Tit
90. Nuthatch
91. Treecreeper
92. Penduline Tit
93. Golden Oriole
94. Red-backed Shrike
95. Jay
96. Magpie
97. Nutcracker
98. Chough
99. Jackdaw
100. Hooded Crow
101. Starling
102. Chaffinch
103. Greenfinch
104. Goldfinch
105. Linnet
106. Serin
107. Bullfinch
108. Italian Sparrow
109. Yellowhammer
110. Corn Bunting