



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Istria
6 – 14 May 2015

Holiday participants

Sonia Donaghy and George Malcolm
John and Ann Titchmarsh
Jenny Loring

Leader

Paul Tout, who also wrote this report.

We stayed at the Hotel Mirna at the spa of Istarske Toplice.

Photos by Paul Tout unless otherwise stated except those involving Hrastovlje and aerial views of Premantura (from public sources).

Cover:

"Like an image of Arcadia, sheep rest beneath an ancient St. Lucie Cherry on Mount Vela Učka."

Below:

Paul Tout handing over the conservation contribution to Bojana Lipej, a DOPPS education officer at the Škocjanski Zatok nature reserve near Koper, where a new visitor centre is under construction.



This holiday, as for every Honeyguide holiday, also puts something into conservation in our host country by way of a contribution to the wildlife that we enjoyed. The conservation contribution from this holiday, €350 (£255) went to DOPPS, BirdLife Slovenia, taking conservation contributions made through Honeyguide since 1991 past the £100,000 total.

DAILY DIARY

Wednesday 6 May – The first evening...

Ryanair had changed the flight-times to a late evening arrival in Trieste but everything went smoothly. Collecting the minibus we headed towards our hotel in Croatia about 90 minutes away, arriving at around midnight, a couple of Roe Deer livening up the journey. With the nearly full moon the night-time sounds around the hotel were remarkable, with calling Scops Owl, Nightingales and even a very noisy Raven which was nesting right behind the hotel!

Thursday 7 May – Around the hotel and up to the quarry

A slightly later start than usual was arranged, given our late arrival last night. As in previous years there were at least three Nightingales in the scrub at the eastern end close to the pumping house (with a dozen or so House Martin nests) drowning out the singing male Melodious Warbler and Cirl Buntings. Paul pointed out the old tennis courts where a pair of Red-backed Shrikes usually perch to hunt, before spotting first the male and then the female in a small tree in the garden of a nearby house. Blue Rock Thrushes were clearly visible on the crags above us.

The weather was very hot as we made our way up into the quarry above the hotel with Glanville Fritillaries skittering ahead of us over the gravel track. The Alpine Swifts performed splendidly, swooping in and out of the caves over our heads and entering their nest-holes in the roof, and there were some 'gone-over' Early Spider Orchids between the rocks. We were also amused and fascinated by a Broad-bordered Bee Hawk-moth flitting like a hummingbird around the milkwort. Coming down to return to the hotel we passed the hotel's crazy golf course, still uncut. Someone spotted a single Adriatic Lizard Orchid (shades of the Sandwich Bay golf-links?) and soon we were seeing dozens together with a pair of Monkey Orchids and a single Bee Orchid, all within 50 metres of the hotel's front door.



Above: Broad-bordered Bee Hawk-moth
Hemaris fuciformis



Right: Adriatic Lizard Orchid
Himantoglossum adriaticum

We went to dinner at the nearby Dolina restaurant at about 7.00 p.m. Temperatures had dropped off a bit and when we emerged into a beautiful evening we could hear at least two Nightjars churring from behind the hotel. From our rooms we could hear Scops Owls calling nearby although thankfully the Raven had calmed down compared to the previous night!

Friday 8 May – Premantura, Pula and the Mirna valley

Splendid weather greeted the group for our trip down to the southernmost tip of Istria just over an hour away. As in previous years a Grey-headed Woodpecker was calling behind the hotel but remained elusive.

The journey south was uneventful and we were soon at our destination and when we arrived we almost had the place to ourselves. Crowds would surely begin to arrive later as the weekenders from Germany and Austria and the locals got off work. Premantura is famous for its many orchid species and we soon noticed one of the scarcer species, Man Orchid, although the plant was in poor condition. The south-facing parts of



Pta. Premantura, the southernmost tip of Istria with a unique microclimate.

the site closest to the sea seemed very dry and, compared to 2013 (which was very wet indeed) the orchids were rather few and far between, with the occasional Pink Butterfly Orchid and Dark Spider Orchid, the latter a species that had been lumped together with Early Spider Orchid in many parts of its range but is now found to be quite widespread in southern Europe, going some way to explain how certain populations of so-called 'Early Spider Orchid' could be found in flower from late February through to late May!

Movement of Painted Lady butterflies was underway with dozens passing and some stopping to feed, interspersed with the odd Red Admiral and Clouded Yellow. Even without many orchids there was plenty to

see, with Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers in the Mediterranean scrub of Lentisk, Phillyrea, Holm Oak, Tree Heath, Spiny Ivy and Myrtle.



Left: Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*. Right: Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* by Claudia Grandi, but the same male we saw, photographed the same day.

An obliging Tawny Pipit sat out for us on a handrail overlooking the sea where a Mediterranean Shag flew past. Brief views were had of a Short-toed Eagle hunting over the scrubland and drifting north, whilst all the swifts seen were Pallid Swifts which nest in several sea caves along the coastline. After lunch, as we set off to make our way towards Pula to see the Roman Arena, we stopped to look at a rather splendid Pink Butterfly Orchid beside the road. It soon became clear we'd been looking in the wrong place for the orchids this year, and here, on better soils and flat ground, they had fared much better, with thousands of Tongue Orchids together with Bertoloni's and tiny Bumblebee (Bee) Orchids as well as those we'd seen earlier this morning.

After our visit to the Roman Arena, the sixth largest in the world, we made our way back towards the hotel, passing along the River Mirna-Quieto from the coast, and alongside the 'usual suspects' of Corn Bunting, Melodious Warbler and Red-backed Shrike we were lucky to see our only Black-headed Bunting of the week which must have been newly-arrived as the date was the earliest I know of for this site.

Saturday 9 May – Local Day, Portole, Lagansi and Čepić

The location of the Istarke Toplice hotel is superb for local walks that require only very short transfers in the minibus and we try to alternate these days with trips further afield.



The rock above the Hotel – Istarke Toplice

After a short pre-breakfast walk that yielded brief views (and plenty of calls) of Grey-headed Woodpecker, Hawfinch and Serin close to the hotel, at 09.00 we started out for our first walk along the high plain above the hotel from close to the town of Portole to the picturesque village of Lagansi and on to the sadly-abandoned one of Jadroni.

The walk to Lagansi is along an unmade road. There are more than a thousand such tiny settlements in Istria and most are connected to the outside world by gravel tracks. South-facing and alternating between woodland and scrub with the occasional piece of grazing or hay meadow, the road to Lagansi has a splendid mix of birds, insects and plants.

There were several specimens of Sword-leaved Helleborine as well as Lady Orchid and Green-winged Orchid which are abundant everywhere in Istria this year. With more shade than elsewhere the Lizard Orchids were just at the spike stage. This is a species that seems to be increasing year-on-year in Istria and in the early years of Honeyguide here (2009, 2011) we struggled to find it but this year they seem to be everywhere. Sunnier parts of the route had nice displays of Carthusian Pink and the local Karst Cow-wheat was just coming into flower.

Birds were rather scarce initially, with Hoopoe being heard together with Woodlark and Skylark although numbers increased as we drew closer to the village. Some lucky observers managed brief views of Black Woodpecker (which by early May have young in the nest and are pretty well silent) but almost everyone managed good views of Golden Orioles flying back and forth. Here and there Red-backed Shrikes were like masked sentries atop the brambles in the sheep-pasture, sharing the habitat with Whitethroats.

Butterflies were numerous, with plenty of Common, Adonis, Small and Short-tailed Blues along the sunnier sections with the occasional Scarce Swallowtail, while Glanville Fritillaries and Dingy Skippers flitted along the road ahead of us. Just emerging, and absolutely fresh, two Marsh Fritillaries showed extremely well in a shady glade along the road.

The only rain of the week took us a little by surprise, but refreshed the puddles while we went for a coffee in Portole after lunch, finding, by coincidence, the perfect spot for the following Tuesday's evening meal when our regular restaurant is closed.



Marsh Fritillary (*Euphydryas aurinia*)



Bird's-nest Orchid
Neottia nidus-avis

The next stop, near the country church of Our Lady of the Snows, produced some excellent birds, butterflies and plants as usual including great views of Turtle Dove, Whinchat, Cirl Bunting and splendid views of a singing male Cuckoo, Small Blue Butterflies and Grizzled Skippers. We also added a new species of orchid for the trip, the saprophytic Bird's-nest Orchid.

After lunch we headed towards the village of Čepić, a little to the east. The toponym "Čepić" is quite common in Istria and seems to derive from the Croatian noun for a spill and is always associated with a *polje* which floods (or flooded) regularly. *Polje* are large flat, fertile areas produced by



Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica*
collecting mud at Čepić

erosion in an area of otherwise rather barren karst topography and this area is no exception. As we arrived above the *polje* the local Barn Swallows were using the newly-refilled puddles to get mud for their nests whilst a Black Redstart took advantage of the insects swept out of the tree canopy by the sharp shower, picking them off the road and carrying them to its nest.

By now the rain had stopped and it was a pleasant stroll down to the *polje*. A huge Slow-worm at least 40cm long crossed the path in front of us, no doubt on the hunt for slugs and snails brought out by the rain. Slow-worms here do seem much larger and darker than the UK species and recent studies suggest that there are at least six cryptospecies within Europe although those in Istria appear to be the 'common' species like that in Britain.

Passing through the cutting in the rock, beloved by climbers and decked with large amounts of Mossy Sandwort, down at the *polje* itself there were no signs of the many Italian Crested Newts we'd seen the year before, only a few Marsh Frogs and a Broad-bodied Chaser, although perhaps the reason lay under some nearby sheets of corrugated iron where a wonderful Grass Snake was curled up and just about to moult its skin.



Left: Slow-worm *Anguis fragilis* out and about after the rain.
Right: Grass Snake *Natrix natrix*

Strikingly, its collar appeared orange rather than the usual yellow-buff. A short walk to the *polje*'s swallow-hole, where the water drains away into the karst before re-emerging about 5km away (and about 20°C hotter) behind our hotel, revealed a few Summer Snowflakes still in flower, relatives of the snowdrop,. But by now it was getting on and time to return to the hotel.

After dinner a trip down to the edge of the side stream of the River Mirna passing by the hotel, together with a bat-detector, revealed numerous Daubenton's Bats which appear to be breeding on the same building holding the many House Martin nests. A few Fireflies were also seen, blinking on and off over the grass close to the river.

Sunday 10 May – Rakitovec and Movraž



Green Lizard *Lacerta viridis*

Another Karst venue was on the programme today, a little further away and a little higher up after yesterday's local walks, kicking off the day with a stop at a beautiful meadow close to the road at the village of Butari. The flysch-based soils over sandstone have excellent water retention and few have escaped the plough even though much of this marginal area is now abandoned to scrub. As we got out of the minibus to continue on foot, a nice, if not fully-grown, male Green Lizard was spotted sunning itself on a roadside rock, seemingly oblivious to the cameras pointed in its direction. Later in the day with a couple of hours of sun he would surely have been more skittish.

This site appears never to have been ploughed or fertilized and has been kept as a hay-meadow for decades. It is FULL of orchids including large numbers of Green-winged and Bog Orchids and Long-lipped Serapias

(or Tongue-orchid). Some time in the past, probably very long ago, someone has cut a drainage channel across the field and this damp flush is host to a large number of Adderstongue Ferns.



From the left: Bog Orchid *Orchis palustris*, Long-lipped Serapias *Serapias vomeracea* and Adderstongue Fern *Ophioglossum vulgare*

Rakitovec, our main stop, is a mid-altitude (c. 700m) area of open dry karst grassland, a habitat called '*landa carsica*' in Italian and '*gmajna*' in Slovene. It is under threat everywhere as a result of scrub invasion and vegetational succession as the marginal areas in which it is found have been abandoned and depopulated. Rakitovec was recently identified by the Slovene BirdLife partner DOPPS as one of the most important remaining areas of this habitat, holding most of the typical ornithological components. On our way up to the site we stopped at the local railway halt to admire a magnificent stand of Perfoliate Alexanders, a plant that created havoc when introduced to Kew Gardens but here, in its natural habitat, restricted to small patches close to the woodland edge. Examining the plants, Paul spotted a newly-emerged Tau Emperor Moth, a species typical of cool beechwoods in south-east Europe. Returning to the minibus we noticed at least half-a-dozen Scarce Swallowtails feeding on the flowering Lilac outside the station.



A newly-emerged Tau Emperor Moth *Aglia tau* on Perfoliate Alexanders *Smyrniium perfoliatum* and one of half-a-dozen Scarce Swallowtails *Iphiclidides podalirius* on Lilac *Syringa vulgaris*

Passing on we saw several herds of cattle which are now being used to maintain the grasslands. EU funding from Natura 2000 and rural development schemes mean that practices that had been uneconomic since the 1950s are once again producing income for local people who rent the state-held lands for a small sum.

Red-backed Shrikes are one of the dominant species in this habitat but there were also migrant Whinchats and a Wheatear which had probably been grounded by yesterday's rain. Further along we saw Woodlarks and Skylarks as well as large numbers of Corn Buntings.

We parked and walked down through the grassland. Eastern Fritillary flowers had already gone over and the seed-heads were forming but the air was filled with the scent of Thyme as well as Winter and Lilac-flowered Savory. It was hot and birds were few and far between but we soon heard the first distinctive song of Ortolan Bunting, now extremely rare in Slovenia, with Rakitovec one of the last sites. It seems to require this dry karstic grassland for breeding but with nearby access to richer agricultural areas where the females search for insect food for the chicks, perhaps explaining the attractiveness of this site as the small cultivated fields close to Movraž are clearly visible, maybe a ten minute flight away. Although we heard several birds singing they are rather shy and only one was kind enough to provide a decent telescope view.



The view up to *landa carsica* from the agricultural area in the *polje* below

Returning to the minibus it was a short descent to the village of Movraž and just outside the town haymaking, very early this year, was already in full swing. Late migrants were taking advantage of the many insects exposed and included several Whinchats, a Wheatear and at three male Yellow Wagtails. As chance would have it these birds were of three different subspecies, a local Ashy-headed Wagtail (subspecies *cinereocapilla*) accompanying a nominate race Blue-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava flava* and a Grey-headed Wagtail of the subspecies *thunbergi*.



Left: Grey-headed Wagtail *thunbergi*. Right: Blue-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava flava*.

The meadows further on were host, once again, to what seem to be three of the commonest birds in Istria, Corn Buntings, Red-backed Shrikes and Melodious Warblers, while the plants included Bog, Monkey and Lady Orchids together with a spectacular plant of the rather rare, here at least, Siberian Iris.

After dinner a few intrepid souls set out along the river once again but there was no sign of any of the Nightjars resting on the gravel in the headlights or of the hoped-for owls. The big reward came on the drive back through the forest close to the hotel, on just side-lights (there was a bright full moon), there being literally thousands of fireflies, probably *Luciola italica*, along the route, a fantastic wildlife spectacle



Siberian Iris *Iris sibirica*

Monday 11 May – Hrastovlje, Škocjanski Zatok, and the Mirna Valley

We awoke once again to warm sunshine and light mist, suggesting yet another hot and sunny day. A quick walk from the hotel up to the quarry revealed a Rock Bunting and excellent views of Alpine Swifts entering and leaving the colony in the cave.



A young Boskarin bull

Our first stop was at a small demonstration farm at the village of Hrastovlje. This was set up with EU funding under the auspices of an Interreg project and is used to display local breeds of animal including sheep, goats, donkeys and the black Carniolan race of the honey bee. The most impressive animals are the oxen, called the Boskarin, which resemble Great Hungarian White cattle and clearly have an eastern origin. Already rare as Yugoslavia entered its final tumultuous years, the breed died out as recently as the 1990s, has been painstakingly reconstructed using hybrid animals, and is undergoing a revival as a rustic meat-producing breed well-adapted to the rugged Karst grazing lands.

The romanesque walled church of Hrastovlje just over the border into Slovenia was our cultural stop for the day. Dating back to before 1490 the church is heavily fortified with high walls to protect it from Turkish marauders from Bosnia who often passed through the valley of the Osp on their way to north-east Italy in search of plunder. It is famous for its superb *danza macabra* showing that death claims both rich and poor, popes and paupers... everybody cheers for the skeleton that flanks the banker on his way to the tomb (and who is trying to bribe his way out of things with a bag of money).

There is ornithological content too in the murals and they appear to show a bird that could represent a young Bald Ibis which of course would be ridiculous were it not for the fact that the painter (John of Castua) was born and brought up in Istria and the species is specifically mentioned for Istria by two 15th Century naturalists, the Austrian Gesner (1557) and the Italian Aldrovandi (1603). Proof of the bird's presence in Europe came when their remains were found in the medieval middens of Salzburg in the northern Alps. 500 years ago the area was very different, there being very few forested areas and vast heavily-grazed grasslands dominated the landscape – ideal habitat for the ibises.



Hrastovlje's 15th Century *danza macabra*

Moving on to the Skocjanski Zatok/Val Stagnon Nature Reserve on the outskirts of Koper, we were warmly met by Bojana Lipej and Igor Brajnik of the Slovene BirdLife charity DOPPS. A large new visitor centre is under construction and the water levels have been lowered to assist with construction so there were fewer birds than on previous visits. All will be restored this autumn when building is complete. After a delicious snack of cheese and wine and the first cherries of the year we were able to add several wetland species that had so far eluded us – Great White Egret, Great Reed and Cetti's Warblers, as well as Greenshank, Common Tern and Black-winged Stilt.

After handing over the Honeyguide donation to Bojana and saying our goodbyes we headed east towards the salt-pans of Sečovlje/Sicciole along the Dragogna river that here forms the (disputed) border between Croatia and Slovenia, where we had lunch. The salt-pans were extremely dry and very few birds were visible from the car-park so a walk towards the sea under the midday sun did not seem like the best use of the time available.

Re-entering Croatia we returned to the Mirna Valley, we were rewarded with Spanish Sparrow, a Lesser Kestrel, a Zitting Cisticola and a Squacco Heron before a real surprise, a pair of Red-rumped Swallows in a new location for the species. This bird has been increasing rapidly in Istria in recent years (global warming again?) and this pair appeared intent on nesting under a bridge, and although there was no sign of construction as yet I was able to photograph a fully-built nest just a fortnight later. Bee-eaters were easy to see once again although the newly-arrived male Black-headed Bunting eluded us on this occasion. We saw several Coypus but there was no sign of the blonde one (I fondly imagine it's a female) that I have nicknamed 'Brigitte Bardot'.

Tuesday 12 May – Stridone, Grisignana and Montona

After a long day yesterday a change of pace was in order, with local visits planned for today. Starting off with a walk to the top of the rock behind the hotel we were rewarded with excellent views of Subalpine Warbler and one of the (real) Rock Doves nesting in the crevices on the rock-face as well as close-up views of the endemic sandwort *Moehringia tommasinii*.



The view from the rock towards Montona-Motovun

Setting off, we didn't have far to go to reach our first stop, passing the only Common Spotted Orchids of the week once again, close to the town of Portole where we would have dinner later.

Arriving at Zrenj-Stridone we strolled around the beautiful meadow close to the churchyard which seems to be improving year-on-year. This year, among the Green-winged (one of them almost pure white in colour) and Bee Orchids were several tiny (perhaps young?) Burnt-tip Orchids, the only ones we would see this week. A lovely male Serin sang and displayed for all to see on a large cypress at the gates of the cemetery. Walking around the graves I was sad to see the name of Duillio Sorgo on a freshly-dug grave. An 80 year-old Duillio had amused, entertained and refreshed the Istrian Honeyguiders in 2013 with his stories from the past and a litre of his – err – 'rustic' *Malvasija* wine. Unlike 2013 however, the Bobwhite Quails for which the area is well-known were almost silent and only a couple of bouts of calling were heard.

From here we were able to walk through the village itself, noting the village birds, Swallows, Black Redstarts and Pied Wagtails and the occasional calling Wryneck, before carrying on beyond the village to our lunch-stop amidst the pines further up the road. As we walked through the haymeadows and small-scale agriculture a pair of Ravens rose from a freshly-cut field ahead of us, probably the pair from behind the hotel which is not far from here.



Burnt-tip Orchid *Orchis ustulata*



Small Blue *Cupido minimus*



Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus malvae*

A Cuckoo called close by while we ate and both Chiffchaff and Mistle Thrush were nesting nearby but the stars of the lunch-stop were several White Helleborine plants – we had seen flowering Sword-leaved Helleborine earlier in the week with its pure white flowers, but these were clearly a creamy colour with fewer, much broader, leaves. A very pleasant circular walk ensued as far as the unpronounceable village of Žnjidarići with beautiful meadows filled with orchids, Yellow Rattle, Carthusian Pink and Crested Cow-wheat although we failed to find the Lesser Honeywort we had come across in 2013. Here and there a Golden Oriole, Woodlark or Hoopoe passed through but we were now in the slow part of the day bird-wise between lunch and late afternoon. Butterflies were plentiful but very lively, Glanville Fritillaries, Small Blues and Grizzled Skippers particularly common, and the only Mazarine Blue of the week showed briefly.

Our usual restaurant, Dolina, is closed on Mondays and we went up once again to Portole for an excellent meal at the *Konoba* where we had stopped for coffee during Friday's rainstorm. There were bonuses too, in the form of watching the House Martins and Common Swifts visiting their nests above the front door of the restaurant and as the sun sank behind the nearby hill a Scops Owl began to call from the Horse Chestnut above our heads. A few lucky people also managed to see it fly as it shifted perch!

As we dropped down from the escarpment and neared the river, the drive back to the hotel was similar to the spectacle on Sunday evening, with thousands of fireflies dancing in front of the minibus but with the added bonus of a Glow-worm *Lampyris noctiluca* too, in the lavender bed outside the hotel door!

Wednesday 13 May – Mount Vela Učka and Brgudac

Our last full day merited a 'big' trip so we headed south-east towards the city of Rijeka and the massif of Vela Učka. The journey to very top of the mountain (1400m) is long, technically closed to traffic (we had a bit of 'scene' with a jobsworth in 2013) and, frankly, adds little to the overall experience, with more birds and plants to be seen on the lower slopes of Mala Učka which is open to the public.

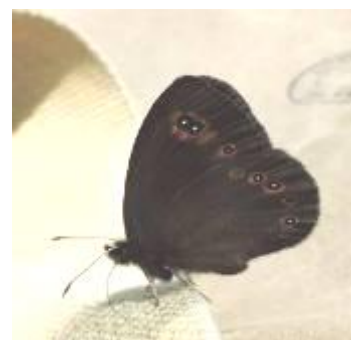
As we approached the mountains we left the highway and went onto the 'old' road which goes over a pass at about 1000m, stopping briefly at the roadside fountain commissioned by the Hapsburg Emperor Joseph II where a beautiful Chequered Skipper was spotted. So rare in the UK, this species is common in these cool but sunny beechwoods. A nearby lane gave a sample of the woodland flora to be found at these sites, including Angelica, Greater Meadow-rue, Baneberry and Fly Honeysuckle as well as the very large and imposing *columnae* subspecies of the Cowslip. There were interesting trees too including the Italian *Acer opalus* subspecies *obtusatum* and Norway Maples *Acer platanoides*.



Baneberry flower (detail)
Actaea spicata



Chequered Skipper
Carterocephalus palaemon



Woodland Ringlet
Erebia medusa

Moving on up the mountain it didn't take us very long to arrive at the south-facing slopes from where we had imposing views across southern Istria. In the 'car-park' (in reality a patch of gravel beside the road) all had good views of a pair of Tawny Pipits as well as the usual Red-backed Shrikes which seem so common in Istria this year. Wild flowers were abundant in the regularly-grazed meadows, including Poet's Narcissus and Spring Gentians still in flower in spite of the heat.

As we descended the gravel road that crosses the hillside we came across large numbers of ringlet butterflies. Checking the photographs and relevant documentation it would appear that these were Woodland Ringlets rather than the near-identical Bright-eyed Ringlet which emerges almost a month later. There were plants too, including the *speciosa* subspecies of the Early Purple Orchid, a Frog Orchid, hundreds of Star-of-Bethlehem and wonderfully perfumed Burnet Roses, while Paul 'tickled' a Two-spotted Field Cricket out of its burrow with a blade of grass. Moving down through the extensive grasslands we were rarely out of earshot of Ortolan Buntings although they remained stubbornly out of sight. There were very few birds of prey visible apart from a pair of Kestrels, a single Common Buzzard and a Peregrine which dashed through. Returning back up the road for lunch we were treated to a singing Lesser Whitethroat though he remained hidden in the Mugo Pine.



Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

After a coffee-stop we moved on towards the town of Brgudac and the wilder parts of inner Istria. As we climbed towards our destination we spotted a superbly-marked Short-toed Eagle hunting over the extensive haymeadows and grazing land and everyone had really excellent views as it soared above us, gradually drifting away eastwards.

Brgudac has a sad story and was a national monument in the former Yugoslavia. It is full of memorials, with virtually the entire population being massacred by the Nazis in reprisals for Partisan activity. Many of the houses were never rebuilt after the war and it now has just a few permanent inhabitants.

The large plain to the north of the town with its associated agriculture and grazing was also abandoned and is now almost completely covered in 70 years of scrub growth but here and there one can still find patches of species-rich grassland close to the road, with Poet's Narcissus, Villous Viper's Grass, Illyrian Iris and Wild Peony.

Arriving at the village we proceeded along the gravel track through the woods leading to the path for the pastures at Korita, a climb for the fittest but we stayed on the shady tree-lined track. Only the luckiest of the group managed the fix on the Hawfinch before it flew off but a Marsh Tit was much more cooperative and showed well. As in 2013 a Southern Festoon butterfly was also seen, although in comparison it was decidedly uncooperative.

After our last dinner with Edi and Myrian an attempt to see the Daubenton's Bats was again foiled by loud music from a dance going on at the hotel. The bats appear to have been frightened off to feed somewhere a bit quieter. Luckily the soundproofing in our hotel was effective and the music didn't go on much after 11 p.m.

Thursday 14 May – Hotel, Vodice, Crnotice and Isola della Cona



The Crazy Golf Bee Orchids
Ophrys apifera

By virtue of the late flight back to London we still had almost a full day's birding and botanizing to enjoy, and after taking some final photographs of the orchids on the crazy golf course and paying the bill we set off for an upland visit to an area about 15km east of the hotel to the interior part of Istria with mountains, part of the Dinaric Alps running NW–SE and parallel with the eastern Adriatic coastline.

We had a quick jaunt around Vodice, which added little to our lists. As we approached the border crossing into Slovenia a wildcat crossed the road ahead of us and was clearly seen by all! As (bad) luck would have it some Austrian bikers were overtaking us at that very moment and the animal was forced to dash (rather than continue its amble) into the undergrowth at the side of the road. The species is quite common in Upper Istria and rarely if ever hybridizes with domestic cats but even so is hardly ever seen in daylight and this particular animal was probably a female with kittens, forced out to hunt during the day to feed her growing family.

The lunch-stop of the day was close-by, a huge area of *Landa Carsica* at Crnotice, dry steppe-like grassland in limestone country produced over thousands of years by deforestation and heavy grazing. Many of the areas in Slovenia are owned by public authorities and have recently been re-let to graziers and are in the process of being restored to open grassland with cutting and grazing. Crnotice did not disappoint, there being plenty to see, including Red-backed Shrikes, Skylarks, Woodlarks, Mistle Thrushes and a territorial Tawny Pipit. Unfortunately the area has become a popular recreational destination for all and sundry to play with their drones and model aircraft and this is undoubtedly reducing its importance for birds.

Having passed through Trieste, our final stop before the airport was Isola della Cona at the mouth of the River Isonzo, the nature reserve with the longest bird list in Italy (and one of the longest in Europe), with 322 species excluding escapes.

Some of the interesting species seen here included Squacco Heron, Cattle, Little and Great White Egret, Purple Heron, a dozen or so Spoonbills, Pygmy Cormorant, Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Shelduck, Shoveler and Pochard, Moorhen, Coot, a distant Gull-billed Tern, Black-winged Stilt Little Ringed Plover, Lapwing, Wood Sandpiper, and breeding Bee-eaters.



Isola della Cona, Photo: Jèan Francois Pegàn

Honeyguide will be organising a holiday based in a hotel on the reserve in September 2015.

More details are on <http://www.honeyguide.co.uk/wildlife-holidays/italy-slovenia.html>

With that it was off to the airport, a 15 minute drive. There remained just enough time to have a final, proper Italian pizza at Paul's favourite pizzeria before saying our farewells.