

Sarus Birdtours

Croatia: 1st – 4th May 2011: Trip Report

Participants: István Bártol - Ecotours Wildlife Holidays (Leader)

Eva Karlsson – Sweden

Jill Wheeler - UK

John Wheeler – UK

As with my previous Slovakia 2007 Trip Report I have written this from a personal angle. Again I hope any lack of objectivity is more than offset by sharing the emotions brought out by birdwatching. For any bird to be added to the Trip List it must have been seen by either Jill and/or me. New species (“Lifers”) are written in **RED**, species seen for the first time on the trip in **blue**.

Reasons for going on this Trip: In a word Rock Partridge! This was a gap in our European Bird List, so again we looked to a Sarus Euroshort tour to remedy this. I was particularly keen to see this bird as, on my last three “Target Bird” Trips (not with Sarus or Ecotours), I had failed to see any of the four sought after species. A fifth “Dip” was unimaginable.

The Trip itself

Date	Day	Itinerary	Weather
May 1st	1	Split airport to Trogir. Coast Road to SE Lake Vrana (Vransko jezero), onto reserve on NW corner. On A1 to Modric, Seline & Starigrad	Cool, Heavy rain at first. Sunnier later, Warm, Breezy
May 2nd	2	Road to Veliko Rujno. Velika Paklenica Canyon. Mala Paklenica Canyon. Road to Veliko Rujno. Starigrad Camping Site	Warm, Sunny, Dry
May 3rd	3	Starigrad Camping Site. Up Veliko Rujna Road to behind Starigrad. Razanac. Pag Island – Saltpans, Veliko Blato, Malo Blato, Pag salt pans	Warm, Sunny, Dry. Clouded over
May 4th	4	Starigrad to Split Airport on A1	Very windy. Dry

Sunday 1st May: Up at 3:00am to catch the 6:10am flight from Gatwick to Split. We arrived in Split at 9:40am CET. Here we met up with Eva & István who pointed out the nesting **Spanish Sparrows**. We then set off in the heavy rain along the road a little way before turning down a track through some cultivation to the margin of a small wetland area. [It wouldn't be a proper birding trip if we weren't bumped along a track!] We were loudly greeted by an unseen Cetti's Warbler, but only saw a **Serin** & the first of many **Blackbirds**. We continued through Trogir & along the coast road, stopping at a marina to view the bay. Ubiquitous **Yellow-legged Gulls** & three **Shags** were on the water with a Turtle Dove crooning on the hill. It began to

brighten up & we sped on to the picnic area at the SE corner of Lake Vrana for our sumptuous packed lunch. Apart from gulls & Coots the only other bird was a Great-crested Grebe. Two Whiskered Terns flew over. A walk around produced Whinchat & a Sardinian Warbler was heard. We were also becoming familiar with Hooded Crows, the grey of which seemed to be darker than the ones in the Scottish Highlands. On all our walks we enjoyed a very varied Mediterranean flora, lizards, butterflies & rocks.

We then drove to the NW corner of the lake where there is a Nature Reserve. A walk to the shore produced Squacco Heron, three Common Sandpipers, Common Tern, Red-footed Falcon as well as singing Cetti's & Great Reed Warblers. Out on posts in the lake were Pygmy Cormorants. We walked along a channel connected to the lake. Here, unperturbed by the many fishermen, several Great Reed Warblers were singing from exposed reeds. In the reeds a Reed Warbler was trying to compete. There were the usual hirundines feeding on insects. Driving through the village we saw a Woodchat Shrike. A search on a knoll for warblers yielded only one Whitethroat. We were to find that Mediterranean warblers do not reveal themselves easily! We then took the A1 [Toll Road] turning off for our hotel in Starigrad after crossing the magnificent Maslenica Bridge. We pulled over to scan the apparently empty bay & scoped a winter plumaged Black-throated Diver & three Red-necked Grebes. Outside the hotel a Nightingale was singing.

Monday 2nd May: After an early breakfast & preparing our packed lunches we set off to look for Rock Partridge. We drove up the road signposted to Veliko Rujno. It was narrow, climbed steeply & ran inland for several kilometres. At intervals we stopped to survey the rocky landscape. The scenery alone with the limestone crags was worth the journey. We saw Blue Rock Thrush but no partridges. We would have to come back in the late afternoon.

We drove to Entrance 1 of the Paklenica National Park, intending to drive up the Velika Paklenica Canyon, whose sides rise over 700metres, & then walk. We were thwarted, being allowed only to park just inside the entrance. The reason was that the canyon was full of rock climbers from all over Central Europe – a climbers' twitch. This was the weekend of the XII international Climbers Meeting & the place was swarming. Every rock face had ropes & climbers. Some were novices on the bottom pitches, others were high up on apparently smooth faces - some barefoot. The birds didn't stand a chance. However we did see a Spotted Flycatcher near the Entrance, a Kestrel hovering high above, Crag Martin at a nest site, Alpine Swifts speeding down the canyon, Grey Wagtails at a near-ground nest site as well as a Cuckoo flying past. We dipped on the Rock Nuthatch. As a reminder of the recent, turbulent past there was also a van of suitably clad soldiers working with mine detectors.

We drove to Entrance 2 of the Park where there was a small Education Centre (closed). The place was deserted. Here we ate our lunch before setting off up the much more open Mala Paklenica Canyon. Suddenly István called out. We stopped & looked. "I heard a Rock Partridge," he said "over there". He pointed to the large hillside. I decided to start looking from the top down, & there at the very top was the bird – a Rock Partridge – in full view, in classical pose. We were able to take in every detail through the 'scope over several minutes. "After this everything else is a bonus." I told Jill. We continued up the gorge. No Rock Nuthatch but a Peregrine flew in & perched high up & a Montagu's Harrier drifted over. Jill

walked on further with István & Eva & came back delighted, having seen another Lifer for her - **Eastern Orphean Warbler** - just days after seeing the Western species in Spain.

We returned to the road signposted to Veliko Rujno & drove till we reached a small farm with fields. The partridges were supposed to come in & perch on the walls but we did not see any. A look round another cultivated area failed to yield Sombre Tits but we were charmed by a **Black-eared Wheatear** perched up on a nearby rock. Before reaching the hotel we had a brief look inside the Starigrad Camping Site. Among the many Blackbirds we had views of a **Wryneck**. In the evening as we ate alfresco we heard the Scops Owl which was new to Jill. However, when we launched our expedition to try to see it, it had stopped calling, & we were unsuccessful.

Tuesday 3rd May: We went out at 6:30am to the Camping Site where again we had good views of the Wryneck & a female **Blackcap**. From there we went a short distance up the Veliko Rujno road behind the houses, to the side of a pine wood where again we had views of a Wryneck which called throughout our stay. A Golden Oriole was calling but remained unseen.

After breakfast we set off for Ortok Pag [Pag Island]. Before reaching the island we stopped near Razanac & walked through the shrubby vegetation. From here there were superb views across the bay to the mountains of Paklenica National Park. A **Honey Buzzard** sailed over, a **Sardinian Warbler** called & annoyingly flew among the bushes. After taking another bumpy track towards some wetlands we stopped. A familiar set of calls heralded the fly over of a couple of **Bee Eaters**, a new bird for Eva. These were followed by a **Raven**.

The scenery was becoming barren & dry as we crossed the bridge onto Pag Island. We stopped & looked across a wide inlet to bare, low hills on which a few sheep were seemingly surviving. On our side there was a little more grass though the hilltop was bare. **Northern Wheatears** were becoming more frequent while overhead a **Short-toed Eagle** soared. We drove on stopping to view some saltpans. There were few birds – some **Black-winged Stilts** & a “**Ringed Plover**” though whether Ringed, Little Ringed or Kentish it was impossible to say. At the end of the saltpans we turned off the main road & parked. This was a damp area with clumps of rushes & hedges. **Yellow Wagtails** & a **Tawny Pipit** ran & flew about. About eight **Green Sandpipers** landed in the rushes before taking off for a wetter area.

We drove on the road signposted to the “Ornithological Reserve”. After about one kilometre we turned down another track to park near a wetland area with extensive open water – so unexpected on this dry island. This was Veliko Blato. It was here in a small Observation Tower we had our lunch while taking in the spectacle. Many of the birds, usually half hidden in reeds, were feeding in the short grass. Four **Glossy Ibis** flew in - another first for Eva. There were **Little Egrets**, Squacco Herons, **Grey & Purple Herons** as well as the usual Coots. Quartering the area were several **Marsh Harriers**. With the stone walls on the surrounding hills it reminded us of home in Yorkshire. We stopped at the other side of the wetland to be entertained by a Squacco Heron feeding very near.

We continued slowly along the road through small fields, bounded by stone walls. There were a number of Whinchats & Wheatears around & we were trying to put people onto them when Jill interrupted, giving

directions to what she thought was a bird in a bush over a wall. It was - another Rock Partridge. Another flew in front of us & they both disappeared. Elated we moved on to a smaller wetland area with no open water – Malo Blato. After a Honey Buzzard had passed we were treated to a flying display by at least six Montagu's Harriers over the reeds. Turning to go István again heard Rock Partridge calling, & we were able to pick out one in a rocky field, again in full view & the nearest yet.

We drove on to take the track towards the south side of Pag salt pans. Again we came across Yellow Wagtails & five Hoopoes which gave good views. The salt pans were full of water &, apart from the odd White Wagtail & gulls, were devoid of birds. We entered Pag, a very pleasant old town, parked & enjoyed large celebratory ice creams. (Does life get any better?) We then set off back to Starigrad. We stopped at Seline to check the bay for divers & grebes but it was empty. No Scops Owl calling in the evening.

Wednesday 4th May: We set off for the Airport at 5:45am in a very strong wind which had blown all night. Fortunately the Maslenica Bridge had remained open, though with a maximum speed of 40kph. After an uneventful, if blustery, journey we reached Split Airport at 7:50am. Here we enjoyed watching the Spanish Sparrows at close quarters before checking in. After a smooth flight over the Alps we arrived in Gatwick on time. Mission accomplished!

I could not finish this report without making mention of István. We cannot commend him highly enough. His birding skills speak for themselves. He would not allow us to do anything but undertook all the needed tasks eg carrying the large lunch boxes. He was a source of information about Croatia. He was both enthusiastic & patient. Thanks, István.

Similarly we would like to thank Ecotours for the organisation of the trip, & the information given to us at the start of the trip. What is it about Hungarians?

John Wheeler

Huddersfield, Yorkshire

8th May 2011

Croatia: May 2011: Species List

x = seen h = heard *h* = only heard

New species for both of us in Red

New species for Jill in Blue

	1 May	2 May	3 May	4 May
Black-throated Diver	x			
Red-necked Grebe	x			
Great-crested Grebe	x		x	
European Shag	x			
Pygmy Cormorant	x		x	
Squacco Heron	x		x	
Little Egret	x		x	
Grey Heron			x	
Purple Heron			x	
White Stork			x	
Glossy Ibis			x	
Mallard	x			
Gadwall			x	
European Honey Buzzard			x	
Short-toed Eagle			x	
Marsh Harrier	x		x	
Montagu's Harrier		x	x	
Common Buzzard		x	x	
Common Kestrel	x	x	x	
Eurasian Hobby	x			
Red-footed Falcon	x			
Peregrine Falcon		x	x	
Rock Partridge		x	x	
<i>Common Pheasant</i>		<i>h</i>	<i>h</i>	
Moorhen			x	
Eurasian Coot	x		x	
Black-winged Stilt			x	
Lapwing	x			
<i>Ringed Plover (sp)?</i>			x	
Common Sandpiper	x			
Green Sandpiper			x	
Black-headed Gull			x	
Yellow-legged Gull	x	x	x	x
Common Tern	x			
Whiskered Tern	x			
Rock Dove		x		
European Collared Dove	h	x	x	
<i>Turtle Dove</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>h</i>		
Common Cuckoo	h	x	h	
<i>European Scops Owl</i>		<i>h</i>		
Common Swift	x	x	x	
Alpine Swift		x		
European Hoopoe			x	
European Bee-eater			x	
Wryneck		x	x	
Skylark			x	
Crested Lark	x		x	
European Crag Martin		x		
	1 May	2 May	3 May	4 May

Barn Swallow	x	x	x	
House Martin	x	x	x	
Sand Martin	x		x	
Tawny Pipit			x	
White Wagtail	x	x	x	
Yellow Wagtail	x		x	
Grey Wagtail		x		
<i>Nightingale</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>h</i>		
Northern Wheatear		x	x	
Black-eared Wheatear		x		
Whinchat	x		x	
Stonechat				
Blue Rock Thrush	x	x		
Blackbird	x	x	x	x
Great Reed Warbler	x		h	
<i>Eurasian Reed Warbler</i>	<i>h</i>			
Zitting Cisticola	h		x	
<i>Cetti's Warbler</i>	<i>h</i>			
Willow Warbler		x		
<i>Chiffchaff</i>	<i>h</i>			
<i>Wood Warbler</i>		<i>h</i>	<i>h</i>	
<i>Eastern Orphean Warbler</i>		x		
Blackcap		x	x	
Subalpine Warbler	x	x		
Sardinian Warbler	h	x	x	
Whitethroat	x	x	x	
Spotted Flycatcher		x		
Great Tit	h	h	x	
Woodchat Shrike	x		x	
Eurasian Jay	x			
Eurasian Magpie		x		
Common Raven			x	
Hooded Crow	x	x	x	x
Jackdaw	x			
<i>Golden Oriole</i>		<i>h</i>	<i>h</i>	
House Sparrow	x	x	x	x
Spanish Sparrow		x		x
<i>Eurasian Tree Sparrow</i>	<i>h</i>			
Chaffinch		x	x	
Serin	x	x	x	
Greenfinch	x	x	x	
European Goldfinch	x	x	x	
Linnet	x	x	x	
Corn Bunting	x		x	
Cirl Bunting	x	x	x	
<i>Yellowhammer</i>		<i>h</i>		

Species seen: 82

Species only heard: 11