



### Slovenia and Croatia

24 June - 2 July 2016

A group of 10 from a UK based Natural History Society spent a really enjoyable time, courtesy of Ecotours Wildlife Holidays, in three centres across Slovenia and Croatia. We had a diverse range of interests across the group which was our reason for choosing this particular tour. We wanted more than just the fabulous birds to be seen in the region.

With conveniently timed return flights from Stansted we arrived at Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, to be met by our tour leader and guide, Milan Vogrin, who specialises in reptiles, amphibians and birds. It turned out he was also almost as knowledgeable and experienced in the other interests of our group, namely plants, butterflies and dragonflies. Milan works as an ecological consultant and is Slovenian. Our driver, Janos, was Hungarian and together they looked after us very well; for example preparing coffees at break times, helping with luggage and making clear what the day's programme would entail.

#### Day 1

Upon arrival we were taken straight to our hotel near to the beautiful Lake Bohinj about 1 and a half hours drive from the airport. After a tasty meal in convivial settings most of us were ready to retire to our rooms for the start of our exciting trip.

#### Day 2

In lovely sunshine and almost immediately from stepping off the minivan we were shown a Common Wall Lizard that Milan skilfully caught, then explaining the differences between the male and female and estimating it's likely age. Moving on we soon found Birds-Nest Orchids, Red Helleborines, Emerald Darter dragonflies and butterflies in profusion including Pearly Heath and Southern White Admiral. For some of us there were lifers and for others there were terrific photo opportunities. The tone for the trip had been set; steady pace, diversity of interests, good humour and natural history information to back up the identifications.

Back to the hotel for lunch and then off to the higher altitude Pokljuka plateau for the afternoon.



There was quite a well-marked path with interpretation boards on the short walk around the edge of the peat bog. Here Woodland Ringlets were abundant and we found and photographed a super, freshly emerged, Clouded Apollo butterfly, amongst others. The plants were in profusion in the meadows and included Bearded Bellflower, Dark Rampion and the rare Verticillate Lousewort and One-flowered Wintergreen. A botanist's treasure trove! Later from a roadside pond we were shown some Alpine Newts that were undoubtedly feeding upon the numerous tadpoles there. Our dragonfly enthusiasts were also happy to have had close views of Brilliant Emerald amongst others.

Returning to our hotel and stopping for photos of the traditional hay racks that are characteristic of the region we also had closer views of the Red-backed Shrikes on the wires. These were the first of many to be seen.

Our first full day had been varied, exciting and very satisfying and finished off with a wholesome meal and drinks from the bar. Some participants quickly learnt that "pivo" was the local word for beer!

#### Day 3

We were off to the alpine peak of Mount Mangart set in the Triglavski National Park. This involved a drive of nearly 2 hours but through spectacular scenery, along steep, narrow roads and for a while through a corner of Italy- passports not required though. For some of us this was to be a trip highlight. At over 2670m this impressive peak offered up truly alpine plants such as Mountain Avens, Gentians and some specialist mountain birds such as the Alpine Accentor, Water Pipit, Snow Finch and luckily a superb view of a Golden Eagle that swooped past us before landing on a crag. Tantalisingly we only found a clutch of 8 Ptarmigan eggs but not their parents! High altitude specialist butterflies included Dark-veined Whites and Dewy Ringlets, whilst for the orchid enthusiasts a small group of Vanilla Orchids was discovered.

Heading back to the van after our picnic lunch we took a different route down the slope and were treated to excellent views of two Alpine Marmots, their thick fur making them look perfectly suited to the harsher climate at that altitude. Hopping around were two Ring Ouzels that added further excitement for the group.

Back on the road and at a known location to our guide we stopped off to witness Milan leap after two individuals of the very rare and localised Horvath's Rock Lizard. These were enthusiastically received by all and photographs



taken whilst in the hand. Milan returned the individuals carefully back to the safety of their wall where they prefer the less sunny and cooler face that their relatives, the Wall Lizard avoid.

We returned to our hotel feeling elated after a superb day in the Alps with some brilliant views of a range of wildlife and stunning scenery. We'd also been lucky with the weather despite the rumbling thunder and nearby rain showers.

Day 4



Milan had been monitoring the weather forecast and advised us that in order to avoid heavy rain in the scheduled stop we should change plans and visit the lower lying lakes and woodland near the small town of Cernisko. We were grateful for his advice as we travelled past the original proposed site where heavy rain clouds were looming. We were excited to stop near the river and to go off in different directions to follow the specific interests of our group members. With Corncrake singing, Marsh Frogs hopping, Ruddy Darter darting and Pearly Heath flitting amongst the marshy vegetation we all found something to keep us happily occupied. The excitement was heightened when Milan found a Grass Snake that demonstrated its defensive behaviour of 'playing dead'. This had been preceded by excellent views of two Common Rosefinch that conveniently sang for us from a nearby bush.

After picnic lunch it was off into the nearby woods that offered up, amongst others, the Woodland Brown butterfly and some Red Helleborine and Lesser Butterfly Orchids. It was back down to the lake when the rain showers finally caught up with us and some of us had frustratingly fleeting glimpses of a Marsh Warbler in the downpour. By holding binoculars in one hand and the umbrella in the other, views of this elusive 'LBJ' were made, albeit briefly.

Onwards to our next accommodation, a Lodge outside the village



of Markovec. We arrived around 5.30pm to find some confusion with the rooms for some of our group. Following phone calls back to Ecotours Wildlife Holidays we resolved the situation with promises of specific compensation to the affected 3 members of the group. We were all offered free drinks on the house, and so, lubricated with some of the local spirits and wines, we settled down to our delicious meal of beef goulash, polenta and local wild mushrooms. We all retired to our rooms well fed and slightly merry.

#### Day 5

We were to have a very full and promising day ahead of us. In the morning we headed off to the famous Postonja Cave system. We expected it to be busy and we were not wrong. We had a timed entrance to the Caves and so joined the parties who boarded the small train into the heart of these impressive caverns. Our tour guide gave us some background to the geology and history of the caves and we were shown a wide variety of cave formations, all well illuminated and in good states of preservation. It had been an interesting morning but we were looking forward to our afternoon and evening 'entertainment'; hopefully sightings of Brown bears.

We were briefed about the use of the small bear hides and given strict instructions we were not to leave the hides once we had entered them - including no departures to answer calls of nature. With empty, 'emergency use' bottles and cameras at the ready we were split into 3 groups, each into different hides, two of which were about 30minutes drive away. We had paid 60 Euros extra for this optional trip but there were no guarantees of bear sightings. As it turned out two of the three groups were lucky but sadly the hide closest to the Lodge proved to be bear-less, despite having bears on the previous day.

Of the two lucky groups, one was visited by two separate individuals who stayed for about one and a half hours; the other had a succession of six bears in total including a mother and two cubs. The conversation later, back at the Lodge, was mixed with excitement and disappointment. We'd all hoped that we'd have had equally good views but in the end only half of the group had been lucky. Hey, that's wildlife watching!

#### Day 6

Just half an hour after leaving the Lodge the following morning, we crossed the border into Croatia. Our next stop was the World Heritage site Plitvice Lakes National Park. What we were not prepared for however were the number of visitors who also had the same idea. The Croatian school holidays had just started and so we found ourselves in the uncomfortable situation of moving, in places, along the narrow paths and boardwalks with the general flow of people behind us. This made our frequent stops for photography tricky and somewhat risky because we were in danger of being accidentally pushed over the edge. No matter, we did manage to find some great Dragonflies and damselflies including the Norfolk Hawker and Brilliant Emerald; butterflies included a brief and tantalising view of the Hungarian Glider. Perhaps the Dice Snake, waiting to ambush a passing fish fry, caused the greatest excitement especially with the other visitors on the boardwalk.





# Birding and Wildlife Holidays BIRDS, MAMMALS, BUTTERFLIES, DRAGONFLIES, PLANTS

We had a picnic lunch in a shady spot and managed to pick up Lesser-spotted Woodpecker and Collared Flycatcher whilst we were munching our ham rolls.

After lunch, and to save our legs, we journeyed first on two boats and later a bus back to our minivan. We were all ready for the welcome hot drink that driver Janos prepared for us. We all felt that the Park, with its waterfalls and clear blue lakes were very beautiful but the sheer numbers of people had spoiled the pleasure of it for us. Out of season it would be a very different experience and probably much more enjoyable.

We had another 2 or 3 hours before we reached our third and final destination so when Milan suggested we find a quieter spot to stop for a break we all jumped at the opportunity. We found a meadow that was rich in flora and consequently insects. Field Crickets, Shield Bugs and butterflies were in abundance but Odonata were scarce owing to the dry habitat. Never the less we were all grateful for the stop and the relative peace of the location after the more hectic pace of the Lakes. The numerous butterflies included Silver-studded Blue, Chestnut Heath and Twin-spot Fritillary

Back on the van and down to the coast to the small town of Starigrad where we were to stay for three nights. Our two-star hotel proved to be comfortable and well provided with all the usual facilities. We'd had a thirsty day and were grateful for the reasonably priced beers from the bar. Our meal was very substantial, indeed it proved to be the case at all our mealtimes.

#### Day 7

We were all glad that the weather had turned cloudy by the morning because Milan had warned us that the climb up the gorge into the Paklenica National Park could be extremely hot, and, in places quite steep and partially rocky. To raise the excitement level before we started out, Milan had caught a large legless Glass Lizard, much bigger than the UK's Slow Worm. He had found it just outside the hotel.

With the lower temperature we all managed the initially steep path but kept stopping for exciting and interesting species along the way. With Alpine Swifts swooping overhead, Hungarian Gliders, (black and white beauties that were relatively common), Balkan Green Lizard, Yellow Foxgloves and probably a Goldenring dragonfly we all had something to excite us. The best was yet to come when Milan presented us, first with a metre long Aesculapian Snake, and later with a Horn-nosed Viper. We would not have found these species without Milan's knowledge and expertise. He handled them proficiently and gave us a good opportunity to photograph them. After coffees and a toilet stop, together with a fleeting glimpse of a Sombre Tit, we slowly continued up the gorge to the Mountain Lodge where we consumed our lunch. One of our group rushed over to us because he'd spotted an Edible Dormouse (*Glis glis*) under the eaves of an outhouse. These cute, but devilish, rodents could be tempted out with apple but sadly they were not hungry and only a few of the party saw it fleetingly. However, several people had brief views of a Two-tailed Pasha butterfly as it flew past and we were able to photograph an impressive Woodland Grayling that posed obligingly on a length of rope.

By carefully walking back down the track we all managed to return to the van in one piece. It had been quite a long walk and when one's personal step counter showed we'd walked 14.7km we were not surprised. A small shop nearby did a roaring trade in ice creams. Milan insisted on a group photograph at the end and we all felt slightly triumphant at having completed the steep walk. Had the weather been hotter we'd probably have turned back sooner.

Our dragonfly enthusiasts had enjoyed the day but had not seen many of their targets and so we stopped for another 30 minutes in a spot alongside the river. At one point we had two of the party flat on their tummies, heads almost in the water with long-lensed cameras poised at some butterflies 'puddling' at the water's edge, including a Long-tailed Blue. We also had excellent views of a tiny Little Tiger Blue and a couple of Southern Commas. Our plant specialist was, as usual crouched down over a beautiful specimen ready with camera and macro lens poised and another member with binoculars was peering at a Peregrine chasing pigeons above the cliff. This summed up our group – interested in everything there was to find!



#### Day 8

The nearby island of Pag was to be our final destination of the trip. First off was an abortive attempt at locating Black-eared Wheatear which remained elusive. Next stop along a causeway between low lying fields produced a range of birds and some exciting insects, including Spotted Fritillary butterflies, but this was overshadowed by the excellent nature reserve known as Veliko Blato or 'Big Mud'. Here we all split off in different directions and luckily managed to locate Black Pennant, a localised rare Dragonfly and the even rarer BladeTail. Other highlights included Scarce Swallowtail, Pygmy Cormorant and Purple Heron. The elevated bird hide was greatly appreciated because the day had turned out to be much hotter than the previous one and the shade and added height was very welcome.

Further on we stopped briefly for views over Pag town before heading for our lunchtime spot at a small, but promising, pond where Milan knew we would find much to interest each of us. He was not wrong. Sitting quietly eating our lunch the group could watch the European Pond Terrapins and the Marsh Frogs being swarmed over by numerous Dragonfly and Damselflies. Nightingales and Golden Orioles were singing in the scrub behind the pond and the drier region produced new species for our enthusiastic plant photographer. The butterfly enthusiasts were not disappointed as Southern Gatekeeper and Eastern Bath White both made an appearance.

A final diversion to an ancient olive grove produced sightings of both Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail butterflies before we headed back to our hotel and a final substantial and tasty evening meal.

#### Day 9

We knew we had a 6hour journey, mainly on motorways, to reach the airport in time for our flight home. This meant we could not fit in a detour to the city to buy a few last minute souvenirs and gifts. Never mind, the airport shop provided that opportunity and so we boarded our flight to Stansted in a very relaxed mood, satisfied that we'd enjoyed an excellent holiday. To round off the trip, the lunchtime roadside stop provided a variety of butterflies, including Purple Emperor, Marbled Fritillary and Map butterfly.



We'd seen some fantastic scenery of stunning beauty, some amazing wildlife and had enjoyed each other's company in verv comfortable accommodation with good pleasant food and discussion. Milan had been an excellent guide and we felt in good, safe hands with our driver Janos. We all wanted to congratulate them on looking after us so professionally.

For the list makers amongst us we were very satisfied with our totals and all of us had seen 'lifers'. The final species totals across the entire group were Mammals: 8, Birds: 102, Reptiles: 12, Amphibians: 5, Butterflies: 63, Odonata: 24, Orchids: 14, Other Plants: In the hundreds!



Thank you Ecotours Wildlife Holidays for making it all happen. In the words of one of our group and said with a broad smile, "it had been the best holiday enjoyed in a very, very long time".



#### **Species List**

#### **BIRDS**

Mute Swan - Cygnus olor

Mallard - Anas platyrhynchos

Little Grebe - Tachybaptus ruficollis

Great Crested Grebe - Podiceps cristatus

White Stork - Ciconia ciconia

Great Cormorant - Phalacrocorax carbo

Pygmy Cormorant - Phalacrocorax pygmeus

Grey Heron - Ardea cinerea

Purple Heron - Ardea purpurea

Great Egret - Ardea alba

Little Egret - Egretta garzetta

Squacco Heron - Ardeola ralloides

Glossy Ibis - Plegadis falcinellus

Short-toed Snake-Eagle - Circaetus gallicus

Golden Eagle - Aquila chrysaetos

Common Buzzard - Buteo buteo

Eurasian Marsh-Harrier - Circus aeruginosus

Montagu's Harrier - Circus pygargus

Water Rail - Rallus aquaticus

Corn Crake - Crex crex

Eurasian Moorhen - Gallinula chloropus

Eurasian Coot - Fulica atra

Black-winged Stilt - Himantopus himantopus

Northern Lapwing - Vanellus vanellus

Common Ringed Plover - Charadrius hiaticula

Black-headed Gull - Chroicocephalus ridibundus

Yellow-legged Gull - Larus michahellis

Rock Pigeon - Columba livia

Common Wood-Pigeon - Columba palumbus

European Turtle-Dove - Streptopelia turtur

Eurasian Collared-Dove - Streptopelia decaocto

Alpine Swift - Apus melba

Common Swift - Apus apus

Eurasian Hoopoe - Upupa epops

European Bee-eater - Merops apiaster

Great Spotted Woodpecker - Dendrocopos major

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker - Dendrocopos minor

Eurasian Kestrel - Falco tinnunculus



## Birding and Wildlife Holidays BIRDS, MAMMALS, BUTTERFUES, DRAGONFLIES, PLANTS

Peregrine Falcon - Falco peregrinus

Red-backed Shrike - Lanius collurio

Woodchat Shrike - Lanius senator

Eurasian Golden Oriole - Oriolus oriolus

Eurasian Jay - Garrulus glandarius

Eurasian Magpie - Pica pica

Yellow-billed Chough - Pyrrhocorax graculus

Hooded Crow - Corvus cornix

Common Raven - Corvus corax

Crested Lark - Galerida cristata

Sky Lark - Alauda arvensis

Eurasian Crag-Martin - Ptyonoprogne rupestris

Barn Swallow - Hirundo rustica

Common House-Martin - Delichon urbicum

Coal Tit - Periparus ater

Sombre Tit - Poecile lugubris

Marsh Tit - Poecile palustris

Great Tit - Parus major

Eurasian Nuthatch - Sitta europaea

Goldcrest - Regulus regulus

Willow Warbler - Phylloscopus trochilus

Common Chiffchaff - Phylloscopus collybita

Western Bonelli's Warbler - Phylloscopus bonelli

Melodious Warbler - Hippolais polyglotta

Great Reed-Warbler - Acrocephalus arundinaceus

Sedge Warbler - Acrocephalus schoenobaenus

Marsh Warbler - Acrocephalus palustris

Eurasian Blackcap - Sylvia atricapilla

Garden Warbler - Sylvia borin

Sardinian Warbler - Sylvia melanocephala

Spotted Flycatcher - Muscicapa striata

European Robin - Erithacus rubecula

Common Nightingale - Luscinia megarhynchos

Collared Flycatcher - Ficedula albicollis

Common Redstart - Phoenicurus phoenicurus

Black Redstart - Phoenicurus ochruros

Whinchat - Saxicola rubetra

Northern Wheatear - Oenanthe oenanthe

Ring Ouzel - Turdus torquatus

Eurasian Blackbird - Turdus merula

Fieldfare - Turdus pilaris

Song Thrush - Turdus philomelos

Mistle Thrush - Turdus viscivorus

European Starling - Sturnus vulgaris

Alpine Accentor - Prunella collaris



Western Yellow Wagtail - Motacilla flava

Gray Wagtail - Motacilla cinerea

White Wagtail - Motacilla alba

Water Pipit - Anthus spinoletta

Tawny Pipit - Anthus campestris

Cirl Bunting - Emberiza cirlus

Corn Bunting - Emberiza calandra

Reed Bunting - Emberiza schoeniclus

Common Chaffinch - Fringilla coelebs

Eurasian Bullfinch - Pyrrhula pyrrhula

Common Rosefinch - Carpodacus erythrinus

European Greenfinch - Chloris chloris

Eurasian Siskin - Spinus spinus

European Goldfinch - Carduelis carduelis

Eurasian Linnet - Carduelis cannabina

European Serin - Serinus serinus

House Sparrow - Passer domesticus

Eurasian Tree Sparrow - Passer montanus

White-winged Snowfinch - Montifringilla nivalis

#### 102 species

#### **REPTILES**

European Pond Terrapin Emys orbicularis

Mediterranean House Gecko Hemidactylus turcicus

Dalmatian Algyroides Algyroides nigropunctatus

Balkan Green Lizard

European Green Lizard

Lacerta trilineata

Lacerta viridis

Horvath's Rock Lizard

Common Wall Lizard

Iberolacerta horvathii

Podarcis muralis

Podarcis siculus

Dalmatian Wall Lizard Podarcis melisellensis
European Glass Lizard Ophisaurus apodus
Aesculapian Snake Zamenis longissimus

Grass Snake Natrix natrix

Nose-horned Viper Vipera ammodytes

#### **AMPHIBIANS**

Alpine Newt Ichthyosaura alpestris

Common Toad Bufo bufo

Marsh Frog Pelophylax ridibundus



Edible Frog Pelophylax kl. Esculentus

#### **DRAGONFLIES**

Banded Demoiselle Calopteryx splendens
Beautiful Demoiselle Calopteryx virgo
Common Spreadwing Lestes sponsa
Dark Spreadwing Lestes macrostigma
Common Bluetail Ischnura elegans

Common Bluet Enallagma cyathigerum Azure Bluet Coenagrion puella Large Redeye Erythromma najas **Small Redeye** Erythromma viridulum Blue Featherleg Platycnemis pennipes Green-eyed Hawker Aeshna isoceles **Blue Emperor** Anax imperator **Lesser Emperor** Anax parthenope

Small Pincertail Onychogomphus forcipatus

Bladetail Lindenia tetraphylla **Brilliant Emerald** Somatochlora metallica Balkan Emerald Somatochlora meridionalis Four-spotted Chaser Libellula quadrimaculata Black-tailed Skimmer Orthetrum cancellatum White-tailed Skimmer Orthetrum albistylum Southern Skimmer Orthetrum brunneum **Ruddy Darter** Sympetrum sanguineum **Red-veined Darter** Sympetrum fonscolombii Common Darter Sympetrum striolatum **Broad Scarlet** Crocothemis erythraea **Black Pennant** Selysiothemis nigra

#### **BUTTERFLIES**

<u>Family</u> <u>Common Name</u> <u>Latin Name</u>

Papilionidae Clouded Apollo Parnassius mnemosyne

Swallowtail Papilio machaon
Scarce Swallowtail Iphiclides podalirius

Pieridae Brimstone Gonepteryx rhamni

Orange Tip Anthocharis cardamines

Clouded Yellow
Wood White (Note 1)

Black-veined White
Dark-veined White (Note 2)

Colias crocea
Leptidea sp.
Aporia crataegi
Pieris bryoniae



### Birding and Wildlife Holidays BIRDS MAMMALS BUTTERFLES DRAGONFLES PLANTS

Small White Pieris rapae
Southern Small White Pieris mannii
Eastern Bath White Pontia edusa

Nymphalidae Painted Lady Vanessa cardui

Red Admiral Vanessa atalanta
Small Tortoiseshell Aglais urticae
Peacock Aglais io

Comma Polygonia c-album
Southern Comma Polygonia egeg

Southern Comma Polygonia egea
Common Glider Neptis sappho
Hungarian Glider Neptis rivularis
Southern White Admiral Limenitis reducta
Map Butterfly Araschnia levana

**Purple Emperor** Apatura iris Two-tailed Pasha Charaxes jasius Silver-washed Fritillary Argynnis paphia Heath Fritillary (Note 3) Melitaea athalia False Heath Fritillary Melitaea diamina **Spotted Fritillary** Melitaea didyma Twin-spot Fritillary Brenthis hecate Marbled Fritillary Brenthis daphne Speckled Wood Pararge aegeria

Southern Gatekeeper Pyronia cecilia
Pearly Heath Coenonympha arcania
Small Heath Coenonympha pamphilus

Maniola jurtina

Chestnut Heath

Woodland Grayling

Woodland Ringlet

Dewy Ringlet

Woodland Brown

Wall Brown

Coenonympha glycerion

Hipparchia fagi

Erebia medusa

Erebia pandrose

Lopinga achine

Wall Brown Lasiommata megera
Marbled White Melanargia galathea

Lycaenidae Brown Argus Aricia agestis

Meadow Brown

Northern Brown Argus (Note 4) Aricia artaxerxes Blue Argus Aricia anteros Long-tailed Blue Lampides boeticus Holly Blue Celastrina argiolus Mazarine Blue Cyaniris semiargus Adonis Blue Polyommatus bellargus Common Blue Polyommatus icarus Meleager's Blue Polyommatus daphnis Small Blue Cupido minimus



### Birding and Wildlife Holidays BIRDS MAMMALS BUTTERFLES DRAGONFLES PLANTS

Silver-studded Blue Plebejus argus
Little Tiger Blue Tarucus balkanicus
Green Hairstreak Callophrys rubi
Small Copper Lycaena phlaeas

Riodinidae Duke of Burgundy Hamaeris lucina

Hesperidae Grizzled Skipper Pyrgus malvae

Large Grizzled Skipper Pyrgus alveus
Large Skipper Ochlodes sylanus
Small Skipper Thymelicus sylvestris
Essex Skipper Thymelicus lineola
Tufted Marbled Skipper Carcharodus flocciferus

#### 63 species

Note 1. One of three possible species (Wood White, Réal's Wood White, Fenton's Wood White). Reliable identification requires examination of male genitalia.

Note 2. Also known as Mountain Green-veined White

Note 3. Two much rarer species (Nickerl's Fritillary & Assmann's Fritillary) can only be separated from Heath Fritillary by examining male genitalia.

Note 4. Also known as Mountain Argus