

## Visit to Slovenia. 3-12 May 2022

Our visit had been arranged for us by Ecotours Wildlife Holidays. While our principal aspiration and objective was birdwatching, we had declared our additional wider interest in all aspects of wildlife, scenery, culture and custom.

We were met at the airport by Milan Vogrin, who was to be our guide, and who proved to be an excellent and informative companion throughout our journey. From Ljubljana we drove through a splendid, naturally forested mountain landscape towards Maribor, and into a more intensely managed agricultural countryside. Milan provided a critical explanation of the agricultural system in the area, which imposes the successive harvesting of grass throughout the year as silage fodder for corralled animals. This initial journey provided two early impressions of the landscape, which prevailed throughout, and which applied equally in town and country. The landscape was without fences, and both town and country were free from the untidy scourge of litter.

During our first evening made visit to the old and fascinating town of Ptuj

We were to reside for three comfortable nights at the Hotel Roskar close to Ptuj.

On our first full day, we headed initially to the uplands of the Pohorje Mountains to seek Woodpeckers and Owls among the smaller woodland species. While the Woodpeckers proved elusive, the noisy Pygmy Owl was more obliging, as were many other diurnal birds. In addition to mixed deciduous, spruce and bog forest habitats, our visit to the Pohorje Mountains provided an interesting glimpse into the local history of resistance during the Second World War. As early afternoon imposed a real threat of thunderstorm, we returned to the lowlands and to some excellent wetland birdwatching at lower altitudes.

Our next morning was to enjoy some very productive bird searching in the floodplain of the Drava River, initially close to Ptuj. In the afternoon we drove to Zgornja Gorica, and to a fascinating and splendidly stocked botanic garden. In addition to a remarkable collection of ponds, plants, and woodland delights, this garden celebrates the legend of Parzival and the search for the Holy Grail with the knights of the Round Table. It provides an excellent location for outdoor education, and for a pleasing sunlit location for lunch. We later continued our bird hunting elsewhere on the floodplain and on Ptuj Lake.

Our first three days had been very satisfying, and though some of our target species had been elusive, Milan explained that the breeding season for some, especially the woodpeckers was already well advanced, and that male birds at this stage were less willing to respond to calls.

The next morning brought a change in the climate and a long drive across the country towards the Julian Alps. We paused for an additional brief walk before leaving the Drava Valley, and were rewarded with Golden Oriole and Short-toed Treecreeper. The rain increased as we proceeded, and we took the decision to make our visit to Bled and the lake of the same name, on this day, thus releasing our final morning to an excursion closer to Ljubljana.

Though mist-shrouded and gloomy, Lake Bled was beautiful and hugely atmospheric, and we lingered at lakeside where the shoreline water was yellow with fallen pollen. In the swirling mists and the gloom of a leaden sky, the Church of the Assumption, and Bled Castle high on the cliff, were all the more atmospheric. The weather did not improve as we gained altitude among the alpine scenery, and we took the decision to make our approach to the day's destination by making a short detour into Italy. As we enjoyed a chilly late lunch beside an upland lake, we enjoyed the company and some splendid views of Crested Tit. Our journey continued back into Slovenia through locations that still carried the ruins and the remains of battles and defences of both of the World Wars.

Our destination for the next two nights was to be Bovec, where we found our lodging at Hotel Alp. The evening provided a break in the gloomy weather, and a chance to become familiar with the small, charming town of Bovec and its sylvan surroundings. The tourist season had not yet begun, and we were ahead of the crowds, though Milan indicated that it became a place of touristic throng and clamour during the peak season.

Our aspired highlight for this leg of the visit was to be the high altitude species on Mount Kanin, access to which could only be by cable car. The morning climate had once more deteriorated, with steady rain and low cloud that completely obscured views of the nearby summits, including Mount Kanin. Though sighting of Golden Eagle, Alpine Accentor and Alpine Chough seemed an unlikely prospect, we checked the cable car anyway, and not surprisingly found that it was out of service, an imposition hopefully imposed by the climatic conditions.

Instead, the beautiful valley of the Soca River became our chosen route to the highest mountain pass in Slovenia. The water of the Soca River is extraordinarily clear, and its purity is further visually enhanced by the tinge of turquoise that it absorbs from the limestone through which it flows. The huge Trout for which it is renowned were readily visible.

Atmospheric visibility during our time at the summit of the pass remained low, and the snow underfoot reminded that winter was not long gone. After returning to Bovec we prospected a nearby wooded valley, but though the climate was clearing it was late in the day and birds

were not receptive to our calls. The evening scenery became an increasing delight, and an early evening walk through the town rewarded us with exceptional views of Wryneck.

Perchance the previous evening we had called upon a small bar at the edge of town to enjoy a glass of the local pivo, and had enjoyed the brief company of group of young ladies who were celebrating the impending marriage of one of their group. A 'Hen Party' in British parlance. After our evening walk we were to encounter this same party in another, very lively bar at the centre of town that served a most remarkable range of local beers. It was a very jolly occasion.

Our next morning dawned clear, and the summit of Mount Kanin sparkled against a blue sky. Though our intended programme indicated a southerly travel day, we quickly agreed to postpone our departure if the cable car was in operation. To our disappointment it was not, and closer examination of its timetables clearly indicated that it would not be in operation until the commencement of its summer schedules. Thus, there could have been no opportunity to make the ascent and to enjoy the aspired high altitude species, the principal purpose of our visit to this location. This would have been one of the highlights of the tour, and its loss was a major disappointment.

We returned to our programme and headed south through the dramatic Soca Valley first to Kobarid (formerly Caporetto), where we made a visit to the museum that houses wonderful and graphic exhibits of the battles that took place over a dreadful period of 29 months during the First World War. This had been perhaps the greatest mountain battle in human history, and the suffering and hardship, especially during the winter months, was abundantly evident in the exhibits and the photographs. The museum is wonderfully presented, and should not be missed by anyone who may be visiting the Soca Valley.

Our journey continued to Sabotin Mountain where we made our ascent on foot through a sunlit, forested landscape, through meadows, along track and road, and through carefully preserved First World War trenches. The breezy summit afforded splendid views into the gorge of the Soca River far below. Once more, our target species proved elusive.

Our journey concluded at Trnje, close to the township of Pivka, where we were to find lodging for our final four nights. Our guest house was a converted farmhouse, set in an agricultural landscape. It was a wonderful location, friendly and accommodating in the extreme, and with a considerable bonus of a wide selection of home-made spirit beverages flavoured with fruits, herbs, flowers and plants obtained from the nearby forests.

We dedicated our first day to the exploration of the diverse shoreline and environs of Lake Cerknica. This seasonal lake is fed by underground springs, and is Slovenia's largest lake when full during the winter months. During the summer, when at its lowest level, or even dry, the fertile silts of the lake bed are utilised for agricultural production. We enjoyed a very productive day which included good observations of birds of the wetlands, the fringing hinterland, the adjacent agricultural locations, the nearby forest and the seasonal islands. In

the early evening we enjoyed the company of orchids and lizards during our walk through the village and to its splendid church.

Our next day took us first to Postojna and to a location that would provide few sightings of birds, but an introduction to a habitat of new and different character. The nearby cave system is one of the largest in the world, and has been afforded UNESCO World Heritage status. Though the term cavernous would be an accurate description, it would not do justice to the immensity of these caverns. A train provided transport for the first half mile or so into the limestone mountain, passing calcite formation, of huge proportions. At its terminus, we passengers disembarked for a guided tour of some of the accessible inner caverns.

We were awed by the immensity of the caverns, of the natural sculpture of the columns, curtains and pillars, and could only imagine the probable initial reactions of the first individual to view this spectacle, no doubt by the flickering light of a guttering candle.

After returning to the bright sunlight, we returned briefly to the subdued light of another cavern to make our acquaintance with the Olm. This remarkable troglodyte aquatic Salamander is sightless and predatory, may go without food for periods up to ten years, and may live for seventy or eighty years without doing very much during the entire time.

We returned to Cerknica in the afternoon where we called to the elusive Corncrake. He called in return, but revealed neither face nor feather. We visited an area of semi-mature beech woodland to call for the equally elusive Black Woodpecker. He too returned our call, but though not far distant, we were unable to tempt him into view.

Our final full day would provide our opportunity to visit Slovenia's only connection with the Adriatic Sea. Close to the major port city of Koper, the authorities had set aside part of the former estuary for the benefit of its wildlife. The Scokjanski-zatok Nature Reserve has been partly enclosed as a freshwater habitat, and partly open as a brackish lagoon. Our morning visit provided an experience of considerable abundance, and we were impressed by the clear evidence of careful management, of scientific monitoring, and of its value and regular use as an educational facility.

Our final visit took us to the border with Croatia and to the Secovlje Salinas. Here we were treated to considerable bonus in the form of species not hitherto encountered. On a very hot afternoon we walked the paths and trails of the former salt pans, to enjoy many bonus encounters with flora and fauna.

On our return journey to Ljubljana we made a woodland pause to make a search for the elusive Nose-horned Viper. It remained elusive, and despite a dedicated search, none came into view.

We have reflected upon an excellent and most enjoyable visit to Slovenia. Though we were unable to locate some of our target species, we were well satisfied with a list of 140 bird

species, a number of bonus species not on the anticipated list, and a number of mammals, reptiles, amphibians and the incomparable Olm.

There were only two aspects of the trip that caused some dismay and disappointment, that we believe could have been avoided, and perhaps can be avoided for future clients.

We were disappointed not to have been able to make use of the cable car and to make the ascent of Mount Kanin. As we were to discover the facility had been closed until the start of the summer season, a fact that would have been clear if it had been checked. With this knowledge perhaps it should never have appeared on our itinerary, and perhaps an alternative location might have provided similar habitat.

We were distressed over the debacle that surrounded the imposed additional payment of a substantial sum that had resulted from confusion relating to currency exchange. Having done everything that was asked of us, we felt that this additional imposition was not of our creation. If such currency confusion should be of future anticipation, perhaps clients should be alerted to the risk, or perhaps they could be afforded clear advice that would ensure that it did not happen.

However, these problems did not detract from a splendid tour, which we both enjoyed enormously. We thank you most sincerely for setting it up, and in particular we are grateful to Milan for sharing his knowledge, for his expert guidance, and for his excellent company.

Ian Tillotson

Iain Prentice

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