

# Birding Croatia

## Sampling Spring migration along the Dalmatian coast



Town of Pučišća. Brač

I knew I was treading in undiscovered territory with the idea of a birding trip in Croatia. For starters, I could not find a single country-specific bird guide (at least, in English) nor a site guide. Not a single annotated checklist was published by any of the usual sources. Fortunately, since my wife Liza is proficient with Birder's Diary software, she could generate a roughly applicable list for the country - You have to start somewhere! Likewise, my search in tour catalogs of birding trips to Croatia came up short. Fortunately, a Google search produced results. A company called Val Tours offers one-week birding tours in late April and May, then again in September, during the spring and fall migrations respectively. Since I do not speak Croatian, it was

fortunate that there were web pages in several languages including English. During our trip we would find that people working in the tourism sector in Dalmatia spoke English (not to mention German given the waves of visitors from Austria and Germany who descend on Croatia and elsewhere in the Mediterranean in the Summer).

So how did we come up with the idea for such a trip in the first place? Well, my wife's paternal grandparents were originally from the Dalmatian island of Brač just off the coast near Split, the second largest city of Croatia after Zagreb, the capital. For that reason, we made a trip the prior year. One other reason is that we found a bicycle tour offered by VBT that visited two islands, one of which was Brač our ultimate destination, while the other was Hvar, a popular tourist destination. During that trip, I took the opportunity to bird when we had some free time during the cycling tour. I managed to come up with some interesting birds on the island of Hvar including Sardinian Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush and Wood Chat Shrike near the Hotel Podstine, European Bee Eater west of Jelsa, and on Brač European Turtle Dove. There seemed to be some potential for a more focused bird tour of Croatia, particularly of Dalmatia. I felt a challenge to bird this little-known country in the eastern Mediterranean. And so we returned to Brač a year later.

The timing for our subsequent trip would be Spring migration, namely late April 2011. We flew to Zadar via Frankfurt to begin our trip and two weeks later we would return home from Split. The key feature of this trip would be the week-long bird tour, but we would have free time both before and after the tour. Prior to the tour we spent a day driving to the Plitvice Lakes National Park and another day in old town Šibenik, between Zadar and Split along the coast. After the tour we planned several days on the island of Brač to visit the town of Selca again.

The tour itinerary was based in two charming coastal resort towns, namely Biograd na Moru located 20 minutes south of Zadar and Trogir just five minutes from Split International Airport. The island of Pag north of Zadar was the first full day of the tour, followed by a day at Vransko Lake and nearby foothills. The day after was a transfer from Biograd to Trogir with the day spent enroute visiting the lakes and waterfalls in Krka





Krka National Park

National Park. Our first full day from Trogir was spent in the local coastal mountains with splendid views of Split in the distance. The following day we followed the course of the Cetina River from near its source below the Dinara Mountains by the Bosnian border to its mouth squeezing through a spectacular canyon at Omiš. The final full day of the itinerary originally was to target montane birds of Biokovo near the Makarska Riviera, but the opportunity for a pelagic trip presented itself and the weather was favorable, so we traveled to the island of Lastovo instead.

Our day trip from Zadar to the Plitvice Lakes National Park was not only a scenic diversion, but also an opportunity to see some of the birds of the Dinaric Alps. The travertine chaos of waterfalls emanating from the tiered lakes in the mountainous karst of limestone and dolomite in central Croatia provided our only chance to experience the beech, spruce and fir forest of higher elevations. Some interesting birds seen here included Eurasian Nuthatch, Jay, Magpie, Hooded Crow, Common Raven, Coal Tit, Common Blackbird (thrush), Song Thrush, Blackcap, and Chaffinch. The next day we would see Common (Eurasian) Kestrel nesting in the fortification above the old town in Šibenik. Meanwhile, meandering in old town Zadar or near our accommodations at the Villa Valentina we encountered numerous birds typical of Dalmatian cities: Eurasian Collared-Dove, Swift, Blackbird, Hooded Crow, Starling, Greenfinch, and along the waterfront, Yellow-legged Gull.

Val Tours provided a transfer from our accommodations in Zadar to Biograd na Moru where our tour commenced. We were joined on the tour by Ray Tipper, a bird photographer and guide with Avian Adventures, who was scouting the area for a potential tour to be offered by his company. We met our guide Robert Crnković at dinner and discussed the itinerary and various target birds. The next day, our first full day of the trip, we made an excursion to the island of Pag. Our first stop was at the Veliko Blato (large marsh) where we spied Garganey, Shoveler, Ruff, Teminck's Stint, Kentish Plover, and Black-winged Stilt through the spotting scope. Nearby, we saw a Yellow Wagtail (Feldegg subspecies). In the distance along a rock wall, we could just make out a Rock Partridge. Our next destination was Malo Blato (small marsh). In the vicinity of the marsh and adjacent fields we enjoyed some special birds including Montagu's Harrier, Pygmy Cormorant, Glossy Ibis, Great-crested Grebe, Sardinian Warbler, Black-eared Wheatear, Corn Bunting, Little Owl, Tawny Pipit, and Stone Curlew. We proceeded further north toward the town of Pag. Enroute we encountered Grey Heron and Griffon Vulture by the roadside. At Kolanjsko blato the chirping of numerous Spanish Sparrows among the campers drowned out all other sounds. Wood Chat Shrike, Kestrel, Little Grebe, Coot, and a distant Long-legged Buzzard were found in the neighboring fields and ponds. On our drive back out we enjoyed scenic views of the town of Pag and mountainous Velebit National Park in the distance. Just south of town we were surprised to find a Great-spotted Cuckoo pair by the roadside.



Griffon Vulture



Hoopoe

We headed to nearby Vrana Lake (Vransko Jezero) the second day of the tour. In the canyons and foothills to the east we found Hoopoe and Rock Partridge along the road, Rock Nuthatch and Blue Rock Thrush among the limestone cliffs, Subalpine Warbler singing throughout, plus Black-eared Wheatear, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Turtle Dove, and a migrating Red-footed Falcon. From the overlook far above the lake we had distant views of Short-toed Eagle while Black-eared Wheatear flew around the parking lot. Once we descended back to the lake, we visited the banding (ringing) station where our guide works. We heard Cetti's

Warbler and Reed Warbler adjacent to the marsh. In fields nearby we saw Montagu's Harrier coursing low while Zitting Cisticola sang from precarious perches on long tufts of grass. In the bushes we had glimpses of Whitethroat.

And on the lake itself we saw Mute Swan and Pygmy Cormorant. On our way back to Biograd we found a Purple Heron along a small canal and Common Buzzard nearby. Back in Biograd we enjoyed a stroll along the waterfront during which we encountered Yellow-legged Gull and a lone Common Tern. In town there were Blackbird and Swift, while Serin was outside the hotel in nearby trees on the grounds.



Calandra Lark

The next day was a transition from the coast near Zadar and Biograd to that near Split and Trogir. We headed southeast toward Šibenik, then inland to the plains near Drniš. In fields dotted with Mediterranean scrub we sought a variety of larks, buntings and pipits. We were rewarded with stunning views of Calandra Lark, Short-toed Lark, Cirl Bunting, Tawny Pipit, and Linnet atop small bushes or on the ground. In the distance, we heard Cuckoo, as we would on several occasions during this trip. On the way to Krka National Park, we stopped at a canyon bisecting the plain. Here we saw Rock Pigeon inhabiting cliff faces in a natural setting (for once!). Jackdaws were also nearby in the canyon, while a Hoopoe was seen by the roadside and a Black-eared Wheatear perched up close to the our vehicle.

We spent the afternoon at various venues in Krka National Park. The first stop was Roški Slap about midway along the Krka River. Here we both saw Gray and White Wagtail around the old mill. Along the forest trail we saw Blackcap and heard Golden Oriole and Long-tailed Tit. The boardwalk here afforded terrific panoramas of the falls cascading down a sprawling creek emptying into the river. From the boardwalk we saw Gray Heron and Mallard with House Martin overhead. Chaffinch was ubiquitous throughout the park. After visiting a wine shop in Skradin, we saw a small nesting Swallow colony under a covered passageway. Back at the vehicle, a Great Tit popped up in the parking lot. We then headed to Skradinski Buk for the most spectacular waterfalls in the park. Among the waterfalls, wagtails were frequently seen. At the mill, we visited an ethnographic museum depicting traditional agrarian life in this canyon. Among the structures, Blue Rock Thrush was a common profile up on the roof. In the air, Swift could be spied soaring high over the river.

We finally left the national park headed for our next base for the remaining portion of the tour in the charming harbor town Trogir near Split. On the way in, we stopped on the limestone slopes above the coast where we heard and saw Corn Bunting. Here we also heard Rock Partridge calling from across the canyon. The fragrance of sage was omnipresent all along the coast and two species of Cistus (rock rose) grew wild throughout the area. Alpine Swift flew overhead and above the ridge we gazed at another Short-toed Eagle. We settled into our cozy accommodations at the Hotel Tragos nestled in the center of old town Trogir.

The next morning, we drove across the coastal mountains back to the interior side. At a church near Labin, our objective was a known nest site of Sombre Tit, a specialty of the area. We were rewarded with fantastic views of this bird. We also saw Linnet, Great Tit and heard Cuckoo once again. With the Dalmatian coast spread out below us, we trekked up the hills to the lip of a canyon. Here we found the hillsides thick with Subalpine Warbler. Our reason for coming up here, however, was to find a Eurasian Eagle Owl on its nest. It was a very odd sight in that the owl seemed to be resting on its side?! Thereafter, we drove out to the end of the island Čiovo across from Trogir and enjoyed a picnic lunch on a bench next to the chapel at Gospa od Prizidnice overlooking the Adriatic. On the way out, we stopped at a wetland beneath the approach to the airport runway where we saw a Curlew Sandpiper in alternate plumage - the reddish-purple bird was quite a sight! Around the other side of the bay, we saw a distant Arctic Loon all by itself. We returned to the hotel where we enjoyed Dalmatian specialties for dinner including stuffed bell peppers.



Curlew Sandpiper

The following day we enjoyed a journey down the Cetina River from its source near the highest point in Croatia, namely Dinara Mountain (which lends its name to the range, the Dinaric Alps), to its mouth at Omiš south of Split. Our first stop was at Lemeš Pass where we spotted Northern Wheatear and Blue Rock Thrush. Best of all, however, we had soul-satisfying views of Rock Partridge in bright sunlight! Approaching the town of Cetina, we found Hoopoe, Eurasian Jay, White Wagtail, Magpie, Mistle Thrush, and Blue Rock Thrush. A lone Common Crane interrupted its migration for a rest in a field by the river where Montagu's Harrier hunted flying low and Skylark was also found. A small flock of Eurasian Tree Sparrow flew over the church in Cetina. At an intersection of farm roads,



Cetina Valley

Red-footed Falcon made quite a show with up to ten hunting from telephone lines over fields before resuming their migration north. At Peručko Lake, a reservoir along the Cetina River, we had distant views of Goosander. Just off the highway, we drove through a scrub habitat with Wood Lark and Tree Pipit, but we dipped on Red-rumped Swallow where it frequently nests under a highway culvert. Further along the highway, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk were hiding from a Peregrine Falcon. After crossing the coastal mountains north of Biokovo, we descended down hair-pin turns (reminiscent of the Amalfi drive in southern Italy) to the coast highway. The next stop was Omiš with the narrows nearby. The cliffs were favored by climbers, naturally, but also by Crag Martin. Our full day out was completed with a walking tour of Diocletian's Palace and the old town of Split before we returned to Trogir.



Audouin's Gull

The final day of our tour originally was supposed to visit Biokovo, a tall coastal mountain east of Split. However, our guide Robert offered us the opportunity to make a pelagic trip out to Lastovo Island instead. This possibility intrigued us as it presented the opportunity to see just a few species, but special ones indeed, namely Cory's (Skopoli's) Shearwater, Yelkouan's Shearwater, and Audouin's Gull, a pelagic gull not found near the coast. And we would see some of these birds skimming low over the Mediterranean Sea. In order to get to Lastovo Island, we would pass between the near islands on a 70-mile journey each way! Fortunately, unlike pelagic trips on the open ocean, this trip was blessed with the mirror-smooth waters of the Mediterranean. The most disturbance we experienced was from the wake of the ferries transiting between the islands and the mainland. We encountered the first shearwaters just beyond the island of Hvar. After passing the Pelješac Peninsula and passing between the islands of Korčula and Vis, Lastovo finally appeared on the horizon. Upon arrival, we met the park superintendent who would accompany us in the National Park. While the boat was refueled, we watched Swift, Swallow, and House Martin flying over the small bay. We then saw Yellow-legged Gull and Yelkouan's Shearwater flying above a small, rocky islet. Although well protected deep in the rocks, their nest sites do not protect them from rats and other introduced predatory mammals, so the park staff have worked hard to reduce their impact, if not eradicate such mammals all together. We left this area to head for a group of islets to the east where the Audouin's and Yellow-legged Gulls nest. On the way, we stopped to view a Peregrine Falcon way up on a cliff face. The female appeared as if out of nowhere, causing nearby birds to explode into the air. We moved on to the gulls soon afterward. With the gulls circling our small boat, it would seem easy to get a good photo of each. But from a moving vessel the task is easier said than done! Thereafter we enjoyed lunch in the main town of Lastovo with the nearly ubiquitous Subalpine Warbler and Blackcap nearby before heading back to Trogir.

The next morning we said our goodbyes to our guide and tour company proprietor grateful for their hospitality, flexibility, and patience. We then left Trogir to head to Split to catch a ferry to Supetar on the island of Brač. There we spent the final few days of our trip based in the small harbortown Postire on the north shore. We saw a number of interesting birds including Turtle Dove,



Turtle Dove

Eurasian Collared Dove, Great Tit, House Martin, Blackbird, Chaffinch, White Wagtail, House Sparrow, and Spanish Sparrow while walking through town along the coast. In Pučišća (try saying that three times fast!), we saw a couple distant cranes migrating north over the island on the way to their breeding grounds. The best birding on the island was in Vidova Gora, the highest point in the Dalmatian Islands. This park had a spectacular view of the mainland and other islands from the top. It also had a rich variety of birds including Coal Tit, Golden Oriole, Serin, Woodchat Shrike, Pied Flycatcher, and Mistle Thrush. Hoopoe and Cuckoo were heard once again here. We crowned a successful tour with a dinner at our favorite restaurant Konoba Stori Gušti in the tiny settlement of Dol before returning by ferry to the mainland for our flight home.

If you are interested in seeing more photos from this trip, check out the photo gallery assembled by my wife Liza at: <http://aves.org/croatia11/>. Liza also posted our trip birdlist: <http://aves.org/croatia11/birds.html>. Croatian bird tour itineraries can be found at [www.croatiabirding.com](http://www.croatiabirding.com).

-Robert Weissler (article and photos)



Krka National Park



Trogir