

Birding Abroad – Albania – Hidden Gem of the Balkans

29 April to 6 May 2025

Albania emerged from Communist isolation in 1991, and since then this once forgotten corner of south-east Europe has seen burgeoning tourist numbers keen to discover its natural and cultural wonders. Only a third larger than Wales, most of the country rises into beautiful mountains, clad in mixed woodland, with more Mediterranean-like habitat to the south. The sparkling Adriatic coastline stretches for over 400 km, sheltering some of Europe's finest lagoons, which form part of the Adriatic Flyway, a major migratory corridor through the Balkans for waterbirds. More traditional agricultural practices have persisted, preserving rich birdlife in the countryside.

Our tour was aimed at exploring some of Albania's key habitats, from rolling pastoral hills and naturally wild river valleys to the higher mountains of the central and southern regions of the country, as well as the important coastal wetlands. With spring migration still in progress, we also hoped to encounter a nice selection of passage birds en-route to more northerly breeding grounds.

The group comprised Ian and Chris Brookes, Penny Chambers, Anne Clarke, Steve Davies, John Dibbs, Gary Foyle, Kathleen Gallagher, Keith and Liz Reynolds, Bob and Pat Martin and Jean Meldrum. Lance and Nick were the Birding Abroad leaders, and we were accompanied throughout by our Albanian birding friend Mirjan Topi.



Tuesday 29 April: Lance and Nick met Mirjan and our coach driver at Tirana airport ready to welcome group members on the two incoming flights from London's Heathrow and Stansted airports, which were due to arrive within one hour of each other. Unfortunately, the Stansted

flight was delayed by nearly three hours and so some of the group went for lunch (a rather grand offering too!) upon arrival in Tirana. Slightly later than originally planned the whole group were united and after warm introductions all around, we set off south along main roads through the rapidly developing coastal plain from where we gradually climbed inland into less densely populated countryside. Here we passed the Vjose river valley, only recently declared a “Wild River National Park”, the wide river flowing from its source in the Greek mountains through Albania to the Adriatic Sea without interruption from dams or hydro-electric plants, a truly natural course with deep canyons and wide meanders.



A short stop at a service station enabled us to have a quick look over neighbouring fields where we noted a Western Marsh-harrier, Crested Lark, Zitting Cisticola and a few Spanish Sparrows. The Kurvelesh mountain range, which we were set to explore the next day, came into view and soon afterwards we arrived in Gjirokaster, where we checked-in to a superbly located family run hotel. We had our evening meal at a nice restaurant set along one of the cobbled streets of the pretty old town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Wednesday 30 April: We had breakfast at 7.30 am, with Common Nightingale and Eurasian Golden Oriole singing in nearby trees and several Red-rumped Swallows circling overhead. We were soon away north along the Drino valley, a tributary of the Vjose, passing Tepelena, a small fortress town, where Lord Byron stayed in 1809 during his Grand European Tour, hosted by Ali Pasha Tepelena, the powerful ruler of southern Albania. The weather was warm and sunny as we turned west into the Kurvelesh mountains and onto minor roads, their verges covered in wildflowers dominated by yellow Jerusalem Sage. We stopped first at a small reservoir where we had a short walk noting Woodchat Shrike, Cirl Bunting and close views of two Eastern Subalpine Warblers, one shown in the photograph below.



Hooded Crows flew over regularly a species which was to become a common and familiar daily sight. A European Turtle-dove was singing and a Weasel was a nice mammal addition. Both Early Purple and Tongue Orchids were growing in the garrigue, nice indicators of the rich plant diversity all around. Further into the mountains several Black-eared Wheatears perched at the roadside and scanning the rocky cliffs produced Eurasian Crag Martins with singles of both Blue Rock-thrush and Sardinian Warbler. Christ's Thorn and Judas Trees added lovely pink blossom colours to the remote hillsides as we ascended to 1100m above sea level and to drier more sparsely vegetated pastures. Here a pleasant walk around a coll yielded Tawny Pipit, Common Stonechat and Northern Wheatears with a flock of 25 Yellow-billed Choughs which flew on further up the mountain. Our coach driver did a great job of negotiating the narrow and winding roads as we descended a few hundred metres for a leisurely lunch of fine traditional fayre at a once abandoned village which is now enjoying a resurgence through eco-tourism. Here we had stunning views over a section of the impressive Nivica canyon, which at

40 km long is one of Europe's longest. By 2.50 pm we were away again and soon taking another walk in the hills, where we enjoyed views of two Golden Eagles, Short-toed Snake-eagle, Woodlark, a couple of Whinchat, Common Whitethroat, a pair of Black-eared Wheatears (this time of the black-throated form), a Little Owl, Eurasian Jay, Woodchat Shrike and yet more Cirl Buntings.

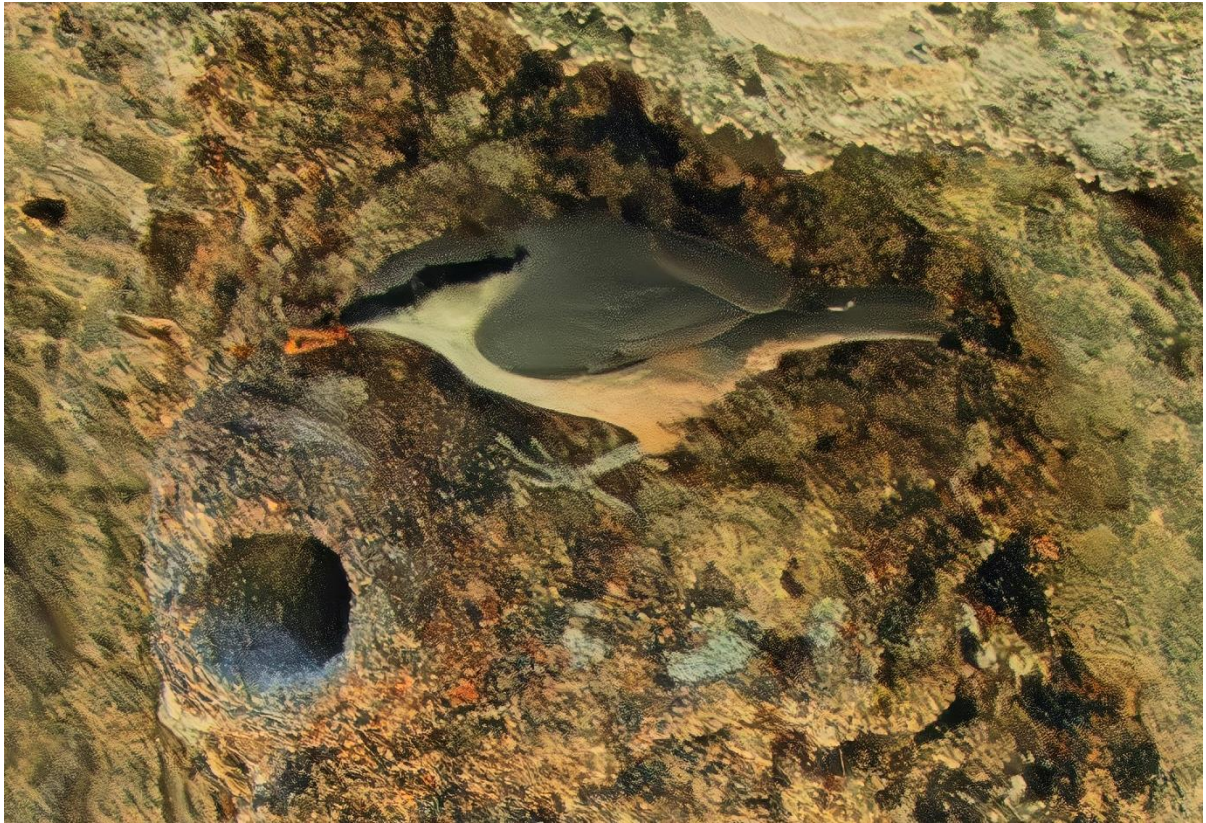
Butterflies seen today included Brimstone (4), Orange-tip (6), Painted Lady (1), Wall Brown (5), White Admiral (1), Brown Argus (3), Common Swallowtail (1), Gatekeeper (1), Clouded Yellow (3) and Common Blue (1). Marsh Frog was an amphibian new for our list.

After a lovely day in the highlands, it was time to make our way back to Gjirokaster where we later enjoyed another fine evening meal at a restaurant in the old town.

Thursday 1 May: We were up for breakfast at 7.00 am and away an hour later, this time heading south along the Drino valley to explore various gorges in the wider region. A pleasant walk in one such habitat produced at least five Black Storks which gave terrific views circling overhead and resting on the crags, two of which are shown below.



Common Ravens were guarding their almost fully grown young and a Peregrine Falcon swooped overhead, with cliffs hosting several pairs of Common Kestrels and Eurasian Crag Martins. Here too, though often overlooked were a few Rock Doves, their features being as close to pure as possible. Our guide pointed out the nest of a Western Rock Nuthatch and watching from a safe distance we observed the adult making repeated returns to the nest, constructed of mud with a small entrance hole as shown overleaf.



Spanish Sparrows chatted away noisily, and several pairs of Eastern Subalpine Warbler and Common Whitethroat were on territory. A slightly deeper song alerted us to the presence of a singing Eastern Orphean Warbler which gave nice views as did an inquisitive Sombre Tit shown below.



A fine Egyptian Vulture dazzled in the brilliant sunshine as it passed overhead.



The Balkan population of Egyptian Vulture is in long term decline due largely to inadvertent (and deliberate) poisoning and electrocution on power lines. Fewer than 50 pairs remain

Later in the morning we headed across the Drino valley and east into the highlands. Several European Bee-eaters were on roadside wires, and a male Red-backed Shrike was noted as we ascended to 1230m in the rockier and sparsely vegetated Parku Natyrori Zagorise from where we could see the snow-peaked mountains near the Greek border away to the south-east. Here we had a pleasant picnic lunch, joined by more local tourists enjoying the scenery. A large flock of at least 150 Yellow-billed Choughs spiraled away and several Common Buzzards were seen, with a single Golden Eagle soaring in the distance. A walk amongst the high pastures strewn with boulders and edged with steep crags led us to a stunning spot where we watched first one then a second Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush in display, with a male Blue Rock-thrush also in the area, one of the few times we can recall seeing both species occupying over-lapping territories. Three Black Redstarts were surprisingly our only ones of the trip, though Red-rumped Swallows were again everywhere from valley bottom to the higher ground (as they were every day of the tour), some perhaps still on passage. As we drove back down the hillsides, we stopped to observe another male Red-backed Shrike.

Butterflies new for the trip today included Red Admiral (1), Small Tortoiseshell (1), Black-veined White (5) and Small Copper (1), whilst wildflowers included Wild Tulip, Monkey Orchid and Few-flowered Orchid. Common Newts were noted in a highland pool.

A male Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush posed nicely for the group



Wild Tulips in the mountains

We were back at our hotel around 3.30 pm and met half an hour later for a sightseeing walk around Gjirokaster town and up to the old castle. We learned about the history of the region and the main empires from Byzantine to Ottoman who had ruled here during various periods of history. There was much nostalgia on show with some stores selling paraphernalia from the communist rule of Enver Hoxha from 1944 to 1985. Lots of artwork was on sale, with some replicating Edward Lear's famous painting of Gjirokaster's aqueduct (which was dismantled in the 1930s), an amazing feat engineering, feeding water into the fortress town from neighbouring mountains. Only a small section, known as the Pasha Bridge remains. Some of the group went inside the old castle to learn more about its history.

Later we enjoyed another fine evening meal in the old town centre.

Friday 2 May: This morning we had breakfast and said farewell to our splendid hosts after a lovely stay and their genuine helpfulness. Sunny skies were again overhead as we drew out of town and along the highway northwards, pausing for a few minutes to watch a pair of White Storks on their nest, which was also being used by several pairs of Spanish Sparrows. We took a walk in the Vjose valley where the scrubby hillsides had a few Eastern Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers. The crags above attracted a few migrating birds of prey, including five European Honey-buzzards and two Western Marsh-harriers, as well as a flock of 30 Common Swifts. White Wagtail and a pair of Black-eared Wheatears were along the riverside trail where we came across a Hermann's Tortoise. New butterflies included Marbled White (1), Small Heath (2), Large White (many) and Eastern Dappled White (1). We were back on the coach by 11.15 am, and set forth to the west, passing rolling hillside countryside dotted with 'nodding donkey' oil extraction pumps.

Just over an hour later we arrived at a section of the vast Vjose-Narte coastal wetlands where we had lunch near one of the lagoons, followed by a walk along one of the tracks passing through the northern part of the protected area. Here a few European Honey-buzzards were on the move to the north-west, with at least six passing overhead, plus the same number of Red-footed Falcons, all males. A couple of Common Cuckoos including a brown 'hepatic' phase were noted with several Zitting Cisticola bounding around as we walked along. Drier areas held a few Tawny Pipits, with a couple each of Greater Short-toed and Calandra Larks, as well as numerous Crested larks, Corn Buntings and a single Woodchat Shrike. Damper areas were ideal for our first waders of the tour which included 25 Ruff and 40 Wood Sandpiper with some 30 Whimbrel also on passage. A few European Bee-eaters and Alpine Swifts flashed through the azure skies, and a male Montagu's Harrier ghosted up and down the dry salinas. We eventually came to a saline lagoon where we enjoyed great views of 25 Little Tern, seven Gull-billed Terns and perhaps best of all 25 White-winged Tern. Here too we had fabulous looks at 12 Squacco Herons and numerous Little Egrets and Grey Herons.

With the afternoon birding session concluded, we drove on to the coastal town of Vlore where we checked into our hotel where later we had our evening meal.

Saturday 3 May: Breakfast was at 7.30 am and we were away one hour later this time to the Divjake-Karavasta National Park, one of the coastal lagoon areas about one hour and 45 minutes' drive to the north. Just before reaching the area, we stopped at the roadside to watch

a large European Bee-eater colony, comprising at least 250 birds. The sight and sounds were superb, one of the tours highlights no doubt.



It was hot and sunny when we took our walk across the marismas. The hoped-for Collared Pratincole colony appeared abandoned this year, but we still enjoyed some good birds with Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Great Reed-warbler singing in the tamarisk and reed fringed canal respectively, with numerous Greater Short-toed Larks and a few Tawny Pipits singing and displaying all around.

Three Common Cuckoo were singing and a male Montagu's Harrier hunted up and down. Watching from one of the small bridges across a canal a male Common Little Bittern flew out of the reeds, and by waiting we saw it and another two more times. Migration always throws up a few nice surprises, and so a singing Wood Warbler was a fine sight in bushes at the canal – no doubt still a long way to go on its journey north.

Lunch was taken at 1.30 pm in a small restaurant nicely shaded by pine trees before we had another drive to the lagoon 'shoreline' where waders were limited to just a couple of Eurasian Oystercatchers, though also using the shallow waters were a Slender-billed Gull, two Caspian Terns, a few Yellow-legged Gulls and ten Greater Flamingos. A single Dalmatian Pelican sat quite distantly out on the water and three European Honey-buzzards drifted over and away northwards. We reached an area of pine forest which is believed to have been 'planted' by Roman soldiers as they discarded their pine nut snacks at their camp here. A further 18 Dalmatian Pelicans were at their breeding colony on an island out in the lagoon and a handful

of Pygmy Cormorants flew around the area. We took time to observe and listen to a couple of close Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, always an informative exercise, whilst a Sea Slug (exact species unknown) was quite a peculiar sight.



By 4.30 pm it was time to set off back to our hotel where we again we had our evening meal.

Sunday 4 May: We were up for breakfast and away by 8.15 am, the sky having a thin veil of high wispy cloud this morning. We then spent 45 minutes exploring a section of ancient olive groves in the hope of finding a warbler or two, but it was generally quiet with only Woodchat Shrike, Sardinian Warbler and a couple of Pallid Swifts overhead.

Returning to the Vjose-Narte Protected Area, this time at its southern end, we drove out into the salt pans and stopped intermittently to check out the bird life. It was slightly more productive here, with 20 Collared Pratincole twisting and turning in the air and four Eurasian Thick-knee secreted in the baking dusty ground of the drier salinas. Migrating waders pausing here included two Dunlin, 25 Little Stint, two Grey Plover, 40 Curlew Sandpiper and singles of Common Redshank and Common Greenshank, with locally breeding waders including 25 Black-winged Stilt, 10 Kentish Plover and 50 Pied Avocet. The saline waters were clearly rich in invertebrate nutrients, good food for the 700 or so Greater Flamingos and 350 Slender-billed Gulls present (one captured in the photograph below raising its wings).



Banks separating the salt pans held small patches of vegetation where several pairs of Western Yellow Wagtails of the *feldegg* sub species (or Black-headed Wagtail) were breeding. By late morning we reached the far end of the lagoons and turned into an area holding more bushes where we enjoyed some fabulous looks at Great Spotted Cuckoos, at least six birds being present, mainly adults though one showing distinctive rusty brown primaries, likely to indicate a first-summer bird.



Great Spotted Cuckoo – one of six seen in the area today

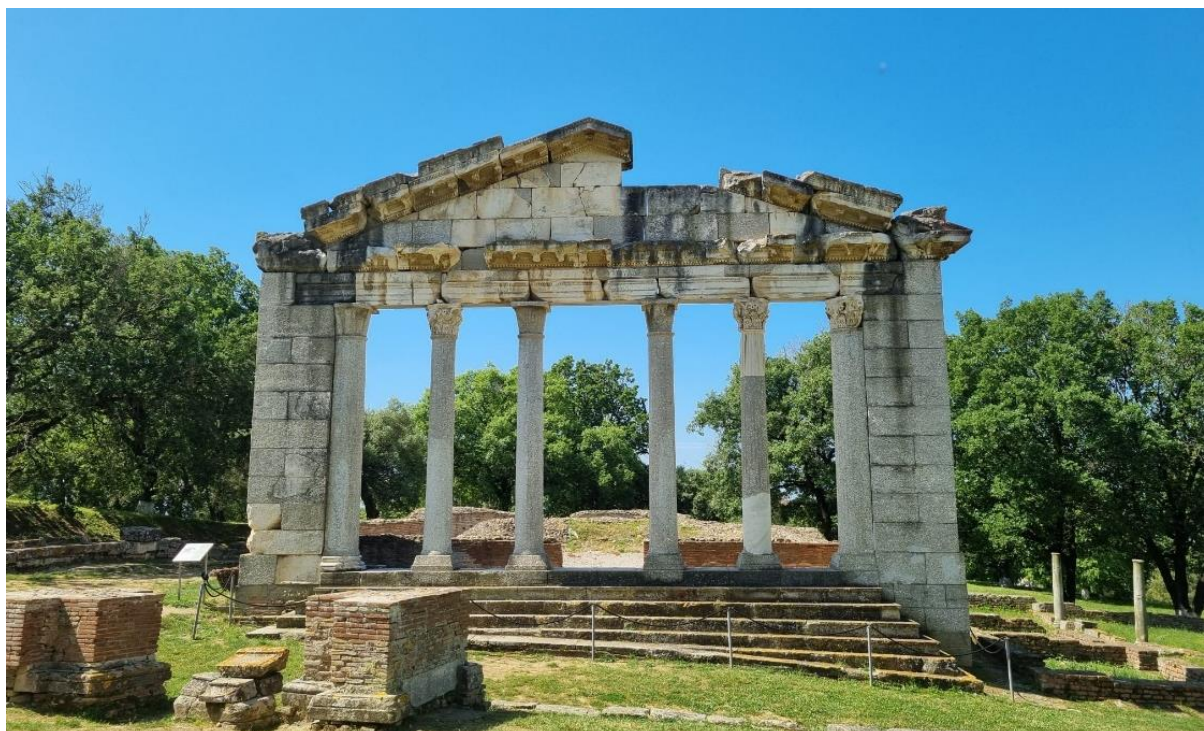
Insect life was more obvious here and attracted 50 hawking Gull-billed Terns as well as at least 350 Mediterranean Gulls of mixed ages which rose at intervals from a lagoon to feed on the flies. Two male Red-backed Shrikes were noted, probably still en-route north. Two male Montagu's Harriers buoyantly quartered the area.

By 1.00 pm it was time for lunch which we enjoyed at a restaurant near the lagoon, before we spent the afternoon on a walk across the coastal fields to the sea cliffs. Offshore, after a patient wait, at least 12 Scopoli's Shearwaters flew by with two Sandwich Terns also being new for the trip list. Scrub and a reed-fringed lake near to where we had parked held Common Nightingales, Great Reed-warblers, Whinchats, Woodchat Shrikes and two Common Hoopoe. We returned to the hotel after a very satisfying days birding.

Monday 5 May: This was our last full day in the field, which began with a walk around the ancient site at Apollonia just one hour to the north. We paused briefly a few kilometres short of the site when a male Black-headed Bunting was spotted on roadside wires.



We then took a relaxing walk around the splendidly preserved ancient Greek archaeological site. Founded around 600 BC by Greek colonists from Corinth, the classically styled town was a major trading centre, which later became allied to the Roman Republic, flourishing as a seat of learning; even Augustus, the first Roman emperor studied here in his youth.



As we ambled around the splendidly preserved site, where there are still many archaeological treasures to unearth, birds were of course all around us including two pairs of Woodchat Shrike, a male Red-backed Shrike, three male Black-headed Buntings, two Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Spotted Flycatcher, four Eurasian Golden Orioles, two Common Hoopoe and several Common Nightingales. Overhead at least 25 Alpine Swift were feeding and the bushes at the field edges were filled with chattering Spanish Sparrows.

We were away again by 11.00 am to our final main stop of the day in the fields surrounding the Shkumbin river valley, a few kilometres from where it enters the sea. Here we had a picnic lunch before taking a walk into the lovely countryside.

Purple Heron was surprisingly a new bird for the trip as was a Syrian Woodpecker. The prime target here was European Roller, which duly obliged with at least five being seen during our walk. More pairs of Black-headed Bunting were on territory, a fine Balkan bird indeed, perhaps only recently returned from their Indian wintering quarters. It was nice to see (and hear) them doing so well in the still unspoiled pastoral landscape.

A male and female Montagu's Harriers was as ever a great sight with Eurasian Hobby and Eurasian Sparrowhawk also around.

New butterflies for the tour were Scarce Swallowtail (1), Meadow Brown (2) and Small White (2).



A male Montagu's Harrier, always an awe-inspiring sight

It was soon time to head back to Tirana, though we did stop once more to view a small colony of Collared Pratincoles, where we took the fine photograph below.



After arriving at our city centre hotel, we had a walk into Tirana enjoying a few of the sights, including the vast Skanderberg Square with its elegant national monuments. Here preparations were underway for the start of the Giro d'Italia 2025 cycle race which this year had come to Albania for the first three stages and interestingly was due to cover many of the areas we had been touring during the previous week. A sumptuous evening meal at a busy restaurant rounded off our tour in style, with thanks being given to tour leader Mirjan for his admiral leadership and for making the tour so informative, enjoyable and rewarding.

Tuesday 6 May: This morning we had a leisurely breakfast before being taken to the airport for our flights home to the UK. It had been a splendid week's birding which enabled us to see some of Albania's still wild countryside. The country will no doubt become more regularly visited by birders amongst growing tourist numbers in years to come.

Thanks go to Bob and Keith for allowing us to use their photographs in this report and to Ian and Chris for their help with the butterflies.