

## SICILY

**8 – 13 APRIL 2013**

The following is an account of a short birding trip to Sicily in the early spring of 2013. The participants were Doncaster birders Denis Jackson, Martin Limbert, Richard Sprakes and Nick Whitehouse (organiser).

**Monday 8 April** – we flew out from London Stansted with Ryanair, arriving in Palermo at 10:30 am and after collecting our comfortable hire car, headed into the mountainous interior of the island. After dropping off our luggage at our quaint ‘agriturismo’ accommodation, we were soon birding covering a wide variety of mountain habitat from scrub and forests to the rugged terrain above the tree line. An adult Golden Eagle soared close overhead, and several local Buzzards put in appearances. The calls of Red-billed Choughs rang out across the hillsides, with some 30 birds being noted. Several Wood Larks were in song, and we had regular encounters with both Cirl and Rock Buntings and other familiar Mediterranean birds such as Serin and Sardinian Warblers. The more open areas held Rock Sparrows, and we had our first look at the intriguing resident sparrows on Sicily, which are believed to be a form (‘maltaì’) of Spanish Sparrow, showing some intermediate features between Spanish and Italian Sparrow!. But our main target bird of course was the enigmatic and rare Sicilian Rock Partridge, and having flushed one bird which sped away low across the horizon not to be seen again, we waited patiently at a location where the habitat had produced birds on a previous ‘recce’. Out of nowhere, thick fog then enveloped the mountain sides, and we had no choice but to keep waiting, frustrated but hoping for it to clear before sunset. Sure enough, the fog cleared for two periods of several minutes, and almost immediately the calls of this rare endemic partridge began to be heard close by. A pair were then located walking and feeding on the hillside giving excellent scope views, whilst around 5 other birds called from adjacent slopes. Fully satisfied with having seen our main target bird, we descended to our lodgings, and there enjoyed a quite amazing meal, typically local cuisine cooked by our hosts and helped down with a glass or two of wine.

**Tuesday 9 April** – the unexpected fog of the previous day had gone, and the skies were a brilliant blue. Spotless Starlings were singing from the roof tops and Swifts and Swallows were already displaying around our accommodation where a Hawfinch dropped in to the garden and a male Montagu’s Harrier flew over. We drove another circuit of the local mountains, and enjoyed some stunningly close roadside views of the Sicilian Rock Partridges, as well as appreciating the beauty of the interior of Sicily in full warm spring sunshine.



Continuing our journey south across the island, we spent some time in more 'steppe' like habitat where we noted 10 displaying Lesser Kestrels, Blue Rock Thrushes, Crested Larks, and some nice 'sylvia' warblers including Subalpine, Spectacled and Sardinian. Cirl Buntings were notably prominent with 12 males singing. Our final destination for the day was the most south easterly point of Sicily at Capo Passero, which was a two and half hours drive away. Here we enjoyed a leisurely stroll around the harbour and also did a brief spell of sea-watching. Gulls present included 50 Audouin's, 14 Slender-billed, 2 Meds and 40 Yellow-legged, and we enjoyed close views of 40 Scopoli's Shearwaters that were tracking the little fishing boats into the harbour. Another splendid traditional meal at our hotel accommodation ended the day very nicely.

**Wednesday 10 April** - This morning we had another look around the harbour at Capo Passero as well as walking the headland path overlooking the sparkling Mediterranean Sea. Over 30 Northern Wheatear and 15 Whinchat had been grounded overnight, as well as a stunning male Black-eared Wheatear (Eastern) and several male Subalpine Warblers, Common Redstarts, Nightingale, Woodchat Shrike and 3 Tawny Pipits. Waders included Kentish Plover and 16 Stone Curlew. A few Bee-eaters came in off the sea, where more Scopoli's Shearwaters glided by. Crested Larks were common as were Zitting Cisticolas and a Peregrine perched on the rocks waiting for tired migrants. The marshes at Longarini on the south coast were our next stop, and we were rewarded with 3 Gull-billed Terns, 300 Greater Flamingo, 8 Ferruginous Ducks, several Great White Egrets, Spoonbill, Great Reed Warbler

and an assortment of waders including Black-winged Stilts, Avocets, Wood Sandpipers, Greenshanks, Spotted Redshanks and 2 nice Marsh Sandpipers.

Moving on we then visited the coastal marsh reserve at Vendicari where we enjoyed nice views from the hide (yes even in Italy now there are hides for birders – a sign of how conservation is moving full steam ahead there!) of Curlew Sandpipers, Penduline Tits at their nest and Turtle Dove. As we took a short coastal walk amongst the sand dunes a movement of Swifts got underway and it wasn't long before a couple of superb Pallid Swift passed close by allowing good comparisons with their darker relatives. Our journey took us in the afternoon to Sicily's own version of the Grand Canyon, the Cava Grande de Cassibile. Here we marvelled at the stunning scenery around this vast limestone gorge. Birds included more Black-eared Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrushes and several close Spectacled Warblers. Wild flower lovers would love it here with over 12 species of orchid in one 100 metre stretch. Leaving the Cava Grande we descended to finish the day at our Agriturismo accommodation the "Lemon Tree Garden" near Syracuse.



A warm welcome awaited us from our host Francesca, with whom we have stayed three times now in recent years. We managed the last couple of hours of light at the Capo Murro di Poco, the 'Spurn Point' of Sicily's East Coast. Here where many rarities have been found over the years, we noted more newly arrived Subalpine Warblers, Quail, 6 Short-toed Larks,

more Woodchats and a Montagu's Harrier. Richard's Pipits over winter here with regularly up to a dozen birds, and we were fortunate to see 2 of these birds, obviously late stayers, one giving nice scope views. The evening closed with a meal at a nearby restaurant overlooking the harbour at Syracuse, and with 3 Scops Owls calling in the garden as we retired to bed.

**Thursday 11 April** – After one of Francesca's lovely Sicilian breakfasts, we had another walk around the headland, enjoying nice views of Pied Flycatcher, several Spotted Flycatchers, Red-rumped Swallows, Yellow Wagtails and some Yelkouan Shearwaters close offshore.

Moving north along the coast we stopped fleetingly at the Commonwealth War Graves on the outskirts of Syracuse, and noted the sacrifice made by so many Allied servicemen in the invasion to recapture Sicily in 1943. Our next birding destination was the Priolo nature reserve near Augusta. Here from the boardwalk across the lake we noted more Ferruginous Ducks, and a selection of waders including Little Stints.

The afternoon was spent making the ascending drive up the slopes of Sicily's most famous and dominant landmark, Mount Etna. The volcano was very quiet that day, with just a few wisps' of smoke appearing from time to time. Subalpine Warblers and Cirl Buntings were the most prominent species on the scrub covered slopes, and the scenery views were tremendous.



By early evening we were at our final accommodation, a hotel in Capo Palero, in the extreme NE tip of Sicily, overlooking the narrow Straits of Messina. From the beach here we watched sea birds moving through the narrow channel between Sicily and the 'toe of Italy', with 25 Yellowlegs and 2 Scopoli's Shearwaters being the best of the species, but also including approximately 100 Med Gulls offshore with a Little Gull and 10 Audouin's Gulls. A nice meal at a nearby restaurant finished the day.



**Friday 12 April** – we were up for a pre-breakfast sea-watch from the beach across the Straits, notching up mostly the same species as the previous evening. A flock of Chaffinches on passage was a slight surprise.

Our main focus for the morning was to undertake a raptor passage watch, and so after breakfast we climbed in the car to the island's best raptor watch point, where in an average spring some 30 to 40 thousand raptors pass north-eastwards over the Messina straits and into Italy. The most abundant are Honey Buzzard ( but in late April and early May, so we were too early for HBs on this trip) but the route is also well known for the regular passage of Pallid Harriers with upwards of a 50 to 100 birds each spring being noted. Our watch was for just over two hours though, so we needed quite a lot of luck to connect with this species. The session was enjoyable with good views of Booted Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, 46 Black Kites, and a 'ring-tail' harrier showing a clear neck 'boa' and other features of Pallid. But we're not too experienced in the nuances of female harrier ID and so frustratingly, but sensibly, we logged it as just a 'ring tail'. Other species on the move flying past us were a male Golden Oriole and 40 Alpine Swifts. So for a short watch not bad at all – imagine that and more every two hours or so!.

We then set off for the long drive back along Sicily's north coast to Palermo, cutting back through the mountains away from the main highway for a couple of hours birding. Here we noted Golden Eagle and Bonelli's Warbler. We could also see a huge plume of volcanic smoke and ash billowing from Etna in the distance, as clearly the volcano had erupted in some style earlier in the day! We were at a safe distance though, and eventually after negotiating through some fairly hectic Friday evening Palermo traffic arrived at our hotel which was not far from the airport.

**Saturday 13 April** – sadly we had to be up early for our morning flight back to the UK. In a 5 night 'whistle stop' tour of Sicily we had enjoyed some excellent birding in some lovely countryside with great scenery, some very welcome warm spring weather and tremendous traditional food. Everyone agreed that Sicily has much to offer the visiting birder, well exceeding expectations, and is certainly a pleasant and valid alternative to the more well watched Mediterranean islands.