

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Istria 16 – 19 March 2008

... or how a reccy became one of those short breaks to see wallcreepers

Chris Durdin, March 2008



Sunday 16 March

A smooth flight to Ronchi airport near Trieste. Paul Tout was there to meet me and we took the back route through the Karst, avoiding Trieste. With Slovenia in the EU and newly within the simplified customs 'Schengen' agreement area, that border was without checks and we were swiftly through the Croatia border too. The journey of 100 kilometres to Istarske Toplice took 90 minutes.

The countryside here was at much the same stage of early spring as in the UK with blackthorn in flower and thousands of primroses, but otherwise all very wintry, which made the few swallows and house martins here and seem out of context. First impression of the hotel is of its super parkland setting, dominated by a large limestone cliff (*above*). The hotel is functional rather than pretty in a post-war behind-the-iron-curtain style, but the rooms are well refurbished and bathrooms excellent. First job, as in so many hotels, was to turn off the TV, left on standby.

There was time enough to drive to the lower stretch of the river Mirna. There were coypu and great white egret on route, but the most promising part was a lagoon by the Adriatic coast on which there were some 70 garganeys and three flamingos. Back to the hotel to eat. Thoughts about finding restaurants begin.

Monday 17 March

Excellent breakfast: cereal, bacon and eggs, and tasty brown rolls. Outside, I caught a movement on the big rock outside the hotel, then a flash of red wings – a wallcreeper! Paul knows several wintering sites for wallcreepers between here and home, near Trieste, but it was still a super surprise.



A bright day with some cloud. Into the hills to see subalpine grassland. Slightly higher, there were even fewer flowers, though yellow shrubs of flowering Cornelian cherry were everywhere and purple crocuses (*both above*) were pushing through the turf. Rock buntings were common.

Hilltop villages, such as Roč and Motovun, are a striking part of the scenery. We took a detour towards another of these with the wonderfully simple name of Hum. The road there has a trail of 10 monuments to the ancient Glagolitic script of this area [see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glagolitic_alphabet]. Stopped to take a picture of one monument at Forčići along this ‘Glagolitic avenue’; a girl bunting was singing here.



The pretty, fortified village of Hum is said to have a population of only 23 people and ‘officially’ is a town, and the Guinness World Record holder for the smallest town in the world, no less. We took a quick walk around on foot. [See www.panoye.com/panorama.183-hum.html for your own tour.] Both violet carpenter bee and hummingbird hawk-moth were feeding at a rosemary bush. Looked into the cemetery, where the mix of Croat and Italian names illustrated political changes last century. Left as a school coach party arrived.

Into the *Park Prirode* – nature park – of Ucka. I don’t expect to see a ‘lifer’ on a quick recce but by good luck a pair of rock partridges walked across the road in front of the vehicle.



Excellent views, but they walked swiftly away as soon as a door was opened. Then a long detour to check what was floodplain wetland at Čepičko Polje but, presumably due to rising commodity prices, the area is now mostly arable, so won’t feature in the holiday itinerary. An extraordinary meadow of grape hyacinths along the way (*left*).

Back to Istarske Toplice. Walked to the top of the big rock, which was much easier than it looked from below, just 20 minutes. It looks promising for wild flowers, in as much you can tell from leaves and shrubs this early in the year. There are ruins of an old chapel up there, and a blue rock thrush.

Another poor evening meal. Drove down the road, exactly three minutes and one mile, to a small local restaurant *Dolina*. Just right for Honeyguide, and Paul talked to the owners – in Italian, spoken widely here – and made all the arrangements for the group to eat here, except on Tuesdays, their closed day. Drove on to the walled town of Motovun (Montona in Italian – everywhere has two names, which can get confusing – *pictured right*); very pretty but largely deserted this chilly March evening.



Tuesday 18 March

Much rain overnight, falling as snow where we'd been yesterday, but fine first thing, followed by a wet morning and a dry, bright afternoon.

Out at 6.30 before breakfast to walk around the grounds and to visit the stone quarry that you can see outside the hotel. Another day, another wallcreeper! Wonderful views on this one in the quarry; it had a hint of black throat (summer plumage). Typically, it was mostly constantly on the move, but I had a go at taking a picture through Paul's telescope – this is the least blurry photo. Back in the parkland by the hotel a flock of alpine swifts came over, there were several hawfinches and great spotted woodpeckers were calling, drumming and scrapping for territory.



Talked to the management at the hotel about the arrangements for the group. All very helpful, and relaxed about us eating out.

Headed south across the Lim Fjord that divides northern and southern Istria. Much of the coast here has campsites or is rather built up for tourism. Checked a coastal wetland nature reserve at Palū, but concluded it wasn't worth a visit: reedbed with one area of open water and poor viewing opportunities. Nearby, there were a couple of black-throated divers and black-necked grebes on the sea.



The rain stopped and the sun came out as we went north to the salt pans at Sicciole / Sečovlje (*above*), which lie in the no-mans-land between the Croatian and Slovenian border crossings. It was good to see some information boards on wildlife and even a latest sightings board in the car park. A kingfisher zapped across. Mid-March was a bit early in the year to see it at its best. What looked, at first, like a scattering of waders were white wagtails, probably migrants. There's a good view over the salt pans from the river wall though the best bird was in the woods on the rising ground behind: a calling black woodpecker, which flew into view in some leafless planes. For waders, there were one of each ringed plover, little ringed plover, Kentish plover and snipe, and four black-winged stilts dropped in. On the saltpan nearest the sea, a few teal mingled with about 15 garganeys.

Restaurant meal tonight – excellent!

Wednesday 19 March

Frost overnight and very cold but bright first thing. Pre-breakfast, wandered through the woodland by the hotel. But the best way to view the woods was from the slightly elevated

road that leads to the hotel, from where there was a good view of a grey-headed woodpecker. And finally, the wallcreeper was on the cliff again, making it three days in a row!

After breakfast, took a quick tour of the farmland above Istarske Toplice, which looks attractive. The first few of the typical continental European mix of black redstarts, serins and ciril buntings were in, with many more birds still to come. Stopped to photograph a group of early spider orchids by the roadside (*below*). Then headed back to Trieste and home.

BIRDS H = heard only

Black-throated diver	White wagtail
Little grebe	Wren H
Great crested grebe	Dunnock
Black-necked grebe	Robin
Cormorant	Black redstart
Shag	Stonechat
Little egret	Blue rock thrush
Great white egret	Blackbird
Grey heron	Song thrush
Greater flamingo	Redwing
Shelduck	Mistle thrush
Teal	Cetti's warbler H
Mallard	Fan-tailed warbler
Garganey	Sardinian warbler H
Pochard	Blackcap H
Marsh harrier	Chiffchaff
Goshawk	Goldcrest
Sparrowhawk	Long-tailed tit
Buzzard	Crested tit
Rock partridge	Coal tit
Pheasant	Blue tit
Moorhen	Great tit
Coot	Nuthatch
Black-winged stilt	Wallcreeper
Little ringed plover	Short-toed treecreeper H
Ringed plover	Jay
Kentish plover	Magpie
Snipe	Hooded crow
Yellow-legged gull	Raven
Rock dove	Starling
Woodpigeon	House sparrow
Collared dove	Chaffinch
Tawny owl H	Serin
Alpine swift	Greenfinch
Kingfisher	Goldfinch
Grey-headed woodpecker	Hawfinch
Green woodpecker H	Ciril bunting
Black woodpecker	Rock bunting
Great spotted woodpecker	Reed bunting
Lesser spotted woodpecker H	Corn bunting
Woodlark	
Skylark	<u>Mammals</u>
Crag martin	Roe deer
Swallow	Coypu
House martin	

Butterflies

Peacock
Large tortoiseshell
Brimstone
Small white

Other notable invertebrates

Violet carpenter bee
Hummingbird hawk-moth

