



Nature Travel NETWORK

RESOURCES FOR BIRDING AND
NATURE TRAVEL

A B O U T C O U N T R I E S D I V E R S I T Y
C O N T A C T U S



☰ Menu

Herzegovina – Plenty Of Birds But Very Few Birdwatchers

by D A V I D C H A N D L E R

on J A N U A R Y 1 5 , 2 0 1 7



Herzegovina is not really on the bird watching map. It's the southern end of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with wonderful limestone landscapes, lots of birds, but only a handful of serious birdwatchers –there are about five! So when you are birding, you don't bump into hordes of birdwatchers, which for me, makes it an attractive destination!

Getting there is easy. I flew to Dubrovnik, in Croatia, from London Stansted, for under £130, as a guest of [Wild Herzegovina](#). I was met by Denis, my guide, at the airport. My Balkan birding bonanza, with one other guest, Dermot, had begun.

A land of limestone

Herzegovina has caves, underground rivers, spectacular plains, imposing mountains, extensive forested areas and glorious wetlands. Our programme started low, got higher, and then switched to wetlands. The pace was relaxed and the weather wasn't always on our side, but we still recorded over 150 species in seven days.

Our low level forays focussed on two karst fields, which, typically, are plains hemmed in by mountains. Most are seasonally flooded. Spring is a great time to visit, as migrating birds flow through the Adriatic Flyway, feeding up before heading north-east to breed. Popovo Polje, our first karst field, covers almost 120 km² and greeted us with glorious blasts of Nightingale

song. I had a fleeting view of a tit, one that looked different to those I'm used to. It wasn't the best view, but made me think 'Sombre Tit' and our guide agreed. Nightingales were almost ever-present but this was the only time a Sombre Tit, a south-east Europe speciality, was recorded. We birded against a cloud-shrouded mountain backdrop, with a bit of rain, Tawny Pipit, Whinchats, Corn Bunting and Hawfinch. The sounds of distant Hoopoe and Bee-eater added a taste of the exotic, and Eastern Orphean Warbler put in its first appearance. This large Sylvia is a close relative of Whitethroat and Garden Warbler, and is another south-eastern speciality. It sang, maybe like a mix of Blackbird and Blackcap, and called croakily. But the star of day one was a bird that builds a mud nest on rocks – a bit like a House Martin's, but with an entrance hole fit for a woodpecker. A short-tailed bandit-faced bird stuck its head out, and, later, gave us a great view on a big chunk of limestone – Western Rock Nuthatch. 'Western' sounds counter intuitive, but its range is significantly more western than its Eastern counterpart!

A record-breaking karst field



Livanjsko Polje Karst Field ©David Chandler

Livanjsko Polje was even more impressive. At over 400 km² this is the world's largest regularly flooded karst field. A small marshy area gave us Little Bittern, in flight, briefly, as is often the case with this diminutive heron. We pondered the identity of an 'Acro' (an Acrocephalus warbler – Reed and Sedge for example), checked a record-shot against the Collins Guide app. – and added Moustached Warbler to the list, another bird with a limited European range.

There was impressive waterside birding, with up-close Wood Sandpipers, Ringed Plover, Greenshank, and perhaps my favourite 'Acro' – a super-sized reed warbler, chuntering out a sore throat song – Great Reed Warbler. A 'whet-my-lips' Quail stayed invisible and some distant marsh terns evaded ID at first, but succumbed later – a dozen buoyant-in-the-air breeding plumage Black Terns – beautiful.

We travelled further up the karst field, through Montagu's Harrier habitat, seeing male and female, and loitered by a still-flooded part of this remarkable area. Redshank, Lapwing, and later, Spotted Redshank, which obliged us with a view of wings and rump – the easy way to identify it. A Bittern boomed, and a Hobby hunted, then perched, giving a glorious view of this always good to see falcon. Enticement enough, but nothing compared to spring 2015's spectacle of a thousand or so Red-footed Falcons. This one karst field is home to about 400 calling Corncrakes. They were silent in our presence – but the nocturnal soundscape must be

incredible.

Near Mostar

The weather forecast wasn't good, but rain didn't stop play. Day three kicked off at a former recreation centre with mature trees and open habitat near the Buna and Bunica rivers, not far from our Mostar guest house. There was fluty Golden Oriole song, rich Nightingale song, and the sound of Wrynecks. Wrynecks are woodpeckers, albeit small and peculiar ones, and we saw several. A Turtle Dove purred, a Hoopoe poo-poo-pooed, a Spotted Flycatcher spotted flies, and a rain-sodden Hobby just sat in a tree.

Our guide had a guaranteed spot for Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – a nest site. We watched and waited, but the woodpecker proved well-named – it was indeed lesser spotted – completely un-spotted in fact. Denis has been back since and seen the Lesser Spot, as well as Wryneck and Syrian Woodpecker, all at their nests and all from the same spot! The more open, slightly scrubby habitat provided good birding too, with plenty of Whinchat, four Whitethroat in two bushes, and seven paint-palette Bee-eaters on a wire.

Later, over a riverside lunch with Golden Oriole accompaniment, Syrian Woodpecker came our way, prompting discussion over its ID. The head markings were good for Syrian, but the vent was as red as a Great Spot and we couldn't see any flank streaks. Helpfully, the Collins guide describes the head markings as the 'safest feature'. We finished the day with a convincing view of a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, a calling Quail, Tree Sparrows, and a stunning yellower-than-yellow Golden Oriole. I can't think of anywhere else I've been with as many

Golden Orioles as Herzegovina.

The village of Blagaj is only about seven miles from Mostar as the oriole flies. Famed for its historic Dervish Monastery, Blagaj sits at the source of the Buna, against a massive, cliff-face backdrop. This was once home to Griffon Vultures, but alas, no more, so after walking past pomegranate bushes, we contented ourselves with Alpine Swift, Blue Rock Thrush, Crag Martins with dark armpits, and those archetypal birds of crashing water, Dipper and Grey Wagtail.

Going up

Podrelezje Plateau gave me my first encounter with subalpine karst fields, with Wood Lark, Eastern Subalpine Warbler and more Bee-eaters. We pulled up for coffee and I opened the van door. A Lesser Whitethroat rattled, a Wood Warbler trilled, and two Hawfinch showed themselves nearby! We strolled past an early Christian cemetery, then an early Muslim cemetery. This country has plenty of history and plenty of birds. An Eastern Orphean Warbler took to the wing – big and grey with a dark head. Then Black-eared Wheatear. There are two morphs of this bird – pale-throated and black-throated. We saw both, and a pristine black-throated sang for us – buzzy and scratchy. A very different sound reached our ears too, as the local mosque signalled prayer time.

We headed on. A Tawny Pipit showed us the dark centres on its coverts, but

the Rock Thrush behind distracted, as did another. From Rock Thrush to Rock Partridge, distant but a pretty good view, handsome with finely barred flanks.

Even higher



Blidinje Nature Park ©David Chandler

By 9 am on day four we were well on our way to the Blidinje Nature Park when a long stretch of unpaved road slowed our pace. That was when Denis heard the 'sip' of a male Rock Bunting. We stopped, enjoyed, and headed on, entering the Nature Park on a high altitude plateau with a manmade lake, surrounded by cloudy mountains, with plenty of snow still unthawed, then went higher, peaking at around 1500 metres above sea level. An out of place Wryneck kicked off proceedings, en-route to elsewhere, with songs from Skylarks, Lesser Whitethroat, Cuckoo and Woodlark. Four Hawfinches flew by – what were they doing up here? Raven. Northern Wheatear. Greenshank. Hooded Crow. Rock Partridge calling again. Eleven distant Alpine Chough. Red-backed Shrike. More Rock Thrush, powder blue and kingfisher orange. Mount Cvrsnica gave us a Ring Ouzel, half a mile away, perched against the skyline at the top of a pine. Then more Alpine Chough, closer, flying, on the ground, yellow bills poking and probing, searching for a traditional invertebrate lunch, 150-200 of them. Our lunch was traditional too – polenta, yoghurt and garlic butter.

Our second day up high took us to a rainy Prenj Mountain. We persevered, heard a Grey-headed Woodpecker, failed to see it, but dug out some Crossbills and a single Crested Tit. The rain persisted and we resorted to van-based birding – we weren't giving up completely! And that was how we got our best views of Rock Partridge, two of them, in the rain, on the track, right in front of us.

River and wetland

The Neretva Delta was our first pure wetland destination. We started a long way from the Delta, looking down from a Mostar bridge. It wasn't the Mostar bridge, which has been wonderfully rebuilt following its destruction in more troubled times. The bridge we were on is the country's only known Pallid Swift breeding site. It is home to six or seven pairs and gave me my best ever Pallid Swift encounter – you look down on them as they fly under the bridge. We worked our way downstream, with intermittent stops... Penduline Tits with a high, thin, whistling call, Little Ringed Plover, 16 or more Common Sandpiper, and the wonderful sounds of Golden Orioles and Nightingales.

Before 11am we crossed into Croatia, where the delta is. It's a big delta, but

used to be much, much bigger. We drove through drained, reed-spattered delta, now a hot spot for mandarin growing, before doing serious bird-business at the delta proper. You would expect waders and we weren't disappointed – elegant Curlew Sandpipers turning brick-red, Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper, Grey Plover, Sanderling, Spotted Redshank, Curlew, Whimbrel and Black-winged Stilt. There was a healthy heron assortment, with Night and Squacco Herons, Little Egret and Little Bittern. I wanted to see Pygmy Cormorant and it wasn't difficult. The clue is in the name – they are much smaller than even a Shag, oily green-black and with a bill that looks like it still has some growing to do. The delta has sandy beaches and a mountain backdrop and the birds aren't all waterbirds – other highlights included Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes, a male Black-headed Bunting – another south-eastern species, and more Bee-eaters. Cuckoos were calling all over the place, and even better, for us anyway, was the spectacle of this dastardly brood parasite on the receiving end – with a male Golden Oriole in hot, close pursuit. If you come to this part of the world, don't miss the Delta – it's a great site.

Minsmere on steroids



Hutovo Blato Wetlands ©David Chandler

I like wetlands and Hutovo Blato Marshlands must be one of Europe's best. It's like Minsmere on steroids without the infrastructure and the birdwatchers! Hutovo Blato is a mix of marshland and flood meadows, surrounded by uplands. The marshlands alone cover 2105 hectares (5200 acres), with another 800 hectares (nearly 2000 acres) of flood meadows. It's a vital stop-off for millions of birds on the Adriatic Flyway. 106 species breed here, including about 100 pairs of Ferruginous Duck. We saw some, as well as Red-crested Pochard and Garganey. Over 140 species winter here and there are 17 endemic fish species!

This is another site not to be missed – an important breeding site for Pygmy Cormorants with more herons than most, with Purple and Squacco seeming the most numerous. At one point eight Purple Herons were aloft at the same time. The beautiful River Krupa was the backdrop for our sixth woodpecker species. It was the commonest species, but one that had eluded us so far – small and always desirable, this was my first Lesser Spot in a long time. Remarkably, Great Spot didn't make its way on to the list!

One Marsh Harrier proved particularly helpful. Dermot spotted it, in a bush. I could see something perched in the right general direction, which I duly 'scoped. But the bird I was on had a massive yellow bill, and was pale and scraggy, with long black claws on yellow feet. It was a White-tailed Eagle, in no rush to go anywhere, and dwarfed the much-closer Marsh Harrier.

We saw that eagle later in the day too, as we explored the wetlands in a boat, enjoying close encounters with Red-footed Falcons, poking our way through hordes of low-flying Sand Martins, and adding breeding plumage Black-necked Grebes to an impressive list. At times there was nothing to hear bar us and the birds.

With thanks to

Denis Bohm at Wild Herzegovina for making it all possible, and to Dermot, for his companionship and bird-finding along the way.

Herzegovina

Denis and David are looking to lead a group in Herzegovina from 30 April – 7 May 2017. You will be well looked after, visit some great sites, enjoy good food and experience some wonderful birds. And the pace won't be manic – we will take our time and enjoy the birds. It will cost £1295 per person all inclusive except flights. If you're interested, contact Denis at info@wild-herzegovina.com

Based on an article first published in Bird Watching magazine (birdwatching.co.uk).

Tagged as: [Featured](#)



David Chandler

David Chandler is a freelance writer and environmental educator. He is the author/co-author of 14 books including 100 Birds to See in your Lifetime, Barn Owl, and Dragonfly. David lives near Cambridge in the UK. [Read More](#)
More Posts by: [David Chandler](#)

Categories:
[destinations](#), [Featured Articles](#),