

Corsica & Sardinia, April 2013

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Corsica, famed for its endemic Corsican Nuthatch and several near-endemics such as Corsican Finch and Marmora's Warbler (both shared with Sardinia), the island also offers some highland birding, Lammergeiers, Rock Sparrow and Alpine Chough amongst the possibilities. Whilst Sardinia lacks the Corsican Nuthatch, the island is blessed by a rather richer selection of lowland birding sites than its neighbour, not only numerous localities for birding the typical Mediterranean habitats, but also a number of excellent wetlands, as well as grasslands supporting populations of Little Bustards.

Combining the two islands means use of the inter-island ferry, an excellent opportunity to view the localised Yelkouan and Scopoli's Shearwaters, as well as Audouin's Gull and the Mediterranean race of Shag. Having visited both islands in the past, the basic idea of the trip was simply to have a few days excellent birding, but naturally effort was made to seek out the endemics, focussing particularly on the pine forests close to the Col de Sorba, key locality for the Corsican Nuthatch and only a short drive from the Restonica Valley, a high altitude locality know for Lammergeier. Basic Itinerary: 18 April. Flights from Vilnius to Milan, Milan to Cagliari. Arrived late evening and drove through the night to Santa Teresa di Gallura. 19 April. Ferry to Corsica at 7.00 a.m., all day then spent in the central mountains, mostly on the D69 to the Col de Sorba, then later to the Restonica Valley. Travelled down to the coast in the evening, staying at Riva-bella on the Etang de Terrenzana. 20 April. Morning birding around the Etang de Terrenzana, then a return to the D69 as far as the Col de Sorba. In the afternoon, took the long winding road (southward section of the D69) to Sartene and onward to Bonifacio. Had intended to return to Sardinia, but strong winds left all ferries cancelled. Camped nearby. 21 April. Morning birding around Bonifacio, then ferry to Sardinia. Afternoon birding in farmland around Tula, then southbound to the Cabras area, camping near Putzu Idu. 22 April. All day birding the wetlands in the Cabras area, particularly at Sale Porcus and from the SP58 between Riola and cabras. In the late afternoon, I drove south to Portoscuso and stayed in a hotel. 23 April. A productive morning on the coastal heaths near Portoscuso, then a return to Cagliari for some birding on the extensive saltpans just west of the airport. Mid-afternoon flight from Cagliari, direct to Lithuania. Daily Log. 18 April - Arrival in Sardinia.

Bidding the last remnants of snow a farewell in Lithuania, I boarded an afternoon flight to Milan Bergamo. Two hours later, in a climate considerably warmer and with a couple of hours to kill whilst awaiting my next flight, I took a wander towards the village of Orio. Not a bad haul for an airport stop-over - male Hen Harrier quartering the airfield, Serins singing from rooftops and abundant hirundines in the village, plus quite a bunch of Lizards sunning themselves on pathways. Back in the air late evening, touchdown in Cagliari a little before 10.30 p.m. Picked up the hire car and immediately set off, a drive of nearly 300 km from Cagliari in the extreme south of the island to Santa Teresa di Gallura in the extreme north. After serpentine roads in the latter parts of the journey, arrived after 3.00 a.m., the only highlights of the drive being three Cape Hares and a distant calling Scop's Owl.

19 April - Col de Sorba & Restonica Valley, Corsica. 7.00 a.m., Yellow-legged Gulls perched on the side of the port, onto the ferry I boarded, a one hour crossing to Bonifacio ahead. And excellent the crossing was, a party of Yelkouan Shearwaters skimming the waves almost as soon as we'd left port, Scopoli's Shearwaters appearing not long after. By journey's end, totals amounted to about 80 Scopoli's Shearwaters and 18 Yelkouan Shearwaters, as well as ten desmarestii Shags and, entering the impressive canyon-like port of Bonifacio, a handful of Audouin's Gulls and a male Blue Rock Thrush, the latter flying between the buildings that cling to the top of the cliff face. Disembarked and immediately hit the road north, arriving at the small town of Ghisonaccia about an hour later, Barn Swallows and House Martins abundant, Spotless Starlings and Italian Sparrows too. Now the real birding was about to begin, turning inland I spent the next couple of hours slowly driving up the mountain roads that lead towards the Col de Sorba, initially taking the D344, then the D69. Both were excellent, twisting up through a steep valley and traversing a variety of habitats, initial farmland meadows supporting Nightingales, Serins, Cirl Buntings and umpteen Italian Sparrows, the middle stages delights such as Firecrest, Wryneck and Crag Martin. It was the pine forests at the higher altitudes that I was heading for however, home to Corsican Nuthatch. With the weather absolutely perfect, not a hint of wind and a warm sun, the forests were rich in bird song, a variety of common species such as Blackcaps, Chaffinches, Coal Tits and the like, but it took only a couple of stops to locate the clear ringing call of a Corsican Nuthatch. A few minutes more, after a couple of Song Thrushes zipped by and a Great Spotted Woodpecker put in an appearance, I located my birds - a pair of very active Corsican Nuthatches high in pines, occasionally dropping down to lower boughs. Following them along the hillside, I eventually managed to get pretty much adjacent to them, they working an adjacent tree almost at eye-level, very nice indeed. With that, I drove the last three or four kilometres up to the Col de Sorba itself ...and promptly found another pair of Corsican Nuthatches excavating a nest hole right behind the sign announcing the Col! Lots of flowers here too, plus a Cirl Bunting and another Great Spotted Woodpecker. With early success with this key species, and knowing the forecast for the coming days, I then decided to make the most of the good weather and head for the Restonica Valley. Red Kites soared in the pleasant sunshine, Grey Wagtails flitted from a river bridge, Cuckoos called in the distance. Within a couple of kilometres of leaving the Col de Sorba, I then bumped into my first Corsican Finches of the day, a group of three feeding on roadside weeds, target bird number two under the belt! The Restonica Valley is stunning, the very narrow road cutting through extensive stands of pine and winding its way up via a few turns that are not for the faint-hearted! Probably an excellent valley for birds too, but with considerable snow still lying at the higher altitudes, I felt probably it was a little early in the season for many of the migrant birds to be back. Either way, I made few stops and kept my eyes largely on the road as I weaved my route to the top. Still, several Cirl Buntings en route, plus a bunch of Jays, several more Red

Kites and, as the valley opened out at the top, one impressive adult Lammergeier playing around a towering crag. A short walk beyond the final parking bay added little more, but the views were very nice and I did see a distant Golden Eagle. In my initial plans, I had thought of camping in the Restonica valley and exploring the forests for Corsican Nuthatches early the following morning, but with the Nuthatch already seen and the quite extensive patches of snow suggesting a rather cold night ahead, I decided to winp out and head for the coast instead. I returned via the small road through Vezzani, picturesque and enlivened by a flock of about ten Red Kites, plus numerous Ravens, my only Black Redstart of the trip and the occasional Corsican Finch here and there. A few kilometres beyond Vezzani, passing through excellent looking heath, I decided it was time to search for sylvia warblers, Marmora's Warblers the obvious main target. My luck was in, it took all of ten minutes before I heard a grating churr in the gorse ahead. I sat myself down and waited ... out popped one Marmora's Warbler! Within a few minutes, not only was I watching three Marmora's Warbler on and off, but also a small flock of Corsican Finches too, a most fortunate spot I had decided to stop at! Late in the day, I arrived in the coast and took a meander northbound searching for a campsite. Many are closed so early in the season, but eventually I arrived at the slightly rundown, but excellently-located Riva-bella site, a campsite on a sandy slither of land between the Etang de Terrenzana and Mediterranean Sea. Be warned, this site becomes a nudist colony when the summer season starts! For now however, it simply offered a nice place to put a tent and then sit on the beach watching Scopoli's Shearwaters cruising offshore, a slightly unexpected Gannet also passing by. Arriving late in the day, I didn't do much birding here, but the lagoon did hold a fine pair of Black-necked Grebes and, as dusk approached, three Night Herons came gronking in, one Grey Heron with them. Also spotted one Corsican Hare just nearby.

20 April - Etang de Terrenzana, Col de Sorba & Bonifacio, Corsica. A warm sunny start to the day and with Black-necked Grebes bobbing just beyond the tent, it was very pleasant indeed. Bunches of Italian Sparrows descending for breakfast, a Great White Egret flying over and two Red-crested Pochards on the lake a little further out. Exploration of the surrounding farmland added plenty of common birds such as Wryneck, Serins and Corn Buntings, along with Marsh Harriers and Red Kites, but the real surprise of the morning was a stunning male Red-footed Falcon, not a species I expected to see on Corsica! Onward towards the Col de Sorba again, six Corsican Finches feeding on a roadside grasses at one junction, two Red Kites over the slopes, three rather splendid Moltoni's Warblers in scrub on one sunny hillside. Good birding all the way up. By the time I reached the Col de Sorba however, a change in the weather was certainly brewing - a distinctively cold wind was whipping over the ridge, getting stronger by the minute. Two Corsican Nuthatches were seen again just below the col, but with the wind cutting through the pines, the birds were not lingering too much for photographs! Having seen my main targets on Corsica and the weather looking like it was about to worsen, I decided to make a dash back to Bonifacio and return to Sardinia a day earlier than I had initially planned. Two slight spanners to my plan - first, the scenic D69 southbound, a nice alternative to the faster coastal road, is over 100 km of non-stop serpentine bends with feral pigs strolling along at all the worst points! I saw almost no birds and wasted several hours doing my best impression of a rally driver! The second spanner, quite terminal, was the cancellation of all inter-island ferries for the entire day due to the high wind. Shucks. Thoughts of finding Marmora's Warblers and their buddies on the coastal heaths were soon dismissed for the same reason, so instead I found a campsite on the road out to Piantarella and then drove out to the headland just beyond for an evening on the beach - quite stunning, the sea whipping up real mean, the sun dropping behind me and glorious views of umpteen Scopoli's Shearwaters riding the winds, cruising in their element.

21 April - Tula & Cabras areas, Sardinia. Winds had subsided somewhat at dawn, the sun was shining and hopes were high for the ferries to be running. Still rather windy for birding on the headlands however - an hour or so overlooking stunted thickets merely producing several presumed Moltoni's Warblers calling and one Spectacled Warbler showing briefly. Decided a better use of time would be to visit the historic town of Bonifacio, the impressive ramparts crammed atop a shard of land pushing out to sea, towering cliffs on all sides. Did not manage to find the Pallid Swifts that supposedly breed here, but no shortage of Common Swifts hurtling about, several Alpine Swifts too. At 11.00 a.m. with the wind on the rise again, I headed for the ferry port and was rather relieved to find the boat actually running. It was quite a choppy crossing and certainly less productive in terms of birds than my first crossing, probably a function of time of day rather than weather, but still a handful of both Scopoli's Shearwater and Yelkouan Shearwaters battling the winds, a few Shags also seen in the sheltered bays in both Corsica and Sardinia. In Sardinia, the weather took a decided turn for the worse, the wind perhaps dropping, but frequent pulses of rain pushing in, each characterised by rising winds and each interspersed by periods of sunshine, the latter becoming less frequent as I climbed into the hill country. The birding nevertheless turned out quite reasonable - my only planned destination for the afternoon was the region immediately south of Tula, rolling grass and farmland dropping down to a large lake. Though a known locality for Little Bustard on the island, I had no illusions that I'd find one in such conditions, but the birding was good regardless - the highlights including a pair of Stone Curlews standing somewhat bedraggled against a stone wall, a Woodchat Shrike on roadside wires and yet another Red-footed Falcon, a female this time. Also one Hoopoe, a couple of Great White Egrets, many Little Egrets, several Marsh Harriers, small flocks of Spanish Sparrows and heaps of Corn Buntings and Stonechats.

Abandoning ideas to veer westward to the Bosa area for Griffon Vultures, I headed directly south to the Oristano area, arriving to pleasant sunshine, few clouds and a couple of hours still to play with. A quick scout of the area turned up a good variety of birds on Sale Porcus, not least several hundred Greater Flamingos, quite a sight. Also Common Shelducks, a few Avocets and Black-winged Stilts and a mass gathering of hirundines and swifts hawking the lake - a relative brief search amongst them picking out both Pallid Swift and Red-rumped Swallow. Fan-tailed Warblers zitted in rush growths, a couple of Yellow Wagtails flitted up from moist grass alongside, but with plans to better visit the following day, I departed to find somewhere to camp.

Settled upon a headland just south of Putzi Idu - to a backdrop of lapping waves and a bright moon, this seemed an idyllic spot. And it was until 4.00 a.m. when a mega thunder storm rolled in, bolts of lightning illuminating the landscape, rain lashing down. Rather conscious of being the lone feature on the top of this exposed high point, I really did not fancy

being frazzled by a lightning strike, so I abandoned camp and drove through appalling conditions to the relative shelter of nearby Putzi Idu, where I slept the remainder of the night in the car! 22 April - Cabras area, Sardinia. Dawn, dripping foliage and skies still grey. However, compared to the deluge just a couple of hours earlier, things had improved markedly, and so they continued to do. In the end, most of the day turned out to be a mix of sunny spells and periods of overcast. Started the morning with a count of the Greater Flamingos at Sale Porcus, an impressive 1250 birds wading the saline shallows. Other birds at this site were rather fewer - a handful of Black-winged Stilts, a single flock of Avocets, a scattering of Shelducks and that was about it, the masses of hirundines and swifts from the evening having dispersed. Just a few kilometres to the south-east however, the freshwater wetlands of Cabras were awaiting - a succession of detours along tracks off the SP58 adding species after species. Purple Herons flying over, Squacco Herons in ditches, Cattle Egrets in meadows, a Spoonbill dropping down to feed in shallows, the tally of birds steadily rose. In reedbeds, Great Reed Warblers sang from all quarters, so too Cetti's Warblers in many places and, in rank meadows, Fan-tailed Warblers, their ditty song flights much in evidence. Also Marsh Harriers quartering the reeds, Quails calling from meadows alongside, a pair of Stone Curlews on the edge of a field and singles of each, Black Tern, White-winged Black Tern and Whiskered Tern. After a short stop in Cabras to buy breakfast supplies, I then headed a little further south, accessing with some difficulty the vast Stagno di Mistras lagoon - this looked excellent, but other than abandoning the car and undertaking a major hike, I could see no way to really cover the site adequately. As it was, on my limited visit, I encountered a flock of about 60 Slender-billed Gulls, a few Wood Sandpipers and a selection of more common birds such as Little Egrets and Great Cormorants. Abundant Corn Buntings in the meadows alongside and both Spanish Sparrows and Spotless Starlings in good numbers in all villages. One stonking great Peregrine came hurtling over too, a local Kestrel none too pleased by the intrusion. Got a bit lazy from here on, a short stop on the headland west of Putzi Idu was nice for views of both Scopoli's and Yelkouin Shearwaters congregating offshore, as well as a Northern Wheatear on the beach, but thereafter I decided to quite the area and head south. A short stop at Arrubia added more Greater Flamingos, as well as Garganey and Red-crested Pochards, but from there I went to the port town of Portoscusa. Sunny and still when I arrived, but decided against any exploration of the coast and checked into a hotel instead, Yellow-legged Gulls the only birds seen. 23 April - Portoscusa & Cagliari, Sardinia. Perfect sylvia weather - not a hint of wind, wonderful blue skies, nice and warm. And the sylvia warblers and buddies clearly liked it too - on a small track just above the town of Portoscusa, an hour or two of wandering through the heathland was just superb. Male Blue Rock Thrush, no less than eight Woodchat Shrikes, one singing Wryneck, four Bee-eaters sallying overhead for starters, a bevy of sylvia warblers for the main course - several Sardinian Warblers, at least four Marmora's Warblers and one family of Dartford Warblers, a nice trio indeed. Also a Woodlark here, plenty of Stonechats, three Alpine Swifts and a couple of Serins. Unfortunately however, I had a plane to catch later this day, so reluctantly I turned towards Cagliari, an hour to the east. With a couple of hours still to spare, my plan was to quickly visit the Molentargius marshes west of Cagliari. However, arriving in the area, the vast salt pans just west of the airport looked absolutely fantastic, so I paused there instead. I regretted not planning in more time here, but what a nice finale it made to the trip ...thousands of Greater Flamingos in all directions, an assortment of other birds such as Little Ringed Plovers and Slender-billed Gulls and, the highlight of this last gasp of the trip, six stunning Gull-billed Terns. Slightly lost in the maze of tracks, the airport was in full view, but the route I had taken seemed to take me forever along the wrong side of a fence, Spanish Sparrows finding it a most convenient perching spot. Then, just as I began to think I was cutting it fine to make my flight, a gap appeared in the fence, through it I went and fifteen minutes later I was at the airport. Spotless Starlings and more Spanish Sparrows around the terminal, trip over.