



The perky Corsican Nuthatch performed ever so well (Mark Van Beirs)

CORSICA

6 – 10 MAY 2016

LEADER: MARK VAN BEIRS

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Corsica, the Isle de Beauté as it is often called, has had a chequered history because of its strategic position in the western Mediterranean. Over the centuries it has been occupied by many other Mediterranean nations, including the Phoenicians, the Etruscans, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Italians (it was for several centuries part of the Republic of Genoa) and many castles and fortresses remind the visitor of its turbulent past. Its most famous son is Napoleon Bonaparte and his name appears all over the island. The highlight of the tour was the exquisite Corsican Nuthatch that showed so very well on several occasions. Our encounters with Corsica's sole endemic were truly magical. The other avian specialities of the island, Corsican Finch, Marmora's Warbler and Moltoni's Warbler performed beautifully in the maquis. The supporting cast consisted of Red-crested Pochard, Scopoli's and Yelkouan Shearwaters, Golden Eagle, Red Kite (amazingly common), Audouin's Gull, Eleonora's Falcon, Peregrine, Dartford Warbler, Spotless Starling, Italian Sparrow, Red Crossbill and Cirl Bunting. The wealth of flowers was a sight to behold and the scenery, hospitality and food were outstanding.



Red Kites were regularly seen and Audouin's Gulls showed well along the coast (Mark Van Beirs)

The group convened at Ajaccio, situated on the east central coast of Corsica on a mid-afternoon in early May. We loaded our minibus and drove south through wooded hills to the lovely seaside town of Bonifacio, at the extreme southern tip of the island. We soon noted that the names of the towns and villages are indicated both in French and in the local 'Corse' language. Birds on the way included Little Egret, Red Kite, Yellow-legged Gull, Eurasian Collared Dove, Common Kestrel, Hooded Crow and many Common House Martins. The hotel was situated in picturesque downtown Bonifacio.

Just after dawn we stood seawatching from the cliffs near the lighthouse at nearby Cape Pertusato. We could see the Italian island of Sardinia only 12 km away and admired the amazing setting of the town of Bonifacio. A fairly strong wind was blowing and it was rather overcast. We scoped an adult and a young Peregrine Falcon perched on the cliffs and could also admire them in flight. At sea, parties of Yelkouan Shearwaters were both feeding and passing through, offering great looks. A few Scopoli's Shearwaters (split from Cory's) flew lazily past. Fair numbers of European Shags (of the Mediterranean race *desmarestii*) were fishing offshore and we noted both adults and pale-bellied immatures. A single Bottle-nosed Dolphin was picked up whilst scanning. There was a trickle of migration as several Western Marsh Harriers and a single European Honey Buzzard were arriving from Sardinia. Thrift was blooming on the cliffs and a male Red-backed Shrike and several 'real' Rock Doves showed well. Other goodies included Northern Raven, Common and a few Pallid Swifts, Greater Short-toed Lark, Barn Swallow, Common Greenfinch and Common

Linnet. We heard European Bee-eaters overhead and a Common Nightingale at the edge of town. We enjoyed a scrumptious breakfast in a lovely setting in the highest part of the fortress of Bonifacio overlooking the harbour. Afterwards we birded the neighbouring maquis, the evergreen scrub consisting of Common Juniper, Kermes and Holm Oaks, Rosemary, French Lavender, Field Gladiolus, pink and white Rock Roses (genus *Cistus*), Giant Fennel and lots of other flowers, offering a very rich, distinct aroma. We briefly saw a Dartford Warbler, but the strong wind kept the birds down. Sardinian Warblers were chattering away and along the coast we noted Common Tern and more European Shags. We continued travelling north along the east coast and observed regular Red Kites, a Common Buzzard and lots of Spotless Starlings and Italian Sparrows. Our afternoon session at the large reed edged Lake Biguglia gave us a cracking pale morph Eleonora's Falcon and several smart Audouin's Gulls next to more common fry like Mallard, Eurasian Coot, Great Crested Grebe, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and heard only Cetti's Warblers and Zitting Cisticolas. We could discern the island of Elba in the distance and in late afternoon we drove inland to the interesting town of Corte in the centre of the island. Our lovely hotel was situated in the lower section of the scenic Restonica Valley. After dinner we took a walk nearby, but the rushing stream made too much noise to even hear any nightbirds.



The lovely town of Bonifacio (Mark Van Beirs)

Next morning, a pre breakfast walk around the hotel produced nice looks at a singing male Cirl Bunting and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. After a delicious breakfast we found a White-throated Dipper in the stream and drove to the nearby Col de Sorba. The scenery was out of this world. At our first stop in a stretch of Corsican Pine (*Pinus nigra laricio*) we soon obtained great looks at the only endemic of the island of Corsica: the delightful Corsican Nuthatch. Although the light was rather poor, we had cracking views of a perky male showing off his black cap while running up and down the straight trunks. Magical moments! A party of Red Crossbills (race *corsicana*) perched up for great views and we also noted Common Cuckoo, Coal Tit, Eurasian Blue Tit, Common Firecrest and Tree Pipit. We heard Eurasian Wryneck and Eurasian Treecreeper and obtained more good looks at the Corsican Nuthatch. Lower down, in dense maquis vegetation, we observed Red-backed Shrike, an all too brief Woodchat Shrike, Woodlark, Long-tailed Tit, Common Chiffchaff, Eurasian Wren and European Stonechat, but best of all was a nice male Moltoni's Warbler that perched up for great looks. We could discern the salmon underparts of this recent split from Subalpine Warbler and also heard the different call. In the afternoon we searched for two more specialities in the flower rich scrub. Several parties of Corsican Finch were found foraging amongst some rocks allowing for excellent scope views. This recent split from Citril Finch is endemic to Corsica and Sardinia. In the same area we also managed to get to grips with the sprightly Marmora's Warbler. Eventually we all had splendid looks as it perched up on top of a bush. Now that the Balearic form has been split off as Balearic Warbler, this has become an endemic of the islands of Corsica and Sardinia. A Goldcrest was seen and we spent a bit of time admiring the many flowers: Broom, Woad, several species of Vetch, Common Asphodel, Hellebore, Spring Sowbread (*Cyclamen*) and Tassel Hyacinth were identified amongst many others. After dinner some of us

indulged in a prolonged owling session, whereby we heard at least eight different Eurasian Scops Owls that all refused to show. Very frustrating and so unusual!



Marmora's Warbler performed beautifully in the maquis (Matthias Baumgart)

Just after dawn we stood watch at a spot in some nearby maquis where Matthias had found a nest with chicks of a Marmora's Warbler. Soon we were all able to get excellent looks again at this delightful little bird as it was bringing food to its hungry young. Eurasian Jay and Grey Wagtail showed and a male Northern Goshawk flew over. After breakfast we drove north to the famous and scenic Asco valley (Gorges de l'Asco). We made several stops in the lower section, where the road winds its way through a narrow gorge flanked by maquis-covered slopes. Common Wood Pigeon, Eurasian Crag Martin and European Serin appeared, but best of all were the two singing and displaying male Moltoni's Warblers that showed so very well. The higher sections of the Asco valley consist of pine forest and open rocky slopes with snow-capped mountains rising to 2700m in the distance. We made our way up to the ski station at 1400m where we admired an immature Golden Eagle showing off its white wing and tail patches. Alpine Choughs were galavanting high over the crags and a bit lower down we obtained eye-ball to eye-ball looks at another Corsican Nuthatch. Awesome! We had hoped to observe Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier) here, but didn't get a sniff. The population on the island is now fewer than 20 birds and there is almost no reproduction, so the future looks rather gloomy for this magnificent species. The Corsican Pines were truly imposing and some were covered in mistletoe

(*Viscum austriacum*). Here we also found a smart Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard was sunning itself. In the afternoon we headed to the eastcoast. A stop in some good looking maquis gave us a nice pair of Dartford Warblers and some Penny-Royal. We intended to explore the southern edge of Lake Biguglia, but found the road blocked by a recent extension of Bastia airport, so we birded the south east shore of the lake where Great Cormorant, a drake Red-crested Pochard, Eurasian Hobby, Sand Martin, Corn Bunting and heard only Water Rail and Common Grasshopper Warbler were added to the list. Several very attractive European Bee-eaters were breeding in the diggings of an archaeological site and gave smashing views. In late afternoon we returned to the hotel and savoured our final dinner. After dinner, some of us tried again for the Scops Owl and this time everyone saw it in flight. Still frustrating and very unusual!

Early next morning we travelled from Corte southwest to the airport of the capital of Ajaccio through the mountains over the famous Vizzavona pass. We noted European Robin and a Song Thrush in the twilight.



The scenery in Corsica is often breath-taking (Mark Van Beirs)



Another photo of the star of the tour: Corsican Nuthatch (Matthias Baumgart)

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

E = Endangered, **V** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened, **DD** = Data Deficient.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* 15 were seen on Lake Biguglia.

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* A single smart drake on Lake Biguglia on 9/5.

Scopoli's Shearwater ◊ *Calonectris diomedea* Just five were noted from the Pertusato lighthouse on 7/5.

Yelkouan Shearwater ◊ *Puffinus yelkouan* (**V**) 80+ showed well from the Pertusato lighthouse on 7/5.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* Regular on Lake Biguglia.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* A few were roosting in a roadside tree near Ajaccio on 6/5.



An immature European Shag of the race *desmarestii* (Mark Van Beirs); a male Common Kestrel (Matthias Baumgart)

European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* 25+ in the Bonifacio area on 7/5. Race *desmarestii*.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Two were noted on Lake Biguglia on 9/5.

European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* A male was observed near Bonifacio on 7/5.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* An immature bird showed in the Haut Asco valley on 9/5.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* Three observations of the race *wolterstorffi*.

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* A male flew over our Corte hotel on 9/9.

Western Marsh Harrier (Eurasian M H) *Circus aeruginosus* 17 sightings of this widespread bird of prey.

Red Kite ♦ *Milvus milvus* (NT) Delightfully common on Corsica. 35 observations!

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* Three sightings only.

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* (H) We heard its piglet screams at Lake Biguglia on 9/9.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* Common on Lake Biguglia.

Audouin's Gull ♦ *Ichthyaeetus audouinii* One off Bonifacio and four at Lake Biguglia on 7/5.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* Common along the seashore and also seen on meadows inland.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* Two were noted near Bonifacio on 7/5.

Rock Dove *Columba livia* Some 'real' ones near Bonifacio on 7/5, next to common feral ones elsewhere.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* Just three observations.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Common.

Common Cuckoo (Eurasian C) *Cuculus canorus* Seen and heard at Col de Sorba and in the Asco Valley.

Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops* Glimpses only of this commonly heard critter! So frustrating.

Common Swift *Apus apus* Regular observations.

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* A few were identified in the Bonifacio area on 7/5.

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* Great looks at breeding birds near Lake Biguglia on 9/5. Heard elsewhere.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* (H) We heard its distinctive voice in the Asco Valley on 9/5.

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* (H) Heard at the Col de Sorba and in the Asco Valley, but no joy.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* Three observations of the Corsican endemic race *parroti*.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* Eight sightings.

Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonora* A pale morph was hunting over Lake Biguglia on 7/5.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* One was seen near Lake Biguglia on 9/5.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Great looks at an adult and a juvenile at Lake Pertusato on 7/5.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* Good looks at three males and a female. Always nice!

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* Glimpses only of one at Col de Sorba on 8/5 (*badius*)

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* Regular sightings of the endemic race *corsicanus* in the mountains.

Alpine Chough (Yellow-billed C) *Pyrrhocorax graculus* A few around distant crags in the Haut Asco Valley on 9/5.

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* Common.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax* Seven observations of the 'croaker'.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater* Regular in the pine forests.

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* Just a few observations.

Great Tit *Parus major* Fairly common (race *corsus*).

Woodlark *Lullula arborea* Good looks at this fine songster at the Col de Sorba on 8/5.

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* One was recorded at the Pertusato lighthouse on 7/5.

Sand Martin (Bank Swallow) *Riparia riparia* A few were over the Lake Biguglia reedbeds on 9/5.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Fairly common.

Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* A few were noted in the mountains.

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum* Delightfully common in towns and villages.

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* (H) Several were heard at Lake Biguglia.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* Several were seen at Col de Sorba on 8/5.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* Several were seen or heard at Col de Sorba on 8/5.

Common Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* (H) One was singing at Lake Biguglia on 9/5.

Zitting Cisticola (Fan-tailed Warbler) *Cisticola juncidis* (H) Just a few were heard.

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* Regular.

Dartford Warbler ◇ *Sylvia undata* (NT) Quite good looks near Ponte Leccia on 9/5 after initial glimpses near Bonifacio.



Another photo of Marmora's Warbler (*Matthias Baumgart*); the near-endemic Corsican Finch (*Mark van Beirs*)

Marmora's Warbler ◇ *Sylvia sarda* Scope studies at Col de Sorba and near Corte! Endemic to Corsica and Sardinia.

Moltoni's Warbler ◇ *Sylvia subalpina* Very good looks at displaying males in the Asco Valley.

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* Regularly recorded.

Common Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla* A few showed well in the mountain forests.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* Just a single encounter.

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* Often heard and a couple seen. Restricted to mountains.

Corsican Nuthatch ◇ *Sitta whiteheadi* (V) THE BIRD OF THE TRIP. Fantastic views at Sorba and in the Asco Valley.

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* (H) We heard one at Col de Sorba on 8/5.

Spotless Starling *Sturnus unicolor* Common throughout.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* Common throughout.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* A single bird was feeding on the roadside on our drive to Ajaccio airport on 10/5.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* Regularly recorded in the hills and mountains.

Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* (H) Several were heard.

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola* Several nice observations in the hills.

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus* One showed well at our Corte hotel on 8/5.

Italian Sparrow ◊ *Passer italiae* Common throughout.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* A couple of sightings along mountain streams.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* One was noted at the Col de Sorba on 8/5.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* Regular observations all along our route.

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris* Just a few encounters.

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina* Nice looks at three at Cape Pertusato.

Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* Cracking views of 20 at the Col de Sorba (Corsican endemic race *corsicana*).

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* Common and so smart.

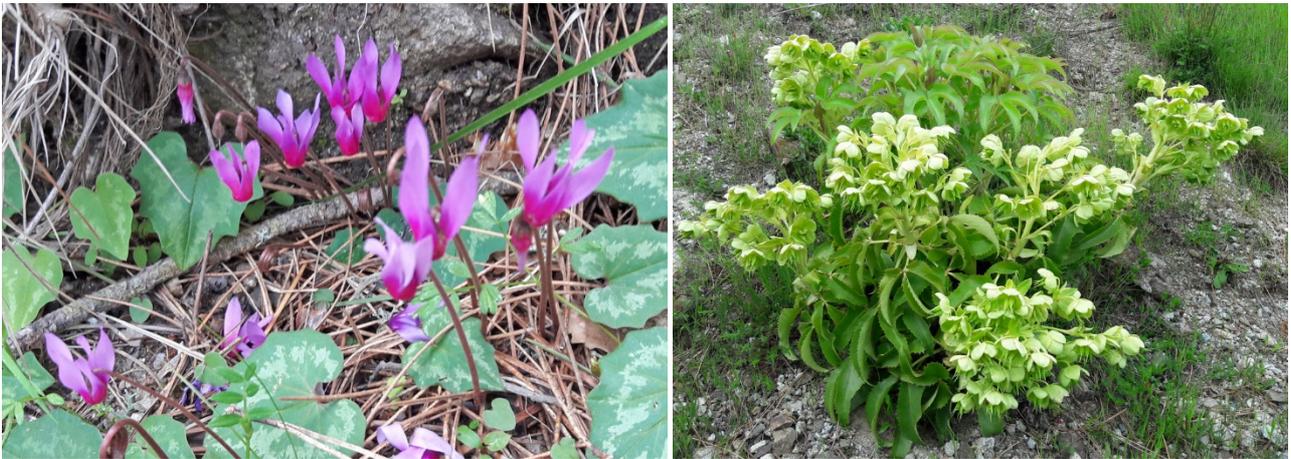
Corsican Finch ◊ *Carduelis corsicana* Regularly noted in the mountains. Endemic to Corsica and Sardinia.

European Serin *Serinus serinus* Just a few were seen.

Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* (H) We heard one at the Col de Sorba on 8/5.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* Good looks at one near Lake Biguglia on 9/5.

Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus* Regular observations of this beautiful species.



Spring Sowbread (*Cyclamen repandum*) and Hellebore sp (Mark van Beirs)

MAMMALS

Bottle-nosed Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus* A single animal was seen during seawatching off Cape Pertusato.

REPTILES

Italian Wall Lizard *Podarcis sicula* Seen at Ajaccio airport.

Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard *Podarcis tiliguerta* Two showed beautifully in the haut Asco Valley.