

## Birding & Wildlife Itinerary

### Slovenia, Croatia & NW Italy.

The area around the Northern Adriatic supports some of the highest levels of biodiversity of any area in Europe. There are several reasons for this including its position at the centre of Europe, close to the influence of both the Italian and Balkan peninsulas, steppe and steppe-like areas to the east and the vast temperate landmass of Eurasia.

Added to this is the, climate, enormously variable over relatively short distances as a result of the Alpine arc (the Dolomites, Carnic, Julian and Dinaric Alps) lying so close to a warm shallow sea, the Adriatic. Average annual rainfall varies from less than 800mm a year in parts of southern Istria to more than 3300mm in the foot-hills of the Julian Alps, points just 100 miles (160km) apart. Average annual temperatures are equally varied over even shorter distances with a mild 15.7°C in Trieste set against less than 7°C in Tarvisio just over 60miles (100km) away. As one moves away from the coast northeastwards the temperature gradient here is steeper than anywhere else in Europe.



*The area covered by the tour*

The result of this is that **Ural Owls** and **Three-toed Woodpeckers** nest less than 10 miles (15 km) from the first pairs of **Subalpine** and **Sardinian Warblers** and sometimes much less and birds such as **Bee-eaters** and **Hoopoes** are less than an hour away by car from **Ptarmigans** and **Pygmy Owls**.

This avian biodiversity is mirrored in that of the rest of the flora and fauna with, for example, almost 200 species of butterfly and where some single 10 x 10 km squares contain as many species of plant as are found in Great Britain & Ireland.

#### Southern Slovenia (days 1 & 2 – day 3 optional)

Slovenia is a small country of just 20,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of about 2,000,000. The western third of the country is the most biodiverse, ranging from the peaks of the Julian Alps over 2500m (8,000 feet) to the Adriatic.



*The Logar Agritourism*

We are based at the **Logar Agritourism**, a very comfortable farm-based hotel in the village of Žerovnica next to Cerknjiško Jezero, a karstic *polje* covering more than 3,000 hectares which floods regularly and plays host to a wide range of birds. It is an Important Bird Area. In spring and early summer the lake-bed is usually well-inundated, with nesting **Red-necked Grebes** and **Bitterns** while the surrounding wetland areas are host to **Corncrakes**, **Spotted** and **Little Crakes**, **Savi's Warblers**, **Barred Warblers**, **Whinchats**, **Scarlet Rosefinches** and **Snipe**, all set in some of the most beautiful landscapes in Europe.



*Cerkniško Jezero “full”*

The lake is surrounded by limestone mountains, part of the Dinaric Alps and largely covered in dense forest, some of it very ancient. Here the bird-life is thinner on the ground but no less interesting with **Ural Owls** and **Three-toed Woodpeckers** both frequent, together with scarcer birds such as **White-backed Woodpecker** and **Hazel Grouse** that are easier to track down in spring when they are territorial.

The local farmland and villages are also a joy to behold with “common” species such as **Fieldfare**, **White Stork**, **Spotted Flycatcher** and **Skylark** in excellent numbers.



*Ural Owl – photo Domen Stanič*

**Istria (days 3, 4 & 5, day 6 optional)**

To the south-west, and covering 8,000 km<sup>2</sup> split and between Croatia and Slovenia lies Istria, a peninsula of fabulous landscapes, a glorious climate and wonderful biodiversity, rich in birds, especially Mediterranean ones.



*The karstic rockface above the hotel*

We are based at **Istarska Toplice**, a thermal spring resort in northern Istria, set in the countryside against the impressive backdrop of karst rockfaces and caves with nesting Alpine Swifts and right in front of an extensive riparian oak forest running along the River Mirna with seven species of woodpecker. Just around the hotel we can find **Black**, **Grey-headed** and **Middle-spotted Woodpeckers**, **Wryneck**, **Red-backed Shrike**, **Rock Bunting** and **Blue Rock Thrush** but much other wildlife besides.

From early the area is host to an extraordinary display of **Fireflies** (*Luciola italica*) as well as being rich in orchids and butterflies.

The peninsula of Istria is all within easy reach. The southernmost tip, Premantura, 70 minutes away, is famous with botanists for its Mediterranean flora which is extraordinary in wet springs but is also host to **Tawny Pipit**, **Sardinian** and **Subalpine Warblers** while **Pallid Swifts** nest in the low cliffs between April and November passing below the observer just a couple of metres away.

The eastern side of Istria, between the Italian border and the city of Rijeka is dominated by a limestone massif, part of the Dinaric Alps running NW – SE and parallel to the coast. Reaching almost 1400m in some places the massif is home to **Golden Eagles**, **Eagle Owls**, **Rock Partridges** and the now-rare **Ortolan Bunting** as well as commoner karstic grassland birds such as **Hoopoe** and **Turtle Dove**.



*Rock Partridge hangs on in the Karst*

These sites are threatened by scrubbing over but several are now being grazed once again.

NW Istria has its own jewels too and as the River Mirna reaches the sea the riverine forest gives way to open agricultural land and, finally, lagoon, saltmarsh, reedbeds and the open sea. Here one can find the most northerly breeding **Black-headed Buntings** in Europe but **Rollers**, **Lesser Kestrels** and **Red-rumped Swallows** often oversummer and the latter bred in 2015. **Short-toed Eagles** often hunt for snakes along the river and **Spanish Sparrows** are frequent around some of the farms.

### North-east Italy

(days 6 & 7, day 8 optional)



*The Caneo Hotel at the mouth of the River Isonzo*

NE Italy is the part of the country with the highest diversity in terms of landscape, peoples, climate and birds. We are based at the Caneo Hotel, set within the Isonzo Rivermouth Reserve, 2,200 hectares of marsh, sea and mudflat with the longest species list of any single nature reserve in Europe at 326 species! It owes this to its position close to the Karst and the Alps which means some truly odd species have turned up over the years. The area round the hotel overlooks marsh and mudflats and egrets, herons, Great **Reed Warblers**, **Spoonbills**, **Marsh Harriers** and **Bee-eaters** are all regular at dinner and log-call with many more to be seen on pre-breakfast walks.

The main birding site is Isola della Cona on the opposite bank a short distance away. Here a freshwater marsh has been recreated with hides and screened paths and an enormous number of species can be added relatively quickly including **Pygmy Cormorants**, **Purple Herons**, **Little Bittern**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Avocet** and **Bee-eaters** at their breeding colony in just a few minutes. The other species on show depend very much on the time of year but the area is a magnet for migrating waders and terns and **Ruff**, Spotted **Redshank**, **Black**, **White-winged Black** and **Whiskered Tern** are all regular in April and May and several usually oversummer.

There are a large number of wetland and karst sites to visit very close by, depending on priorities, together with a large cast of supporting wildlife, especially butterflies including **Southern Festoon**, **Large Copper** and **False Ringlet** and flowering plants in breathtaking displays before the summer sun dries out many of the sites.



*Large Copper butterfly*

### **NW Slovenia – Julian Alps (days 8 & 9, day 10 optional)**

Just 90 minutes from the Adriatic and still within the Isonzo/Soča catchment lie the Julian Alps, rising to more than 2,500 metres above sea-level and straddling the borders of Italy Austria and Slovenia.

We are based at the **Jazebec Bed & Breakfast**, a very comfortable and quiet base in the village of Idrsko, close to Kobarid and the site of the famous battle of Caporetto in November 1917 and nestling below the mountains of Krn and Stol, the latter being our first destination.

Stol is a long ridge in the Julian pre-Alps overlooking the Italian plain to the south-west and the true Julian Alps to the north. Its broad grassy slopes are very popular with paragliders in the summer months but with raptors all year. **Griffon Vultures** are seen every day together with large numbers of **Honey Buzzards** on migration. On quiet days **Golden Eagles** survey the ridge in search of prey. On the grasslands below there are **Corncrakes** in summer and **Rock Partridges** all year although the latter are best seen in late April and May when the males are at their most vocal and visible.



The following day we head further inland towards the town of Bovec and thence to the road leading up onto the mountain of Mangart, the third highest peak in Slovenia and the only one with a tarmac road leading to over 2000 metres above sea-level.



*Ptarmigan are present on Mangart*

Mangart is a massive attraction for botanists and lovers of the Alpine flora from across Europe and beyond as it gives easy access to one of the most interesting parts of the eastern Alps with large numbers of local and endemic species. Birds are not lacking however and there are **Wallcreepers**, **Alpine Accentors**, **Alpine Choughs**, **Water Pipits**, **Ptarmigan** and the occasional **Snow Finch** to whet the appetite on the circular walk up to the saddle and the Italian border which runs along the ridge.

The flora is simply magnificent, depending upon the season and includes large drifts of Alpenrose, various gentian species. Other fauna include the **Alpine Marmot** and an east Alps endemic butterfly, **Lorkovic's Brassy Ringlet**

Our base is approximately two hours from Trieste and Ljubljana airports and three hours from Venice.