

Montenegro Trip Report

13 – 21 April 2015

Tour guide: Attila Steiner, Ecotours Wildlife Holidays

Trip report written by tour participant Ruth Day

Day 1

Arrived in Dubrovnik to blue skies and warm sunshine. Driving to our hotel the road skirted the Adriatic on one side while on the other impressive limestone crags were clothed with Cypress trees, yellow brooms and clumps of euphorbia. A short stop en-route to the hotel showed the potential of the trip as we quickly noted Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers, Blue Rock Thrush, Lesser Whitethroat and numerous Blackcaps.

After lunch we enjoyed a leisurely stroll around the old city of Dubrovnik with its beautiful stone buildings, narrow streets and excellent ice-cream.



Day 2

An early walk round the hotel grounds gave us good views of two Wrynecks calling from the Cypress trees as well as a number of warblers and hirundines. Soon after we left Croatia and started our Montenegro tour. Driving east we followed the shores of the Bay of Kotor until we reached Kotor itself. Here a noisy group of Alpine Choughs flew amongst the city roofs.



Leaving Kotor we began the long climb away from the coast via a narrow road with 25 hairpin bends. Built by the Austrians in the 19th century this amazing road gave us spectacular views to the coast below as well as adding Common Cuckoos, Rock Bunting, Rock Dove, Crag Martin and Jay to our bird list. After a late lunch we reached a village where small fields held Cirl Bunting and White Wagtails. From there onwards the road crossed a series of ridges with small areas of woodland, stone walls and pasture. Here there were patches of primrose, blue anemones and crocus species. Later came clumps of Early Spider Orchid growing by the roadside. Finally we began our descent to Lake Skadar, one of the feeding Rivers providing the sight of Grey Herons, Little Egret and Hoopoe. Overhead we watched a Short-toed Eagle giving a display flight while holding a snake in its beak. After a day of spectacular scenery we finally reached Virpazar, our home for the next four nights.



Day 3

We woke to blue skies and the sound of many hirundines feeding over the river close by. After breakfast we took a two and a half hour boat trip on Lake Skadar. The lake is fed by winter rain and underground springs so is a very large feature in April though much diminished by summer. The lake is surrounded by reed beds and limestone outcrops with the snow clad peaks of the Albanian Alps in the distance. This expanse of water added Pygmy Cormorants, Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes, Coots, and a single Dalmatian Pelican to our growing bird list.



In the afternoon we crossed the causeway and drove along the north shore of the lake through a landscape of small fields, vineyards, orchards and scattered houses. Here we found singing Corn Buntings and House, Spanish and Tree Sparrows. Red-rumped Swallows flew by, Crested Larks were present and again Hoopoe and Common Cuckoo. Viewed from the lake shore were more of the morning's water birds.

Stopping short of our hotel we found an excellent spot with shallow water, reed beds and a large ditch with shrubs alongside. Here, in good late afternoon light, we had a rewarding couple of hours with good views of Dalmatian Pelican, Great White Egret, both Cormorants and an array of ducks in breeding plumage including Ferruginous Duck and Garganey. At the ditch margins were Long-tailed and Penduline Tits and calling Cetti's Warblers.



Day 4

Today we drove South East climbing into typical karst scenery. Pine trees gave way to bare rock, scrub and small trees. Leaving the van we walked slowly uphill along the road enjoying the amazing views, roadside flowers, warm sunshine and birdsong. In this area were Nightingales, Cirl Buntings, numerous Blackcaps and Subalpine Warblers and Black-eared Wheatear. Our guide Attila was delighted to spot a White-backed Woodpecker from the van. A first for him in Montenegro. Higher up, a first for many of us, were the terrific views of a Western Rock Nuthatch.

The lunch stop was a small beech woodland where the ground was carpeted with primroses, celandines, violets, blue anemones and hundreds of Great Butterfly Orchids. Here we found Green Woodpecker, Blue Tit and Eurasian Nuthatch.

Descending from around 900 metres we came to the abandoned salt pans at Ulcinj. In beautiful early evening light we watched a wide variety of birds including around five hundred Flamingos as well as Pied Avocets, Ruff, Wood, Marsh and Green Sandpipers, Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers, Black-winged Stilts, and Marsh Harrier. Nearby grass and shrubs held Zitting Cisticola, Corn Bunting and Yellow Wagtails. One shrub held nine Yellow Wagtails showing four different races including lovely Black-headed Wagtail.



A final stop on the way back showed us a flock of around sixty Corn Buntings, a first Squacco Heron and a female Hen Harrier hunting across the fields.

Day 5

A day trip to Albania. Leaving the hotel we drove south to reach the border within an hour. After crossing the border the landscape was broadly similar but the roads and buildings not so well maintained. Within a short period of time we had good sightings of a beautiful male Montague's Harrier hunting over pasture and two other Harriers which were too far away to identify. Later a stop by a small area of water with reed beds showed several Squacco Herons, Little Egrets and our first and only two Cattle Egrets of the tour. Here too there was a Great Reed Warbler singing which obligingly came to the reed heads to give us all good views. Further along the road our driver came to a stop as an impressive and rather beautiful Balkan Green Lizard slowly crossed the road.

Driving down to the coast our guide spotted a Little Owl hunting over rough grass in the sunlight. While we had our lunch at the coast 3 Red-throated Divers were seen off shore and on the sandy shore there were 6 Sanderlings, Kentish Plover, Oystercatchers Whimbrel and both Little and Sandwich Terns.

Returning to the border we detoured to admire the ancient bridge across the River Kir where there were Grey Wagtails and numbers of hirundines.



Day 6

Today we left Virpazar en-route to Zabljak via Podgorica and Rasko. Overnight and early morning rain gave way to dry but overcast conditions. An unscheduled stop at the side of the main road gave us wonderful views of around twenty five Glossy Ibis feeding alongside Little Egret in shallow water among trees. Even better for many of us was the chance to see Hawfinch in the scope feeding on a small roadside elm. Just as we turned for the van a Cetti's Warbler appeared in full view.

Travelling on into the mountains the potential views were obscured by rain and cloud. Our route took north-west following the Tara River through an astonishing gorge. Cascades of water fell from the valley sides and soon patches of snow appeared and the rain turned to snow as we climbed towards Zabljak at around 1600 meters above SL. By the time we reached our hotel we were in a winter landscape with several inches of snow on the ground and several feet roadside where the snowploughs had cleared the way. An astonishing change from the Adriatic coast!



Day 7

Overnight snow of around 4 inches added to the rather surreal experience and we were glad to put on our winter layers. However conditions favoured our birding as where there were small breaks in the snow cover and the possibility of surface water there were good concentrations of birds. In a seemingly lifeless landscape we watched numbers of Water Pipits, Skylarks, Northern Wheatear and Wagtails while noting singles of Tree Pipit, Green Sandpiper and a Wood Lark. Among all these there were Fieldfares and at least three Ring Ouzels busy feeding. In addition the areas around chalets gave us Hooded Crows, Magpies, Jackdaws, Starlings, Robin, Black Redstart and a Hoopoe.



Descending southwards some 500mts we left the main road and turned up a side valley. Bathed in sunshine, though still chilly, the valley acts as something of a migration route through the mountains and here amongst crags, scattered trees and scrub interspersed with farmland we found an astonishing number and range of birds. Driving along with frequent stops we saw Robin, Black and Common Redstarts, Whinchat, Northern Wheatear, Common Sandpiper, Water Pipit, Rock Nuthatch, Crag Martins and Subalpine Warbler. However as we turned back a welcome tea stop on a bridge over a narrow gorge gave us even better birding as our driver spotted a Wallcreeper busy feeding on a sunny rock close to the road. For most of us this was a lifer and the kind of views you wish for and rarely get. As it eventually flew we noted a pair of Dippers feeding around a band of rock in the river below. A fitting end to a great day.

Day 8

Today the weather was bright and clear and after breakfast we made a short visit to the Durmitor National Park. Lake Cerno Jezero was frozen but amongst the snow clad firs we spotted Crested Tits, Bullfinch and Mistle Thrushes.



Time to go and travelling south via Podgorica and Cetinje we quickly passed from snow to warm sunshine once more shedding coats and fleeces as the temperature rose. At lunchtime we stopped for a picnic close to the lovely monastery at Ostrog.

The last stop of the day was the saltpans at Tivat. There we found more Glossy Ibis along with Wood and Marsh Sandpipers, Greenshank, Common Whitethroat, Whinchat, Northern Wheatear and a lovely Woodchat Shrike. Then sadly we handed in our tea mugs after a final cuppa before boarding the ferry for the short crossing of the Kotor fiord and our hotel.

Day 9

An early morning flight back to London

This was a hugely enjoyable trip giving us the chance to visit a beautiful unspoilt country and see around 140 different bird species in a variety of habitats. The tour was taken at a relaxed pace and the participants are looking at a trip to Slovakia and Hungary next year.

BIRDS

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* 1 at Ulcinj Saltpans

Gadwall *Anas strepera* 3 birds on a pond near Lake Skadar

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* 2 males on a pond near Lake Skadar

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Seen most days

Garganey *Anas querquedula* 10 birds on a pond near Lake Skadar and over 50 at Ulcinj Saltpans

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* 3 birds on a pond near Lake Skadar

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* 13 seen on a pond near Lake Skadar

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* 1 male seen only by the leader

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata* 2 recorded at see at Velipoje, Albania

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* A few seen on Lake Skadar

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* Many seen on Lake Skadar

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* A few seen on Lake Skadar

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* About 500 birds seen at Ulcinj Saltpans

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* A flock of 25 birds at Lake Skadar and 8 at Tivat Saltpans

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* 3 at Velika Plaza, many at the Buna River Protected Landscape in Albania, 3 at Tivat Saltpans

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Seen regularly near wetlands

Great Egret *Ardea alba* 1 seen at Lake Skadar

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* Common, seen most days at wetlands

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* 2 seen at the Buna River Protected Landscape in Albania

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* 1 seen during the boat trip on Lake Skadar, 8 seen at their nesting site on the northern side of the lake and 2 on a pond near Lake Skadar

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmaeus* Good numbers seen at Lake Skadar and at Tivat Saltpans

European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* Several in Kotor Bay, 2 at Velipoje, Albania and 3 near Mlini

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Many seen at Lake Skadar

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* Seen on 5 days, the best was a displaying bird with a snake in its beak near Virpazar.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* 1 seen in Komarnica Valley

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* Common near wetlands

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* 1 female at the Buna River Protected Landscape in Albania

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* 1 female at Velika Plaza

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* 1 male and 1 female at the Buna River Protected Landscape in Albania

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* Common, seen on most days

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* Heard and seen at Lake Skadar

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* Common on Lake Skadar

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* 2 seen on a sandbank at Velipoje, Albania

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* Common at Ulcinj Salt pans

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avocetta* 3 at Ulcinj Salt pans

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* 2 seen at Ulcinj Salt pans

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* 2 at Ulcinj Salt pans, 2 at Velipoje and 4 at Tivat Salt pans

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* 15 Ulcinj Salt pans and 3 at Velipoje

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* 2 Ulcinj Salt pans and 5 at Velipoje

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* A few seen at Ulcinj Salt pans

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* 2 at Ulcinj Salt pans

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* A few seen at Ulcinj and Tivat Salt pans

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* 2 at Ulcinj Salt pans and 1 at Tivat Salt pans

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* Common at the wetlands

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* 1 in the Komarnica Valley and 2 on the beach at Mlini

Sanderling *Calidris alba* A flock of 6 birds on the sand bank at Velipoje, Albania

Little Stint *Calidris minuta* 1 at Ulcinj Salt pans

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* 5 at Ulcinj Salt pans

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* Good numbers at Ulcinj Salt pans

Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei* 1 seen at Ulcinj Salt pans

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Common, seen most days

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* Common, seen most days

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* 1 at Velika Plaza

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* 1 at Ulcinj Salt pans

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis* A few at sea at Velipoje, Albania

Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* 2 at sea at Velipoje, Albania

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* Only 1 at Velika Plaza

Rock Dove *Columba livia* The feral form common, seen every day, wild birds seen above Kotor and in the Durmitor

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Seen almost daily in towns

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* Heard or seen most days

Little Owl *Athene noctua* 1 along the northern shore of Lake Skadar and 1 at Velipoje

Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba* Seen in Dubrovnik and Mlini

Common Swift *Apus apus* Only 2 seen in Albania not far from Shkoder

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* Seen on 6 days

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* 3 birds on day 2 and 1 on day 9 in the hotel garden in Mlini

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos* A surprising sighting of 1 male in the hills above Lake Skadar

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* 2 in the Sweet Chestnut orchard at Ostros

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* Seen most days

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* 1 at Tivat Salt pans was our only record

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* Common, seen most days

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* Seen most days

Alpine Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus* About 50 birds in Kotor and a big flock above a hilltop in Lovcen NP

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula* Common in villages and towns

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* Common, seen most days

Northern Raven *Corvus corax* Recorded in Lovcen NP, near Ostros and Durmitor NP

Coal Tit *Periparus ater* Heard above Kotor and seen in Zabljak

European Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus* Seen and heard in Zabljak, Durmitor NP

Sombre Tit *Poecile lugubris* 2 birds showing well in Komarnica Valley

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris* 4 in Komarnica Valley

Great Tit *Parus major* Common, seen every day

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* Common, seen most days

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* 1 male showing well at Lake Skadar and 1 heard at the Buna River Protected Landscape in Albania

Woodlark *Lullula arborea* 1 at Zabljak

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* Common in the Zabljak area and Komarnica Valley

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* A few seen along the road north of Lake Skadar and also in Albania

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* Only seen at Tivat Salt pans

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Common, seen most days.

Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* 4 above Kotor Bay, several at Moraca River and Komarnica Valley

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum* Common, seen most days

Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* Common, seen most days

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* Heard most days along watercourses

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* Seen on 5 days

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* Common, seen or heard most days

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* 1 migrating bird in the hills above Lake Skadar

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* Seen around Lake Skadar and 1 seen well at the Buna River Protected Landscape in Albania

Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* 1 seen well at Lake Skadar

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* 3 at Ulcinj Salt pans

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* Very common, migrating across region in thousands

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin* 1 seen in the garden of our hotel in Mlini

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* 4 around Mlini, 1 near Virpazar

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* 1 in Mlini, 1 in Komarnica Valley and 1 at Tivat Salt pans

Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* Common, seen every day

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* 1 bird seen near Mlini

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* 2 in the Sweet Chestnut orchard in Ostros, 2 in Komarnica Valley

Western Rock Nuthatch *Sitta neumayer* 2 seen well in the hills at Lake Skadar, 1 heard in Albania, 2 seen at the Moraca River

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria* 1 bird seen very well in Komarnica Valley

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* Common, seen every day

Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus* 6 birds seen in Durmitor NP

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* Seen or heard most days

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* 6 seen in Durmitor NP

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* Seen only in Durmitor NP

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* A few seen near Zabljak, Durmitor NP

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* Heard above Kotor, seen only near Zabljak

Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* Heard most days, seen well in Komarnica Valley

European Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* 1 male seen briefly at Rijeka Crnojevica, 1 female at Moraca River and 2 males in Komarnica Valley

Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis* 1 male in Komarnica Valley

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* Seen in Zabljak and in Komarnica Valley

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* Several seen in Komarnica Valley

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* Seen most days

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* 6 seen at Velika Plaza, several in Albania and near Zabljak

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* A few seen near Zabljak, Durmitor NP

Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* Common in the hills around Lake Skadar, also 1 in Albania

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus* 2 birds seen in the stream in Komarnica Valley

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Common, seen most days
Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* Seen most days
Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Seen around Lake Skadar
Western Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* 3 races (flava, feldeggi, thunbergi) seen at Ulcinj Salt pans, also seen in Albania
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* Seen most days
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Seen on 6 days
Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* 1 in Komarnica Valley
Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* 1 near Zabljak and 1 at Tivat Salt pans
Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* Good numbers seen near Zabljak, Durmitor NP
Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* Common, seen every day
Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* Seen most days in small numbers
Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* 4 birds seen in Zabljak
European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris* Common, seen most days
Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina* Seen or heard a few times
European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* Common, seen most days
European Serin *Serinus serinus* Seen a few times
Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra* Fairly common, a late migrating flock of more than 100 birds at Velika Plaza
Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* Seen above Kotor, around Lake Skadar and in Komarnica Valley
Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus* Seen or heard most days

MAMMALS

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* 1 near Zabljak, Durmitor NP

REPTILES

Balkan Green Lizard *Lacerta trilineata* 1 near Skadar Lake and 1 in Albania

Sharp-snouted Rock Lizard *Podarcis oxycephala* 2 involved in a territorial fight near Niksic

Dalmatian Wall Lizard *Podarcis melisellensis* 1 in Virpazar

AMPHBIANS

Marsh Frog *Pelophylax ridibundus* Common around wetlands

Albanian Water Frog *Pelophylax shqipericus* Seen at the Buna River Protected Landscape in Albania

BUTTERFLIES

Swallowtail *Papilio machaon*

Small White *Pieris rapae*

Green-veined White *Pieris napi*

Orange Tip *Anthocaris cardamines*

Brimstone *Gonepteryx rhamni*

Clouded Yellow *Colias croceus*

Holly Blue *Celastrina argiolus*

Nettle-tree Butterfly *Libythea celtis*

Camberwell Beauty *Nymphalis antiopa*

Speckled Wood *Pararge aegeria*

Wall *Lasiommata megera*

Small Heath *Coenonympha pamphilus*