

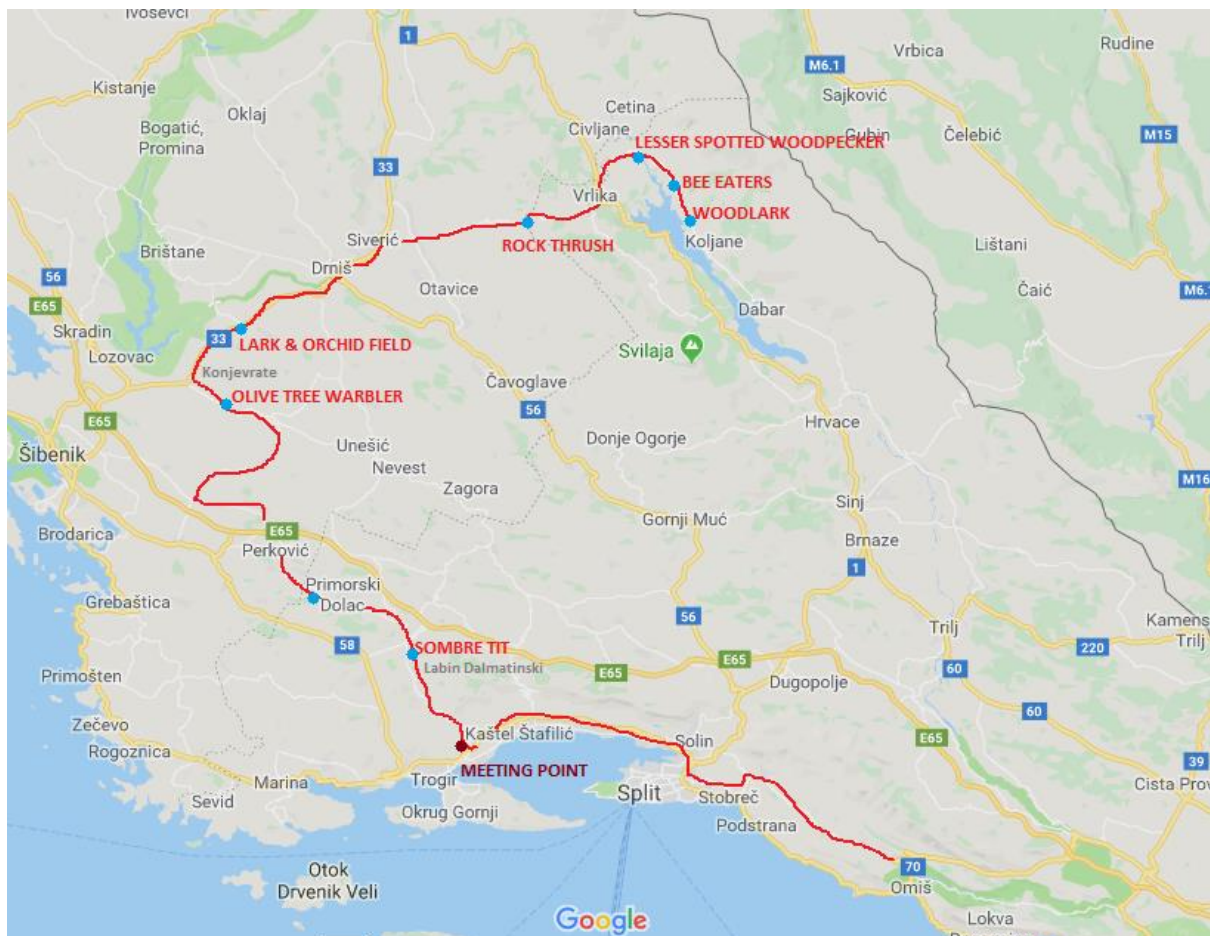
Birds and Orchids of Central Dalmatia

Day Trip Report 4 June 2019



This is a short report of a birding day trip in the Split region of Central Dalmatia, Croatia on the 4th June 2019. The trip was organised from the UK through Sunshine Tours in Croatia as a single day bird trip whilst on a family holiday staying near Omis to the south of Split. Our party was Phil Dargue (author) and Nathaniel Dargue who took most of the photos. We were keen to see some of the local specialities, in particular Sombre Tit, Olive Tree Warbler and Black-headed Bunting which would all be lifers.

Our guide for the day was Robert Crnković (tragos.crni@gmail.com) a very experienced birder who as an added bonus is also an orchid expert. This knowledge only increased the enjoyment of what turned out to be a fabulous day. The weather was mixed as we caught the end of one of the wettest Mays on record in the area, evident from the verdant countryside and mass of wild flowers everywhere. The map of our day is shown below showing some of the highlights and I will describe the day broadly in this order:



Robert suggested to get the most out of the day we pick him up near his home in Trogir close to Split Airport so we duly left our villa in the tiny village of Naklice at 0500 to meet him. We left to a deafening chorus of Nightingales, Golden Orioles and Blackbirds we set off down the valley towards Split picking up Black-eared Wheatear on the way. We picked up Robert as planned by around 0540 at the meeting point and headed inland. We hadn't been going long before we turned off the main road onto a tiny lane and we were suddenly surrounded by beautiful wild flower meadows. Robert informed us that he has been supporting the local population installing nest boxes and has been monitoring the local

population for a few years. The area consisted mainly of small uncultivated fields with drystone walls and small trees, much of it oak. Singing birds were everywhere, despite it being post breeding season for many. The commonest seemed to be Eastern Subalpine Warbler but despite the volume of noise they were incredibly hard to get good views of as they sang from deep cover. A very noisy Wryneck then joined in but again refused to reveal itself whilst Turtle Doves and Red Backed Shrikes seemed to be all around us. We were then joined by a couple of Hawfinches who sat happily on top of trees, if a little distant, in a way that you never see in the UK in summer (if you ever find them at all). Odd the way species behave differently depending where you are.



However, no luck with our target bird so Robert took us to the next field to have a look at a few orchids

And they were everywhere with Bee Orchids and this stunning *Anacamptis Fragrans* standing proudly in the largely undisturbed pasture. This really was a stunning area full of insects and wildflowers although relatively few butterflies. Later in our holiday as the temperatures rocketed to the high 30s so did the butterflies, the wet May clearly suppressing the numbers.

As we walked back towards the car we accidentally flushed a Nightjar which must have been roosting very close to the track and unfortunately we hadn't seen it before we got too close.

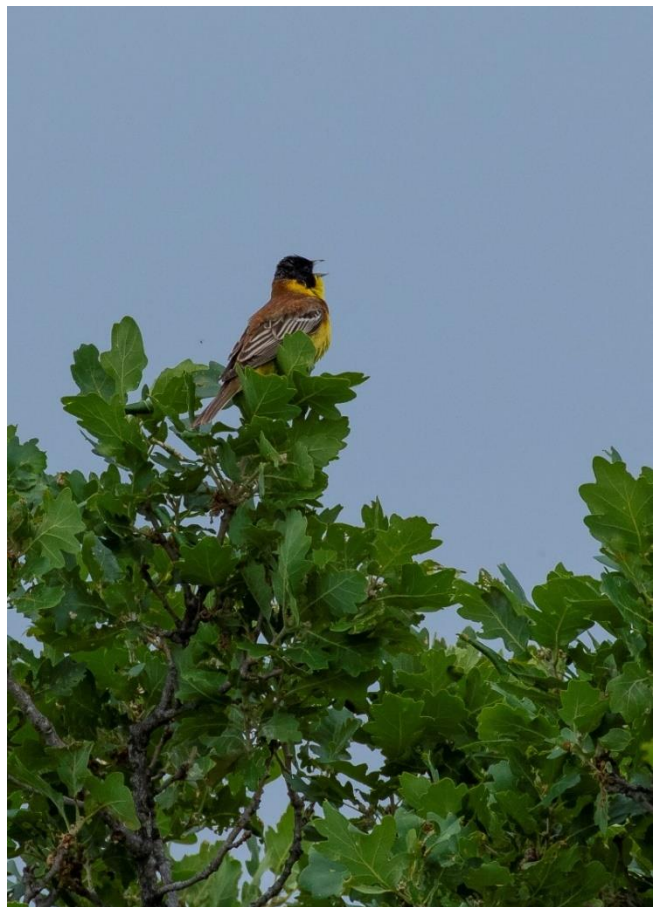
Whilst the Subalpine Warblers continued to call we finally heard a Sombre Tit calling close by (very like a Great Tit unsurprisingly) and suddenly there was a juvenile calling very close by. With a bit of perseverance it finally came out into the open and gave us some great views and continued to hang around for the next five minutes. It really was great to get our lifers list started for the day and despite its less than exciting name it was brilliant to see. It was now time to head further inland and following Robert's instructions we followed a series of country lanes crossing the main Split to Zagreb railway line a few times as we went. We stopped at another spot where Robert has set up nest boxes for Sombre Tit but this time with no luck although we did spot our first





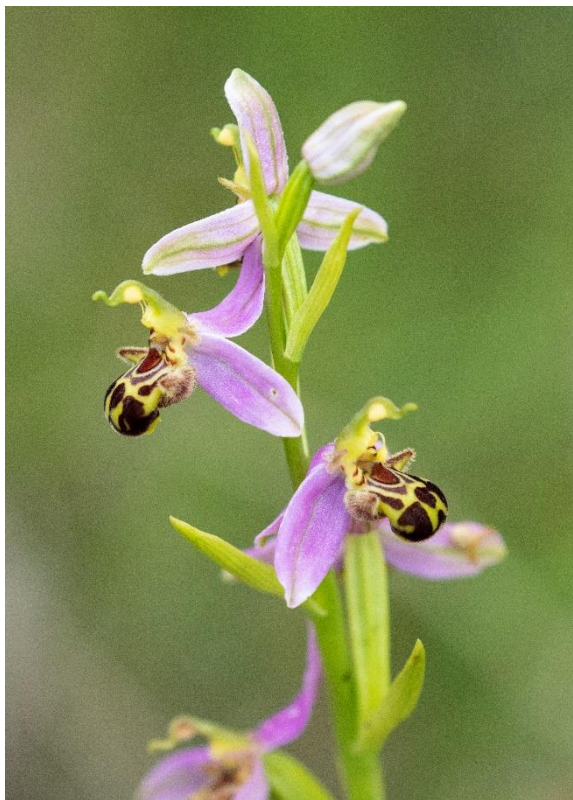
Woodlark of the day. We moved on again stopping occasionally picking up species as we went such as Corn Bunting, Cirl Buntings and a few raptors including Honey Buzzard. However we were failing to pick up our target Bunting for the day. By now my sense of direction was shot as we seemingly zig-zagged further inland as we pulled into a roadside verge – although that isn't what Robert's map shows! Within seconds of getting out of the car we heard Olive-tree Warbler calling and clearly no one ever told this one it was meant to skulk as it sang completely in the open! It continued to call away even as we were distracted by our first Woodchat Shrike of the trip appearing nearby and then the call of our other major target for the area Black-headed Bunting.

We set off down the nearby track trying to locate the singing bird which was competing with some very noisy farm equipment. We needn't have worried as we quickly found it on top of a nearby bush in some scrub. What a stunning bird. Our third lifer of the morning just as the weather was beginning to look a little threatening. We carried on walking down the lane as a male Cuckoo sat proudly on top of a nearby tree calling and yet more Subalpine Warblers sang but failed to show themselves well. Robert was hoping for Eastern Orphee Warbler but no joy as the rain started to fall. We had to remind Robert we were British and a bit of rain wasn't a problem when it came to birding! As we walked back to the car we heard another Wryneck calling and this time we finally saw it perched on top of a tree giving us great views before deciding to give us a flyby as well. This is a fantastic area although I am far from convinced I could ever find it again!

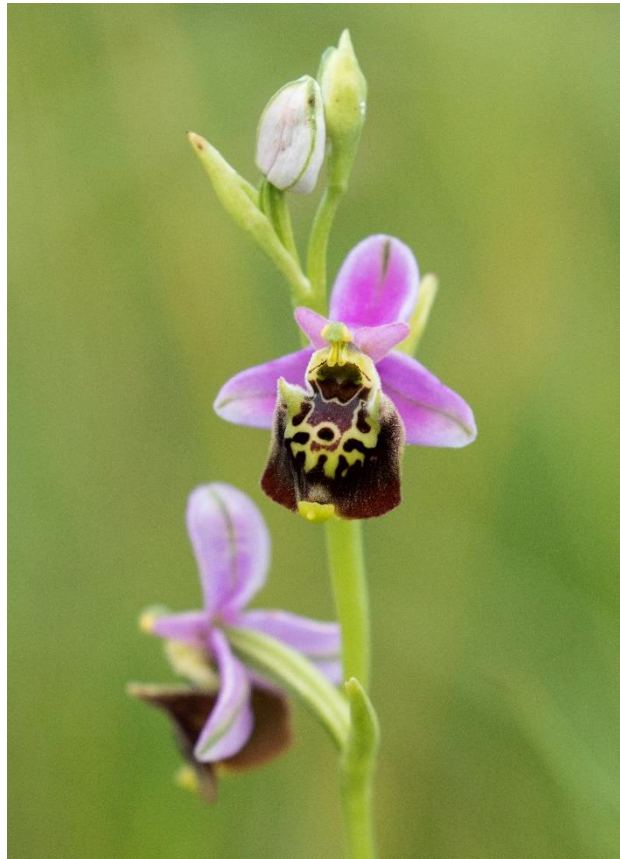




including the stunning Adriatic Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum adriaticum*)—there must have been nearly a hundred



We headed for an area known by birders as the lark fields which turned out to be the site of a planned airport to serve Sibenik and from google earth you can clearly see the planned runway. However, just before we got there Robert told me to pull over. We clambered through a wall to find ourselves in a rocky limestone paddock with obviously shallow soil and a whole host of orchids



spikes of this stunning flower. As we wandered further into the field we found a plethora of Bee Orchids of various different species including *Ophrys Dinarica* named after a nearby mountain on the border with Bosnia. Finding a safe path through



the long grass back to the car without treading on orchids was a real challenge. Just a fabulous place.

Back in the car we pulled off the main road again just a few 100 metres further on into an area of open pasture. Robert instructed me to turn down an overgrown track at which point the long grass started to play havoc with the collision alarms on our hire car. Not exactly great for covert birdwatching! However, there were certainly plenty of birds and lark fields certainly lived up to its name. this



and we were able to get great views of a singing male Eastern Orphean Warbler which came very close to us, another lifer for the day. We finally found ourselves on an area known as the runway – and if you look at the area on

is the only site in Central Dalmatia for Calandra Lark and there were plenty flying around although never easy to photograph. There were also Short-toed Lark a plenty as well as Crested Larks and Tawny Pipits everywhere.

The air was also full of singing warblers



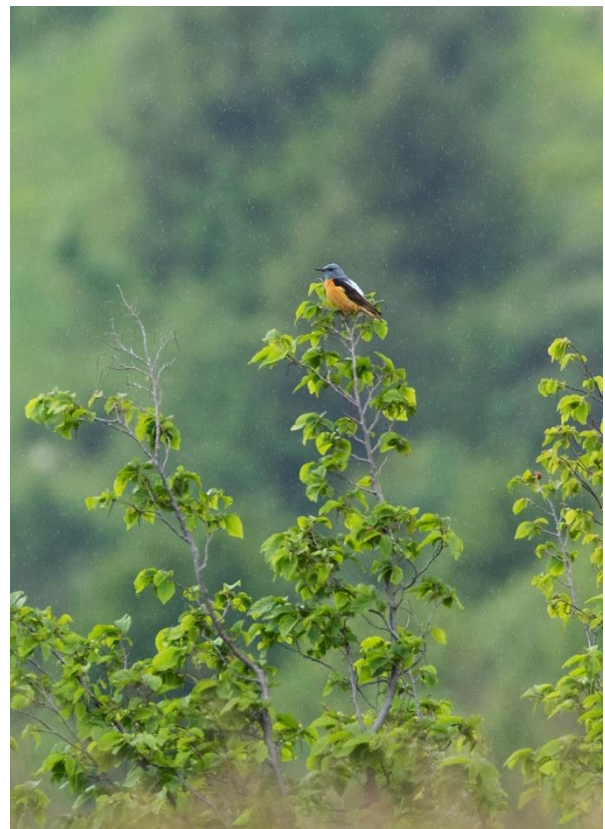
google maps the reason becomes quickly obvious. As we drove slowly down what is actually a gravel track we continued to see larks etc when I suddenly noticed a Stone Curlew very close to the car. Robert was delighted as it is his favourite species which he has been



monitoring here and at several other sights. We were able to sit and watch it for a while oblivious to our presence.

We left the lark fields behind and stopped across the road for a coffee and a recap on the day so far whilst it was a chance to chat with Robert about all things Croatian and his experiences as a naturalist growing up in a country where there are very few birders.

Coffee break over we headed inland in search of my favourite European bird and a particular request for the day. The only problem was the weather looked very threatening where we were heading. We drove on through the endless roadworks in Drnis before we started to climb into the hills before stopping on top of an area that reminded me of limestone areas in the Peak District, England. This apparently used to be a





good site for Rock Partridge but despite hearing one distantly we couldn't pick it out. We could also hear Quail but again no sightings. We did see our only Stonechats of the trip as well as Northern Wheatear and Pied Wagtail but our main target was Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and thankfully a male duly gave us fantastic opportunities to admire this real stunner.

We continued down through the pretty town of Vrlika and passed over the Cetina River before emerging onto an area of open grasslands grazed by lots of flocks of sheep. We pulled off the road a matter of 25 metres to park near a European Bee-eater Colony. We now just sat happily with our lunch and watched as birds were pairing up and digging nests in the soft red soiled banks. Absolute heaven.





After an hour happily sitting watching we moved further down the road. Bee-eaters, Northern Wheatear and Hoopoes seemed to be everywhere as we headed alongside a reservoir created by damming the Cetina River. A pine plantation has been planted alongside the road and more unusual birds for the area include a sizeable Mistle Thrush population. We stopped near an old stone water storage area where a Red-rumped Swallow nest was but as we arrived the heavens opened and the rain poured down so we were forced to shelter in the car. Whilst the swallows flew around us they refused to land but a pair of Woodlarks were more obliging explained by the fact we found their nest inside the old storage area. We also found a pair of Barred Warblers, the male being quite showy and great to see when my previous sightings have been drab juveniles in the

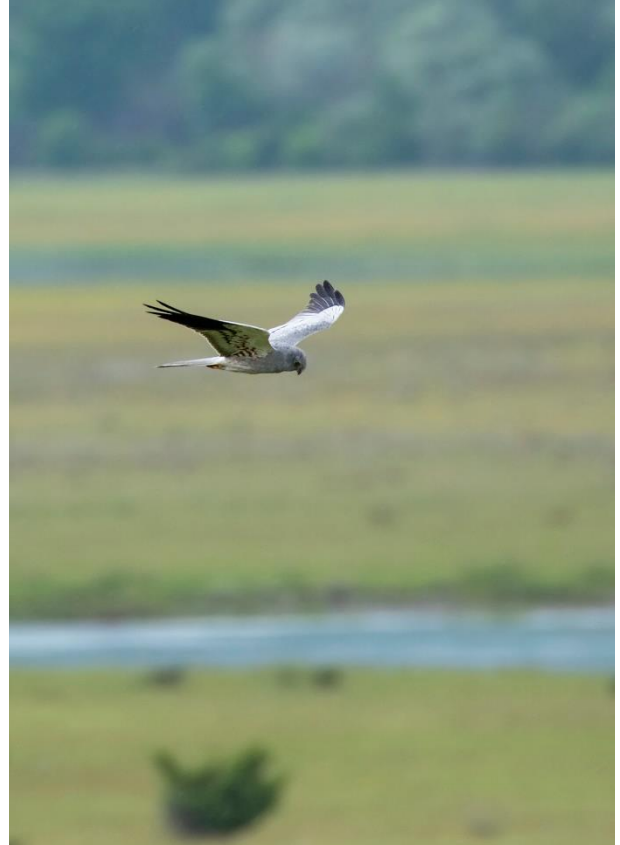
UK.

At this point we headed back down the road before stopping near a Serbian Orthodox Monastery perched high above the reservoir. Near a bridge under the road Robert showed us another orchid, *limodorum abortivum*, which is a striking violet in colour. This is also the best site in Croatia for Goosander in the bay below the monastery although none were around this afternoon.

We couldn't resist another stop at the Bee-eater colony as we drove back past and we got great further views as well as some great sightings of another firm favourite, Hoopoe. This is a stunning area of open, unspoilt countryside and I am sure with more exploration we could have seen even more great birds.



We ended our day's birding in the upper reaches of the Cetina River where glorious flood plains are punctuated by the stunningly clear waters of the river which emerge at an incredible spring straight out of a subterranean hole of azure blue. As soon as we were in the grasslands a female Montagues Harrier appeared quickly followed by a fabulous male who gave us close fly-bys as we sat in the car.



Not only are the birds interesting here but there are some interesting historical monuments. Near one of the modern road bridges is an old bridge built by the Ottoman rulers using Neolithic burial stones removed from nearby sites. There is also a fascinating 9th century church which is the oldest towered church in Croatia and pre-dates the schism that split the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Back to birding and we were on the lookout for Lesser Grey Shrike. This is meant to be the best site in Dalmatia but despite our best efforts we couldn't find one, just lots of Woodchat and Red-backed instead. We had one final quest to find a much sought after lifer for Nathaniel which Robert knew a reliable nesting site. True to form we set off down a narrow lane, well flooded from in places from the recent rains and emerged onto the flood plain with the emphasis on the flood.

We parked next to a stand of poplars but were immediately distracted by a whole host of herons including Great and Little Egrets, lots of Grey Herons and suddenly a Purple Heron lifting up from the nearby long grass. However, no target bird so we wandered over to a nearby bridge over the crystal clear river. Great Reed Warblers were calling from seemingly

everywhere and Sand Martins flew all around us. We managed to spot a black-headed race (Feldegg) of Yellow Wagtail which came close to the bridge.



It was nearly time to head back to Omis and we thought our birding for the day was over but we reckoned without one last piece of amazing good fortune. As we drove slowly down the road something black and white shot past us and suddenly we had not one but five of Nathaniel's target bird – Lesser Spotted Woodpecker! We had chanced across a recently fledged family group who we were able to follow down the road for a while before they disappeared out of sight. A great end to a fabulous day.

Many thanks to Robert for his great company and superb knowledge of both birds and orchids and I can recommend Dalmatia as an under birded area worthy of exploration and I know from talking to Robert we only scratched the surface of what there is to see and experience.



Robert and Nathaniel at Rufous Tailed Rock Thrush Site



