

# Croatia - The Konavle Valley

## 5<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> August 2018

Graham Hogan

### Introduction

We have wanted to visit Croatia for some years, including seeing the wonderful historic city of Dubrovnik (a Unesco World Heritage Site) and as a keen birder, it gave me the obvious opportunity to see Rock Partridge, allegedly one of Europe's hardest birds to connect with, so combining with a family holiday seemed the perfect solution.



Dubrovnik

However, we fancied a 2 week family holiday which left no other option than to go in the summer holiday period. August is hardly the best time of year to go in principle as hardly any birds would still be in song and all breeding would have finished. However, with post breeding swelling the number of birds in theory, some early summer departures and as the autumn migration period would be in its early stages, it could be an interesting time to visit and so it proved.

Croatia is a lovely country, the people a little reserved but extremely friendly and helpful, getting around is straightforward and places to visit, the choice of restaurants, local wines, beaches are excellent, whether you want to totally relax or explore or any combination.

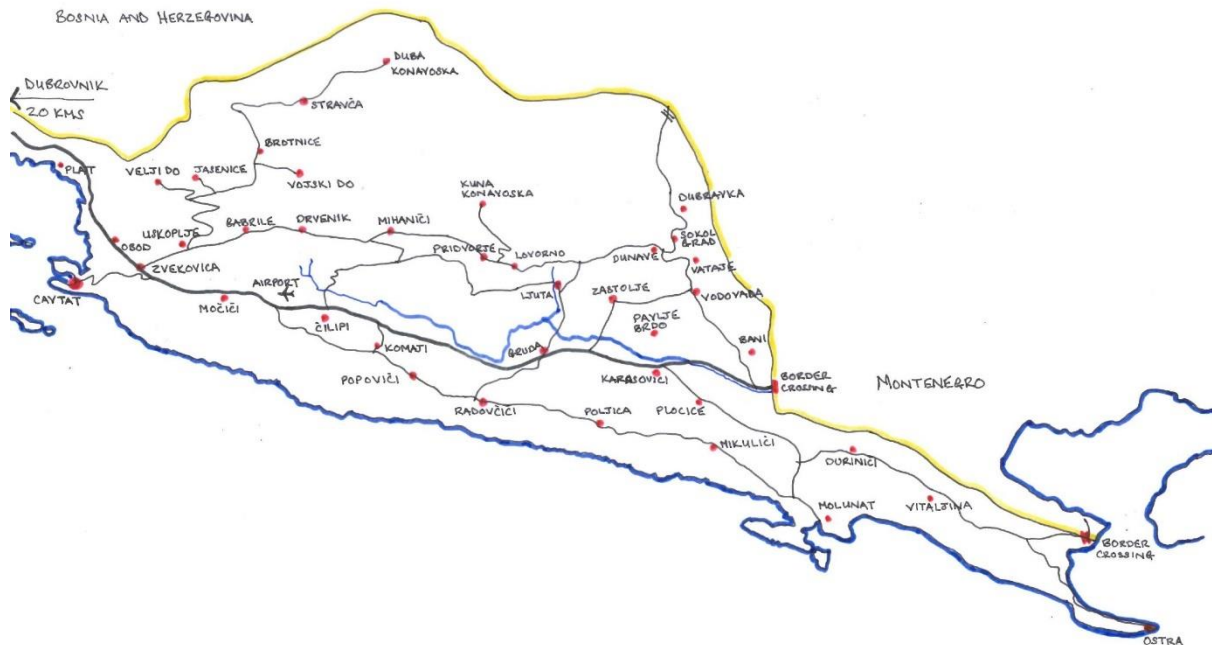
A visit to Dubrovnik is easy, we went by boat from Cavtat, a wonderful way to enter the amazing city by sailing along the Dalmatian coastline. Avoid the days the large cruise ships visit and best go mid afternoon in to the evening when less busy, especially in the summer period and with Game of Thrones enthusiasts visiting, it's also less hot later in the day.

### Logistics

We flew with Jet2 from Manchester to Dubrovnik and just a 2.5 hour flight was ideal. Picking up the hire car at the airport and we were away. We based ourselves in a lovely villa with pool, in the small village of Gruda to the south-east area of the Konavle Valley and airport for the next 2 weeks and a perfect base to relax and from which to explore.

The Konavle Valley lies to the south-east of Dubrovnik, just inland from the coast (30 mins max by car). It is rich in unspoilt areas, an excellent mix of natural habitat with areas of agriculture that is still very traditional with some areas of grazing of livestock and so good for birds, lots of vineyards, is intersected by a main, meandering small river, with a few connecting smaller rivers/streams and surrounded by hills and mountains.

However, the best logistical aspect is that you can drive from one end to the other in an hour or less and the excellent, easy road network allows you to visit all the best sites very easily and explore on foot.



Before we set out, I had scoured the various bird report websites and bird information forums for this area and the amount of quality information was scant to say the least, especially for the time of year we were visiting. The one excellent report available was from Ian Merrill, titled "Croatia 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> May 2013: In search of the Rock Partridge" and I can't recommend this report more highly. That said, for me the timing of that report left me wondering about might lie in store for August and also the report concentrated on seeing Rock Partridge and that immediate area, important enough but what else did this area of Croatia have to offer.

This report, not only qualifies the area outlined by Ian as the place to see Rock Partridge but also identifies other good birding sites and what birds and early migrants are on offer in August.

### General Notes on the Konavle Valley

Just to say the birding as hoped was easy but surprisingly a little more exciting than I expected as early Autumn migrants were definitely moving through. In addition, I found myself a great little wooded area by the river, at the edge of an area of some small agricultural fields and vineyards. The wood would now be affectionately known as 'my wood', only a 5 minute drive from the villa on the edge of Gruda and I visited almost every day, with it offering something new, as early migrants were starting to move through. I visited either 1<sup>st</sup> thing, just after dawn before venturing wider afield and sometimes in the evening, especially if I had visited other sites early morning.

The whole Konavle Valley, is beautiful in itself. Gruda, a large hamlet with a few lovely restaurants offering traditional cuisine, which are lovely, a few local cafe/bars frequented by the locals, which are all low key, quiet and everyone very friendly and welcoming. It's a small traditional community in itself, with butcher, bakery, small supermarkets, bank, post office, art gallery (including silk worm farming) and an excellent relaxed atmosphere.

Not only that, but the whole area is very picturesque, maybe a little similar to further north in Eastern Europe I imagine (although I've never been) and not intensively farmed or over developed, which is good news for the birds and birding, with the valley obviously acting as a natural migrant 'funnel' to top up the residents/summer visitors still present. Sadly, some summer visitors had already departed but very few. Oh, and of course not forgetting the many vineyards and the excellent, locally produced wines too, all at a very reasonable price.

For those looking for a Summer break with the family and offering some good birding with early morning excursions, so spending the rest of the day with the family, it's ideal and easy here and the birding is very good.

Always useful, at this time of year in August, dawn is at 05.30, to 06.00 as the month progresses, likewise with dusk at 20.30, to 20.00.



Konavle Valley, viewed from Gruda

## Birding Sites

They are several good birding sites along the valley.

To get anywhere here, including the other side of this valley takes no time at all, I went out birding every morning and a few afternoons/evenings, sometimes with the family, I only used half a tank of fuel in a week, 30 minutes max seems to get you everywhere, including from Gruda to Velji Do (the recognised Rock Partridge site).

## Rock Partridge

After seeing my 1st **Rock Partridge**, a group of 11 together on the road from the car, driving up to the hamlet of Velji Do beyond the viewpoint, just after first light at the 1<sup>st</sup> time of trying on my 2nd full day here in Croatia, 2 adults at least, the rest fully grown juveniles, the pressure was off and I

could now explore the whole Konavle Valley. I couldn't believe my luck to see them so easily and well, walking in front of me from the car for as long as I wanted it seemed, until they eventually walked off into the limestone scrub. I also have sightings of a sizeable group later, walking downhill along the 'Ronald Brown' pathway, probably the same group and a separate, single bird in flight. I was expecting it to be a tough challenge seeing Rock Partridge as they certainly wouldn't be calling frequently in August.

After my initial, successful visit on the 7th August, I made a 2nd visit to Velji Do on 13th and saw another 8 Rock Partridge, 2 adults and 6 fully grown juveniles again. Incidentally, on my 1st visit to this site I met another birder from Essex, very friendly and willingly sharing birding gen between us. Ironically, I bumped in to him again on this 2nd visit to the same site and had another good catch up/update on each other's sightings over the last week (more to follow....). However, I think I was 'blessed' with good fortune or just 'jammy' but did work hard for my birds, this birder had been 7 times to the site at Velji Do, at different times of day as a 'lifer' for him too, mostly early morning and had only heard the Partridge. 30 mins after he left on this latter date, I had my 2nd sighting.

This time, my sighting was along the 'Ronald Brown' pathway just after the path opens up on the right to the wonderful panoramic views of the coast, beyond the trees and bushes that border both sides of the path initially. I heard them calling briefly, so stopped and waited, half hidden by a lone bush by the edge of the path, so not to be too prominent. Firstly, one adult, then another popped up on to a low limestone stone wall below me towards the escarpment lower down the pathway, then as they disappeared off the wall, the 6 fully grown juveniles followed them, all giving great views through the scope. This seems a good area as this is where I'd also had very brief views of a single Rock Partridge in flight heading downhill the same morning of my 1<sup>st</sup> sighting.



Ronald Brown Path



View of Cavtat from Ronald Brown Path

So apart from the Partridge, another birding highlight around the valley for me:

I scored my 2nd lifer on 11th, having 'cracking', prolonged views of a female **Levant Sparrowhawk** in the early part of the morning, perched in a dead tree on the opposite side of a small river from where I stood, scoped perched at probably 30m max and then also in flight as it headed off low over the trees, all features nailed, including the distinctive central throat stripe, fairly small and elegant shape. Even in flight - very falcon like, longish pointed wings with dark tips. I had a 2nd bird on 18<sup>th</sup> near Vitaljina but beware though, I had several Sparrowhawk sightings too in the area.



Having missed migrating Levant Sparrowhawk at Eilat in the early '90's by just a few days on consecutive years, this was particularly pleasing.

## Main Birding Sites

### Velji Do and Area (see maps below)

Rock Partridge, 12 on 07/08; 8 on 13/08

Black-headed Bunting, a 1st year bird on 13/08, my only one of the trip and pleased to see as all birds have already migrated early, a week earlier the Essex birder had also seen a single male near the coast at Plat, his only one, common in Spring/early Summer

Lesser Kestrel, imm male, (migrant) on 13/08, the Essex birder had also seen a migrant male a few days earlier

Sombre Tit, odd ones on both dates anywhere along the viewpoint road and the 'Ronald Brown' pathway

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, several each visit

Eastern Subalpine Warbler, common

Western Rock Nuthatch, several each visit and regularly calling

Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, very common, at least 35+ on 13/08

Cirl Bunting, odd ones, especially lower down the road from Velji Do nearer to areas of fields

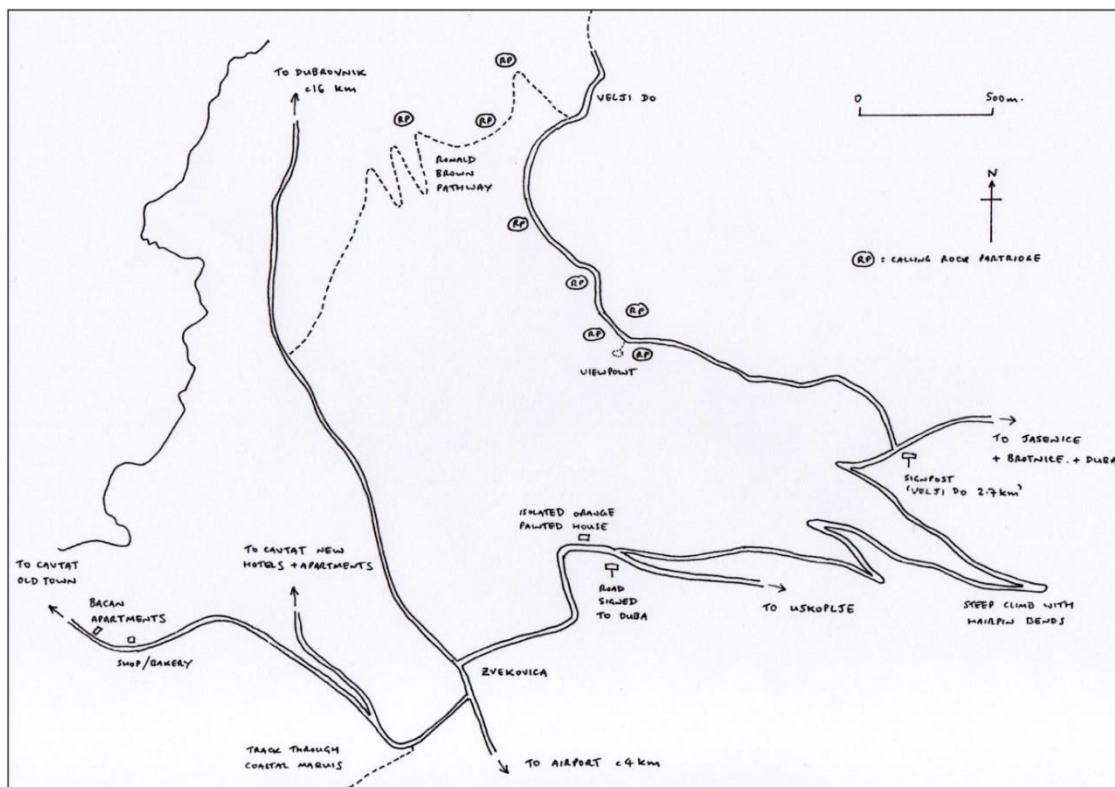
Serin, single male on 07/08 (a migrant??)

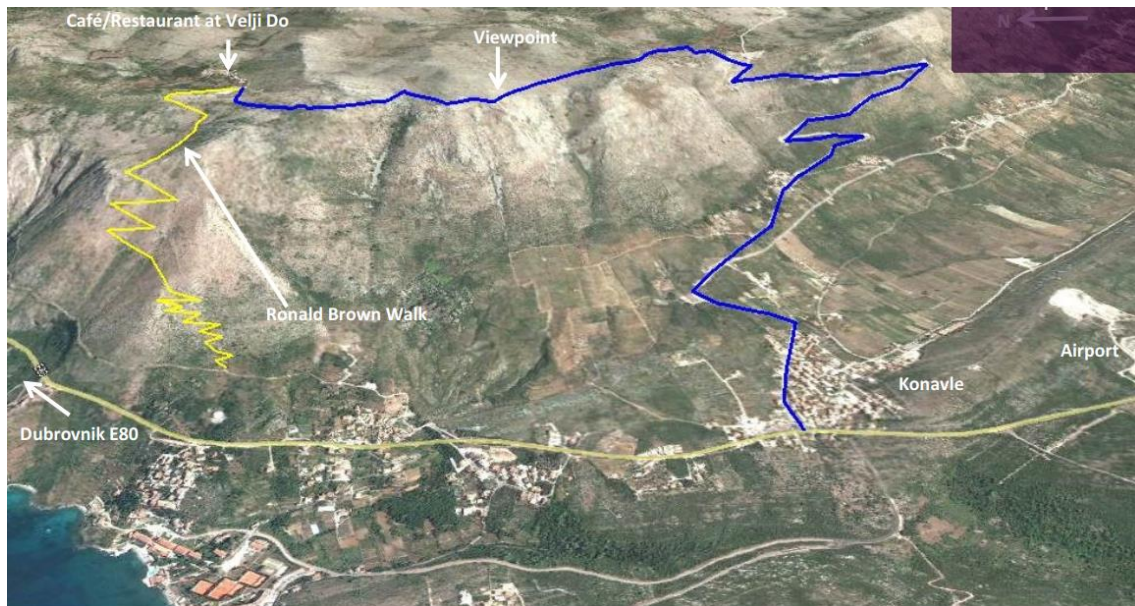
Alpine Swift, 100's both dates, wheeling around in large flocks and very vocal

Blue Rock Thrush, male on 13/08

Other sightings - Northern Wheatear, Redstart, Garden Warbler, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Whitethroat (assumed all migrants)

Rock Dove, apparent pure 'race' birds here and inland at higher valleys, but certainly 'dodgy' origins elsewhere at lower elevations





### **Kuna Konavoska and Area, 992m and nearby peaks of Sniježnica at 1234m, Veliki at 1149m and Lijčin at 1234m**

Take the single track tarmac road, the 69052, north, uphill, between the villages of Lovorno and Pridvorje on road 6239, signed 'Kuna Konavoska'. Initially the road winds up and passes through a wooded area, mainly coniferous trees that looked really promising for birds such as Woodpeckers, Firecrest or maybe a Crested Tit but delivered nothing of note on my 2 visits and spending a little time trawling the roadside through the wood.

After a while the road rises above this tree line and follows the escarpment heading west before cutting inland past an area of small fields and arriving at the village of Kuna Konavoska itself.

The best area to view is along this road along the escarpment, giving views south, right across the whole Konavle Valley and also looking north towards the higher mountain peaks referenced above for Golden Eagle.

Golden Eagle, single on 09/08 and 3 birds together on 10/08

Short-toed Eagle, single on 09/08

Alpine Chough, 6 on 10/08, flying close along the escarpment ridge at eye level

Pallid Swift, few on 10/08

Blue Rock Thrush, male on both dates

Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, common

Western Rock Nuthatch, several

Eastern Subalpine Warbler, few around Kuna Konavoska

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, 2 around Kuna Konavoska on 09/08

Red-backed Shrike, 3 around Kuna Konavoska on 09/08

Buzzard, 2 on 09/08

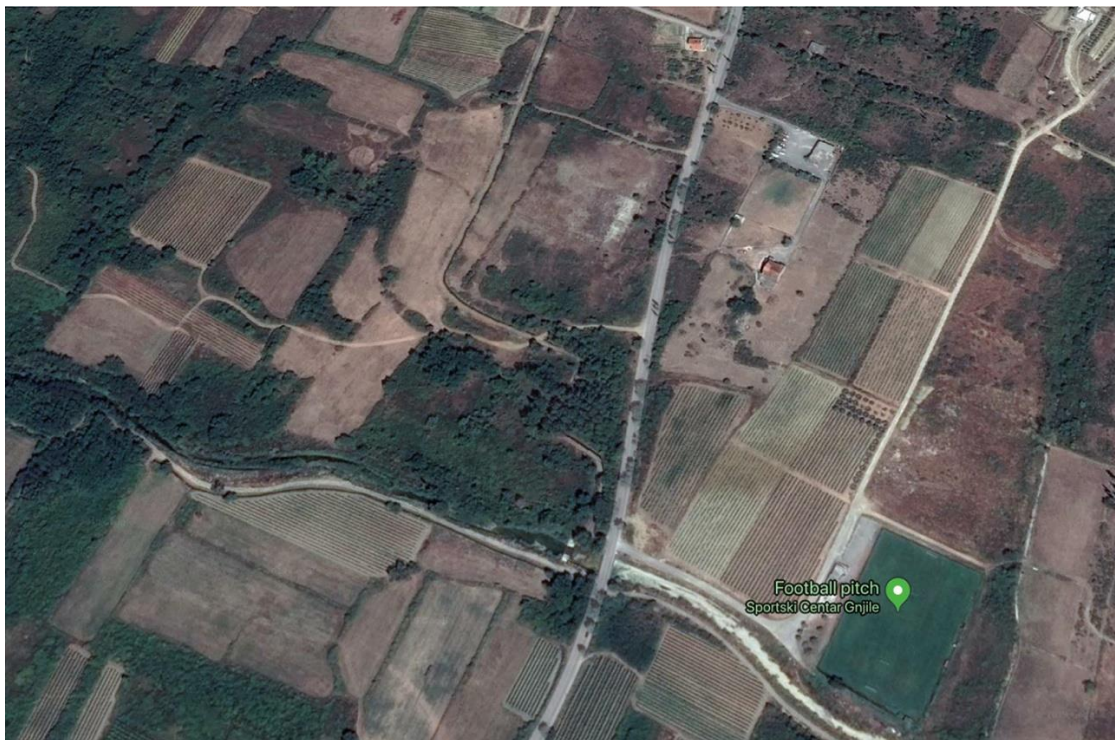
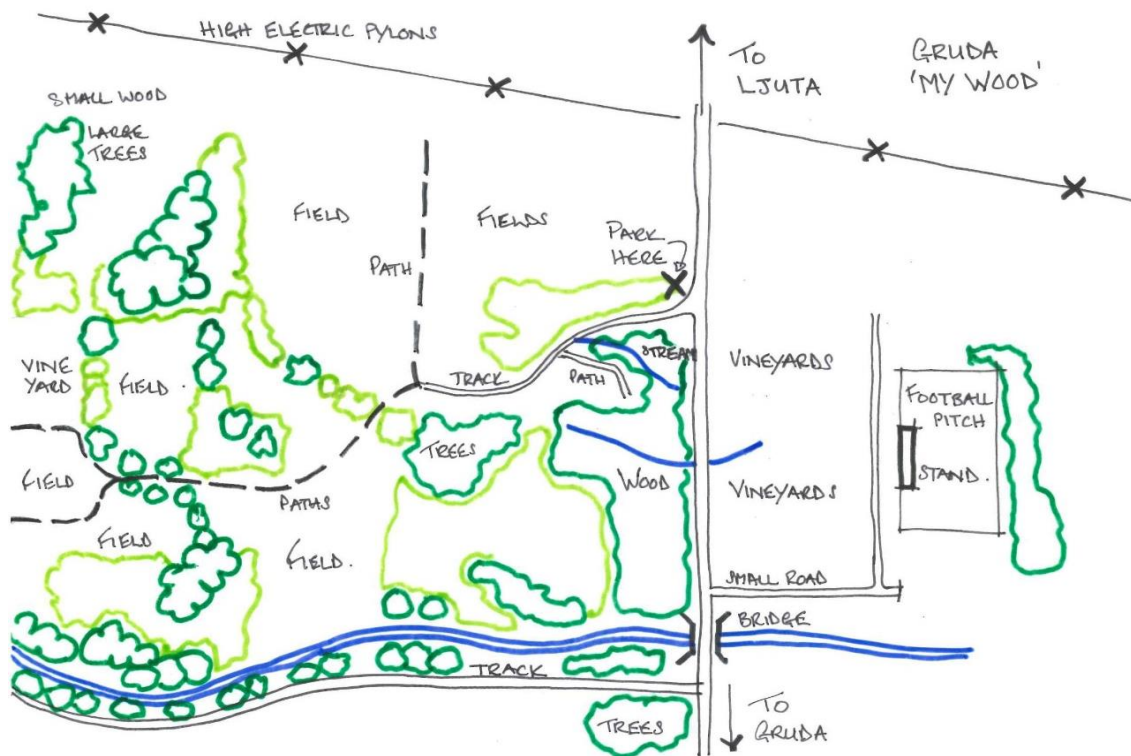
Raven, 4 on 10/08

Jay, few on 09/08

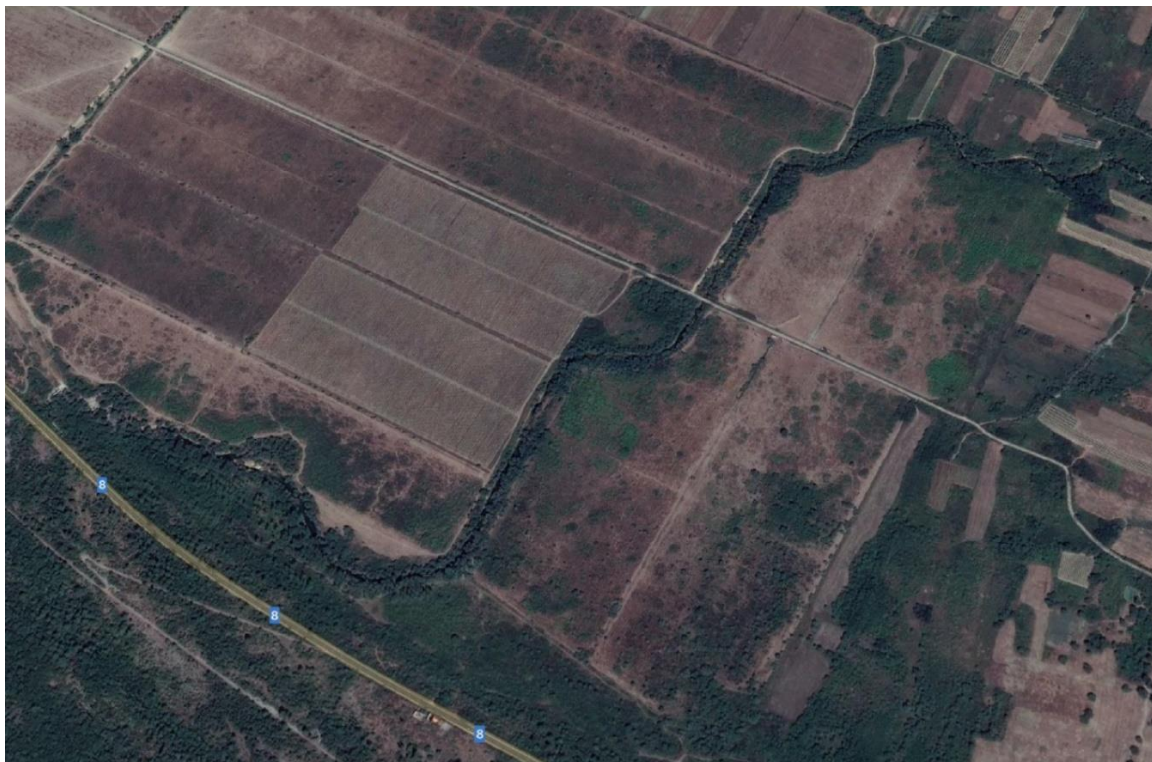
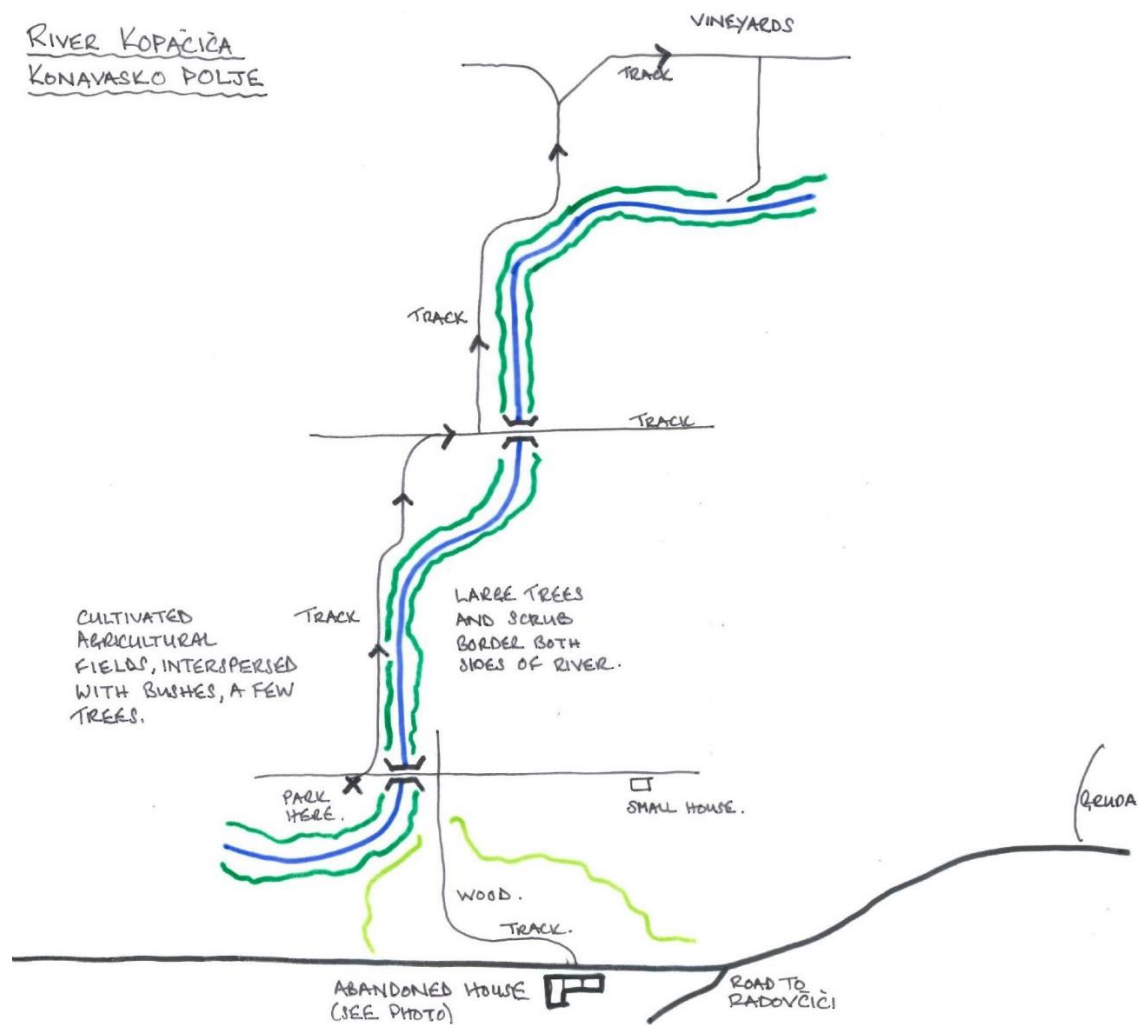


The 3 main areas visited on a regular basis in the Konavle Valley:

1. 'My Wood' near Gruda, on road 6241 (see maps below)



2. Area around Konavasko polje, along River Kopacica, off main road D8 (see maps below)





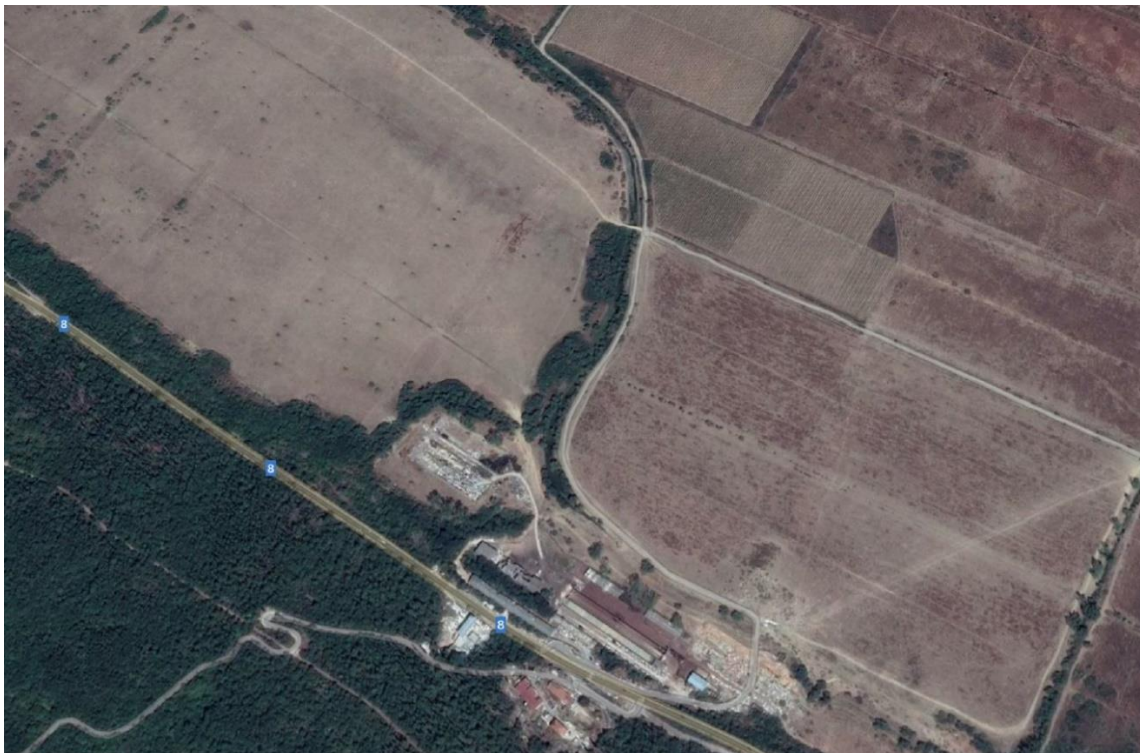


Turn off main road D8, opposite abandoned buildings on to track to above site



Track opposite abandoned buildings to above site

3. **Area around Baljevina, along River Kopacica** (accessed off RHS of main road D8, by stone mason supplier and waste management buildings, several kms before you get to the turnoff to Komaji, heading from Gruda. Follow the track through and beyond the 'works', then the track follows the heavily tree lined river. Park and explore this area on foot.



Birds sighted at these 3 sites:

Levant Sparrowhawk (as above), female, Konavasko polje on 11/08

Olive Tree Warbler, Baljevina, a single bird, late resident but assumed migrant, on 10/08

Collared Flycatcher, double figures, good numbers or same birds at same sites on several dates, seems a fairly common migrant and easy to ID on call, very vocal and most showing reasonable plumage features

Montagu's Harrier, juvenile, migrant, Konavasko polje on 11/08  
 Honey Buzzard, a single, migrant bird near Gruda on 19/08  
 Quail, a single bird heard calling on 17/08  
 Night Heron, adult bird in flight early morning, near Gruda on 18/08  
 Eastern Orphean Warbler, just 2 seen here, either departed early or quiet and mega skulking  
 Icterine Warbler, several, assumed migrants  
 Wood Warblers, several, assumed migrants  
 Golden Oriole, very common and always a delight, still singing like mad.....  
 Great Reed Warbler, strange to see all in scrub but commonplace here, assumed migrants  
 Hawfinch, several small groups seen  
 Cuckoo, 5 birds total, at Konavasko polje and around 'my wood'  
 Wryneck, 3 birds in lowlands  
 Red-backed Shrike, very common, including some nice males in lowlands  
 Woodchat Shrike, odd ones in lowlands  
 Pallid Swift, odd ones  
 Red-rumped Swallow, common, especially higher up in the valleys  
 Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, common  
 Eastern Subalpine Warbler, common  
 Sardinian Warbler, male, only one of the trip surprisingly in 'my wood'  
 Bee-eater, migrants, max count, approx 250+, often perched in tall trees and on pylons  
 Nightingale, common in scrub, many still delivering 'partial' song  
 Cirl Bunting, a few  
 Corn Bunting, odd ones  
 Turtle Dove, several, always good to see  
 Tree Pipit, 3 birds migrating over on 17/08 at 'my wood'  
 Great Spotted Woodpecker, a pair in 'my wood'  
 Pied Flycatcher, several  
 Spotted Flycatcher, common  
 Short-toed Eagle, a few overhead  
 Goshawk, probable, single female but distant over adjacent hillside  
 Sparrowhawk, a few  
 Hoopoe, a few  
 Kingfisher  
 Yellow Wagtail, single bird, sub-species not confirmed, on football pitch early morning  
 White Wagtail, common, especially on football pitch early morning  
 Whinchat, just a single bird, assumed migrant  
 Spanish and House Sparrows, common, no 'Italian' seen here, contrary to some reports  
 Hooded Crow, common

### **Sokol Grad Castle and higher valley beyond Dubravka towards Prapralno**

Heading directly north from the centre of Gruda across the valley on road 6241, you come to a roundabout, turn right here signed to Sokol Grad Castle and Dubravka.

Sokol Grad Castle is excellent and definitely worth a visit. It has been renovated and has a small museum. With few visitors, it's never busy. There is a modest entry fee and recommend walking the high walls too giving amazing views across the Konavle Valley and good for picking birds up in the immediate surrounding area.





Sokol Grad Castle



Views from Sokol Grad Castle across the Konavle Valley

Continuing along this road beyond the Castle and through the large village of Dubravka, the road constantly rising, you pass through an area of small fields, some with crops, some with livestock (which are often on the road), the road quality then slowly deteriorates as this road at one time continued in to what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina but eventually becomes impassable. You are in a small valley, very picturesque, with wooded hills on your right (east side), a valley and fields and limestone hills on your left (west side).

Birds sighted at these 2 sites:

Syrian Woodpecker, towards end of the accessible road beyond Dubravka, my only one on 08/08, also heard at same place on 15/08

Rock Partridge, heard only, from the castle walls and from the road beyond Dubravka on 2 separate occasions both on 08/08

Wryneck, 2 birds, castle area and along road beyond Dubravka on 15/08

Sombre Tit, road beyond Dubravka, on 08/08 and 15/08

Short-toed Eagle, road beyond Dubravka, on 08/08

Quail, heard calling on 18/08

Alpine Swift, 100's



Bee-eater, small groups, road beyond Dubravka  
Blue Rock Thrush, castle area on 15/08  
Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, common  
Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, several each visit  
Eastern Subalpine Warbler, common  
Western Rock Nuthatch, a few each visit  
Red-rumped Swallow, common  
Red-backed Shrike, common  
Nightingale  
Great Reed Warbler  
Redstart, road beyond Dubravka, imm on 08/08  
Pied Flycatcher, castle area, both dates  
Spotted Flycatcher, castle area, both dates  
Buzzard, a few  
Jay, several

### **Road to Konavoski Dvori Restaurant, Ljuta**

Heading directly north from the centre of Gruda across the valley on road 6241, you come to a roundabout, go straight on here towards Ljuta and follow signs for the Konavoski Dvori Restaurant. The road after a relatively short distance, through fields on both sides, runs parallel to the River Ljuta, which is on your LHS, the road then turns sharp left and crosses the river, where just after, you turn right and head up the hill towards the restaurant with the river and wooded area then on your RHS. The road finishes just after the restaurant.

The area along the wooded river is worth more exploration as I only visited it once, briefly late in the holiday and didn't get chance to revisit. You can view the river from the roadside initially and then from the bridge.



Birds seen:

Night Heron, sub-adult  
Kingfisher  
Grey Wagtail  
White Wagtail  
Golden Oriole, few  
Spotted Flycatcher

### **Road to Duba Konavoska**

Heading west on the main road beyond Dubrovnik Airport, as you enter Zvekovica, just after the main left turn to Cavtat, take the road to the right to Uskoplje, and just before Uskoplje, take the road to the left as if you were heading up to Velji Do, but carry straight on the main road 69051, ignoring the left turn off to Velji Do, the road ultimately leads to Duba Konavoska.

There are a number of roads that lead off to various small villages, all very picturesque, such as Jasenice on the left, Vojski Do on the right (check out the cultivated fields too for migrants), through Brotnice and Stravoa on the main road before finally arriving at Duba Konavoska, where effectively the road ends.

Off all these roads are wooded valleys and limestone hillsides, interspersed with gardens around homes, cultivated fields, areas of dense scrub, etc and all worth serious exploration. I visited these areas twice following my early morning excursions to Velji Do but would be worth doing immediately following 1<sup>st</sup> light.

Short-toed Eagle, 2 adults, at Vojski Do and along main road 69051, both on 13/08

Eastern Orphean Warbler, single bird at Vojski Do, on 13/08

Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, common

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, common

Blue Rock Thrush, male on 13/08

Bee-eater, a couple of small groups on 07/08 and 13/08

Woodchat Shrike, single birds on 07/08 and 13/08

Cirl Bunting, common

Golden Oriole, several both dates

Hoopoe, a few on both dates

Red-backed Shrike, odd ones on both dates

Wood Warbler, on 13/08

Garden Warbler, on 13/08

Pied Flycatcher, on 13/08

Spotted Flycatcher, 2 on 13/08

Northern Wheatear, 13/08

Jay, several seen both sides

The birder from Essex also had 2 Rock Bunting in the hills bordering this main road a few days before my arrival in Croatia and also a Syrian Woodpecker.

### **Gruda Village**

Apart from duplication of some of the birds already mentioned, I had at least 2 Nightjars giving good views and the odd bird up to 13/08, in the evenings above the floodlit small church at the south part of the village, nearer to the main road.

A few Scop's Owls still calling in the valley, including a regular bird calling and seen in the Cypress pines around the same small village church in the evenings.

Also seen in and around the village: Short-toed Eagle, Pallid and Alpine Swifts, Collared and Pied Flycatchers, Golden Oriole, Red-backed Shrike, Bee-eater, Hawfinch and Spanish Sparrow.



Church at Gruda



Konavle Valley, viewed from Gruda

### **Ostra Peninsula, Old Fort and Radar Station**

The Old Fort lies at the far end of the Ostra Peninsula and about 25 minute drive from Gruda. Take the D516, then the 69079 to the Peninsula. The Old Fort was closed on my visit but from there, you can view across the whole bay looking towards Montenegro. I arrived an hour after dawn.

From the Old Fort, walk uphill on the narrow concrete track/road away from where you parked by the Fort, for about 100m up to an old, abandoned house on the RHS, immediately opposite take the steps and path uphill through the scrub until you arrive at the radar station. From here you get a good panoramic view out to sea. The sea was like a 'mill pond' when I was there.

In one hour here, I saw 3 separate Yelkouan Shearwaters, all moving from right to left.

Also, Alpine Swift, which presumably breed in the Fort and on the cliffs. Up to a 100 immediately above my head, at times giving stunning views.

Pallid Swift, c.30, also giving excellent views

Assume with a stronger wind and rougher seas here, there would be more Yelkouan Shearwaters and possibly Scopoli's Shearwaters as well.

Yellow-legged Gulls at sea

### **Dubrovnik**

**Historic City** (note it's very expensive within the old city walls - shops and restaurants)

Alpine Chough, 200+ along the high ridges on the mountain, looking inland, north at the horizon, to the right of the cable car top station. Got to be the only place you can see Alpine Chough from sea level??

Alpine Swift, a few, including breeding in the city walls

Pallid Swift, over the old city in the evening

Yellow-legged Gull at sea

Cormorant on coastal islets





Dubrovnik



Dubrovnik

### Additional Birds

Further additional birds also seen during the same date period by the birder I met twice from Essex, who was based at Plat by the coast, but not seen personally, these included:

Eagle Owl, a site near Plat, apparently they breed in the deserted, odd remaining bombed out and still abandoned hotels from the 1991/92 war that are situated close to the coast.

Rock Bunting, a widespread breeding bird in the hills in the summer is an early migrant to depart, 2 birds seen

Lesser Grey Shrike, presumably a migrant by the coast

Black-headed Bunting, a male, presumably a migrant by the coast

Eleanora's Falcon, along the coast

Honey Buzzard, in the hills around Velji Do

Levant Sparrowhawk, in the hills around Velji Do

Lesser Kestrel, along the coast

Peregrine, in the hills around Velji Do

A half day trip south in to **Montenegro**, birding from the road, produced Golden Eagle, Little Egret, Red-rumped Swallow, Hawfinch, several Grey Heron, Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls.

### Other Wildlife of Interest:

I must confess that I am not well educated in identifying butterflies or dragonflies but on this one occasion on this holiday, I really wish I was. There were 'scads' of butterflies of many species, some stunners too and several dragonflies and for anyone that is keenly interested, again Croatia seems a fantastic place to visit in addition to the birds.

Other wildlife seen, included Black Squirrel, Balkan Pond Turtle, Hermann's Tortoise, Balkan Green Lizard, Hare sp.



Hermann's Tortoise



Large Wasp Spider sp

If anyone would like any additional details beyond the detail of this report, please contact me and I will be happy to assist.

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All coloured satellite site maps courtesy of 'Google'.

