

Introduction

This report provides a little bit of information on a number of sites visited, mostly in Montenegro during a week visit in 2009. The primary aim of the visit was to attend a wedding in Kotor City, which was very spectacular, especially given the setting. I was travelling with a friend who was not a birder but still enjoys her wildlife, so time specifically birding was mostly limited to early morning excursions. However we both wanted to see as much of the country as possible, and we did take a number of walks into the countryside at most places we visited. The wedding celebrations were spread over three days, and we opted to extend our visit for a week prior to undertake a whistle stop tour of the country.

This report only just skims the surface of the range of wildlife to be found in this region of Europe. It's a cheap and easy destination to get to, and there are plenty of places to explore.

Background to Wildlife

Pre Trip Information

There is relatively little information on birding in the southern Balkan State of Montenegro out there on the internet, and the few trip reports I could find mostly described the **Rock Partridge** stakeout on the Ronald Brown Pathway above Dubrovnik airport, in nearby southern Croatia. There is information on Montenegro tied up in descriptions of National Parks and Birdlife International Important Bird Areas (IBA) descriptions.

Birdlife

For the seasoned Birder of southern Europe there is likely to be very little new bird life to see. For me, the main aim in terms of birds was to see the European endemic **Rock Partridge**. Apparently the populations of **Rock Partridge** here merge between the nominate subspecies *graeca* of Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria and possibly Albania; and *ssp saxatilis*, which is found throughout the Alps into the northern Balkans.¹

Aside from **Rock Partridge** however, a number of Eastern European Med. specialists find the western extent of their range here along the eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea. These include the locally declining **Pigmy Cormorant** and **Dalmatian Pelican**, as well as goodies such as **Levant's Sparrowhawk**, **Eastern Black Eared Wheatear**, **Eastern Subalpine Warbler**, **Eastern Orphean Warbler**, **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler**, **Olive Tree Warbler**, **Sombre Tit**, **'Black Headed' Wagtail**, **Black Headed Bunting**, and **Western Rock Nuthatch** amongst others. I failed to see Levant's Sparrowhawk, Dalmatian Pelican or Olive Tree Warbler but the rest were seen on numerous occasions.

In the mountains an impressive list of Alpine species potential includes species such as **Black Grouse** and **Capercallie**, **Eagles** and **Griffin Vulture**, as well as **Woodpeckers** and **Collared Flycatcher**; and on

¹ [Corso 2010. Sicilian Rock Partridge: identification and taxonomy. Dutch Birding 32\(2\): 79-96](#)

the higher peaks **Snowfinch, Wallcreeper, Alpine Accentor, Rufous Tailed Rock Thrush, and Horned Lark** (the latter two I managed to see in Durmitor NP). I didn't have much time to travel into habitats for most of these species, but did unexpectedly encounter singing **Red Breasted Flycatcher** in Biogradska Gora National Park.

Other Wildlife

Being a predominantly Limestone geology, the flora of Montenegro is rich and varied with Alpine through to coastal Mediterranean habitats. We saw many early spring species such as Gentians, Daffodils, Daphne, Crocus's and Primulas in the mountains and a number of Orchid species in the lower limestone grasslands, including **White Helleborine, Military and Lady Orchid, Woodcock, Bug, Few-flowered, Lesser Butterfly, Toothed, Early Purple** and the ubiquitous and extremely numerous **Green Winged Orchid**.

The Herptofauna also appears to be rich and varied in a European context, and populations of many species of reptile and amphibian seem high in Montenegro. In the mountains the populations of **Adder** are of the form *bosniensis* and may warrant specific status. They share the mountains with the rare **Meadow Viper**. Lower down many species of snake are present, including good populations of the attractive **Nose Horned Viper**, as well as **Whip Snakes** (Balkan and Caspian). The wetlands have both *Natrix* species occurring in eastern Europe, with **Dice Snake** seemingly common on Lake Skadar (at least in Albania). **Hermann's Tortoise** is present along the coastal strip. Amphibians include the localised **Albanian Pool Frog** and the interesting looking **Yellow Bellied Toad**. During our visit all the above species were seen without specifically searching, with the exception of **Meadow Viper** that didn't want to show itself at all (shame!).

Butterflies are numerous and from our brief visit interesting species noted included **Common Glider**, various Fritillaries, **Clouded Apollo, Scarce Swallowtail** as well as a nice selection of Blues, Whites and Browns. Time spent looking for butterflies would no doubt produce many more interesting species.

Mammals include both **Brown Bear, Eurasian Lynx** and **European Grey Wolf**, but as expected they are very scarce and secretive, only being found in remote areas of Durmitor National Park and the Eastern mountains that border Albania and Macedonia. We did not reach such areas, but did visit Durmitor NP.

Flights

Easyjet fly to Dubrovnik in Croatia from Gatwick cheaply, our flights cost £100 but this was around May Bank Holiday and school Half Term.

Hire cars from Croatia can be taken into Bosnia and Montenegro. We also managed to get our car (a Renault Clio) into Albania for a half day trip around the extent of Lake Skadar, although I'm not sure we had all relevant documents.

Itinerary

	Dawn	Am	Pm	evening
17/05/2009			Flight	Dubrovnik (Croatia)
18/05/2009	Rest	Dubrovnik	Bosnia/ NW Montenegro	Niksic
19/05/2009	Around hillside woodland	Drive to Durmitor NP	Mountain pass Durmitor NP	Lakes + local roads
20/05/2009	Birding Ski Slope	Tara Canyon	Biogradsk Gora NP	Podgorica
21/05/2009	Birding outskirts of capital	Drive to Albania - Skadar Lake	SE edge of Skadar – Ulcinj	Budva
22/05/2009	Rest	Lovcern NP	Lovcern - Kotor City	Kotor + celebrations
23/05/2009	Birding Hillsides S.Kotor	Kotor City Walk the top Wall	Wedding	Kotor + celebrations until 4am.....arg
24/05/2009	Birding Hills E.Kotor	Kotor City	pm & beach nr. by	Kotor + celebrations
25/05/2009	Birding Hills E.Kotor	Back to Croatia	Ronald Brown Pathway (Dubrovnic)	Flight home

Site Information

The following sections provide an overview of some of the more interesting areas visited in Montenegro and South Croatia/North Albania. Driving around the hillsides however provided many interesting sights and wildlife is certainly not restricted to National Parks.

Dubrovnik Area (Croatia)

Dubrovnik Walled City & Ronald Brown Pathway nr Konavle

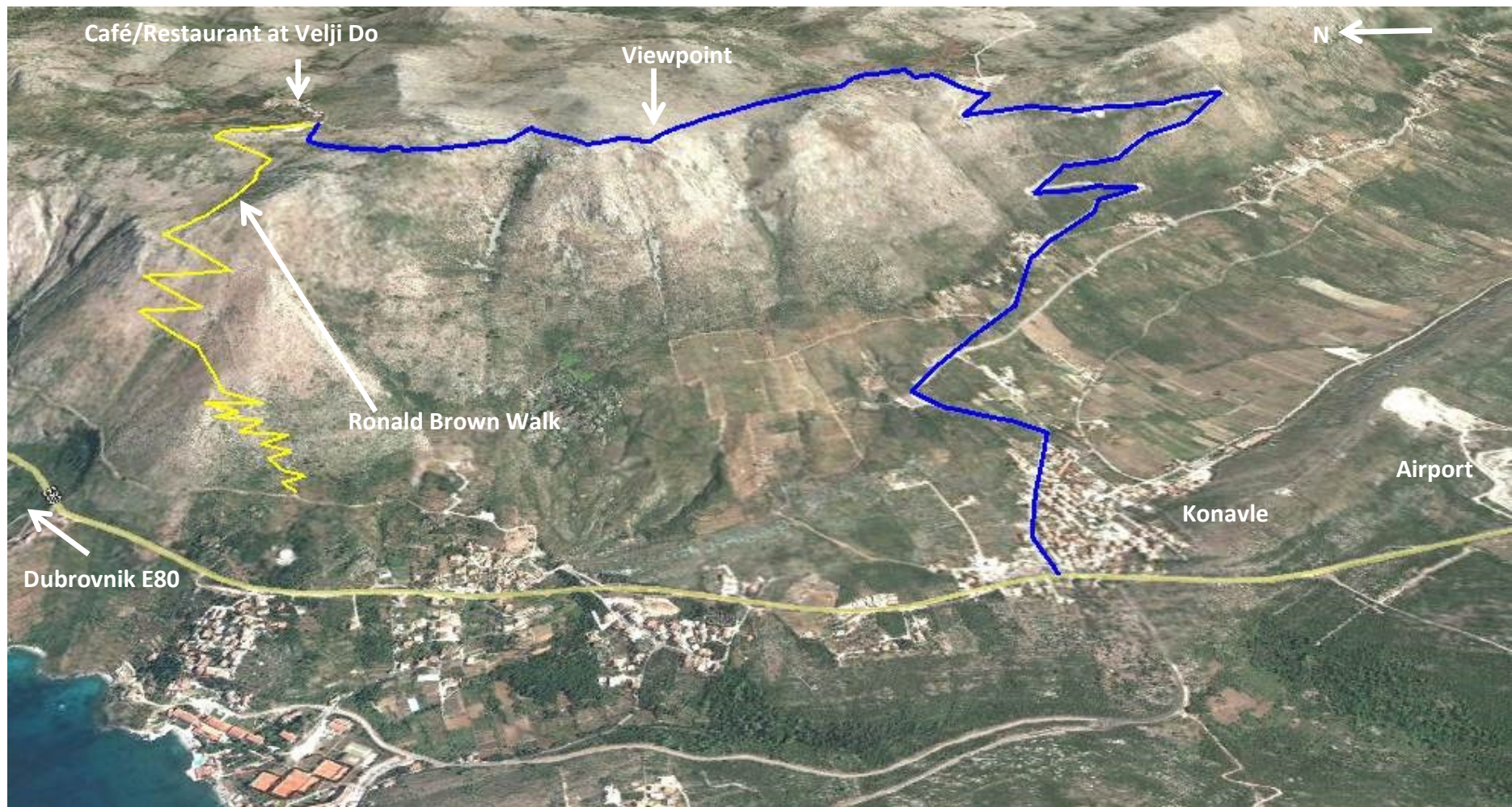
Dubrovnik

The historic walled City of Dubrovnik does not have too much bird life, but swifts are prominent with **Alpine Swift** and **Common Swift** noted. **Pallid Swift** is also said to be present. The only other birdlife of note for me was **Blue Rock Thrush**, which were on territory within the walled city.

Ronald Brown Pathway and Surrounds

This is the most easily accessed **Rock Partridge** site we visited. It is a few kms from the Airport and accessed by following the twisting road up the scarp above Konavle, then turning left near the summit and driving along the edge northwards. The scarp at c500m altitude appears to be good along its length here for **Rock Partridge** with calling birds heard from the Ronald Brown Pathway at Velji Do right to the viewpoint. Other species noted here without too much effort included **Sombre Tit**, **Western Rock Nuthatch**, **Black Headed Bunting** and **Eastern Black Eared Wheatear** as well as **European Bee-eater**. All apart from Rock Partridge & wheatear were seen from the restaurant at Velji Do whilst waiting for lunch to be cooked (I recommend the fresh fish).

The Ronald Brown Pathway runs from the coast at Gornji Obod up the scarp (see yellow line below) and then past the restaurant at Velji Do and uphill to the summit at Strazisce (c700m).





Dubrovnik from the City Wall



Alpine Swift above the walled City of Dubrovnik



Sombre Tit in the Restaurant Garden

Durmitor National Park & Tara Canyon

Durmitor NP

We accessed Durmitor National Park via a scenic route from Niksic. In Niksic we stayed to the east of the city in the Hotel that is within hillside mixed woodland (Bradt Travel Guide). This woodland and open scrub around it provided views of **Golden Oriole, Eastern Subalpine Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Cirl Bunting, European Bee-eater, Nightingale** and a singing **Icterine Warbler**, which I presume was a migrant.

At Durmitor we drove the southern pass into the mountains as far as we could, which wasn't very far into the next valley until snow blocked the road completely. Here we saw **Water Pipit, Northern Wheatear, Alpine Chough, Rufous Tailed Rock Thrush, Ring Ouzel**, as well as good views of **Balkan Adder**. In the late afternoon a walk was made to the two lakes, past the National Park visitor centre (which had no information). Nothing of note bird wise was seen here, but the river was full of very loud **Marsh Frogs**. In the evening we tried to drive to the north west of Zabljak on gravel roads, but didn't find any good routes into the northern edge of the mountains with just our trusty Clio.

At Dawn the next morning I decided to get as high as I could on the main Durmitor peak from the Ski Slope car park. This involved a brisk climb to probably around 1900m in partial fog. From this point I picked my way through the edge of snowmelt and scree to attempt to find some alpine specialities. This produced **Rock Partridge**, a flyby **Horned Lark**, and a few **Alpine Chough** before I had to leg it back down for breakfast.

Tara Canyon

After breakfast we headed over to the Tara Canyon, where the bridge crosses and then south east to Mojkovac. The valley here is beautiful and great to drive along. Not much in the way of bird life was noted apart from **White Throated Dipper** and **Marsh Tit**, during stops for café and admiring the view. Other wildlife seemed prolific here though with many butterflies including **Common Glider** and a probable **Pearl Bordered Fritillary** or something similar (a small Frit. but I didn't see the underwing). Reptiles included **Nose Horned Viper** and **Common Green Lizard** in the valley bottom by the river. **Lady Orchid** was growing up the valley next to the road bridge. We scanned some of the more inaccessible sides of the Canyon for **Alpine Chamois**, but it wasn't to be.





Durmitor National Park from around the National Park Visitor Centre



Nose Horned Viper Tara Canyon, basking on the Black Limestone that gives Montenegro (*Crna Gora*) its name.



The Tara Canyon

BioGradska National Park

On our way down to stay in the capital city of Podgorica, we stopped off for a couple of hours for a late lunch at Biogradska National Park. We drove along the access road until the car park in front of the lake. Here is extensive **European Beech** woodland with a ground flora dominated by **Ramsons** (Wild Garlic) with other species such as **Coralroot Bittercress**, a large **Butterbur** and **Marsh Marigold** obvious in the damper areas. A **Grass Snake** was seen hunting along the main lake edge. Biogradska is home to many of the specialities of the interior noted in the opening section of this report, but I guess access deeper into the mountains would be necessary to see many of these species. We walked the tourist path that skirts the edge of the large lake mid afternoon. The only bird of note was singing **Red Breasted Flycatcher**. I was half hoping for **Collared Flycatcher** here, and slightly surprised that it was Red Breasted that was singing high in the Beech canopy.

This area is definitely worthy of further exploration into the wider countryside of the National Park, but access may be difficult.



E80

E60 Mojkovac

Access road to
Biogradska NP
Car Park & Cafe

Lakside Footpath

Skadar Lake

We spent mid morning to mid afternoon after our visit to the Podgorica driving the eastern section of Skadar Lake. This vast wetland half in Montenegro and half in Albania is known for populations of **Pigmy Cormorant** and **Dalmatian Pelican**, although data on the Ramsar site is not conclusive as to whether the latter species still breeds on the Lake or is just a winter visitor. I failed to find the Pelican but had good views of the **Pigmy Cormorant** on the stretch either side of the Albanian border on the northern shores. Here **Great Reed Warbler** and **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** were also noted amongst others. Crossing into the former communist state of Albania was a real treat and was like stepping back another 20years or so, with horse and cart, donkeys and cars jostling the roadside and older ladies dressed in their traditional attire. We made a diversion along the northern marshes on dirt tracks to get to the lake shore again, which didn't produce much on the lake, but the marshes held **Lesser Grey Shrike** and **Black Headed Wagtail**. A small stream had a number of **Albanian Pool Frog** (which can also be seen in Montenegro).

We drove around past the town of Shkoder and across its rickety bridge over the River Bojana that drains Lake Skadar into the Adriatic, and spent a couple of hours chilling on the southern shores of the Lake, including having lunch in a café overlooking the Lake (which accepted Euro's) somewhere between Shiroke and Zogaj. Here there were **Eastern Black Eared Wheatear** (inc. pale throated) and **Black Headed Bunting**. The lake had **Dice Snake**. I wouldn't be surprised if the scarp to the south also held a number of other specialities including **Rock Partridge**.





Welcome to Albania!



Male Eastern Black Eared Wheatear

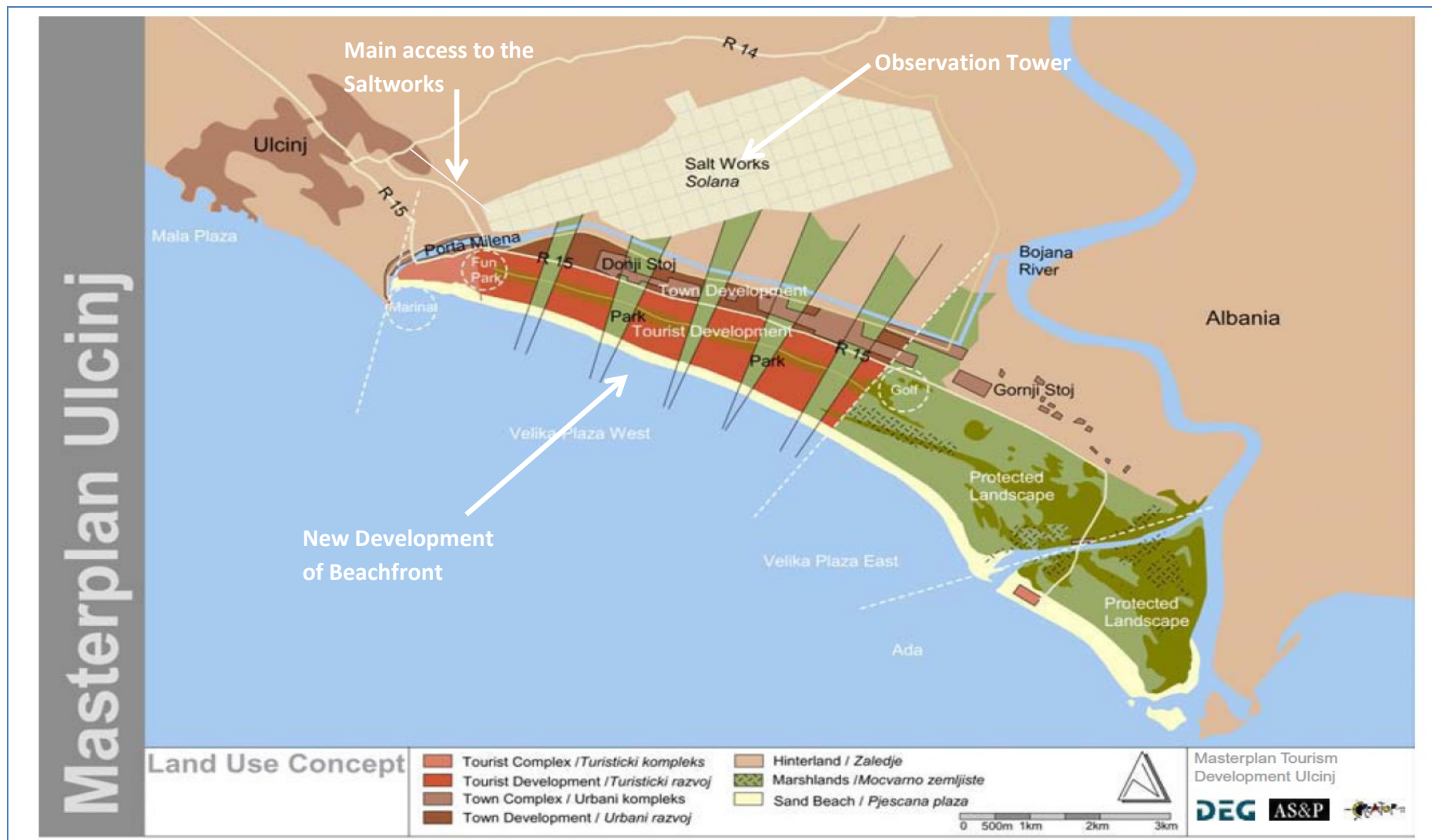
Ulcinj Saltworks and Beach

This area is given as another excellent wetland site. The access to the saltworks is not straightforward, and we tried by driving to the main entrance and asking for access. This was allowed on foot, but unfortunately not in our vehicle. On foot we walked along an internal rail track through the salt pans towards a more natural looking marshy area, but even after a long walk we were still a long way from the marshes and in the distance we could make out an observation tower. There is obviously a way to access the site better. Even without reaching the best bits we still managed to see **Kentish Plover**, **Spoonbill**, **Spanish Sparrow**, and **Red Rumped Swallow**, as well as **Balkan Green Lizards** around the building complex.

The beach at Ulcinj towards the border with Albania at one time was an undisturbed bird paradise with the likes of breeding **Roller**, **Collared Pratincole** and **Stone Curlew** and even **Great Bustard** occurred. As can be seen from the map below, Montenegro has major plans for this beach as a tourist resort. We did not have time to explore this area at all, only accessing the beach from the western end for half an hour. A pine belt behind the beach is intersected by numerous tracks down to the beach on the western end, with extensive local tourist beach development down the trackways. The development is not as progressed as the masterplan provided below, but there is likely to be significant disturbance along the western end of the long beach. If the wetlands survive here at all, they are going to be towards the border with Albania.

Petrovac Area

The hills and coast to the south of Petrovac are given as a location for all of the Med specialities such as **Olive Tree Warbler**, **Eastern Orphee and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler**, **Western Rock Nuthatch**, **Sombre Tit**, **Syrian Woodpecker**, **Levant's Sparrowhawk**, **Eleonora's Falcon** and **Rock Partridge**. I didn't have time to visit this area but try the coast, wetlands and scarp around Buljarica.



Page from an EIA on the future (or lack of) for the natural beach and wetlands of Ulcinj area (DEG, 2003 'Prostorni Koncept za razvoj Velike Plaze, Ulcinj – Masterplan – Zavrсна verzija)

Mount Lovcen National Park

This National Park, home of the Mausoleum of the Montenegrin hero Petar II Petrovic Njegos on the high peak of Jezerski on Mount Lovcen itself, is a mid altitude limestone grassland delight with many rolling hillsides stuffed full of flower rich grasslands with many orchids, hillsides yellow with *Genista* and many other calcareous species. We noted eight species of Orchid here, just driving through, along with many butterflies including **Clouded Apollo**, **Ladybird Spiders** and **Balkan Whip Snakes**. Our visit didn't pick up many new bird species apart from a single **Ortolan Bunting** and **Crag Martins** on the decent to Kotor. More extensive searching may prove more fruitful however. **Golden Eagle** have also been recorded here.

Kotor Area

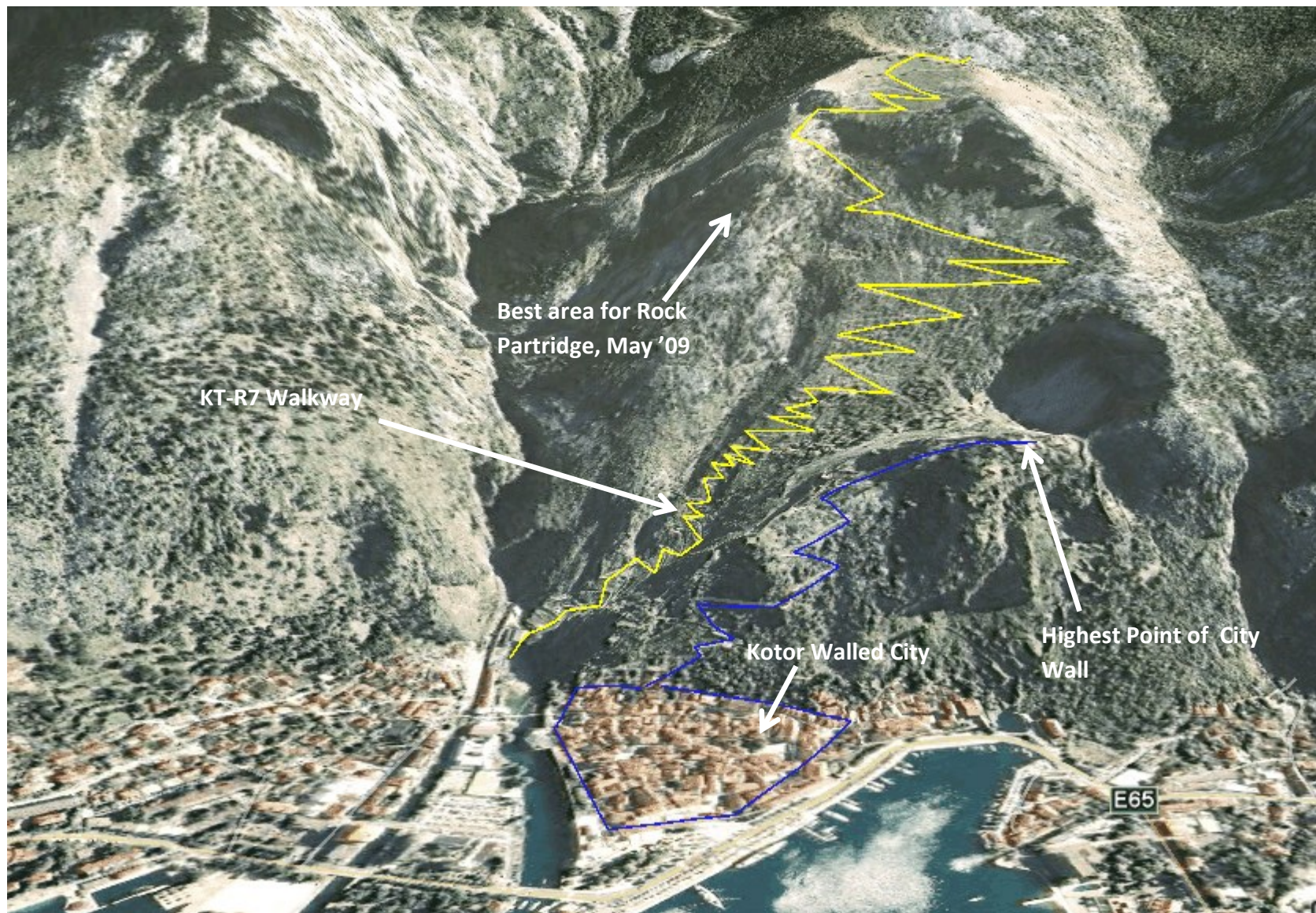
Being based here for a few days I had the opportunity to do some early morning exploring in between the wedding celebrations. Some early mornings were harder than others, especially dragging myself out of bed the morning after the Wedding itself, having sampled the delights of a popular Montenegrin Night Club in Kotor Walled City (worth a look in!). My reward was good views of **Rock Partridge** on the trackway R7 above Kotor City along with **Western Rock Nuthatch**, **Eastern Subalpine Warbler**, **Eastern Orphean Warbler**, **Sombre Tit**, **Black Headed & Cirl Bunting**, **Alpine Chough** and **Eastern Black Eared Wheatear**. Also present were **Balkan Green Lizard**, **Yellow Bellied Toad**, **Lesser Spotted Fritillary**, **Scarce Swallowtail** and different **Ladybird Spiders**. The pay-as-you-enter walled walkway upto the highest part of Kotor City puts you in the zone for all of the above species, but you are restricted and will be lucky to pick up some of the above from this track, although all are possible. The better track is the KT-R7 track that takes you all the way up to the Lovcen NP road (KT-R7?). This track starts on the north end of the City from the northern side of the channel of water.

Elsewhere around the hills of Kotor **Eastern Olivaceous Warblers** and **Eastern Subalpine Warblers** were noted, along with a singing **Sardinian Warbler** on the hillside between Kotor and Tivat.

Tivat Salina

The old saltworks at Tivat can be reached from Kotor by passing south through the Tunnel and then crossing straight over the main Tivat/Airport road heading south west to the coast. The access is on a bend in the road and easy to locate. Here I spent an hour in the heat of the day, in what was a mostly dry salt works. **Great Reed Warbler** and **Eastern Subalpine Warbler** were present in the marsh edge and scrub, and **Fan Tailed Warbler (Zitting Cisticola)** was also noted. There was very little evidence of wetland species presence during my visit, although I'm sure rails are likely, especially if making a dawn visit. The area has had **Pigmy Cormorant** and various species of wader in the past.

BeachFront – A BBQ with the wedding party further along the road to a beachfront hotel produced **Hermann's Tortoise** late one late afternoon.



Best area for Rock Partridge, May '09

KT-R7 Walkway

Kotor Walled City

Highest Point of City Wall

E65



Rock Partridge above Kotor City



Alpine Chough above Kotor City



Eastern Subalpine Warbler at Tivat Salina



The Fjord at Kotor: A Great Place to get Married