

Croatia 4th to 7th May 2013: In Search of the Rock Partridge



Introduction:

Where

This short report covers a four day trip to Croatia, planned with the sole ornithological aim of seeking out one of the Western Palearctic's most elusive resident birds, the Rock Partridge. Such a trip could not, of course, omit the medieval splendour of Dubrovnik and also encompassed a wealth of other local natural history in the form of butterflies, moths, reptiles and orchids.

We chose to base ourselves in the small town of Cavtat, conveniently located just five minute's drive from Dubrovnik airport, but more importantly only twenty minutes away from the outstanding habitat to be found on the limestone hills which run parallel to the coast.

As a first time visitor I cannot commend Croatia highly enough, in terms of logistical ease, the friendliness of the largely English-speaking population, the cultural wealth of Dubrovnik and without doubt the quality of the natural habitat presented by the largely unspoilt stretch of the Dalmatian Coast; the country was a total revelation, in all the right ways. As for finding Rock Partridge, this task can only be described as reassuringly straightforward at our site above Cavtat!

When

Our trip was timed around the UK's May Day Bank Holiday to minimise the use of annual leave, however this period proved perfect as it missed the tourist crowds of the high summer, whilst Rock Partridges were highly vocal and the wild flower display outstanding.

How

Monarch were extremely efficient in conveying us between Birmingham and Dubrovnik, with the impeccable yet highly economical hire car arrangements being delivered by Last Minute Rent a Car (<http://www.rentacarlastminute.hr/en/index.aspx>). Without doubt the best decision we made, with regard to the trip, was our accommodation choice. The combination of quality and value-for-money offered by the Bacan Serviced Apartments (<http://www.cavtatapartments.com/>) simply cannot be beaten. Antun Bacan, the proprietor, speaks superb English and could not do enough to make our stay as pleasant as possible. The establishment is perfectly located, brilliantly equipped and immaculately clean; do not look any further!

Note that guided bird/nature tours to Croatia are available via Green Eye Ecotours (<http://greeneye.org.uk/home.htm>). I would like to take this opportunity to thank Lajos Nemeth - Bóka of Green Eye, who provided me with some very useful assistance during the planning of this short trip and to Sean Cole, for his expert botanical advice.

Daily Diary:

Saturday 4th May

After just two-and-a-half hours in our Monarch Airbus we descend over the Dalmatian Coast, with pale rugged peaks of limestone to our west and the blue waters of the Adriatic Sea to our east. We come to rest at the splendidly modern Dubrovnik Airport (actually some 20km south of the city), which nestles on the narrow coastal plain, and whose passport control and luggage retrieval facilities must rate as some of the most efficient in the world. ATM operation and the Last Minute Rent a Car setup are just as smooth, and we are on our way north in a nearly-new Vauxhall Corsa in the blink of an eye.

We have hardly become accustomed to the pleasantly warm climate, elegant cypress trees and charismatic terracotta roof tiles when we arrive at our small apartment block in the coastal holiday town of Cavtat. At how many destinations can one be propelled from touching down on the runway tarmac to entering the hotel apartment in just an hour? Croatia is certainly set to be a dream of a logistical destination, if first impressions are anything to judge by.



Cavtat town, viewed from the limestone hills above

Our apartment is a modern, clean and thoughtfully appointed example of convenience, just two minute's walk from a lovely local store where we stock up on groceries and the very moreish Ozujsko bottled beer. After a freshen-up, several beers and a few glasses of local red wine we head downhill to the harbour, only ten minutes away, where a plethora of restaurants await.

Our choice is the Restaurant Bugarvila. It comes highly commended and the presentation is superb, but the actual standard of the food is nothing more than average, making the experience rather over-priced. The quay-side setting is magnificent, however, with lights reflected in the calm sea on a warm

Adriatic evening. The return walk up hill to the apartment is something of a struggle after three courses plus drinks, however, and then I realise that I need to get up in just five hours time!

Sunday 5th May

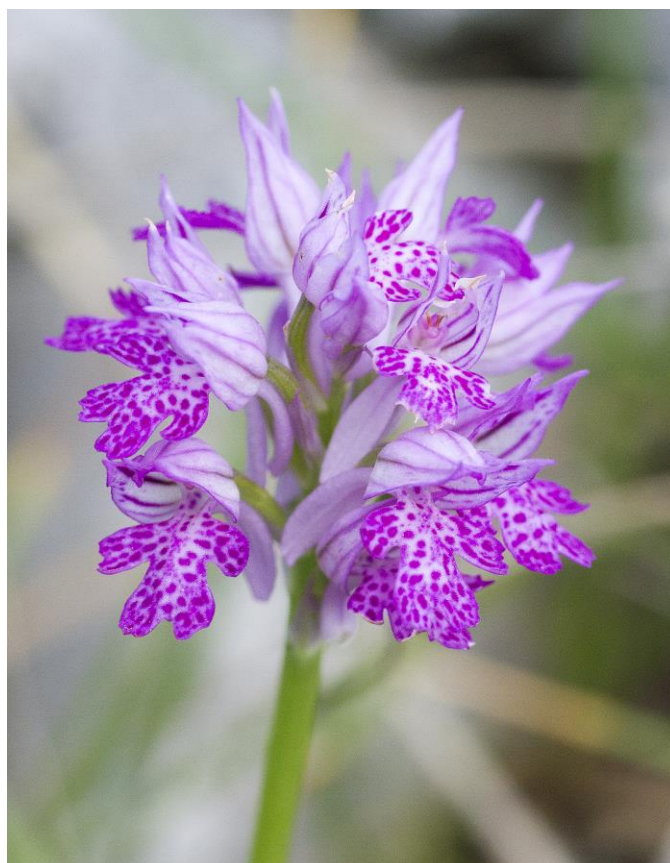
The alarm sounds at a suitably disturbing 05.00, then it's immediately out and upwards, following the windy road which snakes up the side of the limestone escarpment, through flowering broom and the vivid greens of low maquis cover. At the escarpment summit I emerge from the 'bush line', into grassland strewn with large angular lumps of pale grey limestone and a profusion of wild flower blooms, where a small signpost directs me left towards the charmingly named hamlet of Velji Do.

A short distance down the narrow road the escarpment drops away to the west, revealing outstanding views down to Cavtat and the Adriatic waters beyond, with a well-placed viewpoint constructed to give easy access to the magnificent panorama. I park at the viewpoint's small car park and take in the stark beauty of this wonderfully unspoilt habitat, which at this season supports splashes of every colour of the rainbow in the form of the spring flower heads in all shapes and sizes, which punctuate the waving green grasses.

On the water's surface some five hundred metres below, two moving dark islands edge north towards the distant outline of Dubrovnik; these are two gigantic cruise ships which are set to descend on the sleeping city which will also be our target for a visit later in the day.



Sparse-flowered Orchid *Orchis pauciflora*



Three-toothed Orchid *Neotinea tridentata*

The iPod is deployed and after a couple of renditions of a Rock Partridge call, a response is heard from the scarp slope below. With adrenalin flowing I scamper over the sharp limestone shards as fast as I dare, to peer over the rim of the escarpment and scan the huge expanse of rock. Searching for a predominantly grey bird amongst a similarly coloured expanse of limestone is not a task to be taken

lightly and as the partridge chuckles and splutters out its call I frantically scan every prominent rock. Eventually the bins lock onto the distinctive stripy flanks and thick black throat line of this much wanted bird, which is then savoured distantly until the pair whirr into flight and slip off down the valley.

The early success is a great bonus and I can now turn my attention to the wild flowers at my feet, in particular the phenomenal display of flowering spring orchids. The delicate white-and-lemon blooms of Sparse-flowered Orchid are super-abundant, appearing by the thousand and in perfect fresh condition. Much smaller numbers of subtle pink Three-toothed Orchid are periodically picked out, with curving striped bonnets and boldly-dotted gown-shaped bodies which are a macro-photographic delight. The same is particularly true for a small group of exquisitely beautiful Woodcock Ophrys, whose form mimics the body of an exotic insect adorned in intricate markings of pink, mauve and yellow.



Woodcock Ophrys *Ophrys scolopax*



Black-headed Bunting

More calling Rock Partridges lure me up from my hands and knees, and though a close bird calling on the slope above refuses to show himself, another is located on the opposite side of the viewpoint, again vocalising from a prominent rock. This time I manage to grab a few distant photographic images of the weirdly leucistic individual, but the desired definitive shot eludes me.

Walking the route to Velji Do, accompanied by an ever-changing and constantly stunning panorama, I add Black-eared Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Black-headed Bunting, European Bee-Eater, Whinchat, Woodchat Shrike, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, plus Sardinian and Wood Warblers to my notebook list. At the quaint hamlet of Velji Do a few cultivated fields head a sheltered valley of lush green oaks which echo to the fluty notes of Golden Orioles and fluid trills of Nightingale.

At this point the Ronald Brown Pathway cuts off to the west, descending the scarp slope with a line of lichen-covered flagstones marking the route. I follow the trail for the first few hundred metres, where two more calling Rock Partridges refuse to be lured from cover, and more of the preceding list of wonderful Mediterranean birds are recorded.

Mindful of the time of day, I curtail my birding at 08.30, making my way back to Cavtat where entry into the local shop is delayed by the appearance of two very low Honey Buzzards which are clearly taking a migratory journey northwards. My arrival with freshly cooked bread heralds the commencement of the leisurely cooked breakfast, consumed in the very civilised environment of the apartment's balcony.

It is late morning by the time we set off on our drive to Dubrovnik, which takes forty-five minutes on the rather busy main coast road. From the elevated position of our approach, the walled city is already an inspiring sight, growing in splendour as we turn off and descend towards sea level. Our choice of underground car parking facility proves to be a wise move, when we see the queues of traffic during our walk to the old city, where we breach the high imposing walls via the Pile Gate drawbridge, to reach the polished marble of the Stradum. This is the old city's main thoroughfare, and is lined with churches, palaces, shops, outdoor cafés and, inevitably, tourists!

A circuit of the Dubrovnik city walls is a must, but one has to pay for the experience. In our opinion it is, however, very worthwhile, and provides constantly changing views from a bird's eye perspective of one of the most captivating historic cityscapes in existence. Although the Unesco World Heritage Site was badly damaged by shelling during the 1991 siege, it remains one of the best preserved medieval cities in Europe, as the 6m thick, 22m high defensive high walls have served it very well over the millennia. It is still easy to detect which bomb-damaged buildings have been repaired and rebuilt, by the new bright orange terracotta roof tiles which contrast with the dulled ancient tiles of their neighbours.



A view of Dubrovnik Old City from the city walls

Our hour-and-a-half circuit provides countless photographic opportunities of ornate stonework, hidden gardens, time-weathered rooftops, imposing church domes, ranks of moored boats and a beautiful coastline, not to mention the Yellow-legged Gulls and Common Wall Lizards which make their home here. The circuit also proves to be hot and tiring work, and by its completion we are ready for a very expensive drink in the very grand surrounds of the Stradum, a great place to watch the world go by.

Our final act is the purchase of an ice cream from one of the many shops which present a bewildering selection of scrumptiously displayed offerings. Having cooled our palates in the heat of the day, we

retrace our steps through the refreshingly deserted back streets to our waiting car. Back at Cavtat a siesta and snack revive us sufficiently to plan a late afternoon assault on the escarpment.

Victoria is keen to pursue some orchid-sketching and I take to my hands and knees with the macro lens in the early evening sunlight. After the knees and elbows have been suitably battered and grazed by the sharp limestone edges, a wander from the viewpoint down to Velji Do adds another Rock Partridge and Sombre Tit to the growing list of birds notched up earlier, along with the expected fare such as Black-headed Bunting, European Bee-Eater, Woodchat Shrike and company. Butterfly diversity is more limited at this season, but includes huge numbers of Wall Brown, plus a sprinkling of Common Blues, Wood Whites and a single Painted Lady.



Wall Brown



Eastern Black-eared Wheatear

Our fantastic and very full day is concluded back in Cavtat, where sundown drinks at the apartment are followed by a circuit of the harbour, which now hosts several ridiculously lavish yachts whose polished chrome and inbuilt illumination systems exude unfettered maritime affluence. The Pizzeria Kabalero provides us not only with some outstanding value-for-money cuisine, but also a bat-like Giant Peacock, which batters a street lamp before alighting to allow some precariously balanced photography of Europe's largest moth.

Monday 6th May

In a determined effort to secure the definitive Rock Partridge image, I'm in position on the escarpment by 05.15. Two hours later I have heard five different calling birds and not seen one; such is the delightful unpredictability of birding! Although birds respond to playback, they clearly prefer to call from cover, or on unseen lower ledges, and refuse to be drawn in to the iPod.

It is a great place to spend an early morning, nonetheless, with magnificent views and birds to match, until a heavy downpour puts pay to the fun. Descending to mid slope level while the rain continues, I set off for a quick bout of maquis-bashing as the sunshine returns. Black-headed Bunting is quite common here, with 'Eastern' Subalpine Warbler also being recorded for the first time on the trip.

The final stop of the day is made just outside Cavtat, where a track cuts through lower coastal maquis giving access to a subtly different habitat, dominated by flowering Broom. Cirl Bunting is new to the list here, and 'Eastern' Subalpine Warbler is more numerous too. The uninterrupted sunshine which now

warms the hillside has many butterflies taking to the wing, with Adonis Blue and Glanville Fritillary being pleasing additions in the notebook.

Fresh bread collection and another fine breakfast are next on the agenda, followed by a little daylight exploration of Cavtat town. The plan is to sample some Adriatic snorkelling in the second part of the morning, so the appropriate kit is collected and a lovely secluded bay located just north of Cavtat. Then we dip our feet into the clear water, take a sharp intake of breath and abandon all prospect of immersion for fear of instant hypothermia! Instead, the next hour is spent relaxing on the limestone pebbles, until a thunderstorm has us retreating to the apartment.

By mid-afternoon the sun has returned and another assault on the escarpment is made. A juvenile Montagu's Harrier passes overhead en route, with the usual assemblage of birds noted up top (though with a consistent lack of partridges). Most time is spent on the continuation of the Ronald Brown Pathway above Velji Do, with the gorgeous display of wildflowers being the main focus. Here we discover a small colony of exquisite Early Spider Orchid, plus a single teneral Red-veined Darter dragonfly.



Early Spider Orchid *Ophrys sphegodes*



Monkey Orchid *Orchis simia*

To avoid yet another shower we follow the minor road inland towards Duba Konavoska, which takes us through a mixture of cultivation and low oak forest, resplendent in a covering of fresh green leaves. Nightingales abound in this habitat, and the roadside orchid show is exceptional. Green-winged Orchid is abundant, but without doubt, the floral stars are two Monkey Orchid spikes, which are the most surreal flowers I have ever seen. Each bloom head sports a subtly pink 'body', to which are attached bright purple 'arms and legs', each bent at the elbow/ankle. Above the 'body' a hooded pink bonnet shrouds a 'face', complete with smiling purple lips and eyes; absolutely amazing!

The day ends in just as enjoyable a fashion as the previous one, with balcony drinks, a stroll into town and dinner at our favoured pizzeria; perfect.

Tuesday 7th May

Following a particularly heavy thunderstorm in the night, I am relieved that the sound of rain on the window has abated by first light. I set out on the normal route, but have only driven a few hundred metres when it becomes apparent that the escarpment ridge is actually below cloud base level on this greyest of mornings; there will be no partridge hunting for me this morning!

Plan B is quickly hatched and I park up, not far beyond the limits of the village, close to the coastal maquis visited on the previous day. Immediately after closing the car door I am aware of fluid birdsong close by, which is highly varied and seems to mimic Nightingale at times; it is certainly something which I cannot put a name to. After a little searching amongst an area of taller trees I locate the source, a very welcome Eastern Orphean Warbler, which is something of a surprise find.

For the next couple of grey hours I work my way through the low maquis towards the coast, seeing numerous 'Eastern' Subalpine Warblers, Sardinian Warbler, Woodchat Shrike, Cirl Buntings and a single flyover Hawfinch. Despite the gloomy weather there is clearly a significant passage of Honey Buzzards occurring, with eight birds recorded passing through, though oddly they all appear to be moving south.



Balkan Green Lizard



Adonis Blue

Also of note are two large snakes, or at least what I assume to be snakes at the time. It transpires that they are actually European Glass Lizards, effectively 1.5m long slow worms (or limbless lizards), impressive thick-bodied, dark-brown beasts which have a dietary preference for snails, something which certainly flourishes in the area.

After our final Croatian breakfast, of cured ham, scrambled egg, tomatoes and fresh bread, we thank Antun warmly for his hospitality and set off for our last visit to the escarpment, with the sun now breaking through and the low cloud rapidly dispersing. Upon arrival at the viewpoint, the first bird I

hear is a calling Rock Partridge, which soon has me tip-toeing towards the edge of the slope, as it is undoubtedly very close by.

Peering over a dry-stone wall, I come face-to-face with a male Rock Partridge, calling rigorously from a prominent pinnacle. Face-to-face may be a slight exaggeration, as he is still some 60m away, but the light is ideal, the rocky surrounds are a perfect photographic frame and on low ISO I capture as good a shot as I have hoped for; eleventh-hour success once again!

As Vic sketches the local flora, I roam the slopes, where a group of six fly-over Red-billed Chough are my final addition to the bird trip list, alongside a further Rock Partridge and another Eastern Orphean Warbler; the latter surprisingly comes in to a recording of Western Rock Nuthatch, which it is clearly mimicking! Much of my time is spent with eyes looking downwards, however, and my rewards come in the form of Balkan Green Lizard, a very attractive reptile with orange-yellow underparts and a grass-green stripe down his back, plus another sizeable European Glass Lizard.

Scarce Swallowtail butterfly and Hummingbird Hawk-Moth are new to my Lepidoptera log, and we also take time to admire some of the huge snails which are active on the damp limestone; with the size of this 'slow food' it is easy to see how the Glass Lizards grow to such exceptional dimensions!

A final walk down the Ronald Brown Trail, with its magical views up the Adriatic Coast, to Dubrovnik and beyond, and a parting picnic back at Cavtat, conclude what has been an outstanding introduction to this hugely rewarding destination. Croatia has been one of the greatest revelations of my recent travelling experience and I would strongly recommend that others with a similar interest in natural history of all description, culture, scenery and, of course, seeing Rock Partridge, place this wonderful country high on their 'to do' list.



Rock Partridge



Cream-spot Tiger



Green-winged Orchid *Anacamptis morio*



Red-veined Darter



Eastern Black-eared Wheatear

