During a short family vacation in Croatia, I spent two productive mornings birding in search of three target SE Europe specialties: Rock Partridge, Sombre Tit and (Western) Rock Nuthatch. All of these were eventually found, in addition to some other autumnal migrants.

Finding the targets was greatly aided by intel contained in several trip reports found in the Cloud Birder archive:

- **Merrill, Ian**: Croatia – 4-7 May 2013 – very helpful map of Rock Partridge sites
- **Paal, Uku**: Croatia – 4-11 September 2016 – good notes on the Split area
- **Swann, Bob and Dora**: Croatia – 9-15 October 2006 – adventures in Paklenica NP
- **Bertrands, Joachim**: Croatia – 19-27 August 2014 - “A hitchhiking quest to find the elusive Rock Partridge”.
Cavtat, 29-30 September

We flew into Dubrovnik on 29 September and based ourselves in the small coastal town of Cavtat, conveniently located ten minutes from the airport. The town is heavily oriented towards package tourism, but is quiet and boasts numerous accommodation options to suit most budgets. Our main reason for staying at Cavtat however, was to be close to the Rock Partridge sites along the limestone cliffs overlooking the town (as identified by Ian Merrill in his report).

The same day, I birded along the road to the small village of Velji Do for two hours in the late afternoon and early evening with no success whatsoever, not even hearing the target bird. The species vicariously seen were: (Eastern) Black-eared Wheatear, *Oenanthe hispanica melanoleuca*, Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla*, Great Tit, *Parus major* and Blue Tit, *Cyanistes caeruleus*. I also heard several Quail, *Coturnix coturnix* calling form cover among boulders on the grassy slopes. Slightly concerned at not hearing the partridge, I resolved to return first thing the next morning...

The next day, I was up at the Velji Do road before sunrise. It was a chilly morn to say the least. No luck along the road again. I finally decided to leave the tarmac road and walk the Ronald Brown trail which begins at a small car parking area just before the village of Velji Do. As the sun was behind me, the slopes remained in shadow and cold well into the morning. Quail and Rock Nuthatch could be heard calling, but not the partridge. I was surprised to see a lone migrating Merlin, *Falco Columbarius*, (a lifer for me), swooping down low over the rocky slopes.

*The start of the Ronald Brown trail (named after former US Secretary of Commerce)*
Becoming a little desperate, I continued down the trail along the eastern slope facing the sea. Turning a corner, I flushed three birds which were clearly partridge, but did not give views of their undersides and necks. At this point, I left the main trail and walked in the direction of the fleeing birds some 200m to a stone cross that was placed on a cairn on the hillside. The cross is a prominent feature and cannot be missed from the trial.

Arriving at the cross, I took a break and immediately heard the clucking of numerous partridges below me. As they were close, but still out of sight, I sat down at the base of the cross and waited. This was fortuitous because suddenly around 10-12 Rock Partridge, *Alectoris graeca* appeared over the horizon not 10 metres from me. The view was fleeting, but confirmatory, and the birds took panicked flight down the hillside away from me. Shortly afterwards, I happened to turn my gaze up the slope and saw six other partridges sitting on a rock warming themselves in the early morning sun. These were distant, but more confiding, and did not seem to be concerned as to my presence. I watched them for 15 minutes, clearly remarking on the white throat and striped flanks of the species, before they too melted away among the limestone boulders.
Triumphant, I returned to the carpark and was about to drive away for breakfast with the family back at our Cavtat hotel, when I heard the unusual scolding of several birds. These turned out to be a loose group of Sombre Tits, *Poecile lugubris*, feeding in the fruit orchard by the road.

It was a good morning’s birding, but very few other species were seen except for the more common tits and a single Easter Orphee Warbler, *Sylvia crassirostris*. Another Rock Nuthatch was also heard trilling away, but could not be located.
Leaving Cavtat, we visited Dubrovnik and then drove north to Split, where we overnighed on 1 October. *En route*, by the highway north of Dubrovnik, we encountered a huge flock of Red-billed Chough, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* wheeling in tight groups and feeding along the slopes. I would estimate the birds to be in the 2-3 hundreds – a truly impressive sight of mass flocking. We also saw a single Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus* and possibly one Eleonora’s Falcon, *Falco eleonorae* flying between coastal rock cliffs. Note to self: not a good idea to simultaneously bird and drive the windy single lane coastal road!
The next morning, we got an early start and drove north to the town of Starigrad Paklenica in order to visit the eponymous national park in the hope of finding *inter alia*, our elusive nuthatch.

Arriving at midday on a weekend, the park was crowded with rock climbers and we were obliged to park some 1km from the park gate (entrance fee: Kuna 45 per visitor). We walked the main trail into the park, hearing the nuthatch, but decided to bypass the rock climbing activity at the canyon entrance, expecting to easily find the nuthatch in other, quieter, surroundings. This proved to be folly, as we walked some 4kms in and did not once again hear the target. Indeed, the birding was very slow, the only other species noted were: Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*, Swift, *Apus apus*, Robin, *Erithacus rubecula* and several Black Redstart, *Phoenicurus ochruros*.

After two hours, we decided to return to the steep gorge at the entrance to the park to try and relocate our target. *Et voilà*, low down, gleaning the rocks among the gangs of *Petrobatae* were a pair of *(Western) Rock Nuthatch, Sitta neumayer*, happily hunting not 3 metres away from us. The third target in the bag, we departed the park and drove north to Porec, where the following morning, we took the last ferry of the season from Istria to Venice.
All-in-all, a very satisfying and relaxed tour of the beautiful Dalmatian coast, with a spot of productive birding thrown into the bargain (four lifers seen).

I take the liberty of attaching a revised edit to the excellent map that was made by Ian Merrill (all credit to him) that shows my crucifix site for the Rock Partridge.

David Karr, Geneva, 4 October 2016

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