Northern Italy – February 28th-March 1st 2017

This report covers a 2 day, largely non-birding trip to Northern Italy (mainly Lombardia) in late winter.

Flying to and from Milan Malpensa, I was able to draw up a plan to see 5 lifers in a very limited time period. 4 were Category C birds, including the ‘traditional’ 3 of Sacred Ibis, Vinous-throated Parrotbill and Northern Bobwhite. The 4th is a recent addition (2014) to both the Italian and Western Palearctic list – Muscovy Duck. The final target was Wallcreeper. Success with all 5 (including the discovery of a possibly unknown site for one species), some lovely weather and scenery, good food and a decent supporting cast of birds made for a very short and sweet trip.

This report also attempts to provide:
- Helpful directions for the only Muscovy Duck site in the Western Palearctic where it’s ‘tickable’.
- A new and more easily accessible Vinous-throated Parrotbill site.
- A regular wintering site for Wallcreeper within an hour of Malpensa airport.

Transport, accommodation and weather

I flew with EasyJet, with return flights from London Gatwick purchased for an absolute snip at £26 – the cheap deal was the main instigator of the trip. Both flights were uneventful. In Italy, a car was hired with Europcar for just €12. It was a fairly painless pick up and drop off, though upon returning the vehicle the gentlemen tried to charge me €30 for the car being dirty. Given this wasn’t in the small print, he backed down.

An apartment was booked with Air BnB, in the town of Oleggio, just 15km from Malpensa. There seems to be a particular wealth of options for the area on Air BnB, so I’d recommend checking the site out.

The weather was very contrasting. On the first day, rain (though normally light) and poor visibility predominated. However, on the second day it was glorious sunshine and temperatures reached the mid-teens, making for a lovely day.

Literature

With the lack of literature on Italy and birds, this trip was all about reports I found online. As is seemingly often the case, Josh Jones’ was the most valuable, with reports by Richard Bonser and Bob Swann also of use. For Muscovy Duck, an email exchange with Dominic Mitchell was crucial, and I am thankful to him for the gen. Furthermore, Paolo Casali of Birding Lombardia was helpful, and I also dug out some stuff from Birdforum.

Highlights

Wallcreeper, Northern Bobwhite, Venous-thorated Parrotbill, Sacred Ibis, Muscovy Duck, Ferruginous Duck, Caspian Gull, Crag Martin & Hen Harrier.

Day by day account
Tuesday 28\textsuperscript{th} February

Having arrived at Malpensa at 09:30, it was out the airport and past a vocal flock of \textbf{Italian Sparrows} to collect the car. The first destination was the collection of low-lying villages to the west of Novara, a reliable area for Sacred Ibis. On the way plenty of \textbf{Hooded Crows} and \textbf{Great White Egrets} were noted, but when I reached Ponzana the poor visibility made scanning the flat land tough. Driving around was revealing little, but on the way to Palude di Casalbeltrame I spotted a bird feeding in a channel north of Fisrengo (45.4164, 8.488). Pulling up aside the ditch, a \textbf{Sacred Ibis} was revealed, and it showed well as it fed on fish. I enjoyed views before moving on, passing a flock of \textbf{Tree Sparrows}, but a drive around in search of greater numbers of ibis proved fruitless. Given the time at my disposal, I was pleased to find at least one, and headed on to the next destination, Lago d’Orta in Piedmont.

This extremely scenic lake is home to the only considered self-sustaining population of Muscovy Ducks in the Western Palearctic, but for such an obvious bird they were certainly not easy to pin down! Only after much driving around the lake (enjoying a number of \textbf{Goosander}) was I able to spot 4 \textbf{Muscovy Ducks} off Camping Orta, at Tortirogno, on the east side. I felt an odd feeling of ridiculousness and relief as I left the lake, passing another bird on the shore near Circolo Vela Orta.

With the rain coming down, I wasn’t overly enthused for visiting the famously swamp-like Palude Brabbia, but with this my only window to do so I had no choice. The track from Inarzo was very muddy in the car, so walking on food was the only option. All trip reports explain that to get Vinous-throated Parrotbills, one must walk to the observation tower, and hope to get views through the reeds. I was about half way between the start of the track and the tower, when the density of the reedbed to my right led me to play the call on my speaker. I instantly got a reply, and within minutes, I was quite literally surrounded by 50+ \textbf{Vinous-throated Parrotbills}. Always hard to see, I enjoyed the best views I could for several minutes, before they worked their way back away from the path. Happy days, with the 3 targets for the day seen in quick time. The rest of the day was spent not birding.

Wednesday 1\textsuperscript{st} March

The weather was completely different this morning, which was lucky given that I was after the hardest target, Northern Bobwhite. Staying just 15 minutes from the Castana Primo, I was there not long after dawn, and walking from the car to the scrub I noted 10+ \textbf{Ferruginous Ducks} among commoner species and a \textbf{Green Sandpiper} on the reservoir. Arriving at the site, I was disappointed to not hear the distinctive call given the nice weather. I realised this was to be a hard task, and spent the next hour or so trampling through some uncomfortable broom and scrub, with very limited results. The final haul was the briefest of sights of a \textbf{Northern Bobwhite} in flight, 2 different birds heard calling deep in vegetation and a possible 5+ ‘heard’ scampering in broom (sadly Rabbits couldn’t be ruled out!). Frustrated not to get better views, I was pleased to have at least seen one and be able to add it to my list. A flyover ringtail \textbf{Hen Harrier} was the best bird here, and there were loads of \textbf{Marsh Tits}.
The rest of the day, which was turning out to be glorious, was dedicated to the lakes (which was one of the main reasons behind the trip). Managing to stop at Robbiate on the way, I headed to the north of the town where the Centrale Semenza dam runs over River Adda. This is a regular wintering site for Wallcreeper, but an initial scan revealed only Dippers and Grey Wagtails. However, a crimson flutter caught my eye towards the base of the concrete, and there was a Wallcreeper in full view! Certainly a special bird, I enjoyed decent views from the west shore. A ‘scope would have been ideal, but it didn’t dampen the mood.

The rest of the day was spent touring the lakes, with a number of good species seen, including Crag Martins at Como, Short-toed Treecreper and Caspian Gull at Lago Maggiore as well as numerous Goosander and Black-necked Grebes. A big surprise came with a flock of Vinous-throated Parrotbills at Maggiore (more on that below). As with yesterday, Italian Sparrows and Hooded Crows were plentiful almost everywhere. It was then back to the airport for 19:30, and home.

**Selected species notes**

**Muscovy Duck**

This species became a new addition to the Western Palearctic list in 2014 when the population at Lago d’Orta (Lake Orta) was considered self-supporting by the Italians. The birds weren’t as easy to find as I’d hoped, though the particularly poor weather and visibility didn’t help. I ended up finding 5 on the east side of the lake, all either side of the main town of Orta San Giulio, and directions (from the south) are as follows:

Take the SS336, SS33 and A26/E62 to Via Borgomanero/SP142 in Paruzzaro. Take the exit at Arona from A26/E62. Follow the SP142 to SP229/II in Borgomanero, and from here follow the SP229/II and SP229 along the eastern shore until you reach Orta San Giulio.

The bays and inlets either side of the town should hold Muscovy Ducks. The best views I had were from Camping Orta, in Tortirogno, less than 1 km north of Orta San Giulio. If driving on the SP229 from the south, one should see the small car park/lay-by on the west side of the road (45.801931, 8.420479). Park, and either scan from here or walk north along the SP229 with the hedgerow to your left, and view further up. This particular part of the lake held the largest flock of Mallards I saw on the entire water body, as well as a few Gulls, a couple of Goosander and 4 Muscovy Ducks.

I also saw a bird on the shore south of Orta San Giulio, just south of Circolo Vela Orta (at roughly 45.787089, 8.421978). In short, any slightly sheltered parts of the lake either side of Orta San Giulio seem good for Muscovies.

**Vinous-throated Parrotbill**

Palude Brabbia is the well-documented site for this species. It is renowned for being somewhat treacherous, with knee-deep water and mud, and I found this on my successful visit here on the 28th.

However, I chanced upon a colony at Lago Maggiore, on the Piedmont-Lombardy border, and I had equally good views here, but the accessibility was much easier. The birds were in a
reedbed south of Monvallina, in the commune of Monvalle on the east side of the lake. Directions (from the south) are as follows:

Take the SS629 north, continuing straight onto the SP32. At the end of Via Pasubio, turn right at the roundabout onto the SP69. Turn left onto Via Montenero, and continue towards the lake until you reach marked parking spots on your left at 45.847101, 8.621260. Park here, and take the short rough track to the west that leads down to the beach/lake (45.846701, 8.619546). The reedbed is viewable from the track to the south, and Vinous-throated Parrotbills are here.

If one does choose Brabbia though, note that I found the birds easy to find without walking all the way to the observation tower. Indeed, half way was fine.

Wallcreeper

A fairly straightforward site. Wallcreeper winter most years at the Centrale Semenza dam, on the River Adda east of Robbiate. You can park at the dam, simply by coming off the SP54 that runs through the town at Via Alzaia Navigolo. Follow this down to the car park at 45.686187, 9.450705, and take the river path north to the dam.