Italy - Puglia: 8-13th March 2016

The trip was organised using the internet, booking flights, hotels and car hire prior to our departure. We flew out by Ryanair from London Stanstead to Bari. The aim was to see the long staying Grey-headed Gull at Bisceglie as well as some of the historic sites of southern Italy. Car hire was arranged through Economy Carrentals using Firefly. We got a good deal, but I was then conned into taking out an expensive insurance package that I did not want!

8th March. Arrived Bari airport 2020 collected our car and drove north up the main road to Bisceglie. Checked into Hotel Salsello.

9th March. Woke up early to hear a Mistle Thrush in full song just outside the window and noisy Italian Sparrows chirping away. A pre-breakfast stroll round the hotel revealed many Magpies, Jackdaws, Collared Doves, Blackbirds and a noisy Ring-necked Parakeet. In nearby gardens found Jay, Sardinian Warbler, Robin, Serin, Linnet, Greenfinch and Black Redstart. After breakfast headed down to the harbour to find that there were no gulls! Walked south round the harbour and eventually found an offshore wall of rock armour with lots of roosting birds – mainly Black-headed Gulls, with a few Yellow-legged Gulls, an adult Mediterranean Gull, lots of Sandwich Terns and a few Great Cormorants. On the water some Black-necked Grebes, a Great Crested Grebe and a couple of Shags. Along the shore a couple of Common Sandpipers and some White Wagtails. After a wait of three hours got brief flight views of the Grey-headed Gull as it flew from the rock armour out to sea!

Walked south along a coastal path to see if I could re-find the gull. In adjacent fields small flocks of Meadow Pipit, a few Crested Lark, Stonechat, small groups of Starling, Chaffinch and in the scrub Sardinian Warbler and Chiffchaff.

In late afternoon I returned to the harbour. Some large fishing boats had come in as well as good numbers of gulls, most of which were sitting on the outer harbour wall. Scanned through them and soon picked out the Grey-headed Gull. After a while it flew over into the harbour. I relocated it and by throwing out bread got it to within 20m thus obtaining superb close views of this stunning gull in full summer plumage. Headed back to hotel for some celebratory beers then a nice meal in the hotel restaurant.

10th March. Decided to head north along the coast. A brief stop in an agricultural area beyond Trani revealed Cetti’s Warbler and Zitting Cisticolas. Continued on to the salinas at Margherita di Savoia. To begin with these were birdless. Eventually found one pool with a few Greater Flamingo, lots of Common Shelduck and a few Common Redshank. The ditches were also empty bar a lone Moorhen. Hunting over some waste ground along the edge were a male Marsh Harrier chasing some Meadow Pipits and a ringtail Hen Harrier. We skirted round
Margherita heading along the coast road when it started to rain very heavily. Took the road across the salinas towards Trinitapoliu. Once again most of the lagoons were birdless, though there were a pair of Mallard on one and on some muddy ground towards the edge a small group of Skylark.

We stopped just north of Trinitapoliu at a picnic site for lunch. It was still raining and the ground very wet. A small pool held a pair of Little Grebe, whilst Barn Swallow and House Martin fed low over the water. The surrounding scrub held lots of Chiffchaff, with Black Redstart and small flocks of Meadow Pipit and Corn Bunting.

With the weather still poor we decided to give up birding and headed back towards Andria. We followed the signs for Castel del Monte and despite getting a bit lost in Andria eventually found the castle on its commanding hill top and had a good look round it. Surprisingly, not many birds bar a Common Buzzard, some Hooded Crows and a nice Woodlark. Returned to Bisceglie and checked out the harbour again. The fishing boats were all tied up and no sign of gulls.

13th March. Having spent two, non-birding days in the Naples-Pompei area doing the sites we returned to Puglia.

From Cerignola drove north towards Zapponetta. Large groups of Barn Swallows were perched on roadside wires. Took coastal road back south towards Margherita de Savoia. This went alongside and allowed access to the northern, more bird rich salinas. On the lagoons were large rafts of Common Coot, with small flocks of Eurasian Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Garganey, some Red-breasted Merganser and Pochard. Along the edges flushed 18 Pygmy Cormorant as well as some Great Cormorants, also a few Little Egret, Grey Heron, Great White Egret and a Kingfisher. A small roadside muddy lagoon held a Black-winged Stilt, a Spotted Redshank, a Common Snipe and a Common Sandpiper. A larger lagoon with muddy edges held 100+ waders, mainly Dunlin, Little Stint, with some Ringed Plover, a few Curlew and Little Ringed Plover. As we headed south east the lagoons held lots of Greater Flamingo, with Common Shelduck, large numbers (c250) Avocet, many Slender-billed Gulls, some in superb summer plumage, and Black-headed Gulls. There were also lots of paired up Yellow-legged Gulls standing by potential nesting sites. Other species included a few Spoonbill, Great-crested Grebes and a summer plumage Black-necked Grebe. Along the edges lots of Meadow Pipit, White Wagtails, Stonechat, Corn Bunting with hunting Common Kestrel, Marsh Harrier and another ringtail Hen Harrier.

Towards Margherita the lagoons began to get drier with fewer birds, mainly roosting Yellow-legged Gulls but with one fuscus Lesser Black-backed Gull and we had a Whimbrel fly over. The weather had now improved but it was time to head back to Bari to return the car and check in for the Ryanair flight back to Stanstead.

The trip was very successful with superb views of the number one target bird. We only saw 83 species, but had spent quite a bit of time in non-birding activities visiting sites of historic interest. The weather was a bit poorer than we had been anticipating!

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