

Wise Birding Holidays

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Trip Report

THE APENNINE'S OF CENTRAL ITALY:

Bears & Woodpeckers of Abruzzo NP

Saturday 19th – Wednesday 23rd May 2012



HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

Marsican Brown Bear: Three different sightings and exceptional views of two animals mating on our last morning in the National Park.

Apennine Chamois: Six animals seen very well.

White-backed (Lilford's) Woodpecker: A male seen very well on two days.

Collared Flycatcher: A number of singing males plus females, both seen well.



These two fantastic Marsican Brown Bears were watched for an hour on our last morning in Abruzzo.

See video here: <http://www.wisebirding.co.uk/wise-birding-holidays-bird-mammal-videos>

Saturday 19th May

We arrived into Rome's Fiumicino airport and before too long we were heading east towards the scenic Abruzzo National Park. The park was declared as a National Park in 1923 and protects an area of around 400 square kilometres of beautiful mountains, beech woodlands, river valleys and lush meadows. We arrived at the park border in calm sunny conditions and in good time to spend the last hour of the day scanning for bears from one of our viewpoints. **Western Bonelli's Warblers** and **Black Redstarts** were a pleasant distraction and a rather tantalising **Golden Eagle** appeared briefly only to glide just out of view behind the ridge. As we searched the valley below us a large group of around **30+ Wild Boar** including numerous stripey "humbug" youngsters were great to watch. The odd **Red Deer** showed well before the sun set and we decided to drive the short distance to our guest house in the beautiful town of Pescasseroli set in the valley of the River Sangro. Here we checked in and then headed out to town to sample some true Italian Pizzas!

Sunday 20th May

This morning we headed out early, arriving at the Church viewpoint at Gioia Vecchio. **Wild Boar** were, yet again very evident giving some excellent views as a group of 25+ animals slowly worked their way across the valley and the youngsters followed. Birds included **Cuckoo**, **Western Bonelli's Warbler** and **Black Redstart** but despite our best efforts and the continuing nice weather, we failed to find any bears, but as Chris reminded everyone – "it is all about perseverance!"

We returned to our guest house where everyone enjoyed some well earned coffee and a relaxing leisurely breakfast! Once revived, we then took a short walk through the historic town of Pescasseroli seeing our first **Italian Sparrows** and Chris bought some supplies for our lunch before taking a very short drive to the start of our woodland walk in the nearby Difesa Forest.

As we slowly ambled along the well worn trail we enjoyed views of a male **Cirl Bunting** and a singing male **Wood Warbler** before we continued on our winding path up through the attractive Beech woodlands. A species of **Longhorn Beetle** was a nice find, as was a singing male **Firecrest** but it was the male **Collared Flycatcher** that really stole the show. This fine singing male performed very well with an attentive female bird nearby. We took a coffee break in an open meadow before continuing into the woodland where we could soon hear our main target, the **White-backed Woodpecker**. We sat still on some nearby rocks and were rewarded with cracking views of a male bird busily feeding on an old tree stump. It was a real treat to see this bird so well and study the finer details of this race that is considered by some to be a separate species; **Lilford's Woodpecker**. A singing **Golden Oriole** in the adjacent section of woodland was a surprise, but unfortunately our view was too restricted to have any chance of finding it, so we ambled back to our vehicle. Other birds seen en route included **Marsh Tit**, **Mistle Thrush** and **Short-toed Treecreeper**.

There was a little time to relax in Pescasseroli before we ventured out once again for the last couple of hours of daylight scanning for bears.

We returned to the church at Gioia Vecchio and scanned the now familiar landscape and it wasn't long before Chris called "bear!" After some initial excitement and directions, we were soon all enjoying great scope views of a young female Marsican Bear. [The **Marsican Brown Bear** (*Ursus arctos marsicanus*), also known as the Apennine Brown Bear, is a highly threatened, unrecognized subspecies of the European

Brown Bear, with a range restricted almost entirely to the Abruzzo National Park. It is estimated that only around 40-50 bears exist in the park]

We spent 30 minutes watching this animal as it slowly plodded up the slope, disappearing behind vegetation every now and again, but we could clearly see the golden head marking as it eventually came right out into the open. The animal continued its route right out onto the very top of the ridge and stood on the topmost rock sniffing the early evening air – just fantastic! As the animal finally disappeared out of sight, there was still a good 40 minutes of good light remaining, but we decided to call it a day and head to town for a celebratory meal.

Monday 21st May

Some of the group decided to take advantage of a lie in following yesterday's bear views whereas others still ventured out early with Chris! It was another calm and clear morning and we decided to try a couple of different bear viewpoints but we were out of luck this morning. The birding was good though with some great views of **Red-backed Shrikes**, **Hoopoe**, **Woodlark** and **Yellowhammer** all within one of the meadows en route to Bisenga. We returned for a relaxing breakfast as usual and due to the now rather rainy conditions we thought the shelter of woodland would be the best option! Everyone was keen to return to our **White-backed Woodpecker** site.

Despite the rain, we were full of high spirits and enjoyed this very undisturbed forest. We reached our woodpecker spot and waited for the rain to abate. Whilst waiting, a **Bank Vole** amused us as it gave great views moving amongst the leaf litter and even allowing scope views! The rain finally abated and once again we were rewarded with excellent views of what was presumably the same male **White-backed Woodpecker** as it busily moved from dead tree stump to dead tree stump. An adult **Tawny Owl** was a great find as it sat on the edge of a broken tree trunk cavity trying to dry off in the, now warm afternoon sunshine. Once again we were treated to great views of **Collared Flycatchers** and displaying **Wood Warblers** before we returned to Pescasseroli for a coffee.

The early evening weather was really calm and overcast and therefore ideal for scanning for bears and wolves. We spent our time carefully scanning the woody edges and areas where Chris had previously seen **Wolf**, but we had to make do with more great views of **Red Deer** and **Wild Boar**. A showy **Western Bonelli's Warbler** and **Cuckoo** were the best of the birds and we left just before dusk to check another meadow. This particular meadow had a number of bear sightings in 2010 and although we drew a blank it is always worth a look! We then returned to Pescasseroli in good time to sample some more Italian cuisine & wine!

Tuesday 22nd May

This morning everyone had a lie in as we intended to visit a different area of the National Park and walk up into the higher peaks to look for some different species. We took a short drive past the picturesque village of Opi and on towards the impressive Camosciara mountain where we stopped briefly for photos before parking at another spot to start our walk. Birds along the river were **Grey Wagtail**, **Common Redstart** and a number of posing **Red-backed Shrikes** though the best bird of note was a **Wryneck** that perched up in a nearby bush before disappearing into cover. We then headed onto the main forest trail where bird activity was pretty quiet as we slowly plodded up the steep forest trail, stopping every now and again to take in the scenery. After about an hour or so, we finally broke through the tree line and were soon rewarded with a cracking male **Rock Bunting** that posed nicely in a small tree on a

rocky crag. A lone **Alpine Chough** circled directly above us before flying off into the low cloud that was still clinging to some nearby peaks and a **Water Pipit** showed briefly. However, it was the small group of **Apennine Chamois** that were the main attraction as we spent the next 30 minutes obtaining excellent scope views of a group of feeding animals. [The **Apennine Chamois or Abruzzo Chamois** (*Rupicapra pyrenaica ornata*) remains rare. Numbers plummeted to just several tens of individuals in a single population in the Abruzzo National Park during World War II. As a result of conservation action, including re-introductions and the establishment of two new populations, numbers have increased and the population is currently estimated at about 1,100 individuals. Like other Chamois, this species generally stays above 1,800 metres in alpine meadows during the warmer months of the year.]

After a coffee break and time to take in the wonderful 360 degree views we slowly retraced our steps and enjoyed the less exhausting downhill journey! Once back at our vehicle, we had plenty of time for a break before heading back out to look for mammals. Unfortunately, the weather was not on our side with reduced visibility and rain showers, but we persevered all the same because if one thing is for certain, bears and wolves are unpredictable! A **Roe Deer** was a new mammal for the trip list, along with the expected **Wild Boar** and **Red Deer**. We finally gave in at dusk and returned to our guest house to dry off and enjoy an evening meal in Pescasseroli.

Wednesday 23rd May

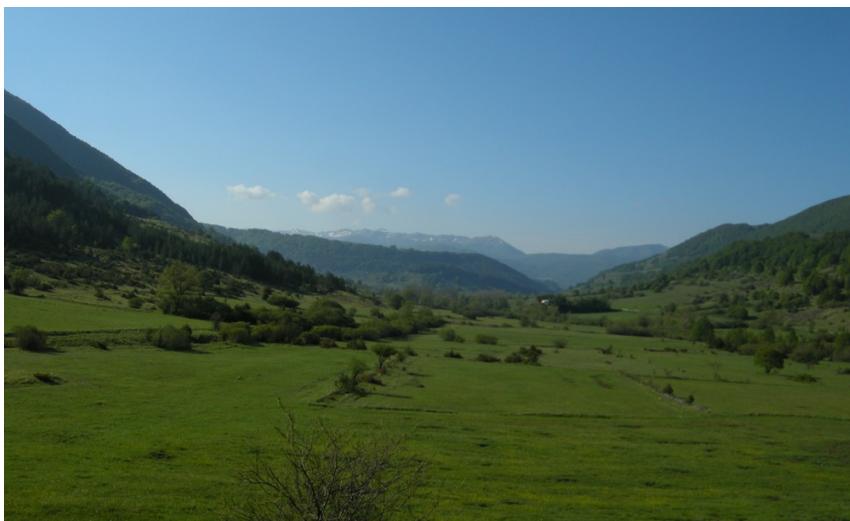
Today was our last morning and our final chance for another bear sighting, so everyone was up early and full of enthusiasm, realising just how fortunate we had been with our first sighting. However, little did we know that things were to get so much better! We spent the first hour of daylight at the Gioia Vecchio viewpoint and within a couple of minutes of arriving, we were soon watching another **Marsican Bear!** The animal was in a similar area to our first sighting and was slowly working its way along a path through some bushes. However, just as all our scopes were focussed on the spot, the mist from the valley below decided to rise up at just the wrong moment and within minutes we could see nothing but mist! It was clearly going to be a nice morning, but unfortunately for us it was a case of whether the mist would dissipate quickly enough! After a while we still had very limited visibility so we headed down to a lower elevation to check some other meadows. Here we heard a calling **Wryneck** and singing **Woodlark** and a distant large **Wild Boar** hiding behind a bush got the pulses racing for a moment as it looked very bear-like!

There was little else of note, so we headed back to the church where the cloud had lifted a little and we stuck it out for a little longer, but despite searching the area thoroughly, it seemed as if our bear had moved on. We took in the last views and slowly drove back towards Pescasseroli carefully checking the nearby meadows en route. Whilst passing one of the meadow systems, Helen spotted a distant blob that didn't look quite right. A quick scan from the roadside soon revealed not one, but two **Marsican Bears** that were busy mating! We were soon out of the vehicle and having great scope views of the two amorous individuals! The male bear was huge and very dark in comparison to the female with hulking shoulders and a huge head and paler muzzle. It soon became apparent that these two animals were not going anywhere fast, so we drove to another spot where we were nearer. Here, we spent the next hour watching these two magnificent animals as they casually plodded across the meadows with the female digging at the ground for potential food items with the male following. The female at times ran short stretches in a bounding gait and they then finally retired to the peace of the forests where they duly collapsed on each other, clearly exhausted

by the morning's events! It was a fantastic end to the tour and clearly shows that patience and perserverance are essential to successful mammal watching!
We enjoyed our final breakfast at our guest house before loading the vehicle and having a little time to look around the older part of Pescasseroli before taking an alternative route through the scenic national park back to Rome.

Conservation Donation – Following the successful conclusion of this tour, a donation from Wise Birding Holidays is being made to the **Life Arctos Project:** <http://www.life-arctos.it/english/home.html>

This is an EU-funded project aiming to find the best ways to assure a co-existence between bears and human activities. This is a joint effort of several institutions and organizations, including WWF Italy. The project focuses on working with local shepherds and looking at livestock husbandry to try and resolve any negative views towards bears. The project invests some money for protecting livestock from possible bear attacks, through donating electric fences to shepherds. The project also investigates any potential risks from the transmission of livestock diseases to bears and other wild fauna. The project works together with researchers to get reliable estimates of the bear populations through non invasive methods, such as the genetic analysis of hair. A lot of time is also invested in raising public awareness on the importance of this special animal.



Sangro Valley, Pescasseroli



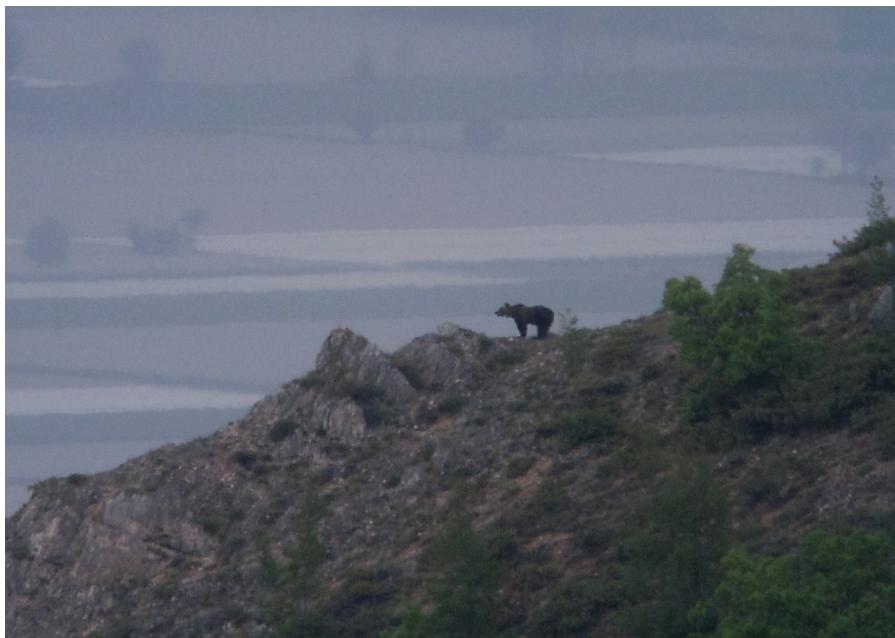
Historic Pescasseroli near our guest house



Tawny Owl, Difesa Forest



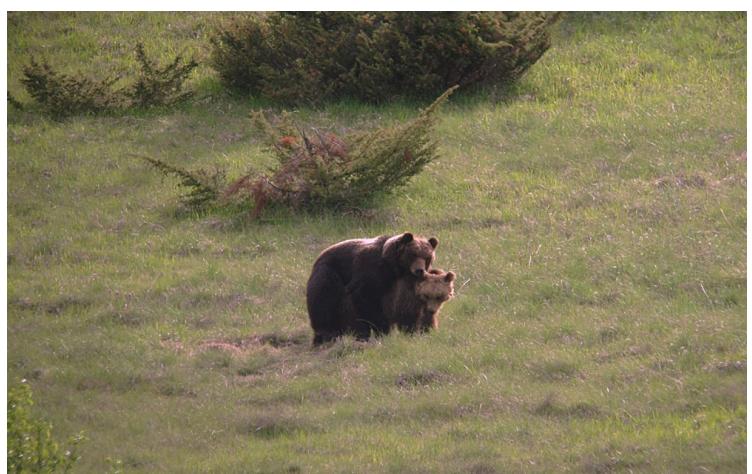
Apennine Chamois, Monte Amaro



First bear sighting, Gioia Vecchio



Longhorn Beetle



Third bear sighting, near Pescasseroli



**White-backed (Lilford's) Woodpecker,
Difesa Forest**



Wild Boar, Gioia Vecchio



Village of Opi

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BIRD LIST for Bears & Woodpeckers of Abruzzo NP, 19-23 May 2012

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Seen on 1 day
2	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Seen on 4 days
3	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Single adult briefly on 1 day
4	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Seen on 2 days
5	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Seen daily
6	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Seen daily
7	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Seen daily
8	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	Seen/Heard daily
9	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	Single bird in Difesa Forest
10	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	Seen daily
11	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Seen on 2 days
12	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	Seen/Heard on 3 days
13	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	Heard only
14	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Seen feeding young
15	White-backed (Lilford's) Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>	Male seen on 2 days
16	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	Seen daily
17	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Seen on 2 days
18	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Seen daily
19	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>	Single bird seen Mt Amaro
20	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	Seen on 2 days
21	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>	Seen daily
22	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Seen on 1 day
23	Marsh Tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>	Seen on 2 days
24	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	Seen daily
25	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Seen daily
26	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	Seen daily
27	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	Seen/Heard on 2 days
28	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Seen daily
29	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	Seen daily
30	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	Seen on 2 days
31	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Seen/Heard daily
32	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>	Seen/Heard daily
33	Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>	Seen/Heard daily
34	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	Seen/Heard daily
35	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	Seen on 2 days
36	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Seen/Heard on 3 days
37	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	Seen on 2 days
38	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	Seen on 2 days
39	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Seen daily
40	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Seen daily

BIRD LIST continued

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	Notes
41	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	Seen/Heard on 2 days
42	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	Seen on 4 days
43	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Seen/Heard most days
44	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	Seen daily
45	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	Seen on 3 days
46	Collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>	Seen/Heard on 3 days
47	Italian Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus italiae</i>	Seen daily
48	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	Seen on 1 day
49	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Seen most days
50	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	Seen at Monte Amaro
51	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Seen daily
52	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	Seen daily
53	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Seen daily
54	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Seen daily
55	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	Seen on 3 days
56	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	Seen on 1 day
57	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	Seen/Heard daily
58	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Seen on 2 days
59	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	Single bird seen Mt Amaro
60	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	Seen on 2 days

MAMMAL LIST

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Daily sightings
2	Marsican Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos marsicanus</i>	At least 3 different animals
3	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Up to 30+ including young
4	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Daily sightings
5	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	A single animal
6	Apennine or Abruzzo Chamois	<i>Rupicapra pyrenaica ornata</i>	A total of 6 animals
7	Weasel	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>	Dead on road
8	Bank Vole	<i>Myodes glareolus</i>	A single animal

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