

Albania in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 20th April 2022



Tour report by Andy Smith



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Participants: Andy Smith and Mirjan Topi (Leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

Another successful and enjoyable tour to Albania. It was great to be back after a three year break. Starting on the coast we enjoyed some lovely sunny weather and a rich range of birds and other wildlife including Greater Flamingos, Purple Herons, Slender-billed Gulls, Short-toed Eagles, Montagu's Harriers and mighty Dalmatian Pelicans. Red-rumped Swallows were all over the place and other goodies included Hoopoes, Little Owls, Black-headed Wagtails, Tawny Pipits and fields full of singing Short-toed and Calandra Larks.

Up in the mountains by contrast, the weather closed in around us and it even snowed. Nevertheless, Black Redstarts, Rock Buntings, Serins and Water Pipits were ever present around the hamlet we stayed in and further afield, amidst consistently spectacular scenery, we encountered Golden Eagles, a Goshawk, Nutcrackers, Black Woodpeckers, Ring Ouzels, a surprise Semi-collared Flycatcher (the first recorded in the region) and a number of Chamois.

Day 1

Wednesday 13th April

We arrived at Tirana airport on time in the early afternoon and after meeting up with Mirjan and our driver Zamir we headed off to the coast for a bite of lunch and a first bit of birding. The area we explored, at a place called Lalzi Bay included a shallow lagoon, and extensive sandflats and low scrub. In a short space of time we encountered Gull-billed and Caspian Terns, Spoonbills, Little and Great Egrets, Zitting Cisticolas, Black-headed Yellow Wagtails and a nice range of waders including Kentish Plover, Ruff, Little Stint and Wood Sandpipers.

After this excellent start we set off towards Berat, a journey that gave us a good introduction to lowland Albanian countryside and brought a few notable roadside birds including Red-rumped Swallows, Corn Buntings, Crested Larks and a rooftop Little Owl. We arrived at our comfortable hotel in Berat in good time to settle in before our first delicious Albanian dinner.

Day 2

Thursday 14th April

After breakfast we set off towards the coast again, to the famous Karavasta National Park, a mosaic of lagoons, saltmarsh, dunes and pine forest which is one of Albania's most important bird areas and hosts an significant breeding colony of the endangered Dalmatian Pelican.

Our first stop was overlooking an extensive area of marshy fields, pools and Tamarisk scrub near the park entrance. Here we found a flock of over 75 Glossy Ibis, a Stone Curlew, a Marsh Harrier, good numbers of Ruff and Wood Sandpipers and a satisfying range of passerine migrants including a female Collared Flycatcher, a Whinchat, three Lesser Whitethroats, a female Black-eared Wheatear and a smart male Subalpine Warbler. Meanwhile, our first Dalmatian Pelicans soared majestically overhead, a pair of Crested Larks posed beautifully at the roadside, Albanian Pool Frogs croaked from the ditches and a Common Swallowtail zipped past – it was a lot to take in!

From here we drove on past the park headquarters and out along the coastal dunes, flushed a couple of Hoopoes en-route, and stopped by a track that led back to the main lagoon and a small jetty where, with some of the national park rangers, we boarded a couple of skiffs. A gentle cruise along the saltmarsh creeks followed, with some lovely views of Little Egrets and Black-winged Stilts, until we reached a wooden viewing tower from where we could look out at the distant Dalmatian Pelican breeding colony. Somewhat reduced in number this year due to an outbreak of avian flu which has decimated their numbers, we were still able to see a couple of dozen of them out on their nests on the low-lying island and appreciate their huge size compared to the much smaller Great Cormorants roosting nearby. Large numbers of Greater Flamingos out on the lagoon and a background soundscape of Nightingale, Blackcap and Golden Oriole nicely completed the experience here.

Next we drove around to the southern side of the park for a beachside restaurant lunch and then took a walk out onto an extensive area of Salicornia flats and scrub. We hoped for Collared Pratincoles which nest in this area had unfortunately not yet arrived for the season but we made up for this with views of a pair of Short-toed Eagles, a smart Cuckoo, a surprise Purple Heron and a stunning male Montagu's Harrier which did a number of close fly-pasts as he hunted his way across the landscape. Satisfied, we returned to the bus and made our way back to Berat.

Day 3

Friday 15th April

Today we visited another major coastal wetland at Narte. A pair of White Storks on their lamp-post nest at a petrol station stop in Fier, along with their tenant Spanish Sparrows, were a nice diversion, and another rooftop Little Owl added extra excitement before we arrived at our destination. Our first stop was in an expanse of wide open fields bisected by ditches and broken up with areas of Salicornia, bare ground and Tamarisk scrub. It proved to be a rich area and in our time there we saw Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, two Short-toed Eagles, a Hobby, five Dalmatian Pelicans (roosting on an embankment), several Black-headed Wagtails, a couple of Tawny Pipits, both Black-eared and Northern Wheatears and some Alpine Swifts. A smart Common Tree Frog snoozing on a Typha stem added further quality but the overall highlights were the Larks. We were all bowled over by the Larks. The air was full of the skirling sound of singing Calandra and Greater Short-toed and we had lots of opportunity to watch both species, the big and the small, in the air and on the ground – very nice.

We ate our picnic lunch a little further on in the shade of some pines, noted some European Pond Terrapins and a very smart Squacco Heron by a trackside pool and then proceeded along a causeway that divided an extensive area of salt pans from the main Narte Lagoon. In fine sunshine we saw a couple more Dalmatian Pelicans, hundreds of Greater Flamingos, several smart Slender-billed Gulls, some Avocets and Black-winged Stilts and good numbers of mostly rather distant waders. Best amongst these were over 50 Spotted Redshanks (many in good dusky breeding plumage) and a neat Marsh Sandpiper.

We arrived back in Berat in the late afternoon and after a short break at the hotel we finished the day with a walk around the citadel with its fine Ottoman architecture and splendid views of the surrounding valleys and hills.

Day 4

Saturday 16th April

With breakfast completed we took our leave of Berat and began the journey to the mountains and the north. After 40 minutes or so we made a brief stop by Thane Lake near the town of Lushnje where we saw a Dalmatian

Pelican, several Great Crested Grebes, a Marsh Harrier, a Hoopoe, some close Crested Larks, over 20 migrant Tree Pipits, five Whinchats and a handful of Tree Sparrows. From here we headed on past the port of Durrës, skirted to the north-west of Tirana and connected with the newish A1 highway that bisects the country. Soon we left the densely populated coastal plain behind and zoomed north-east through miles of uninhabited scrubby hills. We crossed the Kosovo border in the early afternoon and ate lunch in a restaurant in historic mosque-filled Prizren with Dippers and Grey Wagtails on the river below and a Crag Martin or two hawking overhead.

Post lunch we drove on through the pleasant, rolling, agricultural landscape of this part of Kosovo and then, hitting the hills again, crossed back into Albania. A late afternoon stop in some thyme scented meadows near Birjam Curri proved productive; a short stroll turned up a lovely stand of Green-winged Orchids, a couple of Grey Partridge, a Hobby, a Hoopoe, a Common Whitethroat and another Whinchat. Soon after this we were winding our way up into the beautiful Valbone valley and a little later we arrived at our idyllically sited guesthouse in good time to settle in before dinner.

Day 5

Sunday 17th April

We woke to a cold day with intermittent light rain and snow showers. A pre-breakfast stroll for the hardy few in decidedly nippy conditions turned up excellent views of singing Serins and Black Redstarts, a Common Redstart, a few Water Pipits, a Marsh Tit and several smart Rock Buntings. All these were eclipsed however by the sight of a mighty Golden Eagle passing high over the valley in a fixed, crook-winged glide. What a start to the day!

After breakfast we headed off in a team of 4x4's up to the high-level transhumance settlement of Stan I Idriss, where we set off exploring through the meadows, plum orchards, woodland and scrub. Through light snow showers and shifting cloud that allowed us some good views of the spectacular scenery all around us, we had an enjoyable morning's walk. Bird highlights included over a dozen Ring Ouzels out on the meadows, several Black Redstarts, a flock of 50 Crossbills, some Mistle Thrushes, a brief male Collared Flycatcher, a few Northern Wheatears, two Yellowhammers and ten or more smart Rock Buntings.

We ate lunch at the Stan itself where we were served a tasty traditional meal washed down with home-made plum Raki, then set off back down the track through ancient beech forests and plum orchards towards the valley far below. It was quiet for birds overall, save for the ubiquitous Jays, but a lovely walk nonetheless, and we did see another Golden Eagle, this time a sub-adult bird with white wing and tail flashes. We re-joined the vehicles at the bottom of the track and were soon back at the guesthouse reflecting on a very enjoyable day.

Day 6

Monday 18th April

Another pre-breakfast walk this morning produced repeated good views of the local Serins, Black Redstarts, Water Pipits and Rock Buntings plus two Coal Tits, a flyover Black Woodpecker (which perched up in the top of a distant pine), and a pair of Marsh Tits nest-building in the hollow top of a concrete electricity pole.

Post-breakfast we drove a little way down the Valbone valley to the hamlet of Motina and then spent most of the day walking up into the dramatically beautiful valley above the village, firstly along the tumbling stream, then up through some superb old-growth Beech forest. Birds seen included a Hawfinch perched out in full view in a fruit tree in the village, very close Crag Martins over the stream, a pair of White-backed Woodpeckers in the beech

forest plus Dippers and White Wagtails, Marsh and Coal Tits, a few Treecreepers, a couple of Ravens and a Sparrowhawk. We ate our lunch on some lovely grassy terraces surrounded by my majestic snow-capped peaks with Black Woodpeckers calling and flying around in the distance. In the mid-afternoon we got back down to the hamlet where a brief look along the river turned up a superb male Semi-Collared Flycatcher keeping loose company with two or three Pied Flycatchers. All were migrants and the Semi-Collared showed beautifully as it hawked around the rocks and shrubs at the water's edge. It was apparently the first recorded in Valbone!

Back at the guest house we rounded things off well with a couple of Sparrowhawks low overhead and a fine Nutcracker which, characteristically, perched up on the top of a pine in full view.

Day 7

Tuesday 19th April

Assembling by the vehicles after breakfast, departure was delayed first by the local male Black Woodpecker perched in his customary pine, then by two Chamois high upon a distant crag and finally by the appearance of a Nutcracker (presumably yesterday's bird?) perched in a nearby pine again and allowing everyone some excellent views.

Finally we got away and headed up to the Kukaj Valley where we walked through pine and beech forest to a point where the group split according to how energetic they felt. Some went up to the high meadows whilst others opted to take a more level route lower down. In the end all enjoyed a good walk in fine sunshine and fantastic scenery and between us we encountered a satisfying range of birds including a Goshawk, White-backed and Black Woodpeckers, Crested Tits and Alpine Accentors. The warmth of the day, in such contrast to the previous two days also brought out a few Wall Lizards, our first reptiles for a few days.

Back at the guesthouse in the late afternoon the day's action concluded with more views of the Black Woodpecker, another Chamois, this time a close male, and a huge flock of Alpine Choughs wheeling around over the high snow-clad peaks across the valley.

Day 8

Wednesday 20th April

We awoke to heavy snow showers which changed to rain lower down as we drove towards Fierze and the Lake Koman ferry. Indeed the rain was so heavy and persistent that we were forced to sit it out in the small café at the ferry terminal. Finally, we got away on time at 1pm. The rain was easing off and as we passed under towering cliffs and past steep forested slopes we noted a few birds including Grey Herons and Goosanders, a few Cormorants, a Common Buzzard and a couple of Ravens. Towards the end of the journey, a little short of Koman, we had an exciting rush of migrant raptors with at least three Marsh and seven Montagu's Harriers passing over us and then a very close Osprey which took us all by surprise. Pulling into Koman ferry terminal we noted 15 or so Alpine Swifts and number of Crag Martins overhead and then it was a quick transfer into Zamir's waiting bus and away down the valley towards the lowlands.

As we descended the weather improved considerably and in sunshine the journey across the agricultural land of the coastal strip between Skhoder and Lezhe produced at least three Marsh and another Montagu's Harrier plus lots of hirundines of all four lowland species. A comfort stop at a petrol station provided the last birding of the

trip with some Tree Sparrows, a singing Corn Bunting, a field full of Cattle Egrets, yet another superb male Montagu's Harrier and a surprise Collared Flycatcher.

From here it was just an hour or so to the airport where we said our goodbyes and thank yous to Mirjan and Zamir. The check-in was quick and efficient, our BA flight was on time and we all arrived safely back at Heathrow a few hours later.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	April 2022							
		13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			2					
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		4	1					
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>								10
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>				2				
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		4						
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				10				
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		250	400					
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			2	2				
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		150						7
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	6		2					
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>			1					
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	2		1			1	10
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		1						
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	2							
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	8	25	35	2				
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	1	3						25
Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>		20	6	1				
Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>		200+	50					
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1	1	4	5				5
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>								1
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		2	3					
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	3	4	1				7
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		1	2					9
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	2			3		
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>							1	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	3	5	2	2	2	1	2
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					3			
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	2	3						1
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		1+1h						
Eurasian Stone-Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>		1+1h						
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	4		4					
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		5	10					
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			100					
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	1							
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	10							
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	10							
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>			50					
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	5							
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	4	1	10					
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>			1					
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	50	30	30					
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			1					
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		3		1				1
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	3							
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	1							
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	10		6					
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	5	50	100					

		April 2022							
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	5							
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>								1
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	100	15	10	3				10
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>			20					
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			1					
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	30							
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	6							
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	6							
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>			1					
Rock Dove (feral)	<i>Columba livia</i>				30		20	2	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		1		6	40	6	4	
European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		3	2					
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	15	30	25	30				10
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		1	1					
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1	5	4	2				
Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>		1h	3h					
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>					2h			
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>			12					15
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>			3					
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		3	1	3				
Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>					1+1h	3	2	
White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>						2	1	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					2			
Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>				1h				
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>						1h		
Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>					2h	1h		
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	2	5	1	1			1
Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>			1	1				
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		2	1					
Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		1+1h						
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				1	15	30	25	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	5	25	25	15	1			
Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>					1	1	1	
Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>					50		300	
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			9	25		4		
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>				25				
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	10	15	30	40+	1	2	3	10
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	2	4	5	2	2		5
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					8	8	5	
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>					5	10	20	
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>							2	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		2	3	1	8	10	2	1
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>					2	2	4	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	4	20	20	15				2
Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		3	30					
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		10	30					
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	2	10						10+
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	25	50	30	50	2			50+
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				1		6	9	200+
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	5	5	100+	20		5		20+

		April 2022							
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	3	20	40	25		2		5+
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	h	h			h	1	5	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	2	5	1h					
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		4h		2h				
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		1h						
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>					1+3h	1h	1h	
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		2						
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		20	1	3	3	5		
Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Curruca curruca</i>		3	2					
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>		1		1		1		
Subalpine Warbler	<i>Curruca cantillans</i>		1		1				1
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		1						
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					1h	1h		
Collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>		1			1			1
Semicollared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula semitorquata</i>						1		
Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		3	1			5		
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					2h	1+3h	1+3h	
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>						2+1h		
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>						1h		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	15		3	20				3
Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>					15			1
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1h		3	5	5	5	2
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				1h	2	3	5	3
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>					20	15	15	6
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>					3	2	4	2
Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		3h		1h				
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>					25	30	8	10
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>					1	1	1	1
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		2	2	6	1	1		2
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	1	1	1	2				
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1	3		3	1		
Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>		1	3					1
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				1		2	1	1
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	15	30	25	20				5+
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			10+	1				
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				1				2
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>					3			
Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>							12	
Black-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava feldegg</i>	5	100+	100+					
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	1	3		2		
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			2	3	1	4	2	2
Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>			2					
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		2	12	15			1	
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>				1	5	10	12	5
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		1	1				2	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		1	10		20	20	15	6
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>					5	8	4	5
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		3	1	3				
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	6	15	10	5				
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>					2		2	

Common name	Scientific name	April 2022							
		13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>						3		
Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>					50		2	
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	6	12	15	15				1
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>					2	1		
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>					20	20	10	8
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				1h				1

Others

Mammals: Alpine Chamois

Reptiles: European Pond Terrapin, Balkan Terrapin & Common Wall Lizard.

Amphibians: Common Tree Frog & Albanian Pool Frog.

Butterflies: Swallowtail, Large White, Small White, Eastern Bath White, Orange Tip, Clouded Yellow, Brimstone, Holly Blue, Brown Argus, Common Blue, Red Admiral, Speckled Wood, Wall Brown and Small Heath.

Other notable insects: Hummingbird Hawkmoth and Violet Carpenter Bee.