

Albania in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th – 19th April 2023



Green-winged Orchids



Valbone National Park



Komani Lake



Valbone National Park

Tour report and images by Andy Smith



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Day 1

Wednesday 12th April

Sunny with scattered cloud, warm, breezy.

We arrived on schedule at Tirana in the early afternoon and after clearing the airport and meeting up with our local guide Mirjan and our driver Zamir we headed off to a nearby restaurant for a spot of lunch. From here we drove southwards to Berat, initially through the suburbs and satellites of Tirana and then eventually through some pleasant countryside. A few birds from the bus included a Common Buzzard and a couple of Common Kestrels, a few Corn Buntings and lots of Barn and Red-rumped Swallows.

Reaching Berat in good time we settled into our comfortable hotel then proceeded up to the town's remarkable and celebrated Ottoman citadel where we enjoyed a tour with a local guide who told us all about the history of the place. The views over the city, old and new, and the surrounding countryside were superb, and avian distractions came in the form of a passing Hobby, a couple of Alpine Swifts and a very smart male Eastern Black-eared Wheatear. It all added up to a very satisfactory introduction to Albania and we concluded the day in a restaurant eating a selection of delicious local dishes.

Day 2

Thursday 13th April

Sunny and warm with a gentle breeze.

A beautiful morning in Berat. After breakfast we drove across to the Karavasta National Park on the coast. A first short stop by some marshy fields near the park entrance proved productive. In a short space of time, we saw dozens of Glossy Ibis, some Pygmy Cormorants, a Marsh Harrier, several Cattle Egrets, a smart male Whinchat, a singing Cetti's Warbler and a few Crested Larks. From here we drove into the park and out to an access point on the lagoon where we met up with a couple of the park's rangers and boarded two small aluminium skiffs. It was glorious out on the water and the rangers took us as close as we were allowed to the island where the park's Dalmatian Pelicans nest. What a treat! We could see about 40 of these mighty birds at their nests on the small low-lying island. As we sat there watching, birds came and went, huge and graceful, gliding only inches above the surface of the water, fantastic!

Also seen whilst we were out on the lagoon were Yellow-legged Gulls and Slender-billed Gulls, a couple of Common Shelduck, a few Little Egrets and a fly-over flock of Wood Sandpipers, whilst in the scrub where we joined the boats we added singing Zitting Cisticolas, a Hoopoe and a few butterflies including Mallow Skipper, Wood White and Swallowtail.

We ate lunch at a restaurant near the park entrance then transferred a few miles to the hills to the north, above the village of Luz. In this pleasant rolling landscape of grassland, small crop fields, vineyards, olive groves and scrub we found an interesting range of things. There were Oil Beetles and Egyptian Grasshoppers, Green Tiger Beetles, Butterflies such as Camberwell Beauty, Brown Argus and Green-underside Blue, and birds including a pair of courting Woodchat Shrikes and a party of migrant Lesser Kestrels. It was all very nice. From here we drove back to Berat and concluded a very enjoyable day.

Day 3

Friday 14th April

Rain at first, clearing by mid-morning. Sunny and warm thereafter with scattered cloud and a fresh breeze.

We headed back to the coast again today, this time to Narte. We broke the journey at a service station in the town of Fier where we were able to enjoy a welcome cup of coffee whilst watching a pair of White Storks on their nest which itself was a tenement for a number of pairs of smart Spanish Sparrows. On the approach to Narte we crossed an area of open flat fields close to the coast where there seemed to be some on-going passage of Harriers. In a few minutes we noted a Marsh, a couple of Montagu's and a fine male Pallid – pretty good.

Once at Narte proper we had an excellent morning exploring an extensive area of large, flat, ditch bordered arable fields with patches of scrub. First off, we put up two Squacco Herons along one of the ditches and found a pair of Little Owls around a small farm, then we bumped into a sensational Great Spotted Cuckoo preening at the side of the track, a real bonus bird! Crested Larks and Corn Buntings seemed to be everywhere, and Montagu's and Marsh Harriers were out hunting over the fields. A Short-toed Eagle put on a fantastic demonstration of its hovering skills and a Stone Curlew flushed from nearby then typically disappeared behind a low ridge. Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks entertained us with their song-flights, a flock of 30 or so Bee-eaters passed over, heading north, and a pair of subtle Tawny Pipits foraged unobtrusively along the track – all in all, a great couple of hours!

We ate lunch under some pines at the edge of the lagoon where a Hoopoe showed very nicely, then drove slowly along the lengthy causeway that separates Narte Lagoon from an extensive area of salt pans. Stopping regularly to check the birds we saw a rich variety of species in a short space of time including Dalmatian Pelicans, Greater Flamingos, Eurasian Spoonbills and Slender-billed Gulls, plus a range of waders headlined by hundreds of Ruff and Avocets, several Black-winged Stilts and dozens of Curlew Sandpipers, Kentish Plovers and Little Stints. Another satisfying day!

Day 4

Saturday 15th April

Sunny with scattered cloud and a gentle breeze. Warm low down in the morning, cooler at altitude in the afternoon.

We left Berat after breakfast and began the long journey to Valbone. Our first stop, after an hour or so was at Thane Reservoir. Watching from the raised embankment shore we saw a couple of distant Dalmatian Pelicans, Little and Great Crested Grebes, a few Pygmy Cormorants and, most notably, three Whiskered Terns hawking backwards and forwards across the water surface. The air around us was full of Barn Swallows and Sand Martins and in the scrub, we found a singing Common Whitethroat and a smart male Sardinian Warbler. It was all very pleasant and concluded, as we drove away, with a flock of 20 Black-crowned Night Herons flying along the nearby river course.

We drove north around Tirana and past the port of Durrës, noting a male Montagu's Harrier and a few Common Swifts en-route, then headed north-east through apparently uninhabited forested hills. We passed the town of Kukes, reached the Kosovo border a little after 1pm and then dropped down into the city of Prizren. Here we enjoyed the sights and bustle of the attractive city centre and ate a tasty restaurant lunch. The river running through

the centre of town produced a pair of Dippers and some Grey Wagtails feeding young in the nest, whilst a Eurasian Sparrowhawk flashed through the trees around the castle ramparts above.

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 near Birjam Curri in some thyme scented meadows with patches of scrub and trees proved very productive. In a sensational 45 minutes we saw a pair of Woodchat Shrikes, a Hoopoe, a singing Cirl Bunting, two Wrynecks and a pair of Grey Partridge, and heard Nightingale and Woodlark. Soon after this we were winding our way up into the beautiful Valbone valley and a little later we arrived at our guesthouse in good time to settle in before dinner.

Day 5

Sunday 16th April

Overcast with sunny breaks and occasional rain showers, still and cool.

A pre-breakfast gathering outside the guest house taking in the breath-taking scenery all around us also produced sightings of singing Serins and Black Redstarts plus, at huge distance, a flock of over 300 Alpine Choughs wheeling in and out of the clouds around the crags high above – a very atmospheric sight!

Post breakfast we headed off in a couple of local vehicles to the high-level transhumance settlement of Stan I Idriss, where we set off exploring through the meadows, plum orchards, woodland and scrub. The constantly shifting cloud base allowed us some good views of the spectacular scenery all around us and we had an enjoyable walk. It turned out to be a bit of a woodpecker morning, with great views for all of at least three Black Woodpeckers, a pair of Grey-headed, a super male Lesser-Spotted and a surprise Wryneck. Other notables included Black Redstarts, Mistle Thrushes, Coal and Marsh Tits, white-headed Long-tailed Tits, a Northern Wheatear, some brief Rock Buntings and a couple of Sparrowhawks.

We ate lunch at the Stan itself where we were served a tasty traditional meal washed down with home-made plum Raki and Turkish coffee, 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, some Nuthatches and other common woodland species, but we had a great encounter with a Red Squirrel and it was a lovely walk. 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 17th April

Rain until midday then becoming sunny with scattered cloud. Cool overall with a gentle breeze.

With the weather decidedly against us this morning we delayed departure until midday when we set off on the short drive down to the settlement of Motina. From here we walked along the tumbling river and up through magnificent old growth Beech Forest to some ancient abandoned agricultural terraces. Here, in the welcome sunshine, we were able to enjoy glorious views of the snow-capped mountains all around us. Birds seen along the river included Common and Black Redstarts, Grey Wagtails, Water Pipits and a pair of handsome Rock Buntings. In the forest seeing things proved more difficult but by the end of the afternoon we'd collectively noted Black

Woodpecker, Marsh Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Bullfinch, Wood Warbler and an unexpected Semi-collared Flycatcher.

Back at the guest house we finished the day with some good telescope views of several Chamois up on the crags across the valley plus a number of Red-rumped Swallow cruising around low overhead making the most of the sunshine.

Day 7

Tuesday 18th April

Overcast to mid-am then sunny with scattered cloud through to mid-pm; light showers thereafter turning to persistent rain in the evening. Cool.

After breakfast we drove to the Kukaj valley and walked up through the pine woods and beech forest to the treeline and the snow. The snow cover was lower than I've ever seen it in several April visits. As the clouds lifted and broke up we were able to enjoy the spectacular scenery laid out around us; the snow peaks looked absolutely stunning in the afternoon sunshine! Notable wildlife sightings included another Red Squirrel, some columns of Pine Processionary moths, several Common Wall Lizards, a few Rock Buntings and Crested Tits and, up amongst the snow patches, a flock of Alpine Accentors and a pair of Rock Partridges.

We broke the drive back to the guesthouse at the end of the afternoon by the river in Valbone settlement and enjoyed good views of Grey and White Wagtails, a Dipper, a Northern Wheatear and several wonderfully aerobatic Crag Martins. A satisfying end to a day in the mountains!

Day 8

Wednesday 19th April

We left Valbone before dawn and by 6am we were at the modest ferry terminal near the town of Fierze at the northern end of Komani Lake. Nightingales sang in the half light and it was fiercely cold. The ferry left on time and we chugged down the lake under towering cliffs and past steep forested slopes, here and there putting into the shore to drop off or pick up passengers, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The scenery was consistently outstanding and wildlife interest along the way included a number of Goosanders, a couple of Grey Herons, over 75 Mediterranean Gulls (in three separate flocks) and as we neared Komani quayside, some Crag Martins and a dozen or more Alpine Swifts cruising around over their nesting cave in the cliff face.

We connected swiftly with our waiting bus and then headed down through the hills to Shkodra and on along the coastal plain towards Tirana and the airport. Our lunchtime flight schedule gave us little time to spare but it was a pleasant drive nonetheless and we ultimately arrived at the airport in good time. The check-in went smoothly, the 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 2023							
		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		2	25					
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		1		3				1
Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>			2					
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>								8
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>				2				
Rock Partridge	<i>Alectoris graeca</i>							2	
Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>		5	2h					
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				2				
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				10				
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		100's	100's					
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			2	2				
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		50	20					
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			25					
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>			2					
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			6					2
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			1					
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2	8	20					2
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		35	50	20				
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				20				
Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>		50	6	2				
Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>		50		1				
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				5				3
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>			1					
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		3	4					
Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>			1					
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>			5	1				
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				1	3			
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>				1				

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023							
		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	5		3	5	2	2	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		3	1					2
Eurasian Stone-Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>			3					
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			4					
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			30					
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			100's					
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		4	2					
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			12					
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		1h						
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			50					
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>			3					
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>		8	3					
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1	4					
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>			250					
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>			100					
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>			25					
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			5					
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		1						
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>								100
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	2	20	10	3				5
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>		3	100					
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>			1					
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>				3				
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	10		5	50		12	4	5
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				3	2			
European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			2					
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	8	10	10	10				6
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>					1h	1h	2h	
Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>			1					
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			4	1h				
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				1h			1h	
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	1	1		2				15
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>				2				
European Bee-Eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>			30					
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1	21	1	1	1		
Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>					3+1h	1	2h	
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>					2		1h	
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>						1h		
Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>					2	1h	2h	
Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>				2	1			
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	5	2	5	1			
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		5						
Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	1							
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		3		2				
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					10	5	10	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	5	10	15	10				2
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	10	5		50				
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>				15				
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	2	15	15	15	2	3	8	8
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>					2	1h	1h	

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023							
		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>					300			
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					4	5	6	
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>					4	2	12	
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>							4	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	h	4	h	2	5	10	12	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>					5	6	8	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	3	10	20	4				1
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				1h	1h			
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				1h				
Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>			20					
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			10					
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>				50				
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	25	80	100 +	100 +			10	25
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					3		20	10
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	6	10	20	50				50
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	20	50	70	15		7		10
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					7	1	2	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		6	1h	1h				
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		2+5 h		1h				1h
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>					2	1+1 h	2h	1h
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		1h						
Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>						1		
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	1	8		1	3	4+3 h	3h	
Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>				1				
Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>		1h						
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		3h		1				
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>					1h			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					1+1 h	2h	2h	
Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1						
Semi-collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula semitorquata</i>						1		
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					4		1h	
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>						1h	3	
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>						1+1 h	1h	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	5			3				2
Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>					1			
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				3	5	7	8	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				2	1h		2h	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>					8	2h	3	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>					5	1h	4h	
Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		2h		1h				2h
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>					15	8	15	
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>						2		
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		1						
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	1		1				1
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			4		1		1	
Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>	1							
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				2			1	

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023							
		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	25	25	10	25				1
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		10	10					
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>					5		1h	
Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>							15	
Black-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava feldegg</i>		2	5					
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1	6	1	3	1	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	4	2	2	3	4	3	
Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>			3					
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>							3h	
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>					6	10		
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	4	3		1h	10	12	8	
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>					6	4	6	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1h	1h	6	4		h	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		3	5	5		2		
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	2			1	2			
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>						2		
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	3	15	25	10				2
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				4	1	1		
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>					3	2	6	
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				2				

Mammals: Red Squirrel, Balkan Chamois and Brown Hare.

Reptiles: Common Wall Lizard and Balkan Terrapin.

Amphibians: European Tree Frog (heard only) and Marsh/Albanian Pool Frog.

Butterflies: Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, Clouded Yellow, Large White, Wood White, Brimstone, Brown Argus, Common Blue, Green-underside Blue, Red Admiral, Peacock, Painted Lady, Small Tortoiseshell, Camberwell Beauty, Speckled Wood, Small Heath, Meadow Brown and Mallow Skipper.

Other notable insects & invertebrates: Egyptian Grasshopper, Red-winged Grasshopper, Pine Processionary Moth (caterpillars), Oil Beetle Sp., Green Tiger Beetle and *Scolopendra* Centipede.