

# Corsica – The Scented Isle

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 - 15 May 2011

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Alpine Chough



Corsican Crocus



Golfe de Galeria



Western Whip Snake

Report and images compiled by David Morris



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## Day 1

Sunday 8th May

We arrived to a warm and sunny Bastia early morning, swiftly clearing security and picking up our buses before heading to off into the marquis covered hills. A brief stop allowed us to appreciate some of the typical Corsican shrubs and trees before stopping shortly after at Ponte Leccia for a drink and admire the village's classic old bridge.

Due to our early arrival time in Bastia we had the opportunity to explore some of the spectacular coastline in the northwest of the island so we headed off towards Calvi. A brief stop at a roadside market to pick up local fresh produce for our picnic allowed us to observe some of our first birds including Red Kite, Spotless Starling, Yellow-legged Gull and Serin.

We called off in Calvi allowing people to see the old port and citadel before moving on to have our first alfresco picnic of the trip on the coast near Galeria. Around the rugged coast here we found Rock Samphire, *Crithmum maritimum*, Corsican Stork's-bill, *Erodium corsicum* and Sea Lavender, *Limonium corsicum*. In the scrub behind us Sardinian warbler chattered away, Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard scuttled along the walls and Corsican Swallowtail flitted around clumps of Giant Fennel, *Ferula communis*.

After a leisurely lunch we headed south down the west coast taking in the dramatic granite cliffs and jagged peaks towards Porto noting Alpine Swift and Crag Martin above us and lime green Tree Spurge, *Euphorbia dendroides* on the cliffs below. At Porto we headed in land for the gradual clime to Evisa where we settled in our comfortable rustic hotel before enjoying a traditional evening meal and local wine.

## Day 2

Monday 9th May

After breakfast, a leisurely stroll down the long main street of Evisa brought us to the start of our day's walk down the Spelunca Gorge. In the village cemetery at our departure point we found a good display of Pink Butterfly Orchid, *Orchis papilionacea* along with Tassel Hyacinth, *Muscari comosum* and a number of spikes of Dense-flowered Orchid, *Orchis intacta*. The path descended steeply through mature maquis under a canopy of Tree Heather, *Erica arborea* and Strawberry Tree, *Arbutus unedo*, where botanical highlights included the endemic Duchman's Pipe, *Aristolochia tyrrhena* spring flowering *Cyclamen repandum*, the delicate Snowflake, *Leucojum longifolium* and the beautiful, white blooms of the Illyrian Sea Daffodil, *Pancratium illyricum*. Firecrest, Blue Rock Thrush and Cirl Bunting were added to the bird list.

Lunch was enjoyed by the impressive Genoese Zaglia Bridge, before we continued along the track smelling the pungent endemics; *Stachys glutinosa* and *Teucrium marum*. Our afternoon was concluded relaxing and enjoying the views with ice cream, coffees and cold beer from a cafe in the lovely village of Ota, before returning by minibus to Evisa where we enjoyed a delicious wild boar casserole for dinner. Scops Owls were busy in the evening calling to each other across the valley below our hotel.

## Day 3

Tuesday 10th May

A pre-breakfast walk for the early risers found a confiding Wryneck singing around the hotel and a pair of one of our target birds for the trip; the Corsican Nuthatch, one of which was obligingly feeding in chestnut trees next to us. After breakfast we spent the morning walking in the Forest of Aitone, starting off at an old chestnut mill by the river. New plants in the forest included Corsican Mint, *Mentha requinii*, Willow Gentian, *Gentiana asclepiadea*, Pendulous Leek, *Allium pendulinum* and the endemic Bog Asphodel, *Narthecium ossifragum*. On the bird front we found a small group of Corsican Finch, Crossbill and Goldcrest. Corsican Wall Brown and Pine Processionary were added to the increasing list of invertebrates and we found Bedriaga's Rock Lizard basking in the sunshine.

Lunch was taken at the Col de Sevi, where we found Goshawk, Golden Eagle, Subalpine Warbler and more Corsican Finches flitting between the bushes. Once fed, we headed down to the coast towards Sagone to the mouth of the Liamone River. We started off by exploring a couple of water meadows where we found good numbers of Lax-flowered Orchids, *Orchis laxiflora*, Tongue Orchid, *Serapias lingua* and the American escape *Modiola caroliniana*. Bee-eater and Zitting Cisticola were present along with several Island Bluetail damselflies in vegetation alongside the river. A stropky young bull was discovered by one of our leaders within the meadow so we beat a hasty retreat as he skulked about in the cover after being persuaded to back off with a big stick earlier! Down on the beach, a colourful coastal flora included Yellow Horned-poppy, *Glaucium flavum*, Three-horned Stock, *Matthiola tricuspidata*, and Sea Bindweed, *Calystegia soldanella* with birds included Tawny Pipit and Turtle Dove. We finished the afternoon off with a dip of our feet in the Mediterranean and drinks and ice-creams in the beach cafe before returning to our hotel in Evisa.

## Day 4

Wednesday 11th May

Another morning bird walk in the forest close to the hotel found more Corsican Nuthatch, Wryneck and Cirl Bunting. We left Evisa after breakfast travelling the short distance through the forest to the Col Verghio to explore the mountain slopes above the ski station.

A few *Crocus corsicus* were still flowering among the rocks and the silver-leaved *Helichrysum frigidum* sheltered in crevices in the granite. *Brimeura*, *Brimeura fastigiata* and the delicate yellow flowered Star-of-Bethlehem, *Gagea soleirolli* were discovered at the top of the ski tows and good views of Wood Lark and Corsican Finch were had on the way back to the minibuses. En-route to our next stop we briefly paused outside the villages of Calacuccia picking up a distant Lammergeier, Golden Eagle along with Hoopoe in a nearby pasture.

Lunch was enjoyed in the arid and dramatic Santa Regina Gorge where we observed Peregrine, Dipper and the endemic white Thrift, *Armeria leucocephala*. Moving on towards Corte, we had a search of an area of maquis close to the railway, finding a number of orchids including Green-winged Orchid, *Orchis morio*, Provence Orchid, *Orchis provincialis* and the dark Early Spider Orchid, *Ophrys incubacea*. A short stop in Corte allowed all to explore the town, citadel and have an afternoon coffee before moving on to our second hotel below Venaco, on the banks of the Vecchio River.

## Day 5

Thursday 12th May

The morning's pre breakfast walk took us to an old bridge by the Vecchio River where we found a pair of Subalpine Warblers, Sardinian Warbler and Dipper. Plant highlights included Bug Orchid, *Orchis coriophora* subsp. *fragrans* and Man Orchid, *Aceras anthropophorum*.

With the weather set fine again we picked up supplies in Venaco before heading off up the Restonica Valley behind Corte. As we wound our way up the valley, up above the tree line, snow capped granite peaks appeared as clear melt waters cascaded down the Restonica Gorge. The endemic alpine Pasque Flower, *Pulsatilla alpina* was found between the junipers along with Corsican Hellebore, *Helleborus argutifolius*.

From the car park our walk followed a well trodden route to the Lac de Melo, where we found drifts of Corsican Crocus, *Crocus corsicus*, Corsican Butterwort, *Pinguicula Corsica* in the wetter flushes and Tyrrhenian Wall Lizards basking on all the rocks. We enjoyed our picnic lunch and wine overlooking the lake's clear waters as a bunch of attentive Alpine Choughs hung around in search of lunch time scraps, taking leftovers out of our hands. Lunch finished, we descended back down the valley noting Water Pipit and the pretty endemic blue *Aquilegia dumeticola* before ending at the cafe for well earned refreshments.

## Day 6

Friday 13th May

After the pre breakfast walk observing wild boar, we headed off to the Verghello Valley, stopping first above the Eiffel railway bridge. The Heart-Flowered Orchid, *Serapias cordigera* and Tongue Orchid, *Serapias lingua* were abundant on the roadside banks with the parasitic Purple Limadore, *Limodorum abortivum* found growing below the Corsican pines. At the top of the valley we found a number of the creamy yellow spikes of Barton's Orchid, *Dactylorhiza insularis*, Round-leaved Saxifrage, *Saxifraga rotundifolia*, Corsican Finch and Corsican Nuthatch, before having lunch enjoying views of Golden Eagle soaring over the dramatic craggy peaks.

After lunch David wowed us with his snake charming techniques as he pulled a metre long Western Whip Snake out of the grass allowing us all to appreciate and photograph it as it occasionally bit his hands.

In the afternoon we moved south, to the high Col de Vizzavona, to experience the cathedral-like beech forest, with its sparse vegetated understory, only punctuated by the leaves of autumn flowering *Cyclamen hederifolium*. Our final destination for the day was the cafe beside Vizzavona station for refreshments where we looked up train times for those keen to take the spectacular train ride back to Vanaco, only to be disappointed to find that engineering works were to see the train replaced by a bus. Not wanting to take the rail replacement bus, we continued under our own steam back to the hotel where we enjoyed an evening meal before finding Tyrrhenian Tree Frog and Corsican Painted Frog in the hotel pond.

## Day 7

Saturday 14th May

After breakfast we stopped off in Venaco for the usual shopping trip but shortly after getting out of the bus we picked up a couple of Golden Eagle gliding around the ridge behind the town giving us good views of their distinctive golden napes. Having bypassed the village's interesting individual we headed off to visit a small meadow just outside of the village of Soveria to view the abundance of orchids that occur there. Dark Early Spider Orchid, *Ophrys incubacea*, Green-winged Orchid, *Orchis morio susp picta*, Tongue Orchid, *Serapias lingua*, Violet Limadore, *Limodorum abortivum*, Broad-leaved Helleborine, *Epipactis helleborine*, Bumble-bee Orchid, *Ophrys bombyliflora*, Man Orchid, *Orchis anthropophora* and Lady Orchid, *Orchis purpurea* were all discovered flowering in the scrubby field.

By late morning we headed for Corte to park up and start our walk up the Tavignano Valley. Corsican Lavender-cotton, *Santolina corsica* and the fragrant prostrate Rosemary, *Rosmarinus officinalis* were found on the way up the rocky path. Singing male Blue Rock Thrush and several stunning Marmora's Warblers were found on the scrubby hillsides bordering the path.

A leisurely lunch was taken under a stand of Corsican pines, sampling a selection of excellent local cheeses before a steady walk back down to Corte where half the group stayed for a second visit and the remaining members retired to the hotel for some relaxation before dinner.

## Day 8

Sunday 15th May

Our flight was not until early afternoon, so we had an opportunity to make the most of our holiday with an extra half day. Provisions picked up in Venaco for the final picnic, we headed off towards Bastia to explore the area towards the coast and airport to the south of the town, calling off en-route at Ponte-Leccia for a coffee.

South of Bastia Airport, we stopped at the church an Early-Christian archaeological site at La Canonica where we watched a party of feeding Bee-eaters along with Red Kite, Marsh Harrier, Honey Buzzard and Red-footed Falcon. Tree and Italian Sparrow flitted around as we ate our picnic before heading north towards Etang de Biguglia, picking up a cracking Woodchat Shrike en-route. The lagoon at Biguglia was relatively quiet apart from rafts of feeding Coot and good numbers of Yellow-legged Gulls although we did manage to pick out a lone Audouin's Gull and a number of feeding Great Crested Grebes.

Eventually time started to run out so we packed up our bags and headed off on the short drive to the airport observing Red-footed Falcon and Honey Buzzard on our way.

## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May							15
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>								2
2	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			1					
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1					1
4	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			2					
5	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1							
6	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>								3
7	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	20+	1	30	10+	4	6	4	15+
8	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>				1				
9	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>								2
10	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1		1					
11	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>			1					
12	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	4	3	3	6	1	6	6	5
13	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1	1	1		3	2	
14	Red-footed Falcon	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>								2
15	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrines</i>				1			1	
16	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	5	1	3	3	2		2	3
17	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			H					
18	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>								150+
19	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>			2					
20	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			1					
21	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>								1
22	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	100+		40+					60+
23	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	4	6	✓	✓	6		6	4
24	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	5	1	✓	✓		2	4	✓
26	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			2	H			H	
27	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	2	1	2H	H		2H	3+	H
28	Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>	5		4	1	H	H	H	
29	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>	15+	8+	3					2
30	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	10							
31	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>			6					15
33	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1		1	2				H
34	Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>		1	3	4				
35	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	1							
36	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>								1
37	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1	2	2	3	10	4	10	6
38	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>				2	40+	12	4	
39	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	3	✓	✓	✓	6	✓	✓
40	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	8	6	4	8	4	4	4	2
41	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		2	✓	4		5	2	
42	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	2	10	✓	✓	4	6	6	4
43	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>		3	✓	4	2	6	4	
44	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			H	10		H	H	
45	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	10	15		6	10	20	30	
46	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	6							
47	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓		10	10	6			✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May							
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
48	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	20	✓	✓	
49	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			H					H
50	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			H					2H
51	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		4		2	1	4		
52	Western Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Hippolais pallid</i>						1		
53	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	H	6	4	4	3	10	8	3
54	Marmora's Warbler	<i>Sylvia sarda</i>							8+	
55	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>				1				
56	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>			1			2	3	
57	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	H	3	3	4		3	6	3
58	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	H	15	H	H		10	H	H
59	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			H					
60	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	H	H	8H	H	H	
61	Corsican Nuthatch	<i>Sitta whiteheadi</i>			2	2		2		
62	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			2	1		H		
63	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓		6			2+	4	✓
64	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	4	2	3	2	1	3	4	3
65	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1	2					
66	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	H	6	H	H	4H	✓	H	
67	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>			2H					
68	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			1					
69	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	2						1	
70	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				1				
71	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		1			H		1	
72	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		3	2	10+	6	6+	8	2
73	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		H	1	2	1	1	1	
74	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>								6
75	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	10+		✓	
76	Italian Sparrow	<i>Passer italiae</i>			4					20+
77	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1	2	2	4	2	2	1	
78	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>					1			
79	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>			1					
80	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>					4			
81	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	H	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3
82	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	5	3	6	4		4	5	2
83	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	2		1	✓
84	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	6	✓
85	Corsican Finch	<i>Carduelis corsicana</i>			15+	20+		3	2	
86	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	2							
87	Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			6	H		H		
88	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	6		10+	H				10+
89	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		3	6	6	1	8	3	1

## Mammals

Wild Boar

Rabbit

## Herptiles

Tyrrhenian Tree Frog

Italian Pool Frog

Tyrrhenian Painted Frog

Moorish Gecko

Bedriaga's Rock Lizard

Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard

Italian Wall Lizard

Western Whip Snake

### Butterflies

Scarce Swallowtail

Corsican Swallowtail

Swallowtail

Wood White

Large White

Small White

Green-veined White

Orange Tip

Brimstone

Green Hairstreak

Small Copper

Holly Blue

Baton Blue

Common Blue

Brown Argus

Adonis Blue

Southern White Admiral

Large Tortoiseshell

Peacock

Red Admiral

Painted Lady

Southern Speckled Wood

Corsican Wall Brown

Corsican Heath

Small Heath

Red-underwing Skipper

### Moths

Pine Processionary Moth

Hook Tip

Hummingbird Hawkmoth

### Other Invertebrates

Island Bluetail Damselfly

Keeled Skimmer

Lesser Emperor

Migratory Locust

Egyptian Grasshopper

Fire bug

Ant Lion

Violet Carpenter Bee

Glow Worm

Tiger Beetle

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