

Corsica – The Scented Isle

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 – 19 May 2013



Giant Peacock Moth



Brimeura fastigiata



Corsican Fire Salamander



Cyclamen repandum

Report and images compiled by David Morris



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Day 1

Sunday 12th May

We arrived to a warm and sunny Bastia on our early morning flight from Gatwick airport where we collected our bags and met up with one member of the group who was already in Corsica. Minibuses picked up and all loaded in, we set off into the marquis covered hills, pausing briefly at the old bombed bridge at Ponte Nuovo before stopping shortly after at Ponte Leccia for a coffee and admire the village's classic old bridge. Birds around the village included Red Kite, Spotless Starling and Italian Sparrow.

Having arrived in Corsica in good time, we had the opportunity to explore some of the spectacular coastline in the northwest of the island so we headed off towards Calvi in order to explore the rugged coastline. We stopped at a local roadside market to pick up fruit and salads before calling off in Calvi, allowing people to have a drink in a harbour side café and view the old coastal citadel. With the time advancing and day warming up, we moved the short distance down the coast near Galeria to enjoy our first alfresco picnic of the week. Sardinian Warbler, Serin, Hooded Crow and Honey Buzzard started the trip bird list off and as we ate our lunch, Osprey circled above and a pair of Ravens scavenged for scraps. On the rugged pink granite shore we found Rock Samphire, *Crithmum maritimum*, Corsican Stork's-bill, *Erodium corsicum*, Sea Lavender, *Limonium corsicum* and around the car park was Giant Fennel, *Ferula communis*, Three-cornered Leek, *Allium triquetrum* and groups of Tongue Orchid, *Serapias lingua*.

Lunch complete, we headed south down the west coast exploring in the dramatic granite cliffs and jagged peaks towards Porto noting the lime green Tree Spurge, *Euphorbia dendroides*, the spring flowering *Cyclamen repandum* and the bright yellow flowering endemic broom, *Genista corsica* on the cliffs and rock faces.

At Porto, we paused to appreciate the old castle before we headed in land for the gradual climb to Evisa, where we checked in at our rustic hotel at the top of the village, nestled in the Chestnut and Corsican Pine woodland. Birds around the hotel included Cuckoo, Spotted Flycatcher and Cirl Bunting.

Day 2

Monday 13th May

Having woken to a glorious sunny start, we had breakfast in the panoramic hotel restaurant before a leisurely stroll down the long main street of Evisa the start of our day's walk down the Spelunca Gorge. Firecrest, Cirl Bunting and Serin all showed well and in the village cemetery at our departure point, we found a good display of Pink Butterfly Orchid, *Orchis papilionacea*, Tassel Hyacinth, *Muscari comosum*, Dense-flowered Orchid, *Orchis intaca* and the pretty blue-flowered Narrow-leaved Lupin, *Lupinus angustifolius*. The path descended steeply through mature maquis of Tree Heather, *Erica arborea* and Strawberry Tree, *Arbutus unedo*, and woodland of Corsican, (*Pinus nigra subsp. Laricio*) and Maritime Pines, (*Pinus pinaster*) 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*. Alpine Swift, Crag Martin and Common Buzzard 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* and observing the many endemic Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard's that put in an appearance and posed for photographs on the path side rocks. At the road bridge, half the group took the bus to Ota while the others walked the final stretch by the river and over another old Genoese bridge en-route. Our afternoon was finally concluded by relaxing and enjoying the views with coffee and cold beer from a cafe in the lovely mountain village, 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 14th May

It was a bright sunny morning as the birders in the group set off for a pre-breakfast walk up the village finding Wryneck, Hoopoe, Cirl Bunting, an obliging Corsican Finch, and a smart Corsican Nuthatch feeding amongst cones in a nearby Corsican Pine. After breakfast the group moved on to the Forest of Aitone, taking a walk down a forest track under towering Corsican and Maritime pines with *Cyclamen repandum*, Pendulous Leek, *Allium pendulinum* and Corsican Hellebore, *Helleborus argutifolius* much in evidence on the forest floor. A tiny Firecrest gave us a super show as it sang in an adjacent holly. Our path through the forest eventually came to an old chestnut mill by the river where we observed a family of Dippers plus found the endemic Leopard's-bane, *Doronicum corsicum* along with Willow-leaved Gentian, *Gentiana asclepiadea*, Corsican Bog Asphodel, *Narthecium reverchonii* and a few spikes of Early Purple Orchid, *Orchis mascula* subsp. *olbiensis*.

A short ride further up in the forest brought us to a large granite pavement in the forest, overlooking the valley below where, amongst the rocks we found Angular Solomon's-seal *Polygonatum odoratum*, and the two tiny endemic bulbs; *Brimeura fastigiata* and the Yellow Star-of-Bethlehem, *Gagea soleirolii*. Both the endemic Bedriaga's Rock and Tyrrhenian Wall Lizards basked on the rocks and Corsican Finch and Corsican Nuthatch put in brief appearances at the top of the pines.

For lunch we headed the short distance to the Col de Sevi, where we were greeted by the local pigs and a coach of French tourists, both providing us with entertainment over our picnic. At the Col we found Corsican Finches, a distant Golden Eagle and got good views of Marmora's Warbler as it sang from the scrub. Picnic over; we headed down to the coast towards Sagone to the mouth of the Liamone River, calling en-route for a brief stop in Vico to observe the ancient Menhir statue in the village graveyard. At Sagone, works were in full swing to erect a new bridge over the Liamone River so we decided to start off by exploring the shore and dunes with its colourful coastal flora. Sea Medick, *Medicago marina*, Yellow Horned-poppy, *Glaucium flavum*, Three-horned Stock, *Matthiola tricuspidata*, and Sea Bindweed, *Cahystegia soldanella* were all found on the sandy shore and we observed the curious hairy balls of aggregated dead hairs of Neptune Grass, *Posidonia oceanica*, washed up on the strandline with other flotsam and jetsam. Birds in the vicinity of the beach included Nightingale, Cetti's Warbler, Tawny Pipit, Turtle Dove, Osprey and Audouin's Gull.

Some of the group decided to have a break at the beach café while others tried to no-avail to access the floristic wet meadows behind the dunes. The combination of road works and barbed wire stock fencing made the fields hard to access so we observed the stands of Lax-flowered Orchids, *Orchis laxiflora* and Yellow Bartsia, *Parentucillia latifolia* from the road as David ventured into a ditch to find us the American escape *Modiola caroliniana* and Bee-eater flew overhead. We finished the afternoon off with drinks and ice-creams in the beach cafe before returning to our hotel in Evisa, briefly stopping en-route to observe large numbers of Red Kite along with Black Kite, Raven and Yellow-legged Gulls feeding on a roadside landfill site.

Day 4

Wednesday 15th May

This was a transfer day to Corte so yet again the birders in the group took advantage of the location and had another morning bird walk in the forest close to the hotel, finding Hoopoe, Wryneck, Cirl Bunting, and both the endemics; Corsican Nuthatch and Corsican Finch.

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 early *Crocus corsicus* were just about in flower amongst the rocks and Dwarf Juniper, *Juniperus communis* subsp. *nana* and on the rocky outcrops grew the endemic *Helichrysum frigidum*, Forked Spleenwort, *Asplenium septentrionale* and Olive-leaved Daphne, *Daphne oleoides*. Yet again, both the white-flowered Brimeura, *Brimeura fastigiata* and the delicate yellow flowered Star-of-Bethlehem, *Gagea soleirolli* were in evidence along with the prickly Etna Barberry, *Berberis aetnensis* and old stunted Beech, *Fagus sylvatica*, growing on the exposed slopes. Birds were generally quiet with the exception of Woodlark, which could be heard singing from the cloud engulfed slopes.

A brief stop was had near Albertacce finding Corsican Finch, Corsican Nuthatch and Toothed Orchid, *Orchis tridentata* before pushing on for lunch in the dramatic Santa Regina Gorge. On the cliffs grew endemic white Thrift, *Armeria leucocephala* and around the bottom of the gorge we saw Dipper, Grey Wagtail and Crag Martin. Moving on towards Corte, and observing the interesting local driving down the gorge, we paused to explore an area of maquis and roadside verge close to the village of Francardo, finding a number of orchids including Green-winged Orchid, *Orchis morio*, Man Orchid, *Orchis anthropophora*, Small-flowered Tongue Orchid, *Serapias parviflora*, the dark Early Spider Orchid, *Ophrys incubacea* and vast numbers of Tongue Orchid, *Serapias lingua*.

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, where we checked into our rustic little lodges, built out of cobbles from the local area.

Day 5

Thursday 16th May

The morning's pre breakfast walk took us to an old bridge by the Vecchio River where we found Subalpine Warbler, Grey Wagtail and Dipper. Plant highlights included in bud Bug Orchid, *Orchis coriophora* subsp. *fragrans*, Small-flowered Tongue Orchid, *Serapias parviflora*, Man Orchid, *Aceras anthropophorum*, purple-flowered *Crupina crupinastrum* and pyramidal spikes of Italian Viper's-bugloss, *Echium italicum*. With heavy but clearing skies, we headed off to Venaco for picnic supplies before heading south to the Verghello Valley, stopping first above the Eiffel railway bridge to appreciate this magnificent structure. From here, we walked the quiet road finding Heart-Flowered Orchid, *Serapias cordigera* and Tongue Orchid, *Serapias lingua* were abundant on the roadside banks along with Sword-leaved Helleborine *Cephalanthera longifolia* and the parasitic Purple Limadore, *Limodorum abortivum* found growing below the Corsican and Martime pines. With the sun breaking out, insect activity picked up with Corsican Wall Brown, southern Speckled Wood, Wood White and Small Copper taking to the wing. At the top of the valley we picnicked with spectacular views and excellent views of Corsican Finch and Cirl Bunting on a nearby fence. The younger David went off into the pine forest returning with a pair of stunning black and yellow endemic Corsican Fire Salamanders that allowed the group to appreciate their bright colouration and get some close-up photos. On the way down the valley we paused to look at the creamy yellow spikes of Barton's Orchid, *Dactylorhiza insularis*, growing under the pines with spectacular swathes of bright pink *Cyclamen repandum*.

In the afternoon we moved further south, pausing briefly to photograph the picturesque mountain town of Vivario before moving to the 1163m high Col de Vizzavona, to experience the cathedral-like beech forest that grows at this altitude in Corsica. Our final destination for the day was the cafe beside Vizzavona station for refreshments, keeping the train enthusiasts happy with the arrival of two trains before our departure. More naturalistic finds here included Crossbill and Balearic Sandwort, *Arenaria balearica*. Back at the hotel we enjoyed an evening meal before finding Tyrrhenian Tree Frog, Tyrrhenian Painted Frog in the hotel pond and Scops Owl in the trees around our chalets.

Day 6

Friday 17th May

The morning bird walk produced the usual suspects of birds and attendees, so with clear skies and a mild start after breakfast, we picked up supplies in Venaco before heading off up the Restonica Valley behind Corte, pausing en-route to photograph the attractive citadel. 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. A pause near the road found the endemic alpine Pasque Flower, *Pulsatilla alpina* subsp. *cyrnea* along with endemic saxifrage, *Saxifraga pedemontana* subsp. *cervicornis* and a lone Peregrine Falcon.

Some of the group opted to take a more relaxed day around the café and lower slopes of the Restonica, but the majority decided to follow the rough and popular route from the car park to the Lac de Melo and head of the valley. Beyond the café, the slopes of Corsican Pine woodland gave way to the characteristic open, scrubby woodland featuring Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*, Corsican Mountain Ash, *Sorbus aucuparia* subsp. *praemorsa* and the snow-flattened stands of Corsican Alder, *Alnus alnobetula* subsp. *suaveolens*.

In the open areas, adjacent to recent snowmelt, we found bright drifts of Corsican Crocus, *Crocus corsicus* and in the wetter flushes by mountain streams the Corsican Butterwort, *Pinguicula corsica* was discovered. Picnic lunch was enjoyed below the final climb to the lake, before most of the group pressed on the final stretch to reach the crystal-clear waters of the Lac du Melo. At the lake we discovered Water Pipit and groups of swirling Alpine Chough, highlight of the day for many was watching a tame pair take bits of picnic leftovers from our hands. With cloud closing in quickly, and snow starting to fall on higher ground, we headed back down the valley to re-join the rest of the group and enjoy coffee and a warm by the log burner in the cabin.

Day 7

Saturday 18th May

On our final full day in Corsica, the group opted for a more relaxed and bird-filled day, so we headed east to the nearby coastal strip around Aleria, probably a wise move given the rain clouds building in the mountains. No sooner had we left the scrubby marquis clad hills behind us, and entered the diverse lower farmed landscapes of the east coast than birds became more apparent. Red Kites soared above, hirundines hawked around the rivers and villages and brightly colour Mediterranean species became abundant. Picnic supplies gathered in Aleria, we set off for the Plage de Padulone, stopping just outside the town to view Roller, Bee-eater, Turtle Dove, Tawny Pipit and Serin. Colourful roadside verges were abundant with eye-catching members of the daisy and borage family, with striking stands of Milk Thistle, *Silybum marianum*, rich yellow Woad, *Isatis tinctoria* and Purple Vipers-bugloss, *Echium plantagineum* amongst others.

At the beach, a short walk up the sands produced more bright Bee-eaters, Audouin's Gull, Italian Sparrow and both Scopoli's and Yelkouan Shearwaters, gliding effortlessly over the calm sea surface. Butterflies were much in evidence today in the sun and plants around the beach included Sea Holly, *Eryngium maritimum*, Sea Rocket, *Cakile maritima*, Sea Raddish, *Raphanus raphanistrum* subsp. *maritima* and Wild Leek, *Allium ampeloprasum*. After a relaxing coffee stop at a beachside café we pressed on a little further south down the coast, moving through rolling vineyards and roads lined with distinctive knobbly trunked Cork Oaks, *Quercus suber*.

Our pre-lunch stop was at a sheltered bay on the Etang d' Urbino, nestled in the undulating hills. In the hedgerows on the lane down to the lagoon we noted Everlasting Sweet Pea, *Lathyrus latifolius*, Rosy Garlic, *Allium roseum*, Field Gladiolus, *Gladiolus italicus*, and Scarce Tongue Orchid, *Serapias neglecta* plus Whinchat, Fan-tailed Warbler and Nightingale on the bird front. On and around the lagoon we noted Cattle Egret, Coot, Marsh Harrier, Honey Buzzard and on an area of glasswort steppe at the back of the lagoon we found a pair of Little Ringed Plover plus an obliging Collared Pratincole that allowed us some stunning views. In the lakeside vegetation we found Red-veined Darter plus good numbers of the endemic Island Blue-tailed Damselfly. Upon arriving at our lakeside picnic spot, the weather started to change and a sharp shower blew in, not deterred we set up lunch on tables in a rustic lakeside fisherman's hut, enjoying local cheese, wine and herb tarts as the rain bounced off the roof and Osprey glided across in front.

With lunch over and the rain passing, we planned on having a mid afternoon coffee at the idyllic lakeside café but were thwarted by a faulty coffee machine so returned to Plage de Padulone outside Aleria to relax in the now sunny afternoon with ice creams and drinks as groups of Yelkouan Shearwaters passed close in shore. With an early start looming tomorrow; we headed off back to the hotel to finish off the day before having our final dinner of the holiday.

Day 8

Sunday 19th May

With an early morning flight from Bastia to catch, we packed up the buses, grabbed an early breakfast and headed off to the airport before catching our flight back to London Gatwick where we all went our separate ways after bidding our farewells at the baggage reclaim.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	May							
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>								2
2	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea diomedea</i>							50+	
3	Yelkouan Shearwater	<i>Puffinus yelkouan</i>							200+	
4	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			1					
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>							8	
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2						3	
7	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>							1	
8	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			3				6	
9	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			10				3	
10	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1		1				1	
11	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	2						1	
12	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	40+	2	40+	20+	4	6	30+	8
13	Black Kite	<i>Milvis migrans</i>			2					
14	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			1				1	
15	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	2	4	4		1	4	2
16	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			1					
17	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	1	2	1	1		10	2
18	Red-footed Falcon	<i>Falco vespertinus</i>	1							
19	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrines</i>						1		
20	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>							40+	
21	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>							1	
22	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>			1				2	
23	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>			1				1	
24	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	300+		200+				500+	
25	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>							6	
26	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>							3	
27	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	10	6		1	2	2	6	2
29	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			3				1	
30	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	2H	2H	3H	6	5H	2H	H	
32	Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>	2H	3H	2H	2H	2	2H	2H	
33	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>	10+	20+	20+	20+		20		
34	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1							
36	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>			6				40+	
37	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>							1	
38	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	2	3	2	3		H	2	
39	Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>		H	2	H				
40	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		2H	3+	2	2		1	
41	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>				H				
42	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	2	4	6	15	8	6	3
43	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>						30+		
44	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	200+	8	40+				✓	✓
45	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	8+	3	40+	15+	2	6	6	8
46	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	2	4	10+	✓	✓	✓	4	
47	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	2	10+	10+	✓	✓	✓	□	6

	Common name	Scientific name	May							
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
48	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	6	10+	10+	✓	✓	✓	✓	□
49	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	H			4+				
50	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	30+		10	4			30+	20+
51	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		10+		10+				
52	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			4H				H	
54	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			10+		6	H		
55	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>					H			
56	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>			H					
57	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			3				6	
58	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	2	10+	10+		6	4		
59	Marmora's Warbler	<i>Sylvia sarda</i>			2					
60	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>					1	1	3	
61	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	4	6	2	2H	2H		3	
62	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	1	10+	15+	3H	10	6	H	H
63	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			2					
64	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
65	Corsican Nuthatch	<i>Sitta whiteheadi</i>			2	4				
66	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		H	3	2	3			
67	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	40+	10	30+	40+	15	20+	✓	✓
68	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	3	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				2	1	1		
70	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		6	2	6	6	4	2	
71	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>			5H				4	
72	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			1				1	
73	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			2					
74	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			1			2		
75	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	3	10+	10+	6	10+	6	10+	2
76	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			2	1	1			
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	□							
78	Italian Sparrow	<i>Passer italiae</i>	30	80+	30	25	15	20		30+
79	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava</i>						1		
80	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				3	2	6	4	
81	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>			3	1			1	
82	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>						6		
83	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	2	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	3	10	15	20	10	10		6
85	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		4			20	15	30	15
86	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	25	15		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Corsican Finch	<i>Carduelis corsicana</i>	3	2	15	20	23	1		
88	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>							3	
89	Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		2	8	8	1			
90	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	15		10	2			30+	
91	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirius</i>	4	10	15	10	15	3	6	2

