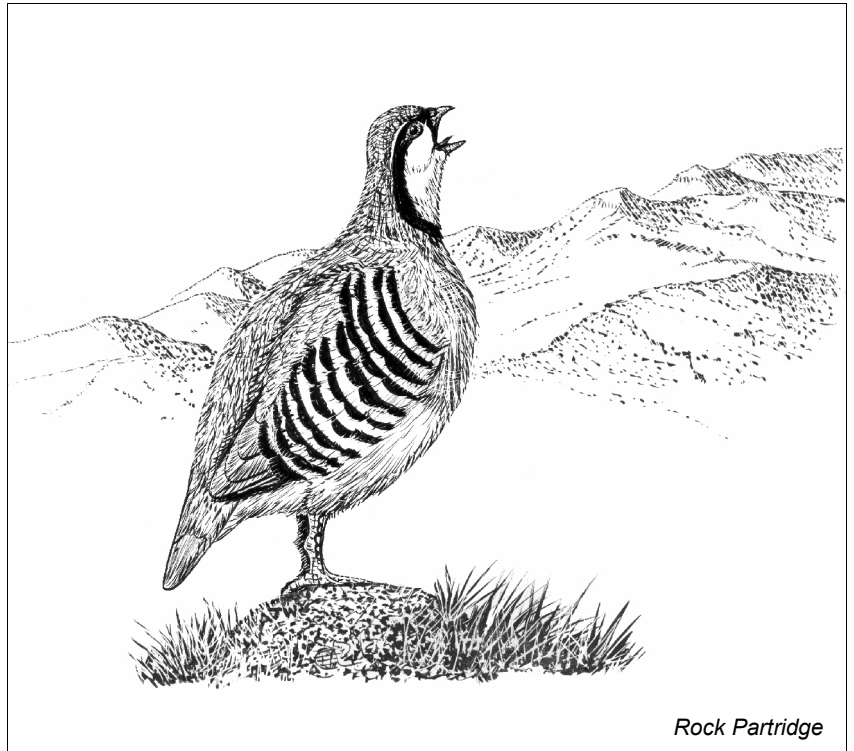


CROATIA

exciting Balkan wildlife amidst beautiful Dalmatian scenery



Rock Partridge

There is a narrow strip of Croatia between the Adriatic Sea and the high mountains that is the Dalmatian Coast.

The geology is all important, being entirely limestone, creating spectacular cliffs, impressive rocky terrain, waterfalls, springs and a multitude of islands. From a distance some of the landscape looks quite barren but closer inspection shows it to be full of wildflowers, butterflies, a rich assortment of reptiles and, of course, birds. The names of some of the special birds of the area give a clue to the terrain. Rock Nuthatch, Rock Thrush, Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Partridge are amongst the key species. Other special birds of the area include Sombre Tit, Olive-tree Warbler, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Pygmy Cormorant, Eastern Orphean Warbler and Black-headed Bunting. Old favourites like Hoopoe, Bee-eater and Turtle Dove are common and widespread.

Woodlands, orchards and open scrub hold a healthy population of Wryneck, Woodlark and three species of shrike. By far the commonest warbler is Eastern Subalpine, but there are many others besides, such as Melodious, Cetti's and Lesser Whitethroat. The strident song of the Great Reed Warbler is characteristic of small lakes in the region.

We will spend the first four nights near Trogir, close to Split, and the remaining three nights further north, at Starigrad Paklenica, close to Paklenica National Park and Pag Island.

ITINERARY

TROGIR

A short drive from Split Airport will take us to our first hotel, near Trogir. We will visit Trogir's beautiful old town, not least to see the Pallid and Common Swifts which nest in the old fort and strangely, in the palm trees. It is the home town of our local guide and he will know where many of the local specialities are nesting. With luck he may have nest sites to visit of such varied birds as Sombre Tit, Olive-tree Warbler, Eagle Owl and Short-toed Eagle. Due to the shallow soils, farmland is being abandoned and people are moving to the coast to work in the tourist industry. Where people leave, wildlife takes over. We will visit one of several picturesque hamlets which is being reclaimed by nature. They are overgrown with a wonderful mix of fig, olive, pistachio, walnut and cherry trees. Rich in wildlife, they provide homes for Red-rumped and Barn Swallows, Black-eared Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Spanish Sparrow and Little and Scops Owls.

The island of Ciovo, just across from Trogir, is connected to

the mainland by a road bridge. It has some spectacular cliffs that are home to Alpine Swifts. Peregrine also breed in this area. We shall keep a look out for Bottle-nosed Dolphin too.

On one day we will visit the source of the Cetina river, set in a lovely area of vineyards, meadows and olive groves. Woodchat and Red-backed Shrikes are common and we also have a good chance of Lesser Grey Shrike. Nightjars breed nearby and we will have an evening excursion to look for them. On another night we will look for Scops Owl which have several regular breeding sites in Trogir.

We will visit Krka National Park, famous for its limestone scenery, rivers and lakes. Larks are plentiful and besides Crested Lark there are plenty of Short-toed Larks and Woodlarks, plus a few Calandra Larks. Hobby may be seen chasing the many dragonflies and damselflies. Fritillary butterflies plus White Admiral, Scarce Swallowtail and many blues grace the meadows, which also have many orchid species and other wildflowers.

In the Krupa Valley we will visit a beautiful area near a monastery with a very accessible Bee-eater colony. Dipper and Grey Wagtail are found on the river while nearby are good areas for shrikes, warblers and buntings. Brightly coloured Black-headed Buntings and Cirl Buntings are frequently seen singing from the tops of bushes.

BIOKOVA NATURE PARK

One day, from our base near Trogir, we will drive south of Split to the Biokovo reserve. The slither of land between sea and mountain, known as the Dalmatian Coast, becomes even narrower here. As we turn inland we will ascend to around 6000 feet to the heart of this limestone mountain reserve. Forest gives way to mountain pasture and boulder strewn meadows, and ultimately scree and cliffs. We will drive well above the tree line and there may still be patches of snow in May. Near Vetii Jure, the highest peak of the range, we should find Alpine Accentors which can be surprisingly tame. Ravens and Black Redstart may also be found at this altitude. We will scan the peaks and hillsides around us for Chamois and Mouflon, though their whereabouts are unpredictable. Golden and Short-toed Eagle are both possible here too.

Afterwards, we will wend our way back down the mountain, stopping for short walks. Other birds we will be looking out for on the lower slopes are Orotolan Bunting, Rock Thrush and Blue Rock Thrush. Black-eared Wheatear may also be found at this altitude. The cliffs hold nesting Crag Martins and Alpine Swifts. Eastern Subalpine Warblers are particularly common here and we should get good views of this smart little bird.

This is also one of the many places to find Rock Partridge. It is widespread along the coast but is more often heard than seen. However, once we have located a calling bird, with patience and many eyes watching we should be able to find this sought after species. Alpine Chough can also be found and we will be listening out for their distinctive calls too. On the lower slopes there are alpine meadows which, in May, are full of flowers, forming a breathtaking sight.

PAKLENICA AND PAG ISLAND

After four nights in Trogir we will head north to Paklenica for the final three nights. On the way we will visit Lake Vrana, the largest freshwater body in Croatia. This is a stronghold for Pygmy Cormorant and several pairs of Purple Heron and Little Egret nest here too. This is the only regular site on the Croatian coast for Great White Egret, though it is still a rare breeder. Great Reed, Reed and Sedge Warblers are all to be found singing in the emergent vegetation. Black-necked, Little and Great Crested Grebe all breed here too. Ferruginous Duck and Garganey are among the many species that pass through on migration in May. Black-headed Wagtail is fairly common throughout the meadow and pasture areas of Croatia and may be found here.

Our second hotel is situated close to the Paklenica National Park. The park encompasses the southern slopes of the Velebit Mountains and reaches down to the coast. There are craggy peaks, alpine meadows, and forests of pine, beech, oak, elm and hornbeam. We will spend half a day in the centre of the park admiring the spectacular gorge and looking for birds like Western Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock Thrush, Sombre Tit and Eastern Orphean Warbler. Most of the Rock Doves here look like the real thing. Peregrine and Short-toed and Golden Eagles are all possible. Being so beautiful, the park can get busy, but with the help of our local guide we will find some areas that are distinctly off the tourist trail.

The island of Pag is accessible by road bridge. As we approach, we find ourselves looking at a barren and rather

sterile landscape, but distant views are deceptive. Instead of being some sort of moonscape, it is actually full of wildflowers hiding between the rocks. Sheep manage to graze this dry looking landscape. Pag is actually famous for its delicious but expensive sheep's milk cheese. Stone Curlews are something of a speciality of the area and we should get good views of this striking bird. It is yet another good site for Rock Partridge too. Crested, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Lark as well as Skylark and Tawny Pipit are present on the island. A colony of Lesser Kestrels nest on a nearby island but regularly feed in a particular area that we will visit on Pag.

Rainwater quickly drains away on most areas of the island so two small lakes with marshes act like magnets for birds. We will visit both of these where there is a healthy population of Montagu's Harriers plus a few Marsh Harriers. A small population of Glossy Ibis is also established here.

After seven wonderful days and nights on the Dalmatian coast we will head back to Split in good time for our afternoon flight home.

CLIMATE AND PACE

Warm, sunny weather is the norm, although rain is possible. It will be cooler in the mountains. Breakfast will be taken at about 7.30am most mornings. Basic fitness is all that is required. Full days will be spent in the field and reasonable length walks will be undertaken regularly. There may be some uphill walking, but at a sensible pace.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full board accommodation is provided, with four nights at the Hotel Jadran, near Trogir and three nights at the Hotel Vicko in Starigrad Paklenica. All accommodation is of a very good standard and has en suite facilities.

PRICE INCLUDES

All birdwatching excursions with expert leader and local guide, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 20th and ending with a lunch on 27th), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, reserve entrance fees, local transport by minibus and international flights.

WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Return flights from Leeds/Bradford to Split using the scheduled services of Jet2 Airlines. The outbound flight leaves mid-afternoon, with the return touching down mid-evening. **If you wish to fly direct from a different airport we may be able to accommodate you if we can get suitable flights. Please call for details.**

7 nights:	20th to 27th May 2017
Principal leader:	Andy Woodall
Local guide:	Robert Crnkovic
Maximum group size:	12 clients with one leader and a local guide
Cost with discount (if you book before 4th February 2017):	£1750 per person sharing (£150 single supplement)
Full Cost:	£1850 per person sharing
Deposit:	£300 per person