

GERMANY, JUNE 2011

HEIDELBERG/KAISERSTUHL AREA

by Neil McCall



On the Wednesday morning we crept out of the house at around 04:20 to catch the airport bus and thence Lufthansa from Manchester to Frankfurt. We were going to Heidelberg to stay with our birding friend Nicole, and spend a few days in the Kaiserstuhl, a warm hilly area in the south-west of Germany with volcanic soils suitable for vineyards. However, the weather on arrival was unusually cold and damp, and on our first afternoon we restricted ourselves to a visit to the gardens of Schwetzingen castle, a venue we could easily escape from if the rain worsened. We had already picked up Black Redstart and Serin casually, as you would in any German town, and the castle grounds gave us a few good species including a summering Fieldfare, a Short-Toed Treecreeper, no less than four Green Woodpeckers and the star of the day, a stunning little Firecrest which we saw close up. We then called in to the nearby small town of Plankstadt where there was an instructive and free bird garden, which included a captive pair of White Stork. However, a genuinely wild and countable pair had also set up a nest in the park and had two chicks!

The drive to Kaiserstuhl next day, in rapidly improving weather, took around two hours and produced both Black and Red Kite close to the Autobahn. In the early afternoon we met up with some fellow birders from the Heidelberg area who were doing a similar trip and we went together to a known Bee-eater nesting area where we found around a dozen of these lovely birds, together with a confiding Tree Pipit, Stonechat, Cuckoo, Redstart and Red-Backed Shrike. We checked in to our accommodation in the village of Oberbergen (the larger party were a short walk away in a hotel) and, early in the evening, set out on one of the excellent pathways in the area to meet them for dinner. This area provided our lifer of the trip, a stunning Cirl Bunting, which everyone duly sought the next morning. We also tracked down a pair of Turtle Dove, a Hobby and a Honey Buzzard flew overhead; we also glimpsed a Hoopoe. A large European Green Lizard, Stag Beetles and bats provided some non-bird diversions.

On the Saturday Nicole, my wife and I decided to travel around by ourselves as a party of nine was a bit unwieldy. Our first call was to a wooded area with lakes on the banks of the Rhein where we picked up a usual batch of woodland birds, however I was the only one to spot a Golden Oriole which proved to be our only one of the trip as I glimpsed it briefly flying through thick woodland, and nobody saw the calling Black Woodpecker. A Treecreeper gave us good views which enabled us to reasonably determine that it was the UK species which is not that common in Germany. After lunch we encountered a Swiss couple who gave us information on a Hoopoe nest site on an accessible footpath in a nearby village, so we quickly went round to stake it out. The Hoopoes were nesting in a vineyard where the owner had put a nestbox inside an old hut, and we had great views of the adult birds flying in to feed the chick. This gave us a dilemma however – should we divulge this site to our friends who were a larger party and, despite being bona fide naturalists, might cause some disturbance? As we thought about this a Bee-eater came along and flew into a hole in a sandstone cliff barely twenty feet from the Hoopoes! Not just one, but two rare nesting

species in one field. For the first time in my life, other than the Ruddy Duck controversy, I agreed with suppressing something which fellow birders would have loved to see and in all honesty I felt very bad about it, but fortunately as we met up with our friends later they'd also had a good day with more sightings of both these key birds. We also made a short foray across into France as we'd been told that Stone Curlew nest in the fields just over the border, but the crops were probably that bit too high to find them, although Yellowhammer made it on to our French list for the holiday.

As we'd done well with the specialities of the area we decided to return and spend the Sunday at Waghausel, one of Germany's premium reedbed reserves; if it were in the UK it would have a café and gift shop and be packed to the brim with birders but as it is all the facilities are two hides, and these are of recent construction as on my earlier visits there was no shelter whatsoever. This produced one or two Purple Herons, a Kingfisher, a Marsh Harrier, a Black-Necked Grebe and a Little Ringed Plover. Nicole also identified a few Marsh Warblers and we caught a brief glimpse of Nightingale flitting between dense bushes. Interestingly the pond areas were well-stocked with Red-Crested Pochard, a bird which has colonised the area in the last decade. Although these highlights might sound mouth-watering the reserve wasn't actually at its best as we've often found Bluethroat, Penduline Tit, Great Reed Warbler, Garganey and occasionally Little Bittern and a variety of good waders, but these all eluded us.

Our total trip list was 89 with one lifer but you have to bear in mind that this is an inland area so you wouldn't expect quite as many birds as, say, East Anglia but it was a beautiful area to visit and, in the end, we were lucky with the climate. The food is good and the beer superb, plus accommodation in the rural areas can often be found much cheaper than in Britain. We had booked an apartment for three nights including two bedrooms, a sitting room and dining kitchen for the extravagant sum of 45 Euros per night! Walking is generally very easy and safe, and if your German's not up to much almost everyone can speak English. A Great trip!

Neil McCall, August 2011

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