

NORTHERN ITALY, JUNE 2009

by John Rayner

Following on from our visit to Portugal earlier this year to target some Western Palearctic 'Cat C' introductions, a brief visit to Northern Italy was arranged. We were still taking advantage of the ridiculously cheap air fares that were available. Would you believe £2.50 each way - tax and duty included, from East Midlands to Bergamo, with RyanAir? (I hope the C.E.O. Michael O'Leary doesn't read this or he really will start charging for using the toilets!). We always check-in online, and take hand baggage only to avoid excess fees.

Again we hoped to see certain 'Category C' birds that are now well established in the area but also planned to find time to explore the Italian Lakes region and Southern Alps.

17th June. A party of 5, Tony Armstrong, Mike Passant, John Rayner, Doug Smith and Fred Wake gathered at East Midlands Airport and, after a flight of less than 2 hours, arrived in Bergamo at 13.45. We had pre-arranged our hire car and were quickly on the road heading in a roughly south-west direction but skirting to the north of Milan.

Our first stop was a Bob-white Quail site at Boschi del Ticino but we failed to find any of the approximately 4000 Bob-whites that now inhabit Italy. Other than **Nightingales** singing and a couple of **Honey Buzzards** it was much the same as many Greater Manchester sites although Syntomid Moth and Sooty Copper butterfly added continental flavour. Oh, and it was 32 degrees as well!



Above: Sooty Copper



Above: Syntomid Moth

We remained in the area till early evening then made our way to nearby Novaro (pausing briefly for a roadside **Little Owl**) where we stayed on a bed and breakfast basis at Hotel Sogno. As we were set for an early start we arranged for packed breakfasts then ate an evening meal in the hotel.

18th June. On the road for 06.00 and under clear blue skies the temperature was already rising. We headed for Lama del Sesia, a large, sprawling reserve along the River Sesia valley. This is a rice growing area and we quickly found one of our targets, **Sacred Ibis**, looking strangely at home although many miles outside its natural range in Africa. A walk along a riverside track to a Heronry produced many more Sacred Ibis plus a nice selection of **Hérons (Grey, Night, Squacco)** and **Egrets (Little, Cattle, Great White)**. Also observed were **Hoopoes**, very showy **Nightingales** and a singing **Icterine Warbler**, which allowed scope views, but a nearby **Golden Oriole** remained 'heard only'. Very attractive dragonflies, Banded Darter and Brilliant Emerald were photographed but the Bob-whites that occur in the area again remained elusive. This was always going to be a difficult target in June - end of the breeding season /birds not calling/high vegetation.



Above: Rice Paddies, Lama del Sesia



Above: Sacred Ibis (copyright J Maarschalk)



Above: Banded Darter (female)



Above: Brilliant Emerald

We decided to leave the area at 09.50 and made a short journey north to the well known Palude Brabbia Reserve (Brabbia Marsh) just south of Lake Varese. This is an extensive reed bed complex which holds quite large breeding populations of Asian parrotbill species and our first access point was from the village of Cassinetta. Here we saw **Black Kites** and **Hobbies** overhead with an **Osprey** perched in a dead tree and **Great Reed Warblers** singing nearby but it was only as we were about to leave that we heard unfamiliar calls from a small party of 3 birds that proved to be **Ashy-throated Parrotbill**. Although they responded well to pishing they were remarkably elusive and eventually moved on.

The temperature was now rising into the low thirties as we transferred a few kilometres to Inarzo. We again accessed Palude Brabbia Reserve, this time finding some hides overlooking small pools. Highlights here were a pair of **Green Woodpeckers**, point blank views of a **Honey Buzzard** that didn't see us until the last minute and tried to land just a couple of metres away, male **Ferruginous Duck**, **Black Kites**, **Cetti's Warblers** and another flock of 6 **Ashy-throated Parrotbills** that showed really well. Insects were well represented but we only identified Scarce Chaser and both Beautiful and Banded Demoiselle.



Above: Palude Brabbia (M Passant)



Above: Searching for Parrotbills (M Passant)

After a late lunch we drove east (via Como and Lecco) then north alongside Lake Como (close now to the Swiss border) before swinging eastwards again to Sondrio. The nearby village of Aquino held **Serins, Black Redstarts, Crag Martins** and **Italian Sparrows** and we had a pleasant late afternoon walk alongside the river in beautiful alpine scenery before finding Hotel Schenatti in Sondrio, our base for the night. An excellent meal round the corner from the hotel at Trattoria Stadio was accompanied by much wine and beer.

19th June. A more leisurely breakfast this morning then we departed at 07.00 to attempt some alpine birding along the hair-pinned track to Alpe Mara. The weather was overcast but still very warm. At lower altitudes we found **Spotted Flycatchers, Nuthatch, Red-backed Shrike, Crossbills** and another **Honey Buzzard** (probably the most abundant raptor on the trip) plus Piedmont Ringlets and a magnificent Apollo butterfly. At higher altitudes we followed up harsh cries and were delighted with good views of a **Nutcracker** with **Crested Tits, Willow Tits** and **Redstart** nearby. Finally, as we neared the cloud base, we broke free of the coniferous belt and into a beautifully floriferous Alpine meadow where **Tree Pipits** fed young, but the best bird here was **Citril Finch**.



Above: Nutcracker (copyright Hofmann-photography.de)



Above: Alpine meadow – above Sodrio



Above: Piedmont Ringlet



Above: Alpenrose



Above: Alpine Clematis



Above: Four out of five (D Smith)

We departed Sondrio at 11.50 and a quick pizza in at a roadside stop by Lake Como also provided 2 more **Honey Buzzards**. No traffic problems getting back to Bergamo and we returned the hire car in good time having driven a total of 390 miles. However, there were considerable problems inside the airport when our hand baggage was rejected by security staff at the last minute. The difficulties lay with the tripods we were carrying and security staff were insistent that our bags would have to be checked into the hold. Time was now tight and we had to literally sprint back and forth to various points in the airport to check in the bags, pay 20 Euros surcharge per bag (last laugh to Michael O'Leary then) and complete the necessary paperwork. This is the first airport in the world we have come across that refuses to take tripods in hand baggage. Fortunately the flight was slightly delayed and we eventually took off at 15.45 for an uneventful journey home.

We recorded 78 species of birds, 19 species of butterfly, 10 species of dragonfly and an abundance of alpine flowers. All photographs by J Rayner unless otherwise indicated. I would like to thank John Maaschalk for allowing the use of his Sacred Ibis image.

This might sound like a lot of travelling in such a brief time but really it is not much different to a long weekend in, say, Scotland or Norfolk and with a flight time of under 2 hours it's possibly quicker to get to Bergamo. Also, as we travelled on almost the longest day of the year, there was a great deal of daylight and birding time available. A cheap and highly recommended trip - but perhaps leave the tripod at home.

John Rayner, June 2009

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