

PO DELTA, ITALY OCTOBER 2007

by Tim Wilcox

Excited by the opportunity of taking a few days extra to go birdwatching in the Po Delta after a work visit to Venice (I know hard job but someone's got to do it!) I set about exploring my options. When enquiring about the out of print Helm book, *Where to Watch Birds in Italy* the helpful chap who runs In Focus at Martin Mere said 'go to the airport and fly somewhere else'. Not encouraging. Eventually I found some bird-related information at www.parcodelta.it including a complete list of species seen in the Delta at www.parcodelta.it/fauna/Echeck_uccelli.html

The list is a positive cornucopia – a whopping 344 species. I decided to base myself in the delightful small town of Comacchio at the north end of the gigantic Valli di Comacchio lagoon. I arrived on Sunday 14th to find myself in the middle of the Sagra Dell'Anguilla – the eel festival. A waiter in Venice had told me about 'the hills' of Comacchio. 'No its flat' I protested. I soon discovered that eels are the lifeblood of Comacchio which once made its fortune fishing them and other species from the lagoon. So much so did 'Little Venice' and its rival wealth annoy the Venetians that they sailed down from the north and flattened the place. It still relies on fishing using mechanically-operated nets which dip in and out of canals dug along parts of the lagoon's edge to trap the eels at the start of their long journey to the Sargasso sea – particularly on moonless nights throughout October and November. Its marinated eels are an EC-protected food like Camembert or Chianti. The festival was a riot of crowds and market stalls groaning with amazing hams and cheeses and stands selling the grilled eels which provided the excuse for the party (delicious by the way).



Comacchio is nearly as car-free as Venice and only sports one hotel which was rammed with diners so it was off to the nearby lidos to check in at the first out-of-season hotel I came across – no problem as it was practically deserted on the coast and Comacchio too returned to its sleepy self by the Monday.

The tourist office in Comacchio, when it finally reopened after the obligatory 3 hour siesta closing, provided an informative leaflet in English complete with maps of the different parts of the national park which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It stretches for about 80km from the Valle di Gorino on the modern mouth of the Po in the north to the Cervia salt pans in the south. It has 6 distinct areas: Volano-Meola-Goro, the Vallette di Ostellato to the west of Comacchio, the Valli di Comacchio the giant lagoon at its centre, the Punte Alberete/Pialassa della Balona/Pineta s.Vitale area, the Classe pinewoods and Cervia salt pans and the Campotto di Argenta. Clearly I was only going to get a taster of what would take easily a week to cover physically so I concentrated on the area around the lagoon and the areas of Valle Mandriole and Punte Alberete.



So what did I see? Well not really as much as I'd hoped for as the summer breeding birds had departed and many wintering species were yet to arrive. Three lifers made the whole thing very worthwhile but there was much tramping about and driving around trying to find the spots marked on the map which had promised a well-organised RSPB/WWT setup. In effect there was practically nothing just a few tiny brown road signs to the main places mentioned and only one hide and one tower that I came across.

Sunday 15 Oct 5.00pm

Sunny with very pleasant late afternoon warmth c. 17°C

After eventually finding my way round the long detour by road necessary to get to the Stazione da pesca Foce information centre and 'station' I set off towards the Salina di Comacchio. I was lucky enough to encounter a local birder who was well-informed and was able to give me some tips. He spoke Italian, I spoke English and we sort of managed to understand each other with the help of our bird guides. It turned out that the tiny number of birders I encountered over 2 and a half days were most jealous of our excellent guides (Collins) as they have very little choice in Italian and they are old and poorly illustrated.

Greater Flamingo- 3 visible from the raised path – my first lifer from the park

Little Egrets- 50+ visible

Great White Egret- 6

Green Sandpiper

Great Crested Grebes- numerous

Little Grebe- 1

Avocet- 18

Yellow-Legged Gulls- 200+

Dunlin- 5

Redshank

Greenshank

Curlew

Kingfisher- pair

Coots- 500+

Black Tern

Also numerous **Black-headed Gulls** and **Mallards**



Above: The Valli di Comacchio lagoon

Monday 15 Oct

Information Centre Quattrocchi 9.35am sunny and cool

Cetti's Warbler heard and seen well from top of canal bank. Cetti's were everywhere over the next 2 days.

The surrounding woods were alive with the sound of gunfire! October sees the beginning of the hunting season and wildlife parks are not immune from legal hunting. Around the lagoon only locals are allowed to hunt – so that's OK then. Only very small areas of the park are protected fully. Men in camo with guns and dogs emerged from the woods to collect their battered old Fiats and pickup trucks. It seems birding in Italy in autumn is a dangerous pursuit!

When I finally got on the right side of the canal for the 40 foot observation tower which looks out over the Valle Mandriole this turned out to be one of the best spots.

Hooded Crow

Teal- 1,000+

Mallard- 100+

Shoveler

Pochard
Robin, Magpies, Starlings
Cormorant- 50+
Grey Heron- 30+
Great White Egret- 3 distant
Little Grebe- 1
Great Crested Grebe- 20+
Avocet- 2
Snipe
Black-headed Gulls- numerous
Female **Marsh Harrier**
Redshank
Lapwing- 6
Kingfisher
A feral **Black Swan**

And the main event - my second lifer - a **Pygmy Cormorant** just visible on a small piece of dead wood at the edge of the lagoon next to a Moorhen which provided a useful size comparison. It then slipped into the water and swam off out of view behind trees below the tower.

Boscoforte 12.15pm getting warmer

Chiffchaff
Shelduck
Great White Egret
Grey Heron
Greenfinch- 30+
Italian Sparrow- 30+ in bushes
Stonechat
Woodpigeon over
Clouded Yellow butterfly
Sedge Warbler- 2

And finally providing some brief but excellent views a Moustached Warbler – one of the resident species. Seen from behind initially showing bold dark brown streaking against rufous Cetti's-coloured ground and then turning to show dark crown and strongly demarcated whitish throat and lighter reddish breast.

Also **Kestrel** and 4 **Buzzards** from the road.

Stazione da Pesca Foce, Valli di Comacchio 4.00pm

Sandwich Terns- 3
Yellow-legged Gulls again and other common species seen Sunday
Greater Flamingos- 386 a magnificent sight
Black-Necked Grebes- 20+
Black Tern
Common Sandpiper- 2

Tuesday 16 Oct

10.30am for boat trip booked for 11.00. Sunny after chilly start. I was the only passenger and my guide was Riccardo Gennari aka 'Riky (sic) Ranger' one of the voluntary wardens – the only one I encountered. He was knowledgeable and spoke good English which helped. He was also an ex-hunter so knew all about that side of life on the lagoon. The main itinerary was a trip to an isolated fishing station occupied in the winter months until 1960.

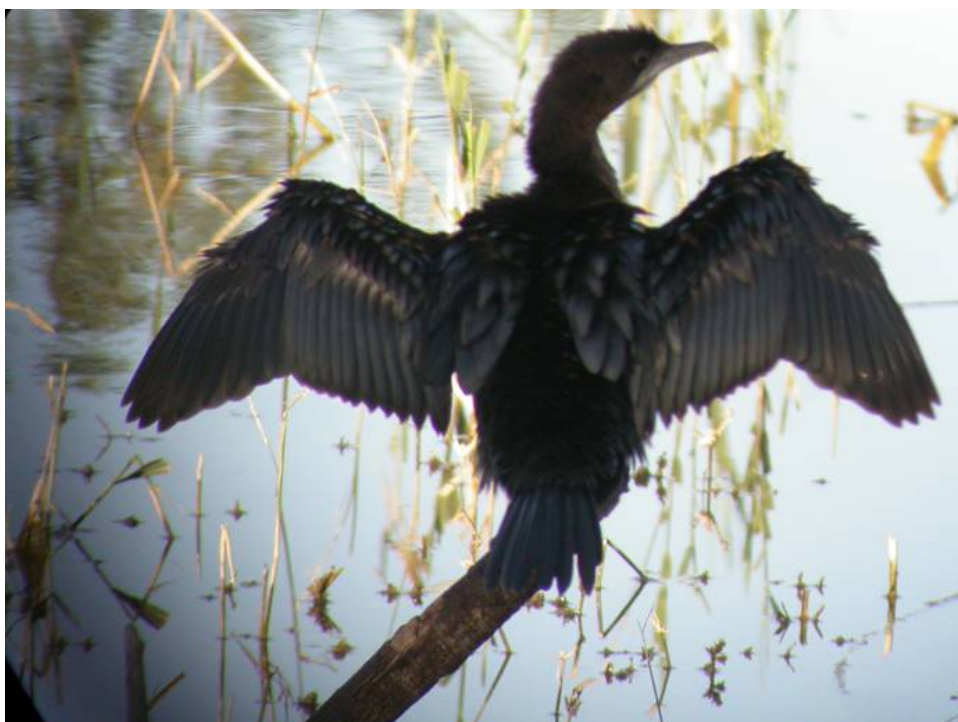


Above: Riccardo and our non-smiling captain

Apart from a **Kingfisher** and 10 **Black Necked Grebes** in the channels near where the boat was moored, the usual **Great White** and **Little Egrets**, **Grey Herons** and **Sandwich Terns** there was little to see on the trip unfortunately. The highlight was a **Black Tern** – probably the same bird perched on a pole as the boat passed. Riccardo pointed out the small islands surrounded by plastic ducks soon to be used by the hunters and a small island which had been home to pairs of breeding Slender-billed Gulls in the summer. On our return to the fishing station a flock of small waders flew quickly above a bank before disappearing but remained frustratingly unidentified by either of us. It would be nice to think they might have been some of the reportedly resident Kentish Plovers but this will remain off my list.

Punte Alberete 3.20pm

A circular walk through woods filled with reedy and stagnant pools this is apparently home to 20 pairs of Ferruginous Duck and in the summer breeding Red-Crested Pochard. The Pochards had gone and the Ferruginous Ducks remained elusive but there was a hide and from it I enjoyed splendid close-in views of 5 **Pygmy Cormorants** and managed to get some digiscoped pictures. A fine end to the trip.



To sum up I wouldn't recommend going out of the way to visit the park at this time of year but I'm told that in spring it is alive with breeding birds including Purple Heron, Night Heron, Squacco Heron, Little Bittern, Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill, White Stork, Red-footed Falcon, Collared Pratincole, Kentish Plover, Scops Owl, At least one pair of Rollers found by Riccardo, hundreds of Bee-Eaters, Crested Lark, Moustached Warbler, Spanish Sparrow and Cirl Bunting amongst other species.

Tim Wilcox, October 2007

www.manchesterbirding.com