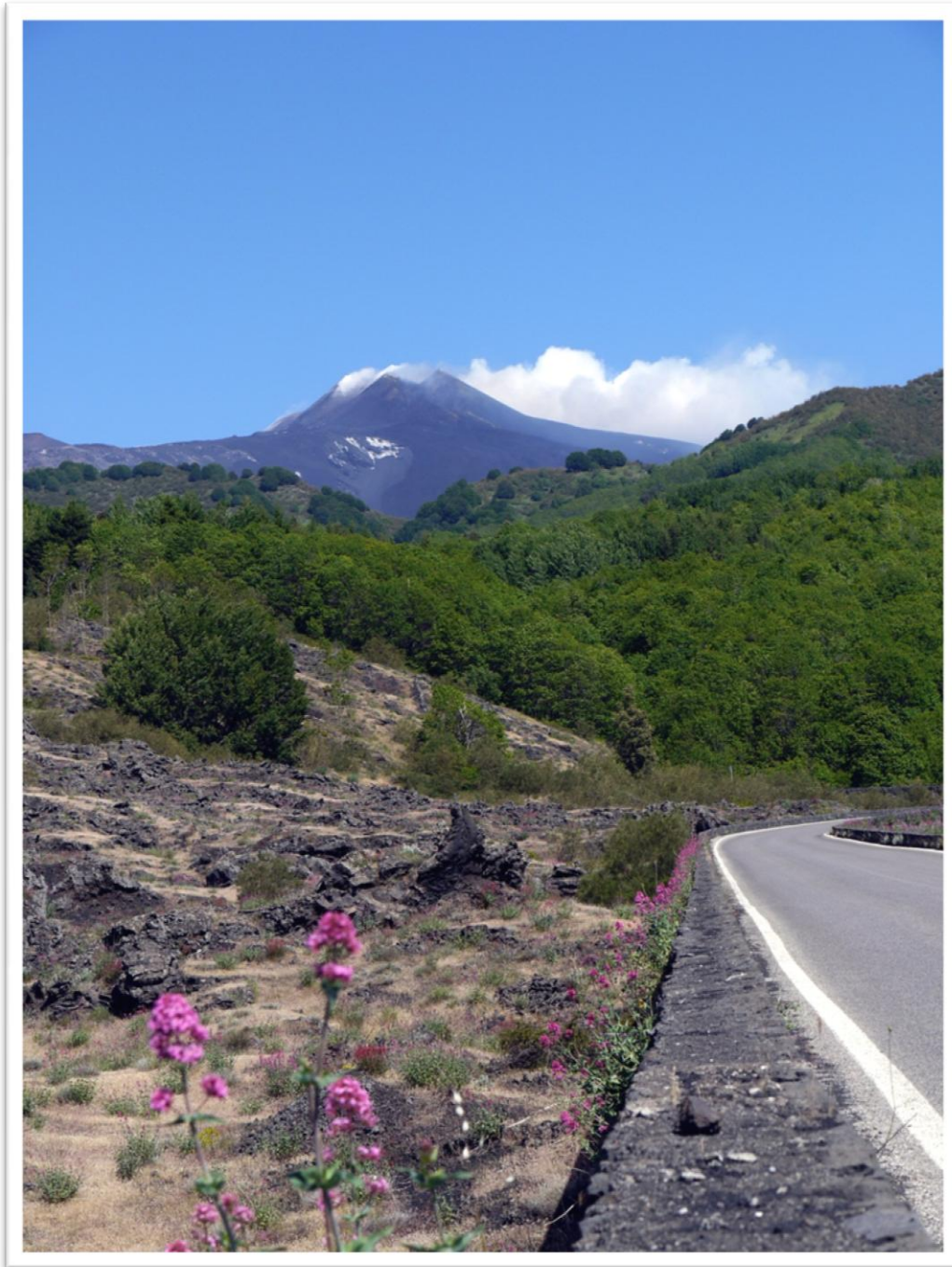


Eastern Sicily
20th May to 3rd June 2012

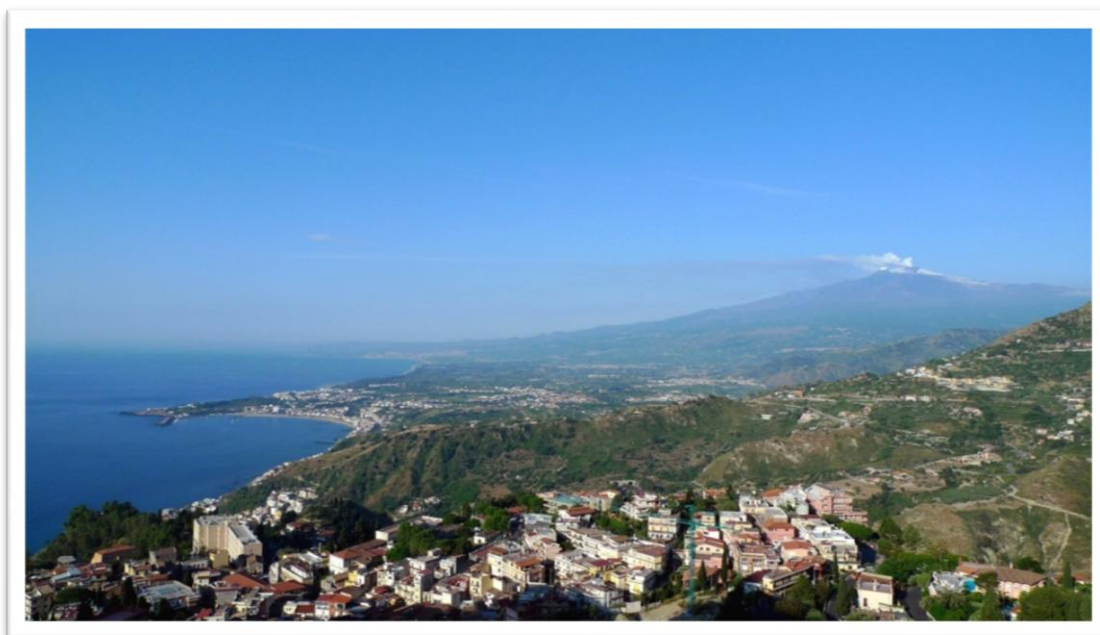


By David Bowman

INTRODUCTION

Sicily doesn't usually feature heavily on most birders wish-lists but has a great deal to offer, in terms of some special birds, gorgeous scenery, friendly people and wonderful local cuisine. This wasn't a birding holiday, as Em and I had been wanting to explore the island for some time, particularly to see some of the historical sites and to get to grips with Mount Etna. I did, inevitably, have my binoculars with me at all times, however. We also managed to briefly visit most of the birding hot-spots, though as migration was largely over, bird numbers and variety were less than you would expect to experience in April and early May. Hopefully this report will give an idea of what can be seen, out of peak times, and of the best sites to visit.

We booked our flights through Thompsons and flew from Manchester to Catania at a cost of about £250 per person return. We then based ourselves for a week at Taormina in the north-east and then a week in the south east, near Syracuse, before returning for our last night to a hotel at Giarre, a few miles north of Catania. At Taormina we stayed at the Hotel Sole Castello at a cost of about £30 per person per night, including breakfast. <http://www.hotelsolecastello.it/taormina-3stars-hotel/> The Sole Castello is a nice hotel with pool, elevated, literally, to true splendour by the outstanding views it offers over the coast and across towards Etna. Taormina is the gem of the north-east coast of Sicily and something of a magnet for the glitterati. It is a pretty, medieval town, standing on a sheer rock pinnacle, with a cable car giving access to a pretty cove and beach hundreds of feet below. The Hotel Sole Castello stands on another pinnacle, hundreds of feet above Taormina, linked to the town by either a shuttle bus or by the "Via Crucis", a stunning seven hundred step stairway. This winds down through pretty, flower-strewn scrub, is excellent for birds, butterflies and lizards and was our preferred route into the town.



View from the Hotel Sole Castello, Taormina, Mount Etna in the distance

For our second week we rented a villa at Plemmirio, south of Syracuse. Plemmirio is an unspoilt, protected area with a rocky coastline, clear seas, coral reefs and large stretches of coastal garigue. We found the Villa Casablanca on the Owners Direct web-site and really loved the place. It is characterful, with large grounds which look over garigue to the sea. From a birding point of view, it has a large roof terrace which is excellent for sea-watching and is also just a fifteen minute walk from what is probably Italy's prime migration and rarity site, at Capo Murro di Porco. <http://www.ownersdirect.co.uk/italy/IT132.htm>



View from the roof terrace of Villa Casablanca, Plemmirio

We rented a car for the two weeks from Holiday Autos, which cost a surprisingly cheap £250. Driving in Sicily was a pleasure – at least away from the major towns. The roads were largely deserted and the views almost always stupendous.

THE BIRDING SITES

Sicily is probably most famous, in a birding context, for the raptor migration in spring-time across the Straits of Messina to mainland Italy. An estimated 30,000 birds of prey cross the Straits every spring and LIPU has done a remarkable job of stopping the bird shooting which was once endemic on the Sicilian side. Although we visited the Straits out of interest, just a few Honey Buzzards were straggling through by then. The sites listed below were also all visited, some of them only briefly, and would warrant serious attention given more time.

Taormina

Taormina has some nice Mediterranean birds, mainly encountered when drinking a glass of Etna Bianco on the hotel balcony, or when walking up and down the Via Crucis. These included Blue Rock Thrush, Sardinian Warbler, Serin, Pallid Swift, Alpine Swift, Hoopoe, Golden Oriole, Hobby and Western Bonelli's Warbler, along with many more common species.

Etna Nord

At the northern approach to Mount Etna at Piano Provenzana, you can park and walk up through lava fields, with pine woods all around. This was productive for birds like Rock Bunting, Wood Lark, Cuckoo, Northern Wheatear, Chiffchaff, Serin, Nuthatch and Coal Tit, alongside more common species.



A fox scavenging on the slopes of Mount Etna

Capo Murro di Porco

This was my favourite birding spot. It is the Sicilian equivalent of Spurn Point on the English east coast i.e. a funnel for migrants and with a reputation as Italy's rarity hot-spot. It is a small, limestone peninsula, which juts out into the Ionian Sea as the most eastern point in Sicily. There is extensive garigue, dominated by Dwarf Palms, offering great cover for tired migrants. Birds that have turned up in the past include: Bar-tailed Desert lark, Lesser Short-toed Lark, Isabelline Wheatear, Ruppell's Warbler, Trumpeter Finch, Desert Wheatear etc. Although migration was largely over it was still a great place to spend time, looking for warblers in the scrub or sitting 'scoping seabirds passing just yards off shore. I managed to find a Rufous Bush-chat among the scores of Sardinian Warblers, Crested Larks, Spanish Sparrows, Serins, Short-toed Larks, Woodchat Shrikes etc. Scopoli's Shearwaters were constantly moving past and the occasional Dolphin pod came close to shore. Back at the villa, sitting on the roof terrace in the late afternoon, drinking the local wines and eating olives, pistachios and cheese while 'scoping the Scopoli's Shearwaters was a very nice way to round off the day. Then the moon and Venus would rise, a score or so bats would start hunting and a couple of

Scops Owls would provide the soundtrack to a very special place. The villa garden, which includes a large, weedy plot outside of the shady gardens also turned up some good birds, with Woodchat Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher, Crested Lark, Serin, Spanish Sparrow and Sardinian Warbler all regulars.



The path down to the lighthouse at Capo Murro di Porco

Fonte Ciane and the Syracuse Salinas

These two places form a long narrow protected area, starting inland at Fonte Ciane and then running down to the Salinas at the coast. They are only a fifteen minute drive from the villa and are very rich in other wildlife as well as birds. Fonte Ciane is a unique place, something of an oasis with a freshwater spring and apparently the only Papyrus swamp outside of North Africa. The place is very atmospheric and features in the Greek legend about Persephone being taken down into Hades at this point, with the spring forming from the tears cried by her close friend Ciane. There are also large Phragmites reed beds and the water from the spring forms a reedy waterway which flows down to the coast at the Salinas.

The Salinas consists of a number of large lagoons and reedbeds, as well as a shingle spit. Birds at Fonte Ciane included large numbers of Reed Warblers, Cetti's Warblers and Zitting Cisticolas, plus Golden Oriole and loads of butterflies, frogs and dragonflies. The Salinas was excellent for birds. On my one early morning visit I managed to see: Purple Swamphen, Black-winged Stilt, Little Terns at their breeding colony, Little Ringed Plover, Reed Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Kingfisher, Golden Oriole, Turtle Dove, Serin, Blackcap, Little Grebe, Hobby and loads of other commoner species. Given regular visits during passage times, this felt like a place where almost anything could turn up. Interestingly, as with all the sites I'll mention, I encountered not a single other birder, which gives an idea of how under-watched Sicily is.



Fonte Ciane

Vendicari

This is the prime wetland reserve of south-east Sicily. It has extensive dune slacks, shallow lagoons, reed beds, saltworks, an island, olive groves and extensive areas of coastal garigue. In all, the reserve covers 1,500 hectares. Birds seen in the past include: Pallas's Gull, Audouin's Gull, Slender-billed Gull, Greater Flamingo, Black Stork, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, Caspian Tern, Glossy Ibis, Desert Wheatear, White Pelican, Ruppell's Warbler etc. Em and I called in when visiting the beautiful nearby town of Noto and had an hours walk around the garigue in the heat of the day, so barely scratched the surface of a place with an atmospheric and isolated feeling. The first bird I saw on getting out of the car was a Lanner Falcon hunting close by at low level, which wasn't bad. Spectacled Warbler, Short-toed Lark and Quail were other good finds.

Biviere di Lentini

This large, shallow natural lake once used to hold some of the Mediterranean's largest populations of wildfowl and waterbirds. Drained after the Second World War, in 1991 it was recreated artificially as a 600 hectare bunded lagoon, with reed beds at one end. It is said to hold the highest numbers of waterbirds in the whole of Sicily. Large numbers of wildfowl, Coots, waders, herons, egrets, raptors and geese are said to be regularly present, with breeding Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, Ferruginous Duck, Garganey, Little Egret, Stone Curlew etc. Lanner and Peregrine are said to be daily visitors. Entry is by permit, obtained at the Consorzio per la Bonifica del Lago di Lentini, in the nearby town of Lentini. We didn't have time to do this, so just made a ten minute stop to look over the wire fence at an elevated viewpoint on the S385. As my scope was packed away for the journey home, I hardly scratched the surface of a very exciting site. Lots of Little Egrets, Grey Herons, Cormorants and Great Crested Grebes were evident and I saw more Turtle Doves here than anywhere else.



Savoca, the hill village north of Taormina where parts of “The Godfather” were filmed

David Bowman

SPECIES LIST

1	MALLARD	A few at Vendicari and the Syracuse Salinas
2	ROCK PARTRIDGE	Two at Etna Nord
3	QUAIL	Two calling at Vendicari
4	PHEASANT	One or two every day at Capo Murro di Porco
5	LITTLE GREBE	Two pairs with young at The Syracuse Salinas
6	GREAT CRESTED GREBE	Scores at the Biviere di Lentini
7	SCOPOLI'S SHEARWATER	Up to 60 an hour at Murro di Porco and from Villa Casablanca
8	YELKOUAN SHEARWATER	No more than 3 per day among the Scopoli's
9	GREAT CORMORANT	Scarce coastally, common at Lentini
10	CATTLE EGRET	Just two near Lentini
11	LITTLE EGRET	Singles at Messina, the Salinas and scores at Lentini
12	GREY HERON	A few at the Salinas, dozens at Lentini

13	WHITE STORK	Only sighting was an occupied nest near Lentini
14	BLACK KITE	Just odd ones near the coast
15	COMMON BUZZARD	Seen everywhere in small numbers
16	HONEY BUZZARD	Small migrating flocks at Messina and Savoca
17	SPARROWHAWK	One at Vendicari
18	COMMON KESTREL	Common, 3 pairs with young, 2 at Taormina and 1 at the villa
19	LESSER KESTREL	Flock of 5 near Noto
20	HOBBY	Five sightings spread across the whole area
21	LANNER FALCON	One at Vendicari
22	WATER RAIL	Singles at Fonte Ciane and Vendicari
23	COOT	Ten at the Salinas
24	PURPLE SWAMPHEN	Three at the Salinas
25	BLACK-WINGED STILT	A few at the Salinas
26	KENTISH PLOVER	A pair possibly nesting on a shingle bar at the Salinas
27	BLACK-HEADED GULL	Scarce with just 6 at Vendicari
28	YELLOW-LEGGED GULL	Common coastally
29	LITTLE TERN	A small colony at the Salinas and a few daily at the coast
30	ROCK DOVE	Presumably pure bred birds were common in the mountains
31	FERAL PIGEON	Common around towns
32	STOCK DOVE	Small numbers near more wooded areas
33	WOOD PIGEON	Common everywhere
34	COLLARED DOVE	Common everywhere
35	TURTLE DOVE	Scarce except at Lentini
36	CUCKOO	One at Etna Nord
37	TAWNY OWL	One calling at Taormina
38	SCOPS OWL	Up to 3 nightly at the Villa and one at Giarre
39	COMMON SWIFT	Very common with 1,000s over the main towns
40	PALLID SWIFT	Common with 100s near the main towns
41	ALPINE SWIFT	Around 40 daily at Taormina
42	HOOPOE	One or two daily at most sites
43	KINGFISHER	One at the Salinas
44	BEE-EATER	A couple of small groups over-head at the Villa
45	GT SPOTTED WOODPECKER	One in the hills above Messina
46	CRESTED LARK	Common everywhere
47	WOODLARK	A couple singing at Etna Nord
48	SHORT-TOED LARK	A few near Capo Murro di Porco and at Vendicari
49	CRAG MARTIN	A few in the hills above Messina
50	BARN SWALLOW	More numerous in the north around Messina
51	RED-RUMPED SWALLOW	Daily over the villa garden in small numbers
52	HOUSE MARTIN	Common breeder everywhere
53	TAWNY PIPIT	Singles at Murro di Porco and Vendicari
54	WHITE WAGTAIL	A few at most sites
55	ROBIN	Skulking but present in most suitable habitats
56	NIGHTINGALE	Skulking but present in most suitable habitat
57	RUFIOUS BUSH ROBIN	One on the track at Murro di Porco gave great views
58	NORTHERN WHEATEAR	Common around Mount Etna
59	STONECHAT	A few in the hillier areas
60	MISTLE THRUSH	Two in the hills above Messina
61	BLACKBIRD	Common throughout
62	BLUE ROCK THRUSH	Two pairs feeding young near hotel in Taormina
63	BLACKCAP	Fairly common throughout
64	WHITETHROAT	Uncommon in scrubby habitats
65	SARDINIAN WARBLER	Extremely common e.g. scores at Murro di Porco

66	SPECTACLED WARBLER	Two at Vendicari
67	SUBALPINE WARBLER	Odd ones in the hills
68	DARTFORD WARBLER	Had a brief glimpse of a possible at Murro di Porco
69	ZITTING CISTICOLA	Common at Murro di Porco, Vendicari, Fonte Ciane/Salinas
70	CETTI'S WARBLER	Common at Vendicari and Fonte Ciane/Salinas
71	REED WARBLER	Very common at Vendicari and Fonte Ciane/Salinas
72	GREAT REED WARBLER	Uncommon at Vendicari and the Salinas
73	W. BONELLI'S WARBLER	One singing at Taormina may have been a late migrant
74	CHIFFCHAFF	A few around Etna Nord
75	FIRECREST	Odd ones in suitable habitat
76	WREN	Fairly common throughout
77	SPOTTED FLYCATCHER	One in the Villa garden was the only record
78	GREAT TIT	A few, most places
79	COAL TIT	Only seen around Etna Nord, where fairly common
80	BLUE TIT	Fairly common throughout
81	LONG-TAILED TIT	Scarce in suitable habitat
82	NUTHATCH	One at Etna Nord was the only sighting
83	WOODCHAT SHRIKE	Several daily at Murro di Porco and in Villa grounds
84	MAGPIE	Surprisingly common throughout
85	JAY	Surprisingly common throughout
86	JACKDAW	Common throughout
87	HOODED CROW	Fairly common everywhere
88	RAVEN	Just a few daily in the higher areas
89	SPOTLESS STARLING	Common everywhere
90	GOLDEN ORIOLE	Seen daily in suitable habitat
91	SPANISH SPARROW	Very common, breeding in Villa garden
92	ITALIAN SPARROW	Some male Sparrows showed characteristics of this hybrid
93	TREE SPARROW	Very common, regular in the Villa garden
94	ROCK SPARROW	A few in the wilder, hilly areas
95	CHAFFINCH	Common but more prevalent in the hilly areas
96	LINNET	Uncommon, odd ones in most places
97	GOLDFINCH	Common throughout
98	GREENFINCH	Fairly common everywhere
99	SERIN	Very common throughout
100	CIRL BUNTING	A few in most areas
101	CORN BUNTING	Fairly common throughout
102	ROCK BUNTING	Common around Mount Etna

OTHER SIGHTINGS

1	WESTERN HEDGEHOG	A few daily
2	BAT species	Very common, large and small but not identified
3	RED FOX	Four sightings, photographed at Etna Sud
4	WEASEL	One sighting near Etna Nord
5	CORSICAN HARE	Several on the drive to Etna Nord
6	RABBIT	Fairly common
7	CRESTED PORCUPINE	One near Fonte Ciane

8	BOTTLE-NOSED DOLPHIN	Pods at Murro di Porco and from the Villa roof terrace
9	WESTERN WHIP SNAKE	One crossing the road
10	EDIBLE FROG	Common at Fonte Ciane
11	GREEN LIZARD	Uncommon. Seen at Fonte Ciane and Vendicari
12	SICILIAN WALL LIZARD	Very common at all sites
13	SWALLOWTAIL	A few at the damper sites
14	SCARCE SWALLOWTAIL	A few in higher rockier habitats
15	SOUTHERN FESTOON	Scarce on dry, rocky slopes
16	BLACK-VEINED WHITE	Fairly common in cultivated areas
17	LARGE WHITE	Common
18	SMALL WHITE	Common
19	GREEN-VEINED WHITE	A few at the Salinas
20	EASTERN BATH WHITE	Odd ones daily in varied habitat
21	CLOUDED YELLOW	Fairly common in most habitats
22	BRIMSTONE	A few daily
23	CLEOPATRA	A few daily
24	SMALL COPPER	Odd ones in a variety of habitats
25	TWO-TAILED PASHA	Several most days
26	PAINTED LADY	Fairly common
27	SMALL TORTOISESHELL	Fairly common
28	MARbled WHITE	Odd ones most days
29	MEADOW BROWN	Common
30	SPECKLED WOOD	Common