

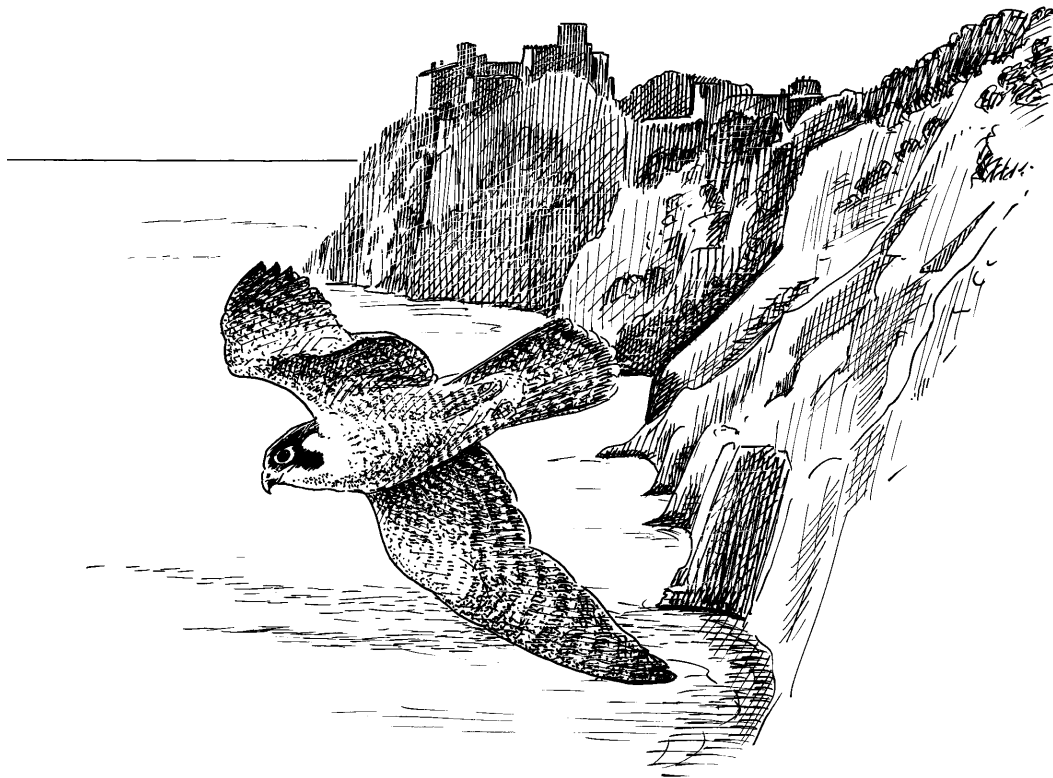
# Honeyguide

**WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS**

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## Mountains and Marshes of north-east Italy

29 May – 8 June 1994

**Mountains and Marshes of north-east Italy**  
**29 May – 8 June 1994**

List of participants

Jane Dunlop  
Jim and Pat Pollok-Morris  
Jennie and Doug Le Huquet  
George and Hazel Shutter

Leader

Paul Tout

Our hostess: Luciana Lauretano, Hotel Alla Pineta, Sistiana

All Honeyguide holidays make a contribution towards the conservation of the wildlife in the country visited. This holiday went one step further with contributions of £175 (£25 per head) to LIPU, Italy and £100 to the Bird Watching and Bird Study Association of Slovenia. There are letters from LIPU UK's Roger Jordan and Peter Trontelj in Slovenia at the end of this report.

Front cover illustration by Rob Hume: peregrine over the Rilke Path.

Report written by Paul Tout. This version was re-typed from a faint printing original in December 2014.

### Day 1 – Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> May: Venice to Sistiana, Rilke Path

After an uneventful drive from Venice where we were met by Paul, enlivened only by a view of a buzzard on a post beside the motorway, we stopped for an ice-cream (obligatory in Italy) before going onto the hotel where we were welcomed by Luciana and her son Claudio. Before dinner there was time to pay a quick visit to the Rilke path overlooking the Adriatic across the road from the hotel. Here we were treated to excellent views of Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting and Black Redstart and admired the narrow strip of Mediterranean vegetation, including evergreen oaks *Quercus ilex* and Broad-leaved Phillyrea *Phillyrea latifolia*.

### Day 2 – Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> May: Carsiana, Monte Stena, Monte Lanaro

We began the morning with a visit to a unique botanical garden, Carsiana, where 800 species of Karst plants have been collected and plated in the natural setting of a dolina (a convex depression on the limestone caused by the collapse of the roof of a cave), where the structure gives the maximum range of conditions of light and shade, dryness and humidity, supporting a huge range of species in a limited area.

Here Paul explained a little of the history of the area, its deforestation, maintenance as grassland through grazing and the subsequent return of forest since the Second World War as local people gave up grazing and woodcutting. Here we were able to familiarise ourselves with some of the plants and trees which we would encounter in the days ahead and although birds were not much in evidence we were tantalised by calling hawfinches which remained all but invisible in the thick canopy.

Next stop was Monte Stena, one of the last areas of open grassland remaining in the Province of Trieste, trees being kept at bay by the powerful easterly wind, the 'Bora' which often blows for weeks at a time during the winter. Here we were treated to excellent views of Woodlark and Tawny Pipit. Lucky members of the group saw Crested Tits in the narrow strip of pines that borders the grassland and although the usual pair of red-backed shrikes was nowhere to be seen, the entire group was treated to a very cooperative Woodchat, much the rarest of the four European shrikes in the region and a real bonus for Paul who has to pinch himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

After lunch we moved on to a pleasant walk to the summit of Monte Lanaro, through light woodland and sheets of Burning Bush *Dictamnus albus*. At the summit the bad weather held off and the several plants of Late Spider Orchid *Ophrys sphegodes* located made a fitting climax to the day.

### Day 3 – Monday 31<sup>st</sup> May – Cerknisko Jezero

Today we crossed the border for our first visit to Slovenia, the wealthiest and most politically stable of the newly independent republics of the former Yugoslavia, to visit the lake of Cerknica. This huge turlough (a seasonally-flooded lake in a limestone area) covering 3500 hectares is one of the finest in the world, with many rare and unusual species.

Starting our circumnavigation of the lake we were disappointed to see how low it was, the dry spring having exposed large areas of grassland, but we brightened up when a Squacco Heron was flushed from a bank. There was plenty to watch, with Grey-headed wagtails (the local race of our Yellow Wagtail), Reed Buntings and Sedge Warbler in song. Good views of Red-backed Shrikes were obtained and overhead the air was filled with Hobbies, perhaps 50 in all, hunting dragonflies. One surprising record was a breeding Bittern. Less unusual were the distant views of Short-toed Eagle and Marsh Harrier. Many of the group were surprised to see Fieldfares in the meadows in warm pleasant sunshine – in Britain we are accustomed to seeing them in the

winter, but in eastern Europe the species breeds much further south, even in wooded gardens in lowland areas.

There was plenty for the botanists and butterfly lovers; especially pleasing were the stands of wild gladioli *Gladiolus communis* waving in the wind. Although not one of the many Corncrakes present at the lake could be provoked into singing with a tape-recording, most of the group did see a Curlew in song – here the species is at the southern limit of its world distribution as a breeding species.

#### Day 4 – Tuesday 1s June: Medea; Gonars; Isola della Cona; Aquileia

A day spent near base today. We first visited a working gravel pit where Bee-eaters nest. As we arrived and got out of the minibus, the birds were to be seen hawking insects above the quarry. A short walk down a farm track put us in a better position to observe them well and two pairs could be seen sitting on the perimeter fence with a large bulldozer working just a few yards away.

A short distance away, where the high stony plateau meets the low, silty coastal area, a line springs reaches the surface. Here, the cold oxygen-poor water inhibits decomposition and as the peat has accumulated, raised bogs have been formed. The one we visited, near the town of Gonars, is one of the best examples remaining.

Getting out of the minibus we were greeted by singing Yellowhammers, Nightingales, Cuckoos and Turtle Doves but had to wait a while before one of the pairs of Montagu's Harriers which breed at the site came into view. Splendid examples of various marsh orchids *Dactyloriza* sp., *Serapias vomeraceae* and Marsh Helleborine *Epipactis palustris* were found.

Lunch was taken at the visitor centre of a new nature reserve at Isola della Cona at the mouth of the river Isonzo. Here, 30 hectares of farmland reclaimed from the marshes has been re-flooded to encourage wildlife to wildlife, and when added to the existing 1000 hectares of woodland, reedbed, saltmarsh and mudflat represents a real oasis for wetland birds at the very northern tip of the Adriatic. Many migrant birds stop off in spring before having to cross the Alps on their journey north. The vegetation is kept in optimum condition, short and sparse for wading birds with the help of Camargue horses brought from the delta of the River Po.

Many species were added to the holiday list in the course of the afternoon, including Little Bittern, Little Egret, Glossy Ibis, Gadwall, Wigeon, Garganey, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Black Tern, Cetti's Warbler, and Great Reed Warbler.

After an earlier dinner than usual we went out in the evening to an open area near the hotel to look for Nightjars, three males of which were heard. One circled the group, investigating this strange apparition in his territory at sunset.

#### Day 5 – Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> June: Julian Pre-Alps, Forgaria, Val Venzonasse

Today we headed for the mountains to visit the visitor centre at Forgaria where Griffon Vultures are being reintroduced. Staring up at the hot rock faces, here and there dotted with Evergreen Oak, the vultures soon came into view soaring on the rising thermals before coming down to the feeding site to join the many ravens and Black Kites already gathering around the carcass of a pig.

All of a sudden, a Griffon bearing a ragged wing tag swooped down to land on the large aviary where birds are being prepared for release. The wing tag showed that she was a wild bird born on an island off the coast of Dalmatia in Croatia four years ago. She has visited the centre each

year since then, spending the summer in the Alps before returning to the Dalmatian islands for the winter.

After lunch it was off to one of the pre-alpine valleys, Val Venzonasse, where the usually ubiquitous Chiffchaffs are large replaced by Bonelli's Warblers, their short trills filling the air. Although difficult to observe, reasonable views were had by more patient and lucky members of the party. Other birds of interest seen included a splendid Golden Eagle being mobbed by a pair of Ravens and Honey Buzzard. Both the Orange Lily *Lilium bulberiferum* and the Carnic Lily *Lilium carniolicum* were found in the grassland.

#### Day 6 – Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> June: Forest of Trnova

An early start this morning and back to Slovenia to visit a range of mountains just over the border from Italy. Although heavily managed for timber production, the Forest of Trnova has a rich variety of wildlife, both in the woodlands and the fine subalpine grasslands.

Passing through tiny villages in the Karst and across a river valley we stopped below some crags. As we got out of the van, a superb male Golden Eagle flew out from its nest, soon to be joined by his much larger mate. For a quarter of an hour or so the pair treated us to first-rate views, both perched on the crags and in flight. The nest, less than a kilometre from the nearest village, was clearly visible. Newly-constructed, it was being used in preference to the much larger nest about 10 metres away which the pair had used for the last four years.

After an early lunch, a walk through the splendid grasslands revealed many new and interesting plants including the endemic flax *Linum tommasini*. The area yielded Rock Thrush and Tree Pipit for our bird list as expected.

Our next stop was a few kilometres away in the forest, where the collapse of caves has produced two of the finest dolinas in the world. One, called Paradana, is so deep and dark as to remain below freezing throughout the year. As we descended into the dolina we felt the temperature drop; Beech gave way to White Fir and as we neared the grassland in the floor of the depression there was a cold blast of air from the cave entrance. From the open area 'above the tree-line' we could see vole runs through the tufts on what appeared to be Mountain Pansy *Viola lutea*. As we climbed back out we could hear the songs of several Firecrests and the call of a Willow Tit.

A rock wall above the second dolina revealed large numbers of butterworts *Pinguicula* sp., Yellow Veronica *Paedorata lutea* and Wulfen's Primrose *Primula wulfeniana*.

#### Day 7 – Friday 4<sup>th</sup> June: Doberdo del Lago

A half-day only today, and a visit to a local turlough. Small birds were abundant, with many Nightingales, Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, a Marsh Tit and a Hawfinch for some lucky observers. Better views of Cirl and Rock Buntings were obtained than at the start of the week.

#### Day 8 – Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> June: Ljubjansko Barje

For the birdwatchers, perhaps the best day of the week and a real taste of birding in eastern Europe, The day began with threatening storm clouds building over the hills behind the hotel, but Paul predicted, rightly for once, that beyond the mountains where we were bound we should get fine weather. How right he was! As we crossed the 'Spartiacque' where the rain falling on Slovenia ceases to flow into the Adriatic but into the Sava, Danube and the Black Sea, blue skies and brilliant visibility greeted us.

At Ljubjansko Barje, a large peat-bog south of Slovenia's capital we were met by Peter Trontelj, secretary of the Slovene Birdwatching and Preservation Society. Taking us past some unpromising shacks inhabited by refugees from the recent fighting in Bosnia, along a poplar-fringed gravel track, we heard the first of many River Warblers, sounding like cicadas. One, its beak wide open, was visible on a bush a short distance from the path.

In some meadows, cut late as bedding for cows in a local dairy, we could hear Grasshopper Warblers, but the hoped for Corncrakes we knew to be there did not materialise. Further along, we had brief views of Barred Warbler, and Goshawk and excellent ones of Red-backed shrike, Tree Pipit and Whinchat. For one participant the best birds were a family of Hawfinches, adults and young, bathing in a puddle on the path in front of us.

We drove on for lunch at a site beside the river Ljubljanica where we saw the locally-nesting Curlews. Then the action started ... as the sun warmed the surrounding land, large numbers of birds held up by the cold of the previous 24 hours began to move. First Buzzards and Honey Buzzards, perhaps a dozen in all, being mobbed by a pair of local peregrines, followed closely by a pair of storks. Which species would they be? We struck it lucky, one Black Stork and one White Stork sharing the same thermal above our heads, allowing for excellent comparisons to be made.

The icing on the cake was saved until last when Peter took us to a site on the edge of the bog. There, sitting on top of a bush beside the road was an adult male Scarlet Rosefinch in song! Sitting tight and allowing the telescope to be trained upon him, he represented a 'tick' for everyone in the group, including the leader!

#### Day 9 – Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June: Cason di Lanza

The late spring and heavy snow in May restricted our access to some parts of the Alps but Cason di Lanza (1700 metres above sea-level) on the border with Austria proved an excellent substitute. As the minibus pulled up the winding mountain road in the sunshine through subalpine meadows and past picture-postcard farms we knew we were in for a treat.

Two species of gentian, probably Clusius's *Gentiana clusii* and Spring *Gentiana verna* were visible even before the car had rolled to a halt. As we jumped down we were greeted by the raucous alarm calls of Ring Ouzels in the trees above and the flight calls of Redpolls which nest only above 1600 metres at this latitude. Alpine Snowbells *Soldanella alpina* were just coming into flower in the damper patches, and on the drier slopes Alpenrose *Rhododendron ferrugineum* was at its best.

As we climbed a path through stunted Larch and Dwarf Pine *Pinus mugo* many were surprised to hear the rattling song of lesser whitethroat, a species of lowland scrub and hedgerows in Britain, but here, along with Bullfinch, Dunnock and Wren, breeds only at altitude.

A sharp chuckling from a nearby hillside indicated the presence of Black Grouse. A strong lek here, of 15 males or so, is currently the subject of a research project and many of the birds carry radio-collars. A thoroughly unsatisfactory view of an Alpine Accentor was rapidly followed by better sightings Water Pipit and Alpine Chough, a flock of which wheeled evocatively over a nearby peak.

The small white stone was all that separated us from Austrian territory and we crossed the border to admire the view before returning to the van. The umpteenth Golden Eagle of the holiday rounded off what had been an extremely successful day.

#### Day 10 – Monday 7<sup>th</sup> June: Monte Matajur

By popular request today we returned to the Alps to a lower peak a little nearer our base. The first treat was a marvellous view of a male Rock Thrush singing from a patch of scrub just below the refuge.

This was a day for the botanists who revelled in the rich subalpine meadows finding, among other things, a scattering of Frog Orchids (*Coeloglossum virid*) and Martagon Lilies (*Lilium martagon*). Whinchats, Tree Pipits and the occasional Raven made up most of the birds in the area.

## Bird list

Little grebe H	Rock dove	Whitethroat
Great crested grebe H	Woodpigeon	Blackcap
Bittern H	Collared dove	Bonelli's warbler
Little bittern	Turtle dove	Wood warbler H
Squacco heron	Cuckoo H	Chiffchaff
Little egret	Nightjar	Firecrest H
Grey heron	Swift	Spotted flycatcher
Black stork	Alpine swift	Long-tailed tit
White stork	Bee-eater	Willow tit H
Glossy ibis	Hoopoe	Marsh tit
Greylag goose	Wryneck H	Crested tit
Gadwall	Green woodpecker	Coal tit
Wigeon	Great spotted	Blue tit
Teal	woodpecker	Great tit
Mallard	Crested lark	Penduline tit H
Garganey	Woodlark	Golden oriole
Shoveler	Skylark	Red-backed
Pochard	Swallow	shrike
Tufted duck	House martin	Woodchat shrike
Honey buzzard	Tawny pipit	Jay
Black kite	Tree pipit	Magpie
Griffon vulture	Water pipit	Nutcracker H
Short-toed eagle	Grey-headed wagtail	Alpine chough
Marsh harrier	Grey wagtail	Jackdaw
Montagu's harrier	White wagtail	Hooded crow
Goshawk	Dunnock	Raven
Sparrowhawk	Alpine accentor	Starling
Buzzard	Robin	House/Italian
Golden eagle	Nightingale	sparrow
Kestrel	Black redstart	Redpoll
Hobby	Whinchat	Chaffinch
Peregrine	Stonechat	Serin
Black grouse H	Rock thrush	Greenfinch
Quail H	Blue rock thrush	Serin
Pheasant	Ring ouzel	Greenfinch
Moorhen	Blackbird	Goldfinch
Coot	Song thrush	Siskin
Black-winged stilt	Mistle thrush	Linnet
Little ringed plover H	Fieldfare	Bullfinch
Ringed plover	Cetti's warbler	Hawfinch
Lapwing	Fan-tailed warbler	Scarlet rosefinch
Curlew	Grasshopper warbler H	Yellowhammer
Spotted redshank	River warbler	Girl bunting
Wood sandpiper	Marsh warbler	Rock bunting
Black-headed gull	Great reed warbler	Ortolan bunting
Yellow-legged gull	Sedge warbler	Reed bunting
Common tern	Melodious warbler H	Corn bunting
Little tern	Barred warbler	
Black tern	Lesser whitethroat	H = heard





**Italian League for Bird Protection - UK Branch**  
**Lega Italiana Protezione Uccelli (LIPU)**

Honorary Patrons: Bill Oddie, Tony Soper.

**Please reply to:-**

as below

16<sup>th</sup> July, 1994

Dear Chris,

I was delighted to hear that the Honeyguide "Mountains and Marshes of n.E. Italy" 1994 trip was such a great success - Congratulations.

I was also delighted to receive your cheque for £175, Honeyguide's contribution to our Italian Wetlands Appeal - very many thanks.

I was especially pleased to hear that you will again be supporting our efforts to protect threatened wetlands in 1995; in particular that's got to be good news for the black-winged stilts at LIPU's Torrile reserve near

Parma - our chosen wetland project for '95.

It really is good news that Honeyguide and LIPU UK will again be working together for wetland birds in Italy.

With every good wish for Honeyguide's continuing success

Roger Jordan

LIPU's UK Representative

**DRUŠTVO ZA OPAZOVANJE  
N PROUČEVANJE PTIC SLOVENIJE**

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**BIRD WATCHING AND BIRD STUDY  
ASSOCIATION OF SLOVENIA**

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Mr Chris Durdun  
Honeyguide Holidays  
36 Thunder Lane  
Thorpe St. Andrew  
Norwich, G.B.

10<sup>th</sup> July 1994

Dear Mr. Durdun,

Hereby we would like to thank you for your donation that was given to us by Mr Tout on this years' excursion to Ljubljansko barje, Slovenia. Your gift represents a valuable help for our work on the field of nature conservation and ornithology.

Field research and developing protection strategies for important and endangered natural areas such as Ljubljansko barje or Lake Cerknica will stay among our main goals for the future. Besides that, we are running some projects for the preservation of endangered species - Corncrake, Roller, Lesser Kestrel ... International cooperation with the European Natural Heritage Fund, BirdLife International (where our organisation is the appointed representative for Slovenia) and other partners proved to be very useful and satisfactory for both sides.

Looking forward to a successful cooperation,

Yours sincerely

Peter Trontelj  
secretary