

ITALY: Birds and Art in Tuscany

'Of all the tiresome tasks of travel, continuous packing and unpacking is the worst. We spent nearly a full week at our first hotel, where morning walks, evening strolls, and delicious meals let us make the acquaintance of such colorful beauties as European Green Woodpecker, Common Stonechat, Golden Oriole, and Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes.

We began each morning with an exceptionally lavish breakfast then set off for the day in the gentle hills and on the wild coast of Tuscany. Our first walk through the Saline di Tarquinia turned up an unexpected Common Pochard; well offshore, a feeding frenzy included several Scopoli's Shearwaters.

An afternoon visit to the Etruscan and Roman city of Vulci combined birds and history in the most impressive possible way as Eurasian Hoopoes and Italian Sparrows - that latter now officially "split" from the familiar House Sparrow - fluttered and chirped among the monuments and palaces. Our day around the Orbetello Lagoon was more intensely ornithological, with European Bee-eaters and Common Kestrels overhead; our walk out to the blinds took us past fields swarming with low-flying Common Swifts and zitting Zitting Cisticolas. But it was the tiny pond at Albinia that had given us the day's most surprising bird: while we admired our first Black-winged Stilts, a drake Ferruginous Duck landed, steamed towards the reeds, and took off again.

After lunch on Orbetello's main square, we drove out onto the Argentario, the bulky promontory that protects the lagoons from the sea. A European Honey Buzzard appeared high in the sky, followed almost immediately by a close view of a Pallid Swift, its contrasting wing pattern and subtly paler body obvious among the abundant Common Swifts.

One of the clear high points of the tour, ornithologically and culturally, was our morning in the Etruscan necropolis of Cerveteri. Barn Swallows nest in the tombs here, and Firecrests and Winter Wrens (likely a different species from either of the North American representatives of the taxon) hiss and bubble. The painted tombs of Tarquinia are equally impressive, full of scenes of daily life from almost three millennia ago. After lunch on the medieval ramparts of Tarquinia, where a Red Kite passed at eye level, we visited the National Museum and its rows and rows of Etruscan artifacts, from vases to sarcophagi.

Life didn't end with the Romanization of the Etruscans. The Middle Ages are abundantly represented in Tuscany, and hill towns like Pitigliano are a visible reminder of what life must have been like atop the sheer cliffs of central Italy. But time doesn't stand still, not even in Tuscany, and the village's Jerry Lee Music Hall and Bar is decorated with colorful sculptures à la Hundertwasser. We followed our exploration of Pitigliano with a wine tasting in Scansano, where we lingered in the winery's shop before leaving laden with bottles, corkscrews, and jars of precious truffles.

That evening, like all the others, brought us another incredibly fine Tuscan meal, made with the freshest of local ingredients. Our *locanda* boasts a profoundly talented and infinitely accommodating chef, and Irene rose to all our various demands for early breakfasts and early dinners, special diets and requested favorites - with graciousness and skill.

The Mediterranean was visible from our hotel, a flat blue sheet between gentle hills, and the allure of the sea proved irresistible again and again. While some of us hiked to the mouth of the Ombrone, the rest stayed on the beach, where a distant feeding frenzy yielded a score of Yelkouan Shearwaters and a few Scopoli's. After lunch we crossed to Diaccia-Botrona, one of Italy's most important wetlands. Our arrival was delayed by an astonishingly confiding and typically photogenic female Red-footed Falcon. Once at the wetland preserve, we were kept busy by Squacco Herons, then sailed gently down the canal in our flat-bottomed boat. The single Greater Flamingo we'd seen at the Saline di Tarquinia faded in memory as we watched some 400 birds stalking around the mud volcanoes of their nests.

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Better views of the shearwaters and other seabirds awaited us on our ferry ride to Giglio Island; we also saw three Shags of the bright-billed Mediterranean race and a late Northern Gannet. Between those mini-pelagic trips, we wandered the fascinating streets and alleys of Giglio Castello, perched high above the sea and with marvelous views of Monte Cristo, Elba, and Corsica in the distance. We ended our walk with fresh fish served in an ancient olive pressing cellar carved right into the island's rock.

More treasures awaited us in Siena and Florence. In Siena we visited the Opera del Duomo, one of the finest museums in Europe. The original statues from the cathedral's west front lose nothing of their grandeur seen up close, and Duccio's *Maestà* fully deserves its place among the masterpieces of the western tradition. We would see more Duccio later that afternoon in Florence. A stroll through the Uffizi is like walking through the pages of an art history textbook: Cimabue, Giotto, Duccio came first; then it was the Sienese school and Simone Martini, followed by all that Botticelli, then the northerners, and then, if only for the sake of completeness, the Titians. A very good dinner just a couple of blocks away restored us. The next day found us visiting Florence's cathedral, the exterior of the baptistery, and Giotto's perfect campanile. A Peregrine Falcon, mercilessly mobbed by Common Swifts, was a noisy surprise. Our final stop was Santa Maria Novella, a serious contender for the title of most beautiful church in Italy.

As we headed north into the lovely Garfagnana Valley, we stopped at the notorious Ponte del Diavolo, where we found our first truly high-elevation birds, a pair of European Crag Martins flying around their nest site in the bridge. The next morning we visited San Pellegrino, where Shelley found the inspiration for "The Witch of Atlas." After an excellent lunch across the street from the pilgrims' hostel, we made the quick drive to the Sassorosso overlook. To our amazement, a large bird in the sky passed overhead to assume the unmistakable form of a Eurasian Griffon Vulture; presumably originating from one of Italy's two reintroduction programs, the utterly unexpected sight of this magnificent raptor was the highlight of the tour for many of us, its provenance notwithstanding.

The Apuan Alps are even more dramatic than the Apennines, a fitting place to spend the final day of our tour. High in the Orto di Donna we stopped for coffee at the hikers' *rifugio*, then birded the bright patio, where European Goldfinches swarmed through the conifers and a male Common Chaffinch fed on the ground. Western Bonelli's Warblers remained just a tantalizing voice, but a Common Chiffchaff eventually revealed itself to our scopes.

On the way back to Castelnuovo we paused to visit one of Tuscany's best-kept secrets, the church of Codiponte. The interior is an elegantly proportioned Romanesque space, the bays of the nave separated by columns topped with some of the strangest capitals anywhere. Art historians, as puzzled as the rest of us, style their ornament simply and uninformatively "proto-Romanesque," monsters and fanciful beasts whose stern symmetry and mysterious meanings recall the decoration of the Etruscan tombs with which our tour had started' – *Rick Wright*

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Bird List:

Column A = Number of years seen during this tour. *Note that 2010 was the first year.*

Column B = number of days seen during the **2010** tour

Column C = maximum daily count seen during the **2010** tour

H = predominantly heard rather than seen

| A | B | C | |
|---|----|------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 6 | <i>Cygnus olor</i> |
| 1 | 2 | 2 | <i>Tadorna tadorna</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Aythya ferina</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Aythya neroca</i> |
| 1 | 8 | 20 | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> |
| 1 | 7 | 1 | H <i>Phasianus colchicus</i> |
| 1 | 3 | 6 | <i>Calonectris diomedea</i> |
| 1 | 2 | 20 | <i>Puffinus yelkouan</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Morus bassanus</i> |
| 1 | 3 | 4 | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 3 | <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 8 | <i>Ardeola ralloides</i> |
| 1 | 3 | 30 | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> |
| 1 | 3 | 40 | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | <i>Casmerodius albus</i> |
| 1 | 5 | 15 | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Ardea purpurea</i> |
| 1 | 2 | 420 | <i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Pernis apivorus</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 3 | <i>Milvus milvus</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Gyps fulvus</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> |
| 1 | 8 | 3 | <i>Buteo buteo</i> |
| 1 | 8 | 8 | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Falco vespertinus</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Falco subbuteo</i> |
| 1 | 2 | 2 | <i>Falco peregrinus</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 3 | <i>Gallinula chloropus</i> |
| 1 | 4 | 15 | <i>Fulica atra</i> |
| 1 | 3 | 6 | <i>Himantopus himantopus</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 6 | <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 8 | <i>Tringa totanus</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Chroicocephalus genei</i> |
| 1 | 2 | 20 | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> |
| 1 | 9 | 100s | <i>Larus cachinnans</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 4 | <i>Sternula albifrons</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | <i>Geochelidon nilotica</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 2 | <i>Sterna sandvicensis</i> |
| 1 | 1 | 12 | <i>Sterna hirundo</i> |
| 1 | 11 | | <i>Columba livia</i> |

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|---|------------------------------|----|-----|---|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Common Wood Pigeon | 5 | 4 | | <i>Columba palumbus</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Collared Dove | 11 | 50 | | <i>Streptopelia decaocta</i> |
| 1 | European Turtle Dove | 6 | 20 | | <i>Streptopelia turtur</i> |
| 1 | Common Cuckoo | 9 | 1 | H | <i>Cuculus canorus</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Scops Owl | 6 | | H | <i>Otus scops</i> |
| 1 | Common Swift | 11 | 250 | | <i>Apus apus</i> |
| 1 | Pallid Swift | 2 | 1 | | <i>Apus pallidus</i> |
| 1 | European Bee-eater | 5 | 50 | | <i>Merops apiaster</i> |
| 1 | European Roller | 2 | 2 | | <i>Coracias garrulus</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Hoopoe | 7 | 2 | | <i>Upupa epops</i> |
| 1 | Wryneck | 1 | 2 | | <i>Jynx torquilla</i> |
| 1 | European Green Woodpecker | 3 | 1 | | <i>Picus viridis</i> |
| 1 | Common Crested Lark | 4 | 12 | | <i>Galerida cristata</i> |
| 1 | Woodlark | 1 | | H | <i>Lullula arborea</i> |
| 1 | Sand Martin | 1 | 1 | | <i>Riparia riparia</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Crag Martin | 3 | 2 | | <i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i> |
| 1 | Barn Swallow | 11 | 100 | | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> |
| 1 | Common House Martin | 10 | 60 | | <i>Delichon urbica</i> |
| 1 | Ashy-headed (Yellow) Wagtail | 1 | 6 | | <i>Motacilla cinereocapilla</i> |
| 1 | White Wagtail | 2 | 4 | | <i>Motacilla alba</i> |
| 1 | Winter Wren | 4 | | H | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> |
| 1 | European Robin | 4 | 4 | H | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> |
| 1 | Common Nightingale | 7 | 1 | H | <i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i> |
| 1 | Black Redstart | 1 | 8 | | <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i> |
| 1 | Common Redstart | 2 | 2 | | <i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i> |
| 1 | European Stonechat | 3 | 1 | | <i>Saxicola rubicola</i> |
| 1 | Common Blackbird | 10 | 5 | | <i>Turdus merula</i> |
| 1 | Cetti's Warbler | 3 | | H | <i>Cettia cetti</i> |
| 1 | Zitting Cisticola | 4 | 6 | | <i>Cisticola juncidis</i> |
| 1 | Melodious Warbler | 3 | 1 | | <i>Hippolais polyglotta</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Reed Warbler | 3 | 2 | H | <i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i> |
| 1 | Sardinian Warbler | 6 | 4 | | <i>Sylvia melanocephala</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Blackcap | 11 | 3 | H | <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i> |
| 1 | Western Bonelli's Warbler | 2 | | H | <i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i> |
| 1 | Common Chiffchaff | 2 | 1 | H | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> |
| 1 | Firecrest | 3 | | H | <i>Regulus ignicapillus</i> |
| 1 | Spotted Flycatcher | 2 | 5 | | <i>Muscicapa striata</i> |
| 1 | Long-tailed Bushtit | 1 | 10 | | <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i> |
| 1 | European Blue Tit | 8 | 3 | | <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i> |
| 1 | Great Tit | 8 | 5 | | <i>Parus major</i> |
| 1 | Coal Tit | 1 | | H | <i>Pariparus ater</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Golden Oriole | 5 | 1 | H | <i>Oriolus oriolus</i> |
| 1 | Red-backed Shrike | 2 | 2 | | <i>Lanius collurio</i> |
| 1 | Woodchat Shrike | 1 | 1 | | <i>Lanius senator</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Jay | 4 | 6 | | <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Magpie | 9 | 60 | | <i>Pica pica</i> |
| 1 | Western Jackdaw | 9 | 50 | | <i>Corvus monedula</i> |
| 1 | Hooded Crow | 11 | 20 | | <i>Corvus corone</i> |
| 1 | Northern Raven | 2 | 2 | | <i>Corvus corax</i> |

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|---|-----------------------|----|----|---|----------------------------|
| 1 | Common Starling | 10 | 25 | | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> |
| 1 | Italian Sparrow | 11 | 50 | | <i>Passer italiae</i> |
| 1 | Eurasian Tree Sparrow | 4 | 4 | | <i>Passer montanus</i> |
| 1 | Common Chaffinch | 7 | 5 | H | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> |
| 1 | European Serin | 10 | 40 | | <i>Serinus serinus</i> |
| 1 | European Greenfinch | 8 | 2 | H | <i>Carduelis chloris</i> |
| 1 | European Goldfinch | 9 | 15 | | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> |
| 1 | Common Linnet | 1 | | H | <i>Acanthis cannabina</i> |
| 1 | Cirl Bunting | 3 | 1 | | <i>Emberiza cirrus</i> |
| 1 | Corn Bunting | 2 | 6 | | <i>Emberiza calandra</i> |

Aug-10