

**ITALY: BIRDS & ART  
IN VENICE & THE PO DELTA**

**OCTOBER 24–NOVEMBER 1, 2016**

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**By Rick Wright**

There could hardly be a more rewarding landscape than northern Italy's Adriatic coast for an exploration of nature, culture, and their intersection over centuries of human history. It isn't just that the visitor can alternate—birds, art, birds, art—but that the two are so closely intertwined at so many of the sites we visited: I suspect that our congenial and fun-loving group had a much deeper experience of that first approach to Venice than did the ferry passengers who overlooked the Eared Grebes and European Shags on the Lagoon, and I know that our visit to the imposing abbey church of Pomposa at dawn will be that much more memorable for the Gray Herons and Hooded Crows that emerged from the fog.

Without even leaving our *agriturismo* on Lio Maggiore, Michele's beautiful La Barena, we were reminded that human life on the Lagoon has always been lived in close parallel to the life of the wild. Eurasian Curlews, Greater Flamingos, Common Kingfishers (unfair name!), Black Redstarts, European Robins, and even Water Rails were frequent sights on the sandbars out our windows or along the narrow road in, and it was sometimes hard, but never impossible, to turn our sights away from the birds and towards our lavish and excellent meals prepared by the family Vianello.

But of course we did leave, each morning taking us to a different set of nearby destinations, from the glories of Venice's St. Mark's and the dazzling thousand-year-old cathedral of Torcello to the avocet-clad marshes of Lio Piccolo and the muddy flats of the ominously named and startlingly lively Laguna del Mort, where Sandwich Terns and Mediterranean Gulls trilled and quacked at us as we stood in the shade of an Adriatic pine forest.

Our stay at La Barena was just the beginning of our time together. Our farewell was a mixture of reluctance and excitement, the latter prevailing by the time we reached the marshes of the Po Delta an hour south of Venice. A Booted Eagle was a fine surprise, as was the first of a very small number of Spanish Sparrows we would see during our time based in a quiet corner of the ancient fishing city of Comacchio. The town center itself on a holiday weekend more closely resembled a circus than a wildlife refuge, but the surrounding salt pannes, marshes, and beaches turned out to be remarkably birdy. Thousands of flamingos and hundreds of Pied Avocets roosted in the shallows with smaller numbers of Common and Spotted redshanks, Common Greenshanks, Dunlin, and a beautifully photographed Little Stint—the last, unfortunately, seen by only a few. A Zitting Cisticola perched up to be admired at leisure, but even here the Cetti's Warblers were as tantalizing as they were noisy, never giving satisfactory looks as they taunted us from ditches and thickets. A long walk on the sandy beach behind our hotel was an opportunity to study Dunlin and Sanderlings up close—familiar birds to some of the group, but few of us had ever

watched these shorebirds in the company of Kentish Plovers against the purple waters and warm skies of the Adriatic Sea.

Comacchio has another advantage, too: its proximity to Ravenna, a grubby industrial city with some of the finest artistic jewels in the world at its center. Some of them dating from the last days of the western empire, these Byzantine-influenced churches and chapels with their justly renowned 1500-year-old mosaics were almost overwhelmingly moving, a fitting climax to a tour that had gone from one beautiful sight to the next—whether natural or cultural. I look forward to the next landscape this fine group explores together.

## **BIRDS:**

### **Waterfowl**

**Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*:** fairly common throughout.

**Graylag Goose, *Anser anser*:** several small flocks, most overhead, with nice views of birds on the water at Mandriole.

**Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*:** moderate numbers throughout on canals and marshes.

**Gadwall, *Anas strepera*:** a few dozen at Mandriole.

**Eurasian Wigeon, *Anas penelope*:** small numbers scattered across various wetlands.

**Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*:** moderate numbers throughout, on lakes and ponds and in large parks. This was by far the most common duck of the tour.

**Northern Shoveler, *Anas clypeata*:** several at Mandriole and Lio Maggiore.

**Northern Pintail, *Anas acuta*:** three or four at Mandriole.

**Common Teal, *Anas crecca*:** hundreds on Mandriole ponds, smaller numbers elsewhere.

**Common Pochard, *Aythya ferina*:** half a dozen seen well at Mandriole.

### **Pheasants**

**Common Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus*:** moderate numbers but very conspicuous on fields and roadsides.

### **Grebes**

**Little Grebe, *Tachypadtus ruficollis*:** common on roadside ditches and shallow ponds.

**Great Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus*:** common throughout on deeper water.

**Eared Grebe, *Podiceps nigricollis*:** common on the deep waters of the Venetian Lagoon and Po Delta.

**Horned Grebe, *Podiceps auritus*:** very small numbers at the Po Delta.

## Cormorants

**Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*:** common throughout.

**European Shag, *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*:** small numbers on the Venetian Lagoon.

**Pygmy Cormorant, *Microcarbo pygmeus*:** common and tame in the marshlands and canals of the Venice Lagoon.

## Flamingos

**Greater Flamingo, *Phoenicopterus roseus*:** locally very common on shallow waters around La Barena, the Po Delta, and Comacchio.

## Ibis

**Sacred Ibis, *Threskiornis aethiopicus*:** a single flock of some 45 birds on a field in the Po Delta.

## Hérons

**Gray Heron, *Ardea cinerea*:** moderate numbers throughout in parks, on fields, and at large wetlands.

**Great Egret, *Ardea alba*:** small numbers throughout

**Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta*:** common throughout.

**Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis*:** fairly common on fields, but always outnumbered by Little Egrets.

## Osprey

**Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*:** one interacting with a Eurasian Marsh-Harrier at Punte Albarete.

## Hawks, Kites, and Eagles

**Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*:** small numbers over marshes and ponds.

**Hen Harrier, *Circus cyaneus*:** beautiful looks at a brown bird at Lio Piccolo; quite scarce in Italy.

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus*:** single birds seen on several occasions, always in flight.

**Common Buzzard, *Buteo buteo*:** living nicely up to its name, this species was common on fields and along roadsides everywhere.

**Booted Eagle, *Hieraetus pennatus*:** a fine surprise in the Po Delta, a single dark-morph bird in flight.

## Rails

**Water Rail, *Rallus aquaticus*:** seen well at several sites, best on the road to La Barena, where two at a time were seen on several occasions.

**Eurasian Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus*:** common on canals and marshes.

**Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*:** abundant on the largest bodies of water, non-existent on smaller canals and ponds.

### **Oystercatchers**

**Eurasian Oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus*:** common on the Venetian Lagoon.

### **Plovers**

**Black-bellied Plover, *Pluvialis squatarola*:** small numbers on the marshes of the Venice Lagoon. The odd specific epithet “squatarola” was originally the local Venetian name of this common species.

**European Golden-Plover, *Pluvialis apricaria*:** singles at Lio Piccolo and Laguna del Mort.

**Northern Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*:** scattered flocks, the largest approaching 200 birds at Comacchio.

**Common Ringed Plover, *Charadrius hiaticula*:** small numbers on the Venetian Lagoon.

**Lesser Ringed Plover, *Charadrius dubius*:** one seen by some on the beach at Comacchio.

**Kentish Plover, *Charadrius alexandrinus*:** about seven individuals on the beach at Comacchio, including juveniles wearing yellow leg bands; one adult male was still cinnamon-crowned.

### **Avocets and Stilts**

**Pied Avocet, *Avocetta recurvirostra*:** small numbers at Lio Piccolo, a roosting flock of 200+ at Comacchio.

**Black-winged Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus*:** one at La Barena, not seen by all, and one or two at Comacchio.

### **Sandpipers**

**Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*:** small numbers throughout on ditches and canals.

**Spotted Redshank, *Tringa erythropus*:** half a dozen or so at Comacchio.

**Common Greenshank, *Tringa nebularia*:** fairly common on the marshes of the Venetian Lagoon and in the Po Delta.

**Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus*:** small numbers on the Venetian Lagoon, but more common around Comacchio.

**Eurasian Curlew, *Numenius arquata*:** fairly common and occasionally noisy on the marshes of the Venetian Lagoon, with flocks of several dozen at Comacchio.

**Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa*:** one over La Barena.

**Sanderling, *Calidris alba*:** low hundreds on the beach at Comacchio.

**Dunlin, *Calidris alpina*:** very common on the Venetian Lagoon, in the Po Delta, and around Comacchio.

**Little Stint, *Calidris minuta*:** one still mostly in juvenile plumage and with a broken maxilla at Comacchio; beautifully photographed but not seen by all.

**Common Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago*:** small numbers throughout, usually in flight.

### Gulls

**Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*:** very common throughout.

**Mediterranean Gull, *Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*:** scarce at most sites, but several dozen seen very well at Laguna del Mort.

**Yellow-legged Gull, *Larus michahellis*:** common throughout.

**Sandwich Tern, *Thalasseus sandvicensis*:** common at Laguna del Mort, with small numbers at most seaside locations.

**Caspian Tern, *Hydroprogne caspia*:** one loafing with Northern Lapwings at Comacchio.

### Pigeons

**Feral Pigeon, *Columba livia*:** moderate numbers in urban and agricultural habitats throughout, and abundant on the Piazza San Marco in Venice.

**Stock Dove, *Columba oenas*:** 5 near our hotel in Jesolo.

**Common Wood-Pigeon, *Columba palumbus*:** very common throughout, occasionally in flocks numbering into the low hundreds.

**Eurasian Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*:** common throughout.

### Owls

**Little Owl, *Athene noctua*:** one heard by some at La Barena, one seen from boat to Burano.

### Kingfishers

**Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis*:** small numbers in marshes and along canals throughout; surprisingly reliable and easy to see.

### Woodpeckers

**Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos major*:** scattered individuals in poplar woods.

**Eurasian Green Woodpecker, *Picus viridis*:** scattered individuals along field edges.

### Falcons

**Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus*:** fairly common throughout in open country.

**Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*:** an adult seen several times near La Barena.

### **Jays, Magpies, and Crows**

**Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius*:** common throughout, especially near fields of corn stubble.

**Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica*:** fairly common throughout on agricultural lands and in villages.

**Eurasian Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula*:** small numbers throughout in the countryside.

**Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*:** common throughout.

### **Swallows**

**Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*:** two or three at Maldrione.

### **Tits**

**Great Tit, *Parus major*:** common and conspicuous throughout.

**Eurasian Blue Tit, *Cyanistes caeruleus*:** common and conspicuous throughout.

### **Bushtits**

**Long-tailed Tit, *Aegithalos caudatus*:** small numbers in wooded areas, generally seen as brief fly-bys.

### **Treecreepers**

**Short-toed Treecreeper, *Certhia brachydactyla*:** seen once by one of the leaders.

### **Wrens**

**Eurasian Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*:** one or more at La Barena.

### **Kinglets**

**Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus*:** very small numbers at a couple of wooded sites, including Burano.

**Firecrest, *Regulus ignicapilla*:** one seen on Burano.

### **Bush Warblers**

**Cetti's Warbler, *Cettia cetti*:** loud and tantalizing from bushes in the Po Delta and at Comacchio, but never satisfyingly seen.

### **Leaf Warblers**

**Common Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*:** common in salt cedars throughout.

### **Sylviids**

**Eurasian Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla*:** one or two seen at Punte Albarete.

### **Chats and Flycatchers**

**European Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*:** fairly common throughout, most readily seen at La Barena, where the birds were still singing at most hours.

**Black Redstart, *Phoenicurus ochruros*:** small numbers throughout on buildings.

**Whinchat, *Saxicola rubetra*:** one at Comacchio.

**European Stonechat, *Saxicola rubicola*:** small numbers throughout.

### **Thrushes**

**Eurasian Blackbird, *Turdus merula*:** fairly common throughout.

**Song Thrush, *Turdus philomelos*:** small numbers, with a small flock apparently arriving one evening to dart one by one in front of the vans on the road from La Barena.

**Blue Rock Thrush, *Monticola solitarius*:** one seen by some on a Ravenna rooftop.

### **Starlings**

**European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*:** very common on fields in large bands, especially in the late afternoon as flocks gathered for the roost.

### **Wagtails**

**White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*:** moderate numbers throughout on fields and rooftops.

**Meadow Pipit, *Anthus pratensis*:** a few scattered along wet edges.

### **Buntings**

**Reed Bunting, *Emberiza schoeniclus*:** scattered and very furtive individuals in phragmites beds, eventually giving good if brief views for most of us.

### **Finches**

**Common Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs*:** small numbers on roadsides.

**European Greenfinch, *Chloris chloris*:** at least one in Ravenna, and heard on our last foggy morning in Comacchio.

**European Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis*:** small numbers in brushy habitats.

**Eurasian Linnet, *Carduelis cannabina*:** a few seen by some at Lio Piccolo.

**European Serin, *Serinus serinus*:** one uncharacteristically retiring male on a dike at the Po Delta.

**Italian Sparrow, *Passer italiae*:** common throughout.

**Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus*:** one in the dunes at Comacchio on our last beachside walk.

**Spanish Sparrow, *Passer hispaniolensis*:** very small numbers in the Po Delta, apparently this oddly distributed species' stronghold in Italy.

## **MAMMALS:**

### **Rabbits and Hares**



**Brown Hare, *Lepus europaeus*:** one on road to La Barena.

**Mice and Rats**

**Nutria, *Myocastor coypus*:** common and conspicuous on canals (and dead on roads) in the Venetian Lagoon.

**Bats**

**Serotine Bat, *Eptesicus serotinus*:** common in the evenings at La Barena.

**REPTILES:**

**Lizards**

**Wall Lizard, *Podarcis sicula*:** a few in towns.

**Turtles**

**Red-eared Slider, *Trachemys scripta*:** two or three basking at Puente Albarete.

**BUTTERFLIES:**

**Small Heath, *Coenonympha pamphilus***

**Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta***

**Wall, *Lasiomatta megera***

**Cabbage White, *Pieris rapae***

**Clouded Yellow, *Colias croceus***

**Small White, *Dixeia***