

Sunrise Birding LLC
ITALY
Birds & Wine
June 29 – July 6, 2015
TRIP REPORT

Trip Report by Gina Nichol



Photos, top to bottom: White Stork, Vineyards, Mountain Apollo and Black-veined White Butterflies, Stemless Gentian, Birding in the Valnontey



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Day 1

By late morning our group had assembled at Milan's, Malpensa Airport and we met our guide Luca and loaded the vehicles to head west toward the Aosta Valley.

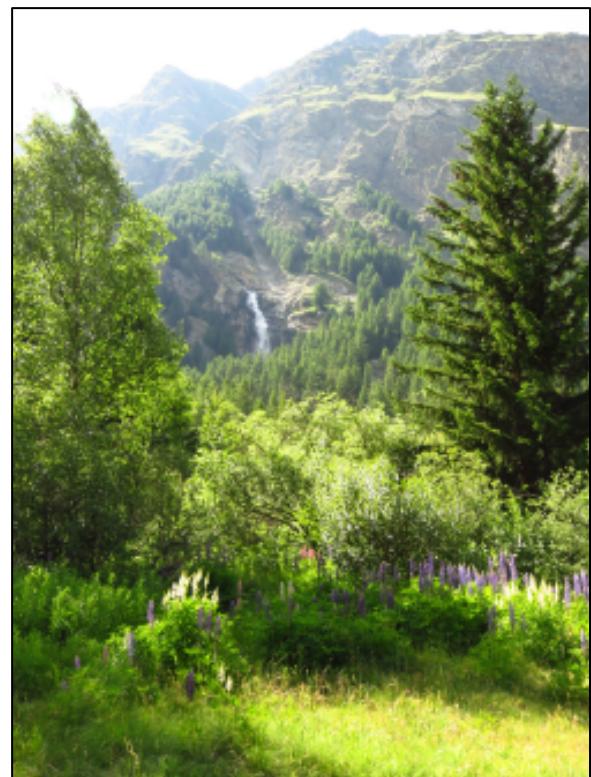
Once out of the city, we enjoyed the lovely scenery of the Italian country side and the numerous Hooded Crows patrolling the highways. The sprawling rice fields fed by the water of the mountains offered Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Grey Heron and overhead we had Common Buzzard and Black Kite. It wasn't long until the expanses of flat land gave way to rugged mountains.

As we reached the Aosta Valley, we passed under several tunnels through the mountains and eventually the snowcapped peaks of the Italian Alps came into view.

From the motorway we continued up the winding mountain roads into Gran Paradiso National Park and soon arrived at our lovely mountain lodge at an altitude of 5610 feet. We unpacked and settled into our hotel for the next three nights and then met for lunch alfresco in front of the hotel. It was a sparkling clear, crisp day.

We immediately noticed a nest of Common Redstarts under the peak of our hotel with the adult singing incessantly from a nearby spruce tree. By the time we finished our delicious lunch, we had ticked Black Redstart, Chaffinch, European Goldfinch, and White Wagtail. Ah, the joys of dining outdoors.

In the afternoon, we walked up into the meadow above the hotel noting a number of butterflies and flowers. Bird wise, we had



European Blackbird, several flyover Fieldfares, Mistle Thrush, and Common (Lesser) Redpoll. We walked up the road next to a raging river and saw our first Gray Wagtail with the stunning snow-capped glaciers as the backdrop. A more wooded area along the road yielded a bright, bland Garden Warbler, quick views of a Blackcap, and great views of Crested and Long-tailed Tits. Later in the afternoon we had distant views of Alpine Chamois and later an adult and two baby Chamois. As we made our way back to the hotel, we found a White-throated Dipper feeding in the water on the river and another Gray Wagtail. An open area dotted with evergreens offered nice views of Whinchat and bright yellow male Serins singing from the tree tops. Our delicious dinner featured wines from the Aosta Valley and we celebrated with a review of the birds we saw on our first day in the Italian Alps.

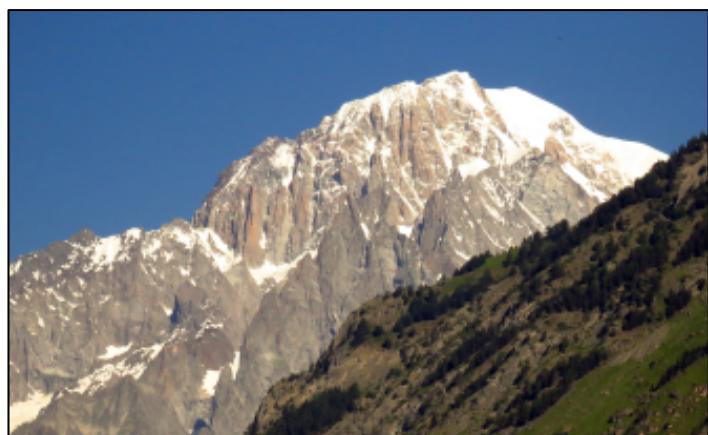
Day 2

After a quiet night, some of us were up early for our morning pre-breakfast walk around the hotel grounds. The day was shaping up to be glorious with a clear blue sky and the sun lighting up Gran Paradiso up the valley.

A sound caught our ear and led us to a group of common Crossbills feeding on cones of a spruce tree. They were backlit but eventually we got good views. We walked up to the forest above the hotel and found Spotted Flycatcher, Common Treecreeper, and a quickly disappearing pair of Willow Tits.

To our surprise an **Alpine Chamois** (Photo: Gina Nichol) appeared fairly close to us and we watched for several minutes as it browsed on flowers growing on the forest floor. Nearby, a Goldcrest was heard and Luca picked up the call note of a Great Spotted Woodpecker which flew overhead and did its best to keep from being seen well.

After breakfast, we drove down out of the valley and got on a motorway which led through several tunnels under the alpine peaks. We stopped for a photo opp of **Mount Blanc** (Photo: Gina Nichol), the highest peak in Europe at 4810 meters. We headed up another valley and stopped in La Thuile, aka the chocolate town, for



coffee and there Lori treated us to some delicious chocolates. Continuing up a valley we stopped on an **open slope with gorgeous views** of the mountains and birded along the open road for a couple of hours.



A Tree Pipit delighted us with its display flight and good perched views. A Black Redstart made several appearances on top of an old building mostly perched atop an old chimney. As we walked we admired the multitude of wildflowers and found several Apollo Butterflies. Over a distant ridge, we saw a Common Buzzard being mobbed by a Common Kestrel and back at the ground near our feet was a little puddle that held a number of Mountain Frog (*Rana temporaria*) tadpoles.

We continued along the road and Gina called us back for a Red-backed Shrike perched close on an old ruin. An Alpine Marmot was making its alarm call and Steve soon located it on a rock down the hill allowing good views in the scope. Looking at that, we found a nice Whinchat on top of an evergreen. A pair of Lesser Whitethroats was flitting around a close bush possibly tending a nest and a little further on, we had good views of a male Rock Bunting perched on a bush up the hill. Flower highlights included Burnt Tip and **Black Vanilla Orchids** (Photo: Gina Nichol) and on the way back we had good views of a Yellowhammer singing on a tamarack tree and a Mistle Thrush foraging on the ground down the hill. We ate our picnic lunch at 6300 feet under sunny skies against a stunning scenery backdrop.



After lunch we headed back to Gran Paradiso to explore another valley. We scanned the slopes and ridges and found two Golden Eagles, one being chased by a probable Chough. Just above the river there were two Spotted Nutcrackers working in the evergreens but for the most part they were not cooperating except for a quick fly around the upper branches of a spruce. Way up over the horizon, we noticed several Yellow-billed Choughs winging around over the ridge. We kept on them and eventually got looks in the scope. A Dunnock came in close but did not stay still for everyone to see. Later on we headed back to our lovely hotel and enjoyed another excellent meal complete with plenty of delicious wine.

Day 3

As we gathered for our pre-breakfast walk, we were greeted by a bright male Chaffinch singing in some bare branches just above a car in the parking lot. A Dunnock posed on top of a Tamarack tree for us and we had more great views of **Eurasian Goldfinch** (Photo: Gina Nichol). We walked down to the village where three Dippers were chasing each other around under the bridge. At one point, one Dipper flew up and perched on the roof of a house and sat there allowing great views of its unusual position.

We walked across the bridge and found three Alpine Marmots together, two of which were allogrooming. Jays were flying among the trees and there seemed to be an invasion of White Wagtails with several on the rooves, on the fence posts, on the ground, on the hay bales, and just about everywhere else we looked. A Great-spotted Woodpecker called and we tried to locate it in the forest. As we searched one area, a Great-spot flew out of another section of trees so there were obviously two birds here.

After breakfast we made our way to Mont Avic Natural Park making a couple of very productive birding stops along the way. The first was just out of our village to see a group of four **young Chamois foraging for minerals** (Photo: Gina Nichol) on the side of the road. It was amazing to witness this behavior at such close range and when several other vehicles stopped to view the spectacle, the result was a "Cham Jam".

After numerous photos, we moved on heading again through the





highway tunnels to the village of Hône as we were trying to navigate through the narrow streets. A wrong turn ended up being fortuitous as Gina noticed some Italian Sparrows in the cut grass field next to the road. We got out for closer views and that led to a whole bunch of other species. The town **clock tower** was host to a number of Common Swifts as happens in many villages in the area. Several Crag Martins were flying around in front of the rock face above and as we scoped them, we saw a European Honey Buzzard soaring above.

Back on the ground, the male Italian Sparrows were quite handsome with their chestnut caps and a Black Redstart was seen carrying food possibly to an active nest. A bare tree held a Spotted Flycatcher and a Eurasian Blackbird. In the forest, there was a Eurasian Robin perched on an open branch. Luca heard a Marsh Tit in another area which led us to a veritable Tit Festival with Marsh Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, and Great Tit all in the same tree. The wrong turn had been very productive adding many new species for us.

We climbed up above the village taking quick photos of the **large castle in the middle of the river**. The castle is called Forte di Bard and is a fortified complex built in the 19th century in a narrow gorge above the Dora Baltea River. Once used to control the route between Italy and France, the fort is now restored as a historic museum. It's has even been used as a movie set, most recently for the 2015 film *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.



A stop just above a sharp corner at Grand Mont Blanc offered some close Jays and excellent views of Firecrest. Willow Tits were also seen here and at one point the Firecrest and Tits were in the same tree creating confusion but offering great views.

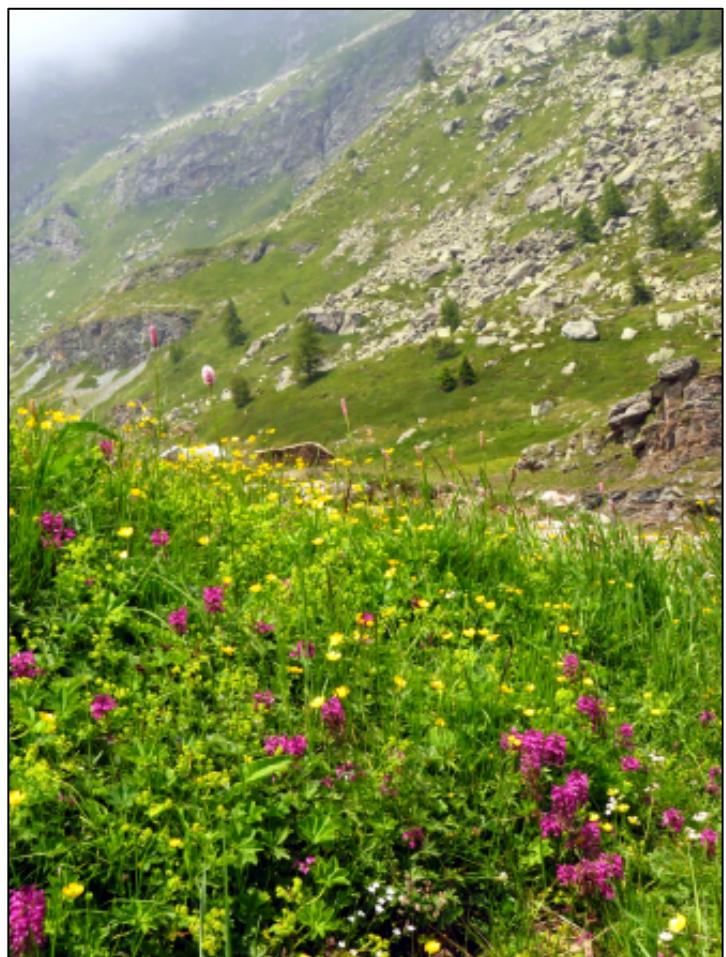
We finally arrived at **Mount Avic** enjoying the stunning scenery as we drove to the farthest point. From our parking spot we had Northern Wheatear and a couple of Yellow-billed Choughs. We walked up a trail and found a nice male Linnet on top of a Tamarack tree. A Citril Finch landed in the tree next door but disappeared quickly coming back later for much better views. A Fieldfare flew across the valley and landed on an open grassy area

where a Ring Ouzel chased it away. Common Redpolls were around and one perched on the side of a building unusually.



We ate our picnic lunch overlooking the valley and then walked up to the Refugio. After lunch, we crossed the river and noticed a nice Northern Wheatear perched on the ruined buildings to our left. The wildflowers carpeted the ground around us and we enjoyed the seemingly endless variety of colors and forms. A Red-billed Chough was heard and then seen briefly as we enjoyed a drink at the Refugio and then walked down to the area where the Ring Ouzel was. A female was present but it flew when a park van drove by.

From here we went to our first winery tour at the Cave des Onze Communes and tasted a number of wines which were thoroughly delicious. Back at our village we enjoyed another nice dinner with multiple bottles of wine and a post dinner experience with a grolla or friendship cup, a traditional Valle d'Aosta coffee ritual. The grolla itself is a special cup made of hand carved wood and several spouts. It was traditionally used for drinking with friends "a la ronde".



Day 4

Our prebreakfast walk yielded a Mistle Thrush, a Pine Siskin perched on a spruce, two Common Treecreepers, several showy Goldfinches, a Goldcrest, a flyover Fieldfare, and several Alpine Chamois on the hills across the valley. Down in the village, a juvenile Dipper was foraging in the water under the bridge and the two adults were further down.

After breakfast, we packed the vehicles, said goodbye to our gracious hosts and descended down out of the mountains. We stopped at Cogne where some people spent some time shopping while others took the cable car up the mountain to have one last search for the elusive Alpine Ibex. At the top we had beautiful views of the valley and good views of a Spotted Nutcracker flying over. Barbara walked up the trail to find a Mountain Hare. We scanned the rocky areas but came up empty.

Back down in the village we picked up the others and headed west toward our next accommodation. We arrived in time for an excellent al fresco lunch and then a short rest before our late afternoon excursion. We arrived in Vignale Monferrato at the small family estate of Oreste Buzio. Since 1860, the Buzio estate has been producing wines typical the Piedmont with grape varieties indigenous to the area, particularly Barbera, Grignolino and Freisa. Señor Buzio told us about his efforts to grow grapes organically and using sustainable methods in their wine making. He led us down into the cellar and offered several wines to taste. It was a memorable afternoon complete with a charming dog that seemed to want to go home with us. We were having so much fun that we had to tear ourselves away to get to our multicourse dinner in town. After dinner, we were a little bird starved so tried some owling. A Little Owl called from the fields below and flew up onto a post for us. On the way back to the hotel, at least two more Little Owls flew off in front of the vehicles as we passed.





Day 5

After an early breakfast we began our exploration of the avian life of Italy's agricultural Piedmont region. As we traveled, we passed numerous rice fields that held Cattle Egret, Great Egret, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Sacred Ibis, and Black-crowned Night Heron. Our first stop overlooking some hilly fields was frustrating to say the least. A distant Ortolan Bunting disappeared quickly and we scoped a couple of Corn Buntings that seemed to be a hundred miles away. A Common Nightingale did its best to remain out of view though it was seen as it skulked through the foliage briefly. A Great Spotted Woodpecker called from some trees down the hill but was best seen as it flew away. There were Skylarks around and a Moltoni's Warbler singing and flitting around some bushes. While we were trying for better views of it, a Melodious Warbler came out and perched up briefly. There were birds here but they were doing their best to remain hidden.

After a stop for a coffee at a local golf club, we moved back up the hill to see some European Bee-eaters and had good views of them perched on a power line. A Cirl Bunting stayed in the shade high up on a tree across the field making it hard to see properly. We found a little park at a crossroads and moved the picnic tables into the shade and enjoyed another lunch alfresco. As we ate, we noticed Italian Sparrows on a nearby house and heard a Golden Oriole in the area but could not detect it. A Turtle Dove was perched on a power line near a distant house and a Jay was doing something funny with a corn cob in a tree nearby.

We traveled back to the hotel and ticked Black Kite along the highway. In the late afternoon, some of us went to the nearby *Sanctuario de Crea* which was quiet except

for a Great Tit bringing food to a nest. There were lots of Blackcaps singing and we found a few birds including Turtle Dove, Red-backed Shrike, and Magpie. We returned to our accommodation and enjoyed a lovely gourmet meal with several bottles of wine.

Day 6

After breakfast we visited a wetland surrounded by a fence. We scanned the waterways through the fence and found Little Grebe, Eurasian Coot, a couple of Coypu, Great Crested Grebe, many Mallards, Common Tern, and Grey Heron. There were several European Bee-eaters around sometimes posing for photos and they looked great when they were perched above the water creating a colorful reflection. We walked a short way along the road where it was quiet except for a couple of Jackdaws that flew over and a Common Kestrel kiting. A large flock of Great Cormorants flew past and we counted at least 367 birds as they just kept coming. The amazing thing was that they seemed to be heading toward the wetland but we could not see where this massive flock landed.



Next we explored the rice fields in Vercelli. As we drove along, we saw numerous Northern Lapwings, Purple Herons, and Black-winged Stilts in the flooded fields. We met up with our local guide and he took us to a disused power plant where there was a heron rookery with Black-crowned Night Heron, Cattle Egret, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Sacred Ibis, Purple Heron, and Squacco Heron. If that wasn't enough of a spectacle, a **Great Bittern** (Photo: Gina Nichol) flew in and landed on a high branch offering great views. We watched and photographed it until a Little Bittern appeared in some nearby reeds and distracted us. Despite looking at all of this through a tall fence, it was an enjoyable bit of birding. In all, we had nine species of herons, all seen well.



We continued on, surveying the rice fields and at one point we passed a Little Owl on top of a farm building. It did not hang around for photos so we continued on to Cascina Spinola, an area with two ponds and lots of birds. We got out and scoped some nice looking Ruff in a variety of plumages. The ponds also held three Garganey, Wood Sandpipers, Greenshanks, Black Terns, Whiskered Terns and a couple of Black-headed Gulls, all seen well in the scopes. Some flowering plants between us and the ponds distracted us with **Large Copper** (Photo: Steve Bird), Peacock, and other butterflies.



Before lunch we went back to the wetland area, entering from another side to view an active European Bee-eater colony with several birds going in and out of the nest holes feeding chicks. We enjoyed a memorable lunch with all kinds of local specialty foods at Locanda dell'Orso in Fontanetto Po. We returned to the hotel in the afternoon for a rest and later went for another wine tasting at the Olivetta Winery which included a short tour of the vineyard. Back at the hotel, we had dinner and reviewed this, one of the birdiest days of the trip.

Day 7

We had an early breakfast today and then departed for the Parma region and the Torrile Reserve. Here we met our local guide, Maurizio Ravasini who told us how he created the reserve 30 years ago. He walked us through along a trail stopping at a kiosk with photos of the progress of the reserve and then we visited a couple of hides. From the hides we saw Tufted Duck, had nice views of Black-necked Stilts, Common Teal, Garganey, and many Northern Lapwings looking nice with their reflections in the water.



A **Common Cuckoo** (Photo: Gina Nichol) was called and Gina picked it up as it perched on a bare tree behind the pond allowing us good scope views of this species which we had been hearing and seeing fly off all week.



From another hide we had great views of Ruff again in a variety of plumages, Whiskered Tern, Wood Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, and Grey Heron. We looked around the visitor center but had to keep moving as we had an appointment with a Montagu's Harrier and we couldn't be late.

We drove a short way to an area on the Po River plain. As we got out of the vehicles a Golden Oriole flew past and there were more Bee-eaters flying around. We walked along a dirt road scanning the open areas and soon found the prize here, Montagu's Harrier. A male appeared first and we watched it as it handed over prey to a female. Fabulous! For the next half hour or so we watched a total of five Montes, both males

and females. Eventually a male perched on a post and offered good views in the scope.



Next was a visit to another rookery that had a Grey Heron on a nest. Behind that, a little further into the trees was a Eurasian Spoonbill on a nest with four chicks. We were standing in cut hay fields and male and female Red-footed Falcons were flying above us. We tried to get to grips with how to identify Lesser Kestrel. On the way back to the vehicles we saw several Black-crowned Night Herons flying around including some juveniles.

and again offered specialties of the Parma region and a nice refreshing sparkling red wine. After lunch we drove along the hay fields and found a **White Stork** (Photo: Gina Nichol), the only one of the trip. Maurizio took us to an area where nest boxes had been erected for **Red-footed Falcons** (Photo: Luca Boscain) and they were occupied so we looked at them at close range including two white, fluffy chicks.

Our final stop of the day was at an old building where Lesser Kestrels were nesting. As we waited for the Kestrels, a Short-toed Eagle flew over and a Yellow Wagtail was seen. Shortly, a Lesser Kestrel came in to feed its chicks that were waiting under the roof of the building. After another very nice day, we said goodbye to Maurizio and headed back to the hotel for our last evening meal together.

Day 8 – Po River and surroundings

This morning we packed up and started our journey back to Milan. On the way, we stopped at a pond that held Mute Swan, Ferruginous Duck, several Little Grebes with nests, Squacco Heron, Little Egret, noisy



Black-winged Stilts with young, Northern Lapwing, Garganey, our first Sand Martins of the trip, and Purple Herons. Looking along the shoreline we found a juvenile Yellow Wagtail and there were the usual White Wagtails around. A Great Reed Warbler showed very briefly on the reeds and then refused to reveal itself again. A Eurasian Tree Sparrow was seen near where we had parked the vehicles.

We walked across the street to another pond that had Common Pochard, Red-crested Pochard, and a Turtle Dove perched on the far bank. From here we drove to an area overlooking the Po River and found Little Terns, Little Ringed Plover, and a couple of Stone Curlew on the distant shore. Suddenly a Parasitic Jaeger, also called Arctic Skua, (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) flew up the river and landed on the shore. We could see that Luca was excited about seeing this bird that breeds on the northernmost coasts of Europe. It is primarily a coastal bird, even during migration, so seeing it 300 km from the coast was quite unusual. Photos were taken as the bird sat along the river edge.



Our last birding stop was in another agricultural area where we soon found two Lesser Grey Shrikes perched in the open on top of a large tree. It was another good sighting as this species seems to be declining across its range.

We enjoyed one last delicious picnic lunch overlooking a flooded quarry and reminisced about our tour - the excellent food, wine, birds, landscapes, butterflies and nature. We continued toward Milan saying our goodbyes and taking with us the memories of the wonderful mountains and piedmont of northern Italy.

Gina Nichol, Sunrise Birding LLC

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