

Italy and Croatia Mammal Report: 6 to 14 May 2014

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Alpine Marmot (*Marmota marmota*)

Introduction

With an unexpected gap in our work schedules Sarah suggested that we take the car over to France for a week and enjoy a relaxing vacation like 'normal people' for once. As I still hadn't seen many relatively common Euro mammals I agreed and hastily started researching a trip to the Vercors for mountain species such as Alpine Marmot and Alpine Ibex.

At around the same time Jon Hall found out about a Mediterranean Monk Seal that was being seen on and off around the Kamenjac Peninsula just south of Pula, Croatia. Amazingly he twitched it from France (or was it New York?) and after a stressful few days he eventually managed to get fabulous views of what is a critically endangered species.

Mediterranean Monk Seal was still on my radar after failing to make it into Mauritania on my Western Sahara trip earlier in the year. Although the Croatian animal was far from guaranteed, Jon had done all the leg work and made some useful contacts who seemed happy to assist any potential seal watchers. It almost seemed rude to pass on an opportunity to see the rarest seal on the planet.

With Sarah convinced that a road trip would be more fun than rest and recuperation, I began to formulate a plan. As we were passing through Italy I could try again for Crested Porcupine and still catch up with the Alpine mammals. As usual I relied heavily on the advice and assistance from other mammal watchers, many are mentioned below.

Travel details

I decided to use my own car for the trip and we used the Channel Tunnel to get from the UK to France. We travelled almost 4,000 miles in nine days and as a result spent a good chunk of our vacation on the road. With the price of fuel and tolls it would have made more sense to fly to Italy and hire a car but I'm not sure it would have been as much fun. At least with my own vehicle I was able to bring as much mammal watching paraphernalia as I wished.

Apart from a night in the car while travelling through France we chose some nice hotels for our accommodation needs. This was primarily to keep Sarah happy although they were certainly more preferable to camping.

Recanati, Italy: 6 to 9 May 2014

After unsuccessfully searching for Crested Porcupines in Umbria several years ago I was keen to return to Italy for another attempt. I remembered Luca Peruzzi had seen a number of porcupines on the rural roads of Recanati in the Marche region. This seemed as good a place as any to try. Sarah and I spent three nights at Hotel Ristorante La Cantina Di Palazzo Bello (recommended) which also served delicious food.



Recanati countryside, Italy

Mammal watching opportunities were limited during the daytime although we did visit Parco Nazionale dei Monti Sibillini for a couple of hours and saw a **Roe Deer** feeding in a roadside pasture. A road killed Crested Porcupine was seen on the drive back to Recanati.

Late evenings were spent driving a network of dirt tracks including the one where Luca has seen porcupines in the past. Initially I was optimistic as the nights were warm and the roads went through, what I imagine, is perfect habitat.

Unfortunately despite dedicating three to four solid hours a night I didn't find my target. Luca typically sees a porcupine every three hours of searching so I guess I was unlucky not to see at least one. Other mammals were also few and far between with **Western Hedgehog** and **Red Fox** the only terrestrial species apart from abundant domestic cats. Bats were numerous but difficult to identify to species level. Several individuals hunting around the security lights of a crop storage building were most likely **Kuhl's** or **Savi's Pipistrelles**.

Other nocturnal wildlife was well represented with European Nightjar and Scops Owl seen several times. Green Toads were also encountered.

In my experience rural Italy is a difficult place to find suitable roads for night driving. Many tracks lead to isolated villas and farms (usually guarded by noisy dogs) and even minor roads resemble race tracks well into the early hours. Even the potholed dirt tracks around Recanati did not escape traffic after dark and it was not unusual to pass a vehicle every couple of minutes. On the plus side knowing that Luca has seen Crested Porcupines many times on my route gave me hope to continue searching even if I wasn't successful this time.

Pula, Istria Peninsula, Croatia: 9 to 12 May 2014



Istrian Peninsula, Croatia

A week before we left the UK I contacted Jasna Antolovic who heads *The Mediterranean Monk Seal Group* to let her know I was visiting Pula to look for the seal. Although she was careful to point out it cannot be guaranteed, she kindly offered to keep me informed of the seals whereabouts if and when she could. As Jasna would not be in Pula at the time of my trip she also recommended that I contact Marco at the Safari Bar for info on any recent sightings.

After the long, hot drive from Italy Sarah and I arrived in Pula late afternoon. We quickly checked into the excellent Boutique Hotel Oasi where we were more than tempted to rest on the balcony with a cold drink. However, with only a couple of days to find the Mediterranean Monk Seal we headed straight to the tip of the Kamenjac Peninsula where the Safari Bar is located.

It was a beautiful evening and the park was busy with tourists enjoying the sun. The cave mentioned in Jon's report was easy to locate in the low cliffs approximately 80 metres east of the bar, complete with solar panel for the camera and a couple of information signs. I spent several minutes establishing that the seal was not home before visiting the bar and asking for Marco only to be told he was taking a day off. We ordered a couple of drinks while planning our next move, only for Marco to suddenly appear several minutes later. Things got even better when I was told that the seal had spent the day on a beach in Pula, only a couple of miles from our hotel. Trying to remain calm I asked Marco if he knew whether or not it was still there and after making a couple of quick phone calls Marco established that it was. Luckily I had a decent map of Pula on my iPad so the exact location of the beach could be located and confirmed saving valuable time.

It was a 15 minute drive from the Safari Bar to Verudela and the light was beginning to fade. Traffic seemed painfully slow (especially after Italy!) and the journey seemed to take forever. Once in Verudela we easily found the car park for Ambrela Beach (situated next to the Brioni Hotel) but the site of the actual beach wasn't so obvious. It took me several minutes to establish that the small section of sand was hidden by a belt of woodland. Through my binoculars I could see a small group of people obviously watching something.



Mediterranean Monk Seal (*Monachus monachus*)

Moments later the pressure was off as we joined the others to observe the **Mediterranean Monk Seal** as it shared the tiny beach with a group of sunbathing teenagers. Apart from an occasional sneeze the seal didn't really do much, even when it attracted the attention of a small dog. It was still a fantastic mammal watching experience and as the sun set over the coast I couldn't help feeling extremely fortunate to have found the seal so easily.

With our target well and truly in the bag we now had two full days to enjoy the many other things Croatia has to offer. Apart from eating, swimming and relaxing I did spend a little more time searching for wildlife. As far as mammals are concerned I had two more species in mind.

The Istria region is just in range for Striped Field Mouse, a creature mostly confined to moist areas and river valleys. I couldn't find any wet areas around Pula so I set some Sherman traps in a small meadow of tall grass, bordered by woodland.



Striped Field Mouse habitat, Croatia

The next day only one of my traps was tripped but it contained the animal I wanted – a fantastic **Striped Field Mouse**.



Striped Field Mouse (*Apodemus agrarius*)

The next night I set the traps in woodland down the road from my hotel and captured a juvenile **Brown Rat** and a **Wood Mouse**.

Beech Marten was another mammal species that I hoped to find around Pula. Interestingly the currency of Croatia (the Kuna) is named after the marten as their pelts were used as units of value in medieval times. My only plan to see one involved driving around the peninsula after dark and hoping one crossed the road.

The plan worked and an hour after sunset I had a **Beech Marten** in my headlights, albeit for a few seconds. The sighting occurred on a forested road between the villages of Valtura and Sisan (east of Pula) although I imagine they're pretty common everywhere. The only other wild mammal I came across was a **Wood Mouse** together with good numbers of unidentified bats. Other interesting nocturnal mammals that occur on the Istria Peninsula include Golden Jackal and Forest Dormouse although I couldn't find any information concerning the likelihood of seeing either.

During daylight hours we did not encounter any other mammals. Apparently dolphins (presumably Bottle-nosed) can be seen from shore most evenings although I never looked for them. Other wildlife was abundant and I saw many reptiles including European Glass Lizard, Dalmatian Wall Lizard and double figures of Western Whip Snakes (including some very large individuals).

Croatia is a fantastic country and both Sarah and I thoroughly enjoyed our short time there. The people are exceptionally friendly, the scenery stunning and the food delicious. It's also a pretty decent country for wildlife viewing and it would have been interesting to have explored more of the area. However, on this trip we now had a long drive back to Italy in search of some Alpine mammals!



Stelvio National Park, Italy

Italian Alps, Italy: 12 to 14 May 2014

While researching mammal watching opportunities in the Alps I read Coke Smith's excellent account of his trip to Italy in the summer of 2013. It seemed the Stelvio National Park was the place to visit for Alpine Ibex, Alpine Chamois and Alpine Marmot, in particular the Stelvio Pass. Poor planning on my part meant I didn't realise until the last minute that the pass is often still closed in May due to snow. This was the case in 2014 forcing me to find another site for my targets. Furthermore, there was also a possibility that the marmots could still be hibernating particularly if the temperatures remained low.

The journey to our accommodation in Bormio took much longer than expected as several other mountain passes were closed. It was dark when we checked in at the Miramonti Park Hotel (recommended) and the weather had taken a turn for the worse with snow forecast the next day.

Luckily I had contacted local naturalist Mattia Altieri who kindly offered an alternative, lower altitude site for all three species. Early the next morning we drove to the picturesque village of Livigno and headed to the northern end as directed. Here we found the Shell petrol station where I stopped to refuel while scrutinising the mountain slopes before me. Mattia suggested that Mount Motto usually has a herd of Alpine Ibex so I wasn't surprised to see an ungulate feeding on a rocky scree. Reaching for my binoculars it became apparent that the animal was in fact an **Alpine Chamois**, another target I hoped to find further down the road.



Alpine Chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*)

After paying for my fuel I parked away from the pumps and set up my telescope. At this point the sun had appeared raising the temperature by a couple of degrees. On top of the mountain I quickly found a herd of male **Alpine Ibex** giving me my second mammal lifer of the morning. Moments later Sarah spotted some **Alpine Marmots** in the meadow at the foot of the mountain and before long it seemed the whole valley was alive with these fantastic rodents.



Alpine Marmot (*Marmota marmota*)

We spent the whole morning around Livigno getting fantastic views of all three alpine mammals. The ibex moved further down the mountain to escape a snow storm, while the marmots kept us entertained for hours. More chamois were spotted on the mountain slopes from the road heading north towards the Munt la Schera Tunnel (Swiss border). It is possible to park at the roadside in many places and there is at least one trail that leads up the mountain.

After our evening meal back near Bormio we took a brief night drive and saw a **Red Fox**. A road killed Red Squirrel was the only other mammal of note and I was surprised that we didn't come across any live ones throughout our stay.

The next morning we packed our car and began the long drive back to the UK with no new mammals seen.



Alpine Ibex (*Capra ibex*)

Species seen

1.	Western Hedgehog <i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One seen crossing road outside Recanati, Italy on 8 May a couple of hours after sunset.
2.	Pipistrelle sp. <i>Pipistrellus sp</i> or <i>Hypsugo sp.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The small bats seen hunting around rural Recanati, Italy, were most likely <i>P. kuhlii</i> or <i>Hypsugo savii</i>.
3.	Red Fox <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brief view of individual on minor road outside Recanati, Italy on 7 May. One seen on night drive near Bormio, Italy on 13 May.
4.	Beech Marten <i>Martes foina</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brief view on minor road east of Pula, Croatia, one hour after sunset on 11 May.

5.	Mediterranean Monk Seal <i>Monachus monachus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female observed for almost an hour as she rested on Ambrela Beach, Verudela, Croatia on 9 May.
6.	European Roe Deer <i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual seen in meadow late afternoon, Parco Nazionale dei Monti Sibillini, Italy on 8 May. Several seen from motorway while driving through France on 14 May.
7.	Alpine Chamois <i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four observed on morning of 13 May on Mount Motto, Livigno, Italy.
8.	Alpine Ibex <i>Capra ibex</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor herd seen on Mount Motto, Livigno, Italy on 13 May.
9.	European Hare <i>Lepus europaeus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One observed in roadside field, Marche, Italy on 6 May. A couple seen from motorway while driving through France on 14 May.
10.	European Rabbit <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good numbers seen from motorway while driving through France on 14 May.
11.	Alpine Marmot <i>Marmota marmota</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common in the meadows around the north end of Livigno, Italy on 13 May.
12.	Striped Field Mouse <i>Apodemus agrarius</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One trapped in meadow south of Pula, Croatia on 11 May.
13.	Wood Mouse <i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One trapped in woodland near Pula, Croatia on 12 May. Probable seen crossing road late evening on 12 May.
14.	Brown Rat <i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Juvenile trapped in woodland near Pula, Croatia on 12 May.

Conclusion

All things considered it was a very successful trip. Although I failed to find Crested Porcupine once again in Italy, I gave it a good amount of effort in an area where they are known to occur in decent numbers. I may have just been unlucky although it's certainly a difficult mammal to connect with. Perhaps later in the year when the crops have been cut they will be easier to find with a spotlight. One thing's for sure, I'll be giving them another go before long!

The Alpine mammals were easy to find with good local information. I didn't really target anything else in the mountains although in warmer weather it would be interesting to trap for Alpine Mouse and Snow Vole.

The Croatian part of the trip couldn't have gone better. I saw the Mediterranean Monk Seal nice and early so the pressure was off and I could relax a little. I mopped up my other targets with minimum effort while doing 'normal' tourist activities at the same time. Croatia is definitely somewhere I would like to return to although it doesn't have a huge amount of mammal diversity. Targets on a future trip may include Golden Jackal (useful for European mammal listers), Forest Dormouse and Western Rock Mouse. There's also a slim chance of Eurasian Lynx in areas such as Risnjak National Park on the Slovenian border.



Mediterranean Monk Seal (*Monachus monachus*)