

North-central Italy, May 9-30 2011.

This was mostly a culture-oriented trip, although we did spend some time in nature reserves. We rented a car in Rome and returned it in Venice, visiting Ostia Antica, Tarquinia, Copalbio, Pitigliano, Sovana, Sorano, Civita di Bagnoreggio, Orvieto, Spoleto, Visso, Norcia, Monte Sibilini National Park, Assisi, Perugia, Gubbio, Cortona, Siena, San Gimignano, Volterra, Greve in Chianti, Florence, Pisa with adjacent coast, Alpi Apuane, Bolgheri Reserve, Lucca and mountains south from Bologna along the way. We didn't do any trapping, and all IDs are sight IDs (only a few bats got photographed).

North-central Italy is a great country to travel by car; the main hazards are demented old hags sleeping behind the wheel, imbecile bicyclists creating traffic jams on mountain highways, and poorly marked no-entry-for-outsiders areas in city centers. Food is great if you stay away from touristy areas and highway joints (also, keep in mind that there is virtually no correlation between price and quality). Accommodation is tricky: hotels are often overpriced, campgrounds are a total waste of money, finding places to stay through Hospitality Club or Couchsurfing seldom works, but some monasteries are really cheap, nice and quiet, and wild camping isn't a problem, except in Rome area and Venice proper. Few people speak English (surprisingly, Russian was helpful on a few occasions). Italians have been spoiled by two hundred years of mass tourism, so tourist infrastructure is poorly organized, difficult to use and often ridiculously expensive: most third-world countries run it better nowadays. People are very helpful, but you often have to first make them realize that talking to a foreigner is not as scary as they think it is. Of all guidebooks we used or read before/after travel, Rough Guide's Tuscany & Umbria was by far the best.

The weather was generally comfortable, with hot afternoons and cool nights (too cool for most herps in the first half of May). There were only two seriously rainy days (we happened to be in the highest part of our route). It got a bit too hot for our taste only on the last day.

Of course, there is no untamed wilderness in Italy. There are people everywhere except in some places above 1500 m, and even in nature reserves much of the land is used for agriculture. Almost all large animals you see on Etruscan vases and frescoes (lion, leopard, mouflon, ibex, auroch) are extinct in the region; only roe deer, fallow deer and wild boar are still common. However, rural population in Tuscany and Umbria is apparently decreasing: plenty of abandoned houses and farmland in the areas far from large cities. (This gradual decrease is what made possible the amazing preservation of medieval hill-towns in these two provinces. Lazio, Emilia-Romagna and Veneto are much more densely populated). Intensive splitting of South European fauna didn't spare Italy, and if you accept all those splits, your life list can grow almost every time you see a vole, a shrew or a bat. There are growing numbers of chamois, red deer, wolf and bear in high-elevation national parks (which we almost didn't visit). So it looks like mammal watching in Italy will only get better with time.

Rome: Three spp. of small bats roost under Vittorio Emanuele Bridge near Castello San Angelo. I tentatively identified them as *Pipistrellus kuhli*, *P. pygmaeus* & *Hypsugo savii*.

Ostia Antica: There is a bat colony in an underground chamber called Cisterna di Nettuni under the palestra grounds adjacent to Templo Nettuno (thanks to Luca Peruzzi for the tip). The entrance is a bit difficult to find (tour guides don't know where it is – a miracle, since the cistern is generally very interesting, and if it was included into tourist itineraries, there would be no bats by now). There was plenty of *Miniopterus schreibersii* (hanging in the open) and a few *Myotis capaccini* (hiding in cracks). Please try to minimize disturbance if you visit this site. Ostia Antica is also very good for lizards and snakes.

Sorano: A wonderful, half-abandoned medieval town, surrounded by tall cliffs on almost all sides. Sneaking through crumbling buildings and narrow passages in search of bats is a lot of fun. I found *Myotis myotis*, *M. blythi*, and *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*. The surrounding area has nice forests and meadows, with lots of Corsican hares at dusk (they look more like jackrabbits than brown hares).

Bolsena: Blu International campsite is bordered on the southern side by a small creek flowing into the lake. You can see *Neomys anomalus* in the creek. Four spp. of frogs breed at the creek's mouth. The place is also good for birds.

Monte Siblini: A nice national park with a long checklist. It was raining/snowing for much of our time there, so we didn't see much. The place is supposed to have red deer, wolves, bears and a few Pyrenean chamois (recently reintroduced). There is a large area of open meadows, where we spent some time watching hovering kestrels and managed to spot a small mole (apparently, *Talpa caeca* is the only species there) which disappeared underground before we or the kestrel could snatch it. Saw a roadkill porcupine above Visso – I didn't expect them to occur so high in the mountains.

Assisi: There is a nature reserve next to town, apparently similar in history to the sacred mountains of China and Mongolia. Unfortunately, the forest is full of feral cats. They are unusually friendly and insist on following you around. One tried to get something from under a stone (part of road curb). I picked the stone and saw a tiny *Suncus etruscus* dashing under another piece of rock which was too heavy to turn over. It was the only wild mammal I saw in two hours of spotlighting, but the place should be good for dormice later in season. I think I heard an edible dormouse, but the previous time I'd heard one was in 1997, so it was hard for me to be sure.

Perugia: At dusk, *Tadarida teniotis* and some small pipistrelles come to drink from the rooftop pool at Etruscan Chocohotel (if you stay there, use the restaurant only for breakfast – other meals suck).

Cortona: The road towards Siena-Perugia Hwy passes by a few abandoned houses, where I found *M. myotis* and *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*. The monastery of St. Catherine, where we were staying, had an *Apodemys* in its courtyard, but I never managed to see it well enough to ID. Can't imagine how it survived all the cats. The garden also has nesting hoopoes and blue rock-thrushes.

San Gimignano & Volterra: The area between these towns is dotted with unmarked Etruscan tombs, some of which had *Myotis* sp., *Pipistrellus* sp. (likely *P. pipistrellus*), *Rh. ferrumequinum* and *Plecotus austriacus* (IDed by grey-and-white coloration and elongated faces). There are supposedly caves with more bats in sandy cliffs west of Volterra, but I couldn't find them. Watch for beautiful adders at the bottom of the cliffs (*Vipera aspis*, although I'd rather expect *V. ursini* in this steppe-like habitat). I noticed a few pallid swifts mixed with black swifts in San Gimignano (you can have a good look from above if you climb the tallest tower).

Greve in Chianti: Lots of roe deer in forest-bordered meadows at dusk.

Pisa: There is a small botanical garden (world's oldest) in the center of town. Look for a weed-covered pile of broken roof tiles in NE corner; the pile looks as old as the garden itself. A shrew foraging route starts from the pile and follows the base of the garden wall for a few meters. The shrew shows up for a few seconds every 70-90 minutes. It is definitely a *Crocidura*, and almost certainly *C. leucodon*.

Alpi Apuane: a beautiful area north from Lucca (unfortunately, most summits are disfigured by marble quarries). There are extensive beech forests up to the timberline, and almost no conifers. High-altitude birds include lots of Alpine accentors and nice raptors. Red squirrels are common, especially near fir stands if you can find any. Morning drives are good for snakes. A bunch of abandoned houses near the NE entrance to the long tunnel on SP10 north from Levigliani had a few bats; most left as soon as I entered, but one *Plecotus* remained. It was grey-colored, white-bellied and had a small triangle on the lower lip, so I think it was *P. macrobullaris*. That would be a bit south from this species' known distribution in the Alps proper, and I really wish I had at least a photo of its face, but it took off before I could focus the camera. Rock walls along a little stream nearby have numerous crevasses and small caves, where I was happy to find lots of *Hydromantes* salamanders.

Alpi Apuane are said to be the easiest place in the Apennines to see marmots. I really wanted to (Alpine marmot is the only non-tropical sciurine I haven't seen, except for the Barbary squirrel), so I hiked up to alpine meadows at Monte Tambura (a grueling 3-hour climb if you don't have a 4x4), walked around the meadows for another two hours, and found two old burrows that could be marmots'. What did I do wrong?

A bit of a consolation was finding a nice vole runway at the timberline; watching it for half an hour produced a vole that was almost certainly *Microtus multiplex*.

Driving back to Pisa, I noted a low-voltage powerline being installed, followed it for a while and voila! – found the part where the pits had been dug, but the poles not yet stuck in them. Checking those pitfall traps lead to rescuing a small Alpine newt and a midsize *Sorex* (*S. samniticus*, I presume). At dusk a very suspicious-looking cat crossed the road about 3 km from the nearest settlement; wildcats are reportedly common in this area (and increasing), but I don't want to sound too optimistic, especially since lots of feral cats in Alpi Apuane look similar to wild ones. Another place I'd love to spotlight at, but didn't have time to.

San Rossore Regional Park: This park covers most of the coast near Pisa, and can be easily walked into from touristy beaches. It has nice dunes and pine forests, with marshy areas and patches of broadleaf forest. It is good for birding and probably for spotlighting, but I was there

around noon, and saw few birds and only one mammal (a vole that looked consistent with *Microtus savii*).

Bolgheri Reserve: This is a WWF reserve, almost impossible to visit legally (guided tours only, cost a lot, conducted at noon Fri-Sat, have to be booked in advance by phone, the guy answering the phone speaks only Italian and isn't very smart). It is said to be good for deer, wild boar and marten, but the only sign of mammals I saw there were old harvest mouse nests in the fields. I don't know what the purpose of these restrictions is: there is an agricultural establishment inside this tiny reserve, and lots of traffic on reserve roads.

Roncobiaccio: A small town off the highest part of Florence-Bologna Highway, just north of Tuscany/Emilia-Romagna border. It is surrounded by broadleaf and coniferous forests, where I spent a few hours spotlighting and saw two courting porcupines, a bunch of wild boars, one fox, one garden dormouse, and, at dawn, a few fallow deer in the meadows near the top of the hill. The fallow deer is often said to be an early introduction from Asia Minor; if this is true, it should've been a *very* early one, as fallow deer are commonly depicted in Etruscan art from at least 800 B.C.

Venice: One of the lagoon's peripheral islands, called Torcello (accessible from Burano), has once harbored a major city, but is now almost completely depopulated and slowly sinking. Except for a short street leading to the lagoon's oldest cathedral, the island is mostly marshland with lots of birds (look for small rails). Abandoned houses have some bats; there was a bunch of *H. savii* in a side corridor of the cathedral, and *P. pipistrellus* in two boarded-up houses N from the street.

We saw a brown hare while taking off from Treviso Airport.