



ABRUZZO ADVENTURE

Tour Report

14th – 19th October 2024



Day 1 – Arrival in the Abruzzo

Monday 14th October

After months of anticipation, the day of our Abruzzo Adventure finally arrived! The group met up at Rome Fiumicino Airport, everyone buzzing with excitement for the week ahead. After a quick round of introductions, we piled into the jeep for the scenic 2.5-hour scenic to Pescasseroli, the gateway to the Abruzzo National Park. Along the way, we spotted a few familiar Roman birds, such as green monk parakeets fluttering around the city outskirts and cattle egrets. Anticipation grew as we neared our destination, ready to explore this stunning little known wilderness of central Italy.

Upon arrival, we were welcomed by a park ranger for a brief induction on park rules, especially the importance of maintaining a respectful distance from wildlife.



We headed out for our first evening watch at a well-known viewpoint from which we'd hopefully catch our first glimpse of the park's elusive wolves or perhaps even the famed Marsican brown bears. No luck yet – just some curious sheepdogs, a common sight on the hills, and a few red deer in the distance. Although we didn't spot any large predators, the rich autumn scenery made up for it.

We wrapped up the day with a delicious dinner at La Vecchia Locanda in the village of Opi, our base for the week. The meal was a celebration of local flavours, including fresh chitarra pasta with tender lamb, earthy mushrooms, and aromatic truffles, alongside a tempting spread of salamis and cheeses. As we savoured each bite, we discussed our photographic and wildlife targets for the week ahead. With full bellies, we were in bed by 10:30 p.m., ready for an early start the next morning.





Day 2 – Aschi & Sangro River

Tuesday 15th October

Day 1 kicked off with an early 5:30 a.m. wake-up, well before the sun was up. After a quick coffee, we drove towards a lake, excited by reports of red deer carcasses nearby – an indicator that wolves might be in the area. On the way, we were lucky enough to glimpse the bushy tail end of a Wild Cat as it scampered across the road, as well as a Pine Marten, two rare sightings that set the tone for a thrilling morning.

However, upon arrival at the lake, our hopes of seeing wolves were dashed by some foolish tourists carrying bright lamps as they traipsed through the forest just above the carcasses. Our chances of spotting any wolves here dwindled as their presence likely scared off anything nearby.

Undeterred, we switched gear and headed to an open mountainous location where we have had reliable (dare I say guaranteed!) wolf sightings on every visit. We scanned the hillsides and soon spotted red deer on the hill crests, a few wild boar and red foxes emerging from the underbrush. A local photographer friend pointed us in the direction of a cluster of trees, where he had just seen a lone wolf go four minutes before we arrived. Encouraged, we immediately focussed in with our thermal camera.

The morning quickly turned into one of those days you dream about or see in a nature documentary. The presence of churring jays hinted that something was nearby. Our patience paid off when a pair of wolves, with striking orange ears, emerged and cantered along the hilltop. They weren't in hunting mode, just casually making their way towards a group of deer and cows, effortlessly crossing the rocky terrain. Jumping into the jeep, we followed alongside them for a good 30 minutes, taking pictures as they strode along the hill crest, until eventually they slipped into the mid-morning shade to rest. What a way to kick off the trip – wolves on our first morning!

After breakfast, we visited a stretch of the Sangro River. Our main targets here were red deer swimming in the river and the dippers that frequent the babbling waters. It didn't take long before we spotted two dippers flying low over the river, their tiny dark forms zipping along the water. After some patient waiting, we found a couple perched on the river rocks, giving us the perfect photo op as they darted in and out of the water. Further up river, we spotted three red deer hinds delicately wading through the crystal-clear water. Heading deeper into the forest to check out this morning's deer carcasses, we found plenty of wolf



footprints around – evidence of nocturnal activity that made us all the more determined to revisit the spot early tomorrow morning for a chance to catch them again.

After a relaxed lunch at a café by the lake (delicious focaccia stuffed with smoky scamorza, salami, and roasted aubergine) and a short rest back at the hotel, we followed up on a tip from some local photographer friends and headed out to a forest glade, which had been the recent feeding ground of a female bear known fondly as Giacomina. While she remained out of sight, we did catch a brief glimpse of a rare white-backed woodpecker darting through the canopy, one for the birders among us.

We pushed onwards to a hilltop village, where Giacomina had also been reliably spotted among the houses. As we strolled through the quaint village streets, we saw a few red deer calmly walking around, almost like locals themselves. From up here, we could hear the ethereal howls of wild wolves all around as darkness fell.

We wrapped up the day with a hearty dinner of wild boar pappardelle in a cozy locanda. After one last attempt to spot a bear in the orchards, and with the wolves' howls still echoing in our minds, we went to bed content, ready for whatever tomorrow might bring.





Day 3 – Piana di Opi & Pianezza

Wednesday 16th October

Another early start, with hopes of wolf activity near the deer carcasses at the lake. Unfortunately, yet again, reckless tourists disturbed the area, with cars leaving their engines running and headlights blaring – a reminder of how not to behave around wildlife. A lone fox trotted by and a few deer kept their distance. A quick check of the forest clearings and Opi plains with the thermal imaging camera picked up the heat signature of a recently parked car, which surely would have scared away any wildlife.

Undeterred, we skipped the site of yesterday morning's success, as the sun was steadily rising, and headed back to the well-known viewpoint. This turned out to be a good decision in unexpected ways. We spotted two wild boar snuffling around in the misty valley. The village, abandoned after earthquakes some decades ago, was alive with a flurry of bird activity, with black redstarts on the rooftops and a distant white-backed woodpecker drumming. Whilst attempting to catch a glimpse of this bird, a dark movement in the pine trees instead revealed a rare endemic Calabrian Black Squirrel. A thrilling sighting, even if it wasn't the bear we hoped for.

We took a detour to a little-known stream that is home to the last remaining population of White-Clawed Crayfish. We were delighted to find the stream teeming with these endangered crustaceans, and we managed to carefully lift a few into the water's edge for some close-up photos.

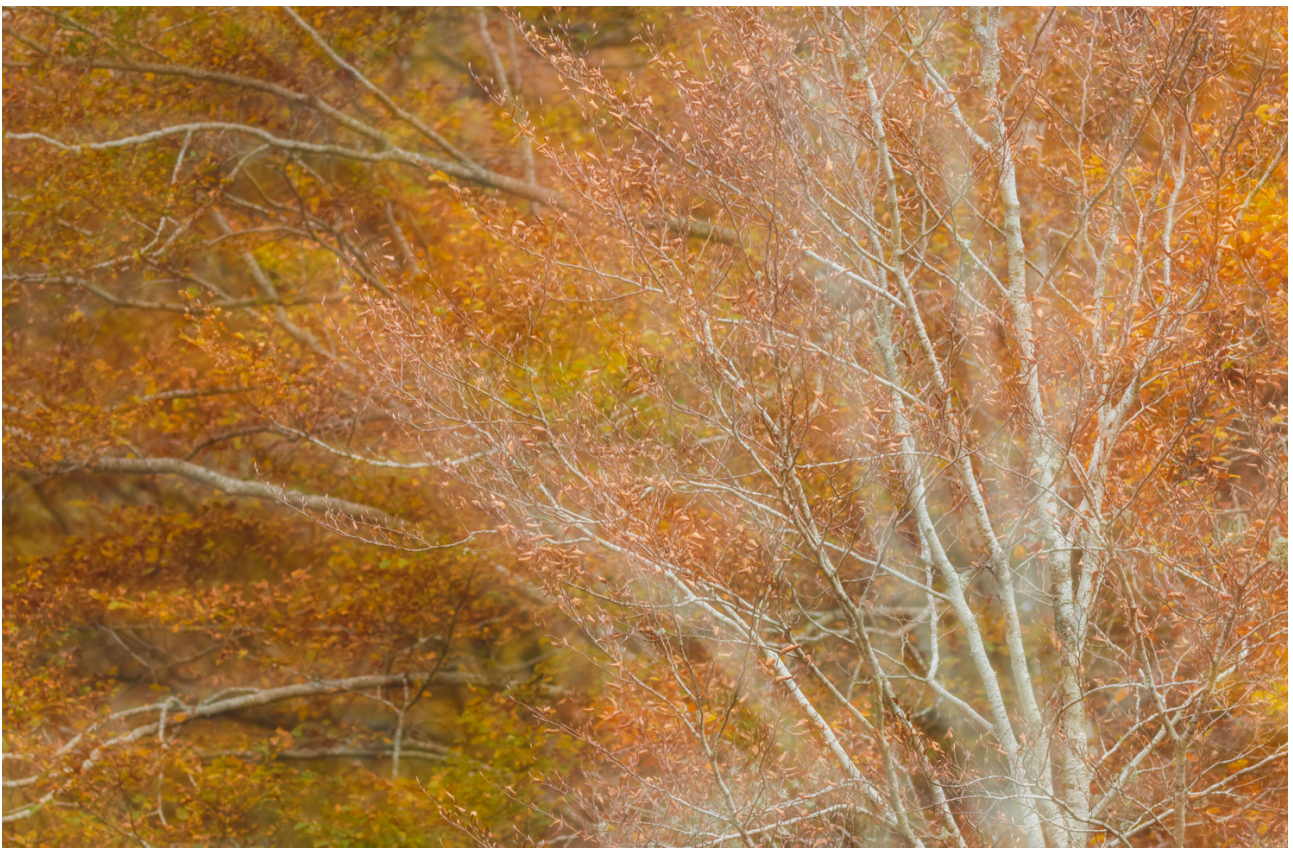
Late morning, we went birdwatching in local fields, but birds in late autumn can prove elusive. Lunch at a trattoria in Pescasseroli – grilled vegetables, assorted meats, and local cheeses – gave us energy for our afternoon hike in search of Apennine chamois, a type of mountain antelope endemic to this area. The hike involved a bit of a climb through beech and sycamore forest, the stony path winding upwards like a natural staircase. The forest floor was rich with the scent of white truffle. Along the way, we were entertained with some great macro photography subjects: a fierce-looking devil's coach horse beetle, a few praying mantis, a wolf spider carrying hundreds of spiderlings on its back, and clusters of delicate pink touch-me-not flowers.

At the top of the forest, we got lucky – there, standing proudly and eyeing us from a rocky outcrop, was a one-horned chamois! It posed beautifully, allowing us to get some great portraits, before giving a sharp whistle and disappearing into the mist. The rest of the plateau was eerily quiet, with no other chamois in sight, but our thermal camera picked up the distant forms of a few deer and a



fox moving through the trees below. The abundance of acorns in the forests suggested that it would be a challenge to spot any bears in the orchards.

We ended the day with another check at the lake carcasses, but again, human activity kept the wolves away, so we called it a day. Dinner at the hotel was a comforting bowl of polenta with gorgonzola and cutlets, perfect after a long day outdoors. We rounded off the evening with a screening *My Neighbour Is A Bear*, our film made during the 2020 pandemic lockdown about a bear family, which brought laughter and stories about past trips.





Day 4 – La Difesa & Ortona

Thursday 17th October

Given the huge potential payoff of seeing a wolf eating a carcass, we all agreed to give the lake another try – and our intuition paid off big time! We spotted a lone wolf, feeding on a carcass, just 20 meters away from us in the pre-dawn light, before it cantered across the river.

As the sun rose and more spectators arrived, other sightings included a wild boar and red deer running across the lake's mudflats, giving us more to capture. The misty conditions and big sun made for some atmospheric photography, with egrets appearing like ghostly figures in the fog, their reflections creating beautiful high-key images. Hooded crows cawed from the cloudy forest.

After breakfast, we set out for a spectacular beech forest, embarking on a lovely autumnal walk. The golden-orange leaves rustling in the breeze made perfect subjects for double exposure photography. We had a fleeting glimpse of a honey buzzard overhead, and although we only heard the drumming of a white-backed woodpecker, a few sharp-eyed members of the group managed to spot it. A willow tit posed nicely on a mossy stump for us. Engrossed in autumn colour and fungi around our feet, by pure chance we stumbled upon something truly rare – a hazel dormouse! It rustled through the leaf litter and quickly scurried up into the fork of a beech tree, pausing long enough for us to take photos. This was an unexpected highlight, as hazel dormice are notoriously hard to spot in the wild, and it was a first for many of us.

Following lunch in Pescasseroli, a quick refresh stop and a bird walk around the local area, we drove to our reliable wolf site, and another viewpoint which had great potential. The former site was uncharacteristically quiet and drizzly, with no sign of wolves; but at the viewpoint, things took a dramatic turn. As the light began to fade, we spotted four wolf cubs running around the fields! We battled against the fading light but managed to get some fantastic sustained views as they played together – an absolute joy to witness. We left the site with plans to return tomorrow, certain we'd see more.

Dinner at La Vecchia Locanda was a casual affair – delicious pizzas shared around the table, with everyone recounting their favourite moments of the day. By 11 p.m., we were back at the hotel, tired but thrilled after our various encounters with rare mammals great and small.



Day 5 – Ortona & Petrella Liri

Friday 18th October

Our last full day kicked off at 5:20am, and we were on the road by first light, heading for the previous evening's wolf pack. The weather wasn't on our side, and the roads were quiet, apart from a few green toads making their way back to the woods – quite the reverse of their spring migration. Drizzly rain pushed us on to the viewpoint, arriving just after 7 a.m., where the first sounds of the day came from a rock partridge calling in the distance. Our headlights flushed a woodcock.

Suddenly, our wolf spotter Gianluca's voice rang out: wolf cubs! Not just one or two, but seven cubs, playing across the fields. The adrenaline kicked in as we watched them run across the valley, heading towards the road. In a flash, we were back in the car, driving into the valley to intercept them. It was a thrilling game of cat and mouse – spotting them from the viewpoint, then racing ahead to get a closer look. As we pulled up to a clearing, we had a cub just feet away from us in an apple orchard, its curious eyes peering through the branches. Another crossed the road right in front of us, a rare and heart-pounding moment. We spent the next few hours following their movements closely, watching as they



darted back and forth. It's incredibly rare to have such close and prolonged encounters of these shy animals.

Hearing dogs barking, we couldn't believe our eyes as the wolves made their way towards the main road running through the town. Try as we might, we couldn't locate them among the houses, but we did spot a rare Calabrian Black Squirrel and even a black red squirrel in the hedgerows. Back at the viewpoint for another check, the mist rolled in, drawing curtains on the morning's action. We celebrated with breakfast and coffee at the viewpoint.

Next, we checked in on peregrine falcon nesting site. The male peregrine took off from the cliff, disappearing into the clouds, a brief but impressive sight. From there, we headed 1 hour up to a refuge for griffon vultures. At least 20 of these majestic birds circled overhead, joined by a few ravens and another peregrine. This site did not disappoint, as they dipped in and out of the mist against fascinating rock formations.

Wild boar pasta and ravioli hit the spot for lunch, even if the comically chaotic service had us all chuckling as orders got mixed up left and right. After lunch, we bid farewell to our brilliant wolf spotter, Gianluca, who had to return to Rome to present his Colosseum photography project. It was sad to see him go, but we were grateful for all the knowledge and enthusiasm he'd shared with us throughout the trip.

On the drive back to Pescasseroli, we made a quick stop for ice cream. A final attempt to spot a bear at the well-known viewpoint, but instead, we admired the beautiful beech forest and watched two tired stags sparring. A tawny owl flew across the road, a bonus before returning to the hotel.

Dinner was a feast at La Vecchia Locanda – a huge meat platter that could have fed an army – and a night walk in the village for owls and foxes. Off to bed, knowing tomorrow we'd be packing up and heading home.



Day 6 – Return

Saturday 19th October

Checking the lake one last time, to our surprise the carcasses had been dragged into the middle of the water and completely devoured. The wolves had done their work, leaving just bones picked by hooded crows, and the curtain had come down on this incredible wildlife spectacle.

With that chapter closed, we returned for breakfast and packing. We recalled the heart-racing excitement of multiple wolf sightings, notably watching seven wolf cubs playing in the fields, and the magical moment when we spotted a hazel dormouse scurrying up a beech tree. The camaraderie we shared, swapping stories over fresh pasta and wine, added to the adventure. It wasn't just about the wildlife – though that was spectacular – but also the joy of discovery and the warmth of good company.

And with that, we bid farewell to Abruzzo, already dreaming of when we might return to chase wolves, the elusive bears, and the magic of the wild once again.



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Species Lists

SPECIES OBSERVED	9/17	5/18	10/24
MAMMALS			
Apennine Wolf	✓	✓	✓
Marsican Bear	✓	✓	
Apennine Chamois	✓	✓	✓
Wild Boar	✓	✓	✓
Red Fox	✓	✓	✓



Red Deer	✓	✓	✓
Roe Deer	✓	✓	✓
Wild Cat			✓
Apennine Hare		✓	
Pine Marten			✓
Badger		✓	
Calabrian Black Squirrel			✓
Black' Red Squirrel			✓
Hazel Dormouse			✓
Bat species (Pipistrelle)		✓	✓
BIRDS			
Coot			✓
Mallard			✓
Yellow-Legged Gull			✓
Great Cormorant			✓
Grey Heron			✓
Great White Egret			✓
Cattle Egret			✓
Honey Buzzard	✓	✓	✓
Goshawk		✓	
Buzzard	✓		✓
Griffon Vulture			✓
Golden Eagle	✓	✓	
Short-Toed Eagle	✓		
Sparrowhawk	✓		✓
Kestrel	✓	✓	✓
Red-Footed Falcon	✓		



Peregrine	✓	✓	✓
Rock Partridge	✓	✓	✓
Woodcock			✓
Monk Parakeet [Rome]			✓
Tawny Owl		✓	✓
Lilford's White-Backed Woodpecker		✓	✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	✓	✓	✓
Green Woodpecker	✓		✓
Wryneck		✓	
Treecreeper		✓	
Short-Toed Treecreeper			✓
Nuthatch	✓	✓	✓
Cuckoo		✓	
Hoopoe		✓	
Kingfisher			✓
Bee-Eater		✓	
Swift		✓	
Swallow		✓	
House Martin		✓	✓
Crag Martin	✓	✓	
Rufous-Tailed Rock Thrush		✓	✓
Blackbird	✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	✓	✓	✓
Dipper		✓	✓
Grey Wagtail		✓	✓
White Wagtail			✓



Redstart		✓	✓
Black Redstart	✓	✓	✓
Eastern Subalpine Warbler		✓	
Bonelli's Warbler		✓	✓
Blackcap		✓	
Wood Warbler		✓	
Chiffchaff		✓	✓
Firecrest		✓	
Hooded Crow	✓	✓	✓
Raven	✓	✓	✓
Jay	✓	✓	✓
Magpie	✓	✓	✓
Alpine Chough	✓	✓	
Red-Backed Shrike		✓	
Lesser Grey Shrike		✓	
Wheatear	✓	✓	
Skylark		✓	
Tree Pipit		✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	✓		
Tawny Pipit		✓	
Wren	✓		✓
Great Tit			✓
Blue Tit			✓
Marsh Tit		✓	✓
Willow Tit			✓
Long-Tailed Tit		✓	✓
Stonechat		✓	



Serin		✓	✓
Chaffinch			✓
Greenfinch		✓	✓
Goldfinch	✓	✓	✓
Bullfinch		✓	✓
Linnet		✓	
White-Winged Snowfinch	✓		
Tree Sparrow	✓		
House Sparrow			✓
Corn Bunting		✓	
Yellowhammer		✓	
Rock Bunting	✓	✓	✓
Cirl Bunting			✓
REPTILES			
Italian Wall Lizard	✓	✓	✓
Green Lizard	✓	✓	
AMPHIBIANS			
Green Toad			✓
Common Toad			✓