

Northern and Central Italy birding in early June 2015

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Early June (2-9) we made with Leena a combined birding and tourist trip to North and Central Italy. My aim was to tick **Rock Partridge** and four C category birds: **Sacred Ibis**, **Vinous-throated Parrotbill**, **Northern Bobwhite** and **Red-billed Leiothrix**. We booked flights to Milan already early this year when Finnair had special offers available (250€ return per each, direct flights). I copied key parts of Josh Jones report in which he had very well described how to find those birds. Link to his report <http://joshjrjones.blogspot.fi/2013/06/italy-trip-report-may-2013.html>

We had early flight to Milan on June 2 and soon we drove to our first destination close to Malpensa airport. Between Castano Primo and the river Ticino are pools very close to a village Nosate. Those pools are just on the northeast site of the village.

When I had copied the text in small parts from Josh's report, some additional text was copied and I first misunderstood which side of the pools birds should be. I tried to search them on the western corner. I did not find them in few hours in a burning heat, so we continued to Oldenico to try next species, **Sacred Ibis**. We soon found the site with car navigator and picked up 2+1 birds feeding on the rice fields. Additionally 1+1 was flying nearby. A Turtle Dove was calling somewhere by the river forest.



One Sacred Ibis flew very close to our car on the wall and landed to a nearby Ibis feeding together with Little Egrets.

Then we continued to Palude Brabbia Marshes a bit south of Varese. We soon arrived in the village of Inarzo where the entry to the area was. We parked to the parking area and in the late evening visited both hides nearby. However, I did not get the point how to go further inside reedbed. In the old notes the entry path to the bird tower from the village Bernate was closed. In my short stay in the hides did not bring Parrotbill though I played the tape.

Later in the evening I contacted Seppo Järvinen concerning Northern Bobwhite site. Then I understood that the birds are just on the northern side of the pools, so new try next day.

June 3 I went again to the left hand side hide in Palude Brabbia Marshes. I continued the old track behind the fence and following the ditch only around 150m when I heard **Vinous-throated Parrotbill** actively calling in the reedbed. It came few times up to 5m from me but stayed always very low in the reedbed moving actively. I had only rather brief views of the bird during the few minutes I stayed there. However, they were satisfactory to me when tens of mosquitoes were biting me.



Palude Brabbia marshes map shows well the sites and entry points to the area.



Early morning view from the left hand side hide to the north.

Now we returned to Northern Bobwhite site and soon northern side of the pool, just crossing the bridge over the northern canal, I heard first calls of **Northern Bobwhite**. Around 300m north of the bridge by the track I counted at least 4 birds calling around me. The closest bird I approached and saw it flying away. In the pools I saw 2 pairs of Ferruginous Ducks, a breeding Mute Swan, Great Reed Warbler and around 10 Black-crowned Herons among others.

Now was time to drive to Tuscany area. We decided to find accommodation from a town of Lucca which was good in many ways. I read that the town is a birth place of opera composer Giacomo Puccini and additionally my fourth target bird, Red-billed Leiothrix site was close to Lucca. However, June 4 was fully dedicated to Lucca and its history. We enjoyed old town with narrow streets, small cafes and good Italian food. The town was not too touristic. Certainly we visited Puccini's birth house which is nowadays a museum. His music I like and we have seen several of his operas in Finland (in Helsinki Opera House or in Savonlinna Opera Festival). Serins were singing everywhere.

June 5 we first drove just western side of Lucca, road SS439 to Ponte San Pietro, the bridge going over the river Serchio. We parked the car northern side parking slot as described in Josh report and walked the river path to south close to A11 motorway bridge. I soon picked up several trip species: Penduline Tit, Melodious Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Kingfisher, Bee-eater, Crag Martins (under A11 motorway bridge), Wryneck, etc. Finally after an hour I saw first **Red-billed Leiothrix** flying low over the river side bushes. Its orange-red bill was shining and bird's greenish color was unmistakable. I saw the same bird

a bit later in a willow very shortly. It did not respond to my pishing at all. Maybe breeding time was going on and the birds were less active to respond or show up. Anyhow, now was time to continue our trip.



View from San Pietro bridge towards south along Serchio river. Bushes on the left side was the site we covered. On the back is A11 motorway bridge.

We continued to Massaciucoli village and walked the nature trail on the eastern shores of the lake (Lago di Massaciucoli). This time of the year the lake seemed rather empty. I picked up close to 10 Purple Herons, few Marsh Harriers and Moustached Warblers but otherwise this one hour stop was rather poor.



Walking around the nature trail can reveal that the site of Lago di Massaciucoli park can be very rewarding in migration and winter time.

We continued to Pisa which appeared to be a very touristic city with hundreds of tourist buses and thousands of people.



Very famous Pisa leaning tower and huge tourist herds around it in a hot summer day.

We wanted to get rid of tourist herds and unbearable heat and continued our drive to Aielli, down to Abbruzzo mountains east of Rome. On a way our car showed temperature of +38C! It was extremely hot.

We finally arrived in Aielli at 6.20pm. We drove to the highest point of the village in the northeast corner and then continued sandy track up next 500m where we parked the car. I continued on by foot and on the eastern side of the hill I finally 7.30pm heard a **Rock Partridge** calling. I found the bird inside spruces sitting on a rock and managed to take few photos.



Rock Partridge climbed on the rock and was calling few times. Then it stepped down and went to the left side of the spruce onto another rock. I had to move to see the bird. It saw me moving, stepped down and stayed quiet and hiding next 15 minutes.

Sun was already gone down and a bit chilly evening had made Leena to an angry mood as it took a bit longer for me to see the bird. Anyhow, the last target bird was seen, so now the rest of the trip was dedicated to tourism in Tuscany.

To my understanding Josh's report describes a bit different site near Aielli where he and others have seen the species. I had a bit difficulties to interpret driving to the site. So I made my own judgement where the birds could be.



Rock Partridge was on the right hand side of the spruce area on the top of the hill. Flowering meadows provided excellent base for tens of butterfly species.



Few pairs of Tawny Pipits were indicating that they are breeding on the slopes by the track.

Next day (June 6) we still visited few hours the same site on the hills to photograph day butterflies. It had good number of nice species to get documented. Additionally I saw Subalpine and Bonelli's Warbler as well and a Cirl Bunting for the trip list. We started our return drive.

We drove to Siena where we familiarized to this old and lovely town. June 7 we continued a bit north to Chianti wine area. We visited a small Saint'Agnes farm which is producing organic wines and olive oils. We stayed the next night in a small B&B in Castellino in Chianti.



Good Italian dinner was accompanied with a local Chianti wine. I selected the bottle based on the label as you can see.

June 8 we continued driving across Chianti wine road, further close to Ligurian sea and Genoa. We had nice lunch at Portofino by the sea. Its narrow roads made driving very slow. It appeared to be rather touristic and expensive area, so we continued north. Finally we found our last night accommodation north of Genoa in the mountainous area.



The heart of Chianti wine region showed lovely scenery with wine fields and small farms here and there.

Last morning was finally cooler and cloudy. On our drive to north we faced first time rain. We were thinking to drive close to Malpensa to make the last step to the airport quickly. I aimed to explore a bit in Titico Park but it was still raining. We continued to the Northern Bobwhite site and the rain just stopped. Already on the south-north wall I heard one Northern Bobwhite calling close to the bridge. Another one was calling a bit further away. When we returned our car, I still heard quietly the call of a bird. Actually you do not need to walk around the eastern corner of the pools. You can walk across the wall which leads south-north of the pools and it leads directly to the bridge which you need to cross over to move to the scrub where the birds are calling.

We returned early to Malpensa airport and waited our evening flight to Helsinki. The trip had well fulfilled both of our targets, my bird targets and our common Italy tourist target around Tuscany. We did not even visit Florence which will be left for the next trip. However, less touristic towns were more interesting to me to experience local life and history. We drove a bit over 2000km and experienced excellent, even too hot weather. I preferred Chianti wines from sangiovese grapes with pasta foods.