

Albania in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 - 11 April 2017



Common Swallowtail



Hermann's Tortoise



Karavasta dune forest



Crocus veluchensis

Report & images compiled by Andy Smith



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Day 1

Tuesday 4th April

The tour started with a flight from the UK to Albania. After arriving at Tirana airport on schedule in the evening, and meeting up with our local guide Erkan and driver Zamir, we drove south to Berat. We received a warm welcome at our very comfortable hotel in the old quarter of town and enjoyed an excellent late dinner before retiring to our beds.

Day 2

Wednesday 5th April

After breakfast we drove to the coast and the Karavasta National Park. Here, in the company of Albanian ornithologist and conservationist Tao Bino, we explored the lagoons, saltmarsh, dune scrub and pine woodland of this interesting and attractive area. The weather was pleasant and through the course of several short walks either side of a delicious restaurant lunch, we encountered a wide range of wildlife.

Bird highlights included Dalmatian Pelican, Pygmy Cormorant, Great Egret, Stone-curlew, Black-winged Stilt, Caspian Tern, Hoopoe, Cuckoo and Red-rumped Swallow. Reptiles were represented by several smart Balkan Wall Lizards and three separate Hermann's Tortoises. Insects included Common Swallowtail, Clouded Yellow, Egyptian Grasshopper and a mass emergence of Tiger Beetles. Meanwhile the botanists found *Amenone hortensis* and *Ophrys* orchids that looked like Early Spider Orchids.

At the end of the afternoon we headed back to Berat and enjoyed dinner at a restaurant in the old citadel, complete with a Scops Owl calling outside.

Day 3

Thursday 6th April

Today we headed back to the coast to Narte and explored the extensive saltpans there with Erraldi, one of Tao's colleagues. Pallid and Montagu's Harriers and a bunch of Alpine Swifts passing overhead as we arrived started things off well, and these were followed by a very satisfying range of birds. Highlights included hundreds of Greater Flamingoes, lots of Avocets, Black-winged Stilts and Ruff, dozens of smart Slender-billed Gulls, several Marsh Harriers, a pair of Stone-curlews and at least 15 neat Marsh Sandpipers. Meanwhile Corn Buntings sang from the wires, Black-headed Wagtails sat up on the suda scrub, and Crested Larks and at least one Tawny Pipit potted around on the ground. All in all, very nice!

In the mid-afternoon we headed back to Berat and finished the day with a walk around the citadel with its fine Ottoman architecture and splendid views of the surrounding valleys and hills.

Day 4

Friday 7th April

Nightingales singing by the river at Berat in the early morning made for a good start to the day. With breakfast completed, we took our leave and began the journey to the mountains and the north. Skirting to the north-west of Tirana, we connected with the newish A1 highway which bisects the country, left the densely populated coastal plain behind and zoomed north-east through miles of uninhabited scrubby hills. We crossed the Kosovo

border a little after midday and ate lunch in a restaurant in historic Prizren, with Crag Martins hawking over the river outside and a chorus of prayer calls from the cities several mosques.

In the afternoon we drove on through the pleasant, rolling, agricultural landscape of this part of Kosovo. We made a few short stops and noted some good birds including a Black Stork, several White Storks and a Woodlark. Soon we hit the hills again and crossed back into Albania, and a little later we were winding our way up into the beautiful Valbona valley. We saw Dippers along the river and arrived at our comfortable guest house surrounded by impressive snow-capped limestone mountains in good time to settle in before dinner.

Day 5

Saturday 8th April

Today, after a short transfer in some local 4x4's, we did a mid-level walk through meadows, plum orchards, woodland and scrub. The scenery was consistently splendid and the quality of the habitats impressive. Insects and reptiles kept a low profile on account of the cold wind, but during the course of the morning we saw an exciting range of birds including an immature Golden Eagle, a female Grey-headed Woodpecker, a brief Black Woodpecker, a Nutcracker, several Marsh Tits, a few Black Redstarts, a flock of a dozen or so Water Pipits and some Rock Buntings.

We ate a lunch at a stan (a summer grazing farmstead) where we were served a tasty traditional meal accompanied by plum raki. Then we continued walking back down towards the valley bottom. We enjoyed good views of a second Black Woodpecker and found a couple of smart Queen of Spain Fritillaries and some Eastern Wood Whites before meeting up with the vehicles and returning to our lodgings.

Day 6

Sunday 9th April

Today, after another short 4x4 transfer, we did a high level walk up into the Kukaj valley. We climbed up through pine and beech forest to the high meadows and then, amongst snow patches and scree, we ate a picnic lunch by an as yet untenanted stan. The weather was lovely and the scenery outstanding. We all enjoyed the challenge of the walk and the awesome beauty of our surroundings. Birds included Alpine Chough, Black Redstart, Water Pipit, Rock Bunting and a pair of courting Northern Wheatears plus some Rock Partridges that called enticingly from a distant boulder field but remained frustratingly hidden.

The snow had only recently receded from the meadows and the yellowed and flattened grass was riddled with vole 'mines' and peppered with colourful crocuses (*Crocus veluchensis*) and Alpine Squills (*Scilla bifolia*). As we descended back through the forest in the heat of the afternoon we heard a Grey-headed Woodpecker repeatedly calling and encountered numerous small lizards, which we took to be mostly Erhard's Wall Lizards, and a range of butterflies including Grizzled Skipper, Green Hairstreak and Orange-Tip.

Day 7

Monday 10th April

After enjoying some Serins in the plum trees outside the guesthouse, we drove a short way down the valley and then walked downstream along the river, through meadows, scrub and some very fine old Beech forest. Wildlife highlights during this lovely walk included a smart Nose-horned Viper, a few handsome Eastern Green Lizards, a

brief male Semi-collared Flycatcher, several impressive Tau Emperor moths and a fine stand of *Saxifraga sempervivum*.

Day 8

Tuesday 11th April

We departed from our guesthouse in Valbona before dawn and by 6am we were at the modest ferry terminal near the town of Fierze, at the northern end of Komani Lake. It was a beautiful morning but fiercely cold. The ferry left on time and we chugged down the lake under towering cliffs and past steep forested slopes, here and there putting in to the shore to drop off or pick up passengers, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Wildlife interest along the way included a few Goosanders, some Cormorants, a couple of Dippers and a large flock of Alpine Swifts. After a very scenic and culturally interesting couple of hours, the boat arrived at the slipway at Komani.

Here we were reunited with Zamir and our trusty minibus and began the journey through sparsely inhabited scrubby hills towards the coastal plain and the city of Shkoder. We noted Cirl Bunting, Black-eared Wheatear and Subalpine Warbler en route, and made one principal stop by a small marsh where we were greeted by a loud chorus of Marsh Frogs and found a smart male Woodchat Shrike and a nice range of butterflies.

We reached Shkoder Lake by lunchtime, saw some Ruff, Pygmy Cormorants and a Marsh Harrier, and ate lunch in a rather swish lakeside restaurant. After this we took a brief exploratory drive along the lakeshore towards the Montenegrin border before proceeding south via the historic hilltop town of Kruja to Tirana airport and our flight back to the UK. All went well and we all arrived safely back at Gatwick a few hours later.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Erkan for his help throughout; to Zamir for his excellent driving; to Tao and Erraldi on the coast and to Catherine in the mountains. Thanks also to the Naturetrek group for their rich and varied contributions - it was a very interesting and enjoyable trip!

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Species Lists

Birds (h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	April							
			5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
1	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	50	10						
2	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	15							
3	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	50	1						
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	10	3						
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	30							
6	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	1							
7	Rock Partridge	<i>Alectoris graeca</i>					2h			
8	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		1						20
9	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	150	500						
10	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			1					
11	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			6					
12	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		22						
13	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	6	8	25					2
14	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	10	1						
15	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	50	50	5					6
16	Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>	65	21						
17	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>	50	35						5
18	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	20							12
19	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	6	2					1
20	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		1						
21	Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>		1						
22	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1	1					
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	3	4	7	3	1	1		2
24	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				1				
25	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	17							70
26	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>	1	2						
27	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	1	5						
28	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	30	70						1
29	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		150						
30	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	1	1						
31	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	4							
32	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		1						
33	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	2	12						
34	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	20							
35	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	3							
36	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		3						
37	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		2						
38	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1	12						
39	Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>		15						
40	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	110	5						
41	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1	3						2
42	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		1						
43	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		25						
44	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	100	250						45
45	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	3	100						5
46	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>	45	120						
47	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>	30							

	Common name	Scientific name	April							
			5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
48	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	30	50						20
49	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	10							
50	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>							6	5
51	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			2	6	1	2		
52	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	20	30	40					25
53	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	3							
54	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1	1	1					
55	Eurasian Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>	1h							
56	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>						1h		
57	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>		6	4					75
58	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	1							12
59	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	2	2	1					
60	Common Kingfisher	<i>alcedo atthis</i>	1							
61	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>				2	1h	1h		
62	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>				1	2h			
63	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	1	2	1	1			2
64	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1					
65	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>								1
66	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			1	7	8	5		
67	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	20	25	30					5
68	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>				1				
69	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>					180			
70	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	1	20	50					
71	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	30	15	50	10	6	4		10
72	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		3	6	2	2	3		2
73	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			1h	12		2		
74	Sombre Tit	<i>Poecile lugubris</i>								1
75	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>				4	8	6		
76	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	5	5	6	10	10	10		5
77	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	2		1	2	2	2		
78	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	3	5	6					
79	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			1		1h			
80	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		2						
81	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	50	50	50					20
82	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			25		1	2		5
83	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	20	35	20			5		40
84	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	30	12	15			2		20
85	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	4							
86	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	4h	1h	1h					1+1h
87	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>								1h
88	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>				4h	5h	5h		
89	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	2		1	5	2	8		1
90	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	1h							
91	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>	1							10
92	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	10	4						
93	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1h			1h	1h	1h		
94	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				3	2	3		
95	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		15	10					
96	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	6	2	2	6	4	4		2
97	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>					3	2		
98	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				7	6	2		

	Common name	Scientific name	April						
			5	6	7	8	9	10	11
99	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1h			7	10	10	
100	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		2h	1+2h				1h
101	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>			4	20	15	6	
102	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>							1
103	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		2					
104	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					2		
105	Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>				1			5
106	Semi-collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula semitorquata</i>						1	
107	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			4			1	2
108	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	100+	50+	100+				30
109	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	2	1	1				
110	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				5			
111	Black-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava feldegg</i>	15	10					
112	Romanian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava dombrowskii</i>		1					
113	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	2	5	3			1	
114	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	2	6	2	2	2	
115	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>		1					
116	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		2					
117	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	1			12	15		
118	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	20	1	5	6	20	25	5
119	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>					2	8	
120	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	20	10	5				2
121	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	10	50	10				5
122	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>					3	1	
123	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	3	12	10				1
124	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				2			
125	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			2	10	8	9	
126	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	1h	1h					4

Reptiles

Nose-horned Viper, Eastern Green Lizard, Balkan Wall Lizard, Erhard's Wall Lizard, Common Wall Lizard and Hermann's Tortoise.

Amphibians

European Tree Frog, Common Frog and Marsh Frog.

Butterflies

Common Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, Brimstone, Clouded Yellow, Eastern Wood White, Eastern Dappled White, Small White, Mountain Small White, Orange-Tip, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell, Large Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral, Camberwell Beauty, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Holly Blue, Common Blue, Chequered Blue, Green-underside Blue, Green Hairstreak, Wall Brown, Speckled Wood, Small Heath, De-Prunner's Ringlet and Grizzled Skipper.

Other notable Invertebrates

Yellow-tailed Scorpion (*Euscorpius flavicaudis*), Egyptian Grasshopper, Field Cricket, Violet Carpenter Bee, Tau Emperor, Green Tiger Beetle and a brown Tiger Beetle.

Plant List - Courtesy of C. M. Jackson-Houlston

Plants are arranged in alphabetical order of scientific name. Those plants that attracted most interest from participants are marked in **bold**

6-7 April. Berat. Coastal tracks, lagoons, salt pans and dune forest (Mediterranean flora)

Anagallis arvensis	Scarlet Pimpernel
<i>Anchusa italica</i>	Blue Alkanet
<i>Alkanna tinctoria</i>	Dyers Alkanet
<i>Anacamptis (Orchis) morio</i>	Green-winged Orchid
<i>Anemone hortensis</i>	Anemone
<i>Asphodelus aestivus</i>	Common Asphodel
<i>Bellis annua</i>	A daisy (annual version of ours)
<i>Galactites tomentosa</i>	Purple Milk Thistle
<i>Hippocrepis multisiliquosa</i>	A horsehoe vetch
<i>Lithospermum purpureocaeruleum</i>	Blue Gromwell
<i>Ononis reclinata</i>	Small Restharrow
<i>Ophrys sphegodes</i>	Early Spider Orchid
<i>Ornithogalum</i> sp.	a Star of Bethlehem
<i>Pinus halepensis</i>	Aleppo Pine
<i>Pistachia lentiscus</i>	Lentisc
<i>Ruscus aculeatus</i>	Butcher's Broom
<i>Sedum eriocarpum</i>	a stonecrop
<i>Smilax aspera</i>	Smilax
<i>Trifolium resupinatum</i>	Upside-down Clover

8 April. Travel day: roadsides and hillsides to Valbona

<i>Euphorbia cyparissa</i>	Cypress Spurge
<i>Muscari neglectum</i>	Common Grape Hyacinth

9-11 April. Valbona. Mountain meadows and woodland

<i>Adiantum ruta-muraria</i>	Wall-rue
<i>Ajuga reptans</i>	Bugle
<i>Anemone nemoralis</i>	Wood Anemone
<i>Aremonia agrimonooides</i>	Bastard Agrimony
<i>Asarum europaeum</i>	Asarabacca
<i>Asplenium ceterach</i>	Rustyback Fern
<i>Cardamine bulbifera</i>	Coralroot
<i>Chelidonium majus</i>	Greater Celandine
<i>Corydalis bulbosa</i> (= <i>cava</i>)	a fumewort (n.b. not <i>solida</i> , at least as far as my photos show)
<i>Corylus avellana</i>	Hazel
<i>Cornus mas</i>	Cornelian Cherry
<i>Crocus veluchensis</i>	a crocus
<i>Cyclamen hederifolium</i>	Sowbread (leaves only)
<i>Daphne laureola</i>	Spurge Laurel
<i>Doronicum columnae</i>	a Leopards's Bane
<i>Draba aizoides</i>	Yellow Whitlow-grass

<i>Dryas octopetala</i>	Mountain Avens
<i>Erica herbacea</i>	Spring Heather
<i>Euphorbia rigida</i>	Narrow-leaved Glaucous Spurge
<i>Fagus sylvatica</i>	Beech
<i>Fragaria vesca</i>	Wild Strawberry
<i>Gagea</i> sp.	a yellow star of Bethlehem
<i>Helleborus odoratus</i>	Green Hellebore
<i>Hepatica nobilis</i>	Hepatica
<i>Lathraea squamosa</i>	Toothwort
<i>Lathyrus vernus</i>	Spring Bitter Vetch
<i>Muscari armeniacum</i>	Armenian Grape Hyacinth
<i>Oxalis acetosella</i>	Wood Sorrel
<i>Oxytropis campestris</i>	Yellow Milk Vetch (n.b. not listed in <i>Flora Europea</i> for Albania, but the Albanian Flora—not available in Oxford—may have more accurate distribution records)
<i>Petasites albus</i>	White Butterbur
<i>Primula veris</i>	Cowslip
<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	Primrose
<i>Pumonia officinalis</i>	Lungwort
<i>Ranunculus millefoliatus</i>	a buttercup with finely divided leaves
<i>Saxifraga sempervivum</i>	a red, lime-encrusting saxifrage
<i>Scilla bifolia</i>	Alpine Squill
<i>Symphytum tuberosum</i>	Tuberous Comfrey
<i>Viola canina</i>	Heath Dog Violet
<i>Viola odorata</i>	Sweet Violet
<i>Viola riviniana</i>	Common Dog Violet
<i>Viola tricolor</i>	Heartsease

12 April Travel day: lake gorge, roadsides and hillsides

<i>Arum italicum</i>	Italian Arum
<i>Asphodeline lutea</i>	Yellow Asphodel
<i>Colutea arborescens</i>	Bladder Senna
<i>Cruciata laevipes</i>	Crosswort
<i>Euphorbia characias</i>	Mediterranean Spurge
<i>Geranium tuberosum</i>	Tuberous Cranesbill
<i>Linum ?elegans</i>	a yellow flax

Fungi, April 5

<i>Tulostoma ?brumale</i>	Winter Stalkball
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