

Albania in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 - 11 April 2018



Common Sandpiper



Hermann's Tortoise



Lake Boat



Subalpine Warbler

Report compiled by Andy Smith
Images courtesy of John Van de Graaf



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Tour participants: Andy Smith (leader) & Ardi Abazaj (local guide) with 16 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Wednesday 4th April

After flying from the UK, we arrived at Tirana airport on schedule in the evening and met up with our local guide Ardi and driver Zamir. We then drove south to Berat. We received a warm welcome at our very comfortable hotel right by the river in the old quarter of town and enjoyed a late dinner before retiring to our beds.

Day 2

Thursday 5th April

After breakfast we drove to Narte lagoon and met up with Mirjan Topi, one of Albania's foremost birders. First we walked through a pleasant area of farmland and scrub along the edge of part of the huge main lagoon and enjoyed a lovely first taste of the Albanian countryside. Sardinian Warblers called from the scrub, Slender-billed Gulls bobbed around on the water and Red-rumped Swallows zoomed around overhead. At a grassy headland with a view out across the Adriatic to Sazan Island we found migrant Whinchats and Northern Wheatears, and had a series of views of at least five Hoopoes. The sunshine brought out butterflies too, including Cleopatras and Eastern Wood Whites, whilst Tree Frogs croaked in the bushes and Marsh Frogs in the pools. All in all, very nice indeed!

We ate our picnic lunch back near the bus with a Lesser Whitethroat and a flock of smart Spanish Sparrows to keep the birding going. Then we drove around to the extensive salinas on the north side of the lagoon. Here, despite a fresh wind, we saw an impressive selection of birds including an immature Pallid Harrier, several Stone-curlews, lots of Avocets, a few Black-winged Stilts, dozens of Kentish Plovers and our first mighty Dalmatian Pelicans. Dazzlingly yellow Black-headed Wagtails sat up on the suda bushes, Crested Larks potted around on the tracks, and in a patch of scrub we found a Tawny Pipit and a migrant Black-eared Wheatear. Satisfied with our success we returned to the bus and began the drive back to Berat.

Day 3

Friday 6th April

Today we headed back out to the coast and the Karavasta National Park where we explored the lagoons, saltmarsh, dune scrub and pine woodland of this interesting and attractive area. Our first stop was overlooking an extensive area of marshy fields and pools near the park entrance. Here we found a huge number of birds including 400 Ruff, 80 Wood Sandpipers, 95 Glossy Ibis and 75 Pygmy Cormorants. Other goodies included several smart Marsh Sandpipers, two Little Ringed Plovers, a Squacco Heron, a couple of Marsh Harriers and a Peregrine.

Karavasta is a vitally important site for the endangered and localised Dalmatian Pelican. Having checked in at the park office, we met up with park guide Irvin and walked out to a viewing platform overlooking the distant Pelican breeding island. About 40 of these massive birds were on the island or sitting around on the surrounding water: a great sight! Here too were over 30 Slender-billed Gulls, a Great Egret and several Little Egrets. Three Ferruginous Ducks flew rapidly over our heads as we took in the scene, and both Nightingales and Cetti's Warblers sang from the nearby scrub.

After a delicious restaurant lunch we set off for a walk through the dune scrub along the edge of another section of the lagoon complex, this time on the seaward side. An exciting range of birds here included at least three Caspian Terns, a couple of Marsh Harriers, an Osprey, a pair of Garganey, 10 Greenshanks and 30 Whimbrels. Here too we saw more Dalmatian Pelicans: some roosting out on a sandbar, some distantly on the water, and one which flew in at some height, passed quite close to us and then, with breath-taking poise and control for such a huge bird, glided in low over the water and made a perfect, smooth landing – what an amazing creature! A last little highlight here was a smart Hermann's Tortoise which we encountered on the track and which allowed close observation and photographs.

We arrived back in Berat in the late afternoon and after a short break at the hotel, finished the day with a walk around the citadel with its fine Ottoman architecture and splendid views of the surrounding valleys and hills. As the light faded a Scops Owl began calling and some of us were lucky enough to get excellent views of the bird as he sat in a Fig tree in one of the gardens.

Day 4

Saturday 7th April

With breakfast completed we took our leave of Berat and began the journey to the mountains and the north. After 40 minutes or so we made a brief stop by Thane Lake near the town of Lushnje, where we saw a dozen Dalmatian Pelicans, four Great Egrets, 25 Grey Herons and a trio of Spoonbills, and enjoyed fabulous views of a couple of Crested Larks and a superb Little Owl. From here we headed on past the port of Durrës, skirted to the north-west of Tirana and connected with the newish A1 highway that bisects the country. Soon we left the densely populated coastal plain behind and zoomed north-east through miles of uninhabited scrubby hills. We crossed the Kosovo border in the early afternoon and ate lunch in a restaurant in historic Prizren, with Dippers and Grey Wagtails on the river outside.

After lunch we drove on through the pleasant, rolling, agricultural landscape of this part of Kosovo. We made a couple of short stops and noted a few good birds including Tree Sparrow, Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting and Great Spotted Woodpecker. Soon we hit the hills again and crossed back into Albania. A little later we were winding our way up into the beautiful Valbone valley. We saw a couple more Dippers along the river and then arrived at our idyllically sited guesthouse in good time to settle in before dinner.

Day 5

Sunday 8th April

Today we met up with local guide Catherine and drove a short distance in 4x4 vehicles up to Stan i Kidris, where we set off on a mid-level walk through meadows, Plum orchards, woodland and scrub. The scenery was consistently splendid and the quality of the habitats impressive. During the course of the morning we enjoyed good views of a range of birds including Hoopoe, Ring Ouzel, Black Redstart, Hawfinch and Rock Bunting.

We ate lunch at the Stan itself (a summer grazing farmstead) where we were served a tasty traditional meal accompanied by plum raki, and had some fabulous close encounters with a couple of handsome Eastern Green Lizards. After our lunch we walked back down the track towards the valley bottom. Water Pipits were out on the meadows, Jays, Marsh Tits and Nuthatches were active in the woods, and the open sunny areas along the way were alive with a large emergence of Tiger Beetles. At the end of the afternoon, after a satisfying walk, we met the vehicles and drove back to the guesthouse.

Day 6

Monday 9th April

Today, after another short 4x4 transfer, we started out on a higher level walk up into the Kukaj valley. We climbed up through pine forests tinkling with Serins, and enjoyed some reasonable views of a dozen or so Nutcrackers that flew across the valley, tree to tree in ones and twos.

As the pine forest began to grade into high altitude beech forest we heard Black Woodpeckers calling, and then saw a loose party of five flying over the tree-tops on the far side of the valley. They disappeared from view and whilst we sat down for a rest, Catherine started to tap experimentally on one of the surrounding trees with a stick. Amazingly, within a couple of minutes, one of the woodpeckers came looping purposefully across the valley and landed high up in a beech about 50 metres from us. There it sat, sizing up the situation, a male with full red crown, ivory bill and mad white eyes. Clearly he could see us but he could also hear an imposter whom he needed to check out. After a couple of minutes his curiosity got the better of him and he flew in over our heads and landed right above us, searching for the mystery woodpecker. For a few thrilling seconds we all had superb views of him until, satisfied or spooked, he was off and away. Wow! What a great bird!

By this stage of the walk we had already negotiated some fairly heavy snow drifts and it was clear that we were not going to be able to go any further up, so we back-tracked to the Stan where we had started our walk. Along the way we saw a couple of Bullfinches, a Long-tailed Tit and a Coal Tit, and heard a woodpecker drumming which sounded rather interesting. A few of us set off up the slope into the pines to investigate. The drumming continued and as we got closer and could hear it more clearly, we realised it was a White-backed Woodpecker – very exciting! Unfortunately the bird was shy and made off before any of us got anything other than brief flight views.

We ate our picnic lunch at the Stan with a flock of Alpine Choughs swirling around the limestone crags far above us, then drove down the valley to Motina and finished the afternoon with a walk through Beech woods by the beautiful, tumbling Valbone River.

Day 7

Tuesday 10th April

Today we walked up into the dramatically beautiful Motina valley through terraced fields and superb old-growth Beech forest. Brimstone and Orange-tip butterflies flitted amongst the trees and Erhard's Wall Lizards skittered over the rocks. Birds seen included Black Redstart, Crag Martin, Short-toed Treecreeper, Blue Rock Thrush and outstandingly, three White-backed Woodpeckers! We found first one and then a pair, and enjoyed some very good views of these attractive and elusive birds. Thwarted again by recent heavy snowfalls and the ominous rumblings of avalanches far above, we back-tracked to an area of open sunny terraces and ate our lunch surrounded by majestic snow-capped peaks.

In the mid-afternoon, after what had been a really lovely walk, we made our way back down the valley to the vehicles and returned to the guesthouse.

Day 8

Wednesday 11th April

We left Valbone 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 three Goosanders, some Cormorants, a Common Sandpiper 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 towards the coastal plain and the city of Shkoder. Driving through scrubby hills along the lakeshore we made one principal stop by a marshy river delta where we were greeted by a loud chorus of Marsh Frogs and Nightingales. In a short space of time here we saw three Black-necked Grebes, two Green Sandpipers and some displaying Little Ringed Plovers, plus a pair of Cirl Buntings, a Black-eared Wheatear and a nest-building Subalpine Warbler.

Continuing on, we arrived at Shkoder and our lakeside restaurant at noon and saw some good birds from the terrace including a Dalmatian Pelican, three Squacco Herons, a further nine Black-necked Grebes and a Hobby which was hawking around low overhead, cashing in on a mass emergence of Mayflies.

Lunch completed, we proceeded 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 Ardi for his help throughout; to Zamir for his excellent driving; to Mirjan 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							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		120	50					
2	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			4					
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		5	20	1				
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		12	15					
5	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>		3						
6	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>			3					
7	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>								3
8	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1h						1h
9	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			6					10
10	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		3						12
11	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		100	12					
12	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		2						
13	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		95						
14	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		1		3				
15	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>			1					4
16	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		4	6	25				2
17	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			5	5				
18	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		10	50	1				10
19	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			3					
20	Dalmatian Pelican	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>		10	45	12				1
21	Pygmy Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i>		1	75					
22	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		10	1	30				2
23	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		1						1
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		2	3	1				
25	Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>		1						
26	Pallid/Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus/pygargus</i>			2	1				
27	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		2	1	1				1
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		3	2	8	5	4	5	4
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		2						
30	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			25					70+
31	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oediconemus</i>		8						
32	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		1						
33	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		6						
34	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		50						
35	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>			2					3
36	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		75						
37	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			1					
38	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			30					
39	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		8	400					
40	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		5	10					
41	Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>		2	9					
42	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>			80					
43	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>								2
44	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		5						1
45	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		12						
46	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		2	1					
47	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			15					50+

	Common name	Scientific name	April								
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
48	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		20	20						10
49	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>		50	20						2
50	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>			4						
51	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		50+	50+	100					50
52	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				1	1	1	5		
53	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		25	20	30					10
54	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>						1h			
55	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1								
56	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			2	1					1
57	Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>			1						
58	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>								1h	
59	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>				4	12	5			50
60	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		2							4
61	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		7	2		1	1			1
62	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>					1h	5	1+1h		
63	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>						1	3		
64	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1					
65	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>					2h		1h		
66	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	4	10		3	2	4	
67	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>									1
68	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		2							
69	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				4	20	20	20	5	
70	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		20	15	20	4				8
71	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>						10			
72	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		200	2	100+					2
73	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		30	30	40	4	5			30
74	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4	2	6	3	2	1	2	
75	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>					20	55	2		
76	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>				1	18	5	8		
77	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>						3			1
78	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	3	4	12	20	15	8	
79	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>					10	12	12		
80	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		5	8	10					5
81	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		2							
82	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		30	20	30					30
83	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				5	2	10	10	5	
84	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		30	40	25		1+			20
85	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		50	30	50	2	15	2	30	
86	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					3	2	1		
87	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			1h						
88	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		6h	5h						1h
89	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>		1h							
90	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>					5h	3h	3h		
91	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		2		1	5	4	2	3	
92	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>		1	3		1				
93	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		1		1					1
94	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>		1	3						6
95	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		8	1h						
96	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					3		5		
97	Collared Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicollis</i>		1							
98	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					4	3	5h		

	Common name	Scientific name	April							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
99	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>							4	
100	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		20		100+				
101	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>					1			
102	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			1	2	5	8	10	
103	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				1	5	2	1	
104	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>					10	4	5	
105	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>					10	5	5	
106	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		5h	1+2h	1h	1h			5h
107	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>					4	1	2	
108	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		4						1
109	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		1		1				
110	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		3						
111	Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>		1						4
112	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		1h	1h	1h			1	
113	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				3	1	2	1	
114	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		25	20	30				15
115	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		25	5	5+				
116	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				50				
117	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>					1		1	
118	Black-headed (Yellow) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava feldegg</i>		15	2	1				
119	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2	1	2	1	1	2	
120	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			2	2	4	4	4	3
121	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>		2						
122	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		1	1		1			
123	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>					6			
124	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		1	2	2				
125	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		2	8	8	12	25	20	7
126	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1h			1	7	2	
127	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		5	10	10	5	5		2
128	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		30	3	15		5		
129	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		12	1					
130	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>					4	3		
131	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				1	4			
132	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		30	10	25				12
133	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				3				
134	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>				5	20	6	20	
135	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1h	2h					4

Reptiles:

Eastern Green Lizard, Balkan Wall Lizard, Erhard's Wall Lizard, Common Wall Lizard and Hermann's Tortoise

Amphibians:

European Tree Frog and Marsh Frog

Butterflies:

Common Swallowtail, Brimstone, Cleopatra, Clouded Yellow, Eastern Wood White, Small White, Orange-Tip, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell, Painted Lady, Camberwell Beauty, Holly Blue and Wall Brown

Other notable insects:

Violet Carpenter Bee, Green Tiger Beetle and Humming-bird Hawk-moth