

# Corsican Bird Report 2011

7<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> July



Photo: Spotted Flycatcher. FM.

**Text by** Francois Mullan  
**Photography by** François Mullan & Harry Mullan

## Prologue

Corsica is one of the most underestimated places to bird in the Mediterranean. However, there is a simple reason for this: there are very few species to see. If you want more birds, go to Spain, Greece, etc. So why do birders come to this unspoilt, rather 'shy' island? Once again, it is quite simple. Firstly, many of the familiar species that you would see in Ireland, e.g: European Goldfinch, or Eurasian Jay, are races (subspecies), some endemic, semi-endemic, or are shared with nearby islands. This makes birding here more exciting. Better still, the rare Lammergeier, and the much sought after Marmora's Warbler – are both found here. Last, but by no means least, in fact, saving the best till last, two endemics, Corsican Finch (*Carduelis corsicana*), which until recently was only a race of Citril Finch, and Corsican Nuthatch (*Sitta whiteheadi*), both of which, with a bit of luck, can be fairly easy to see. Unfortunately for us, Corsica is best birded during spring (May being the peak time to visit), where it is unique for holding plenty of birds coming in on passage. It is actually so known (mostly to the locals) for passage migrants, that up in Barcaggio (near the cap of the island), is a camp which, much to any birders excitement, specializes with ringing birds en route to their breeding grounds, further up in Europe. Therefore, as unknown to the birding world as Corsica may seem like, it is worth at least a couple days' birding – needless to say, it can produce some wonderful species...

We got an early flight to Bastia, Corsica, via Marseille, where we spent most of the day, so arriving at night: we'd be able to get an early start. This was a family holiday, so we wouldn't be birding to different sites every day. Our first morning on the balcony saw us ticking our first few species of the three weeks: Italian Sparrow, Spotted Flycatchers (of the race *tyrrhenica*), and not long afterwards were two Red Kites soaring close enough in view, one coming within just several metres away, allowing some alright shots. Our drive down to the beach at around midday brought some more kites, and a Common Kestrel perched on a wire. San Pellegrino Beach is rich with vegetation: as you enter the beach, there is a short road, which neighbours a mixed woodland, where the endemic race of Eurasian Jay are a guaranteed bird here, and at night, apparently owls, birds I am yet to see in Corsica, can be seen here. Finally, the beach: Spotted Flycatchers (of both continental and Tyrrhenian races) are plentiful, as are the insects that these small birds devour around here. Spotless Starlings nest wherever there are pipes, cracks, et al – around the hotel. Italian Sparrows are often seen dust bathing on the dusty playing field of boules, or else in the mixed habitat of thorns and long grass, which is behind the restaurant. Our drive back gave us more roadside raptors, but along with the familiar kite and kestrel, was firstly a Common Buzzard (of the race *arrigonii*), perched on one of the many wooden poles, just as we got out of the car park, and a Lesser Kestrel, which was perched on a wire just a bit before our apartment. Nearer to evening, Red Kites came extremely close overhead, giving superb views, and so producing good photos was much easier. Fortunately, they would keep up this routine for most days: being most active in between six and seven. The last species of interest during the day was another Lesser Kestrel, this time flying over the vast stretch of fields. A pretty good start to the holiday. For the days that weren't spent actually birding in the field, the days would be spent like our one just there. Our next few days were spent like this, however, we did come across more Lesser Kestrels and Common Buzzards, and good numbers of Eurasian Jay. During the middle of the week, a Serin landed on a wire, just outside the apartment. It was seen for the next couple of days, and wasn't spotted at all again. Our first birding trip saw us going to Etang de Biguglia, the 'Tachumshin' of Corsica, and also the biggest wetland on the island. Again, spring is when birdlife here is most active. The usual raptors were seen on the drive up, and as we closed nearer to the etang (lagoon), a large field held a huge flock of Spotless Starlings. Getting out of the car, we started birding on a

small wooden bridge, which, from a bird's perspective, looked promising. As we expected, birdlife was little: the only birds we came across included a single Great – crested Grebe, Grey Heron, and flying Little Egrets. While trying to photograph the grebe, a lady started to walk in our direction. As she was on the bridge, she introduced herself as Vanina, one of the many guides who works at this etang. She told us that we couldn't be at this bridge, as it was closed for Bank Holiday. As we introduced ourselves, we told her that we were only here for some birding. She seemed pleased to hear that, and she gladly told us about some birds we may come across during the day. She told us that just opposite the car park, a flock of Cattle Egrets feed alongside cows. As these birds are rare in Ireland, I wasn't going to keep my hopes up. But I was reminded that I was in the Mediterranean, where birdlife differs from Ireland and Britain, not completely, but a lot. Indeed this is true, for there in a poorly vegetated field, along with around six cows, were a flock of roughly seven to eight Cattle Egrets, either walking, feeding, or just looking around them. We immediately set up the scope, getting some great views. By now, the weather was hot and humid, which made little chance for a decent photo, so Nicole suggested we walk down the track, even though it wasn't part of the reserve. So off we went, getting close up and personal with the small white birds. Unfortunately, the temperature didn't change, so still trying to get a good image was hard, although Harry did get one decent shot. Luckily, the bird he photographed was in summer plumage, making the bird far more eluding. Other birds in the area included a pair of flying European Bee-eaters, the two of which landed on a nearby dead tree, posing for some very dull shots, another flock of Spotless Starlings: all of them hopping about in the dusty pathway. As the bee-eaters soon left their perch, a pair of sparrow-sized birds landed in the same tree. Of course the light was against us, but the very dark image showed two European Goldfinches, even though, according to Jean Claude Thibault's *Connaitre les Oiseaux de Corse*, the local race of European Goldfinch (*tchusii*), is smaller. Leaving our troubles of making sure that this bird was a European Goldfinch and not some larger passerine, we made our way to the tracks, but before entering the walk, we stopped and admired a Lesser Kestrel, circling low over a field, then landing perfectly in front of view. With that, we finally started our walk, with the etang on one side, and a mix of trees on the other, separated by a narrow stream, which seemed to attract many frogs. The only birds on the lagoon included Great – crested Grebes, one with a crèche of just two young, and a Western Marsh Harrier, which flew far in the distance. We then took our attention to the reedbeds, stretching out along the broader part of the stream, as we heard a rather explosive call. Soon enough, our call came into view, though all we saw was a small, rather round, brown bird. Our idea of this 'lby' came to Cetti's Warbler, though we were not completely satisfied with the ID of this mystery bird. Our next bird was another warbler, though this time was of the Cisticola group, and we were happy with a Zitting Cisticola (or Fan – tailed Warbler, as they are also known) flying up and down a large field, a bit like a skylark. It would frequently land on a wooden pole, posing for some good photos, though as all the possible perches were far out, our images came out very poorly. As the trip was becoming quite birdless, or at least we weren't ticking off any species, we headed back to the car, seeing most of the species we saw on the walk in. Later during the week, we took a short drive to the Cascade (waterfall), off the main road in Moriani, which was roughly ten minutes from our town: Folelli. The actual walk up to the Cascade produced some amazing looking wildlife, butterflies in particular, but only Corsican Swallowtail was to be fully identified. At the cascade, we added European Honey Buzzard to the list, as one male flew very high overhead. Our drive back home gave us the usual raptors. We then went to the beach where, in the middle of a short walk to the mixed woodland forest, with my good friend Donal O'Connor, we came across a Grass Snake, a first for both for us. No longer than ten minutes did we have a

Eurasian Jay just metres away from us, giving us time to really take a look and try to see just how different this race is from the Irish, its distinctive facial markings almost make the lores and area above the eye look bald. Of course we fired up our cameras, trying to take the perfect photo, just wanting a simple portrait. Luckily, I find that this race is less shy than Irish birds, and what it doesn't have in shy jays, Corsica has shy robins. Even though we didn't see one this year, they certainly don't let you come close to them, as we've come to find out during the past few years. As it was now deep into the evening, we headed back to the beach, happy enough with our jay shots, though I was hoping to get all of the bird in my photo (the image ends without the end of the tail). A few minutes before we left, a Slender – billed Gull flew low over- head, followed by two others. Yellow – legged Gulls were more common though, as they were seen most days: often seen flying over the see, sometimes the beach and, quite rarely, landing on the water. Another day at the beach, visiting the O'Connor's bungalow at around twelve, another Eurasian Jay landed on the roof, giving even closer views than the day before. It then flew up into a huge pine tree, which is just outside the garden. Seamus told me that the jay came every day to the same area, usually at around midday. The rest of the day was pretty much the same 'itinerary' as yesterday: going back to the woods, we were disappointed not to find our snake, and that we didn't see great, close up views of Eurasian Jay, although we did see a couple, not far out but, nothing like the previous day. Then, in a tree which is at the edge of the vegetated field, a single bird was not singing, but rather screaming, as they do. We made our way back to the beach, only to find more Slender – billed Gulls flying, though one did fly much closer in our direction than yesterday. However, it was one species that caught my eye. As I was photographing a large flock of Italian Sparrows, in the vegetated field behind a games room, a flock of about three to four warblers landed in the long grass beside the sparrows, not minding at all the about the larger flock of bigger birds which they were sharing the long grass with. As there is a fence separating the field from the pathway, I only managed to get dull shot, which I could only tell was a juvenile warbler of the genus *Sylvia*, my ideas being that the photo shows an immature Spectacled, or Subalpine Warbler. This was the only occasion that we came across this flock, or in fact any *Sylvia* warblers. That was the last interest of the first week. Our next trip was again at Etang de Biguglia, this time, fortunately, with a guide. We arrived at the etang at eight in the morning, waited for a couple more people to come, then started our 'trail'. Our guide was Christian, who we took a walk with two years back, and Vanina, from the previous week. To my disappointment, this was a nature walk, still with plenty of birds, though. We first stopped at a large bush, as Christian told us to be careful of the poisonous, yet stunning, Zebra Spider: Corsica's dangerous arthropod. As we left the spider, a Common Buzzard flew low over a row of trees. Our next bird was one we could finally put on the list: Cetti's Warbler, in the same place as last time, too. We got more, slightly closer views of Zitting Cisticolas, doing the same flight pattern as during the previous trip, then landing on the far posts. Christian then told us that just the day before, exactly where we were, an Osprey flew over the area. Osprey has been high on our list, so seeing one would just be brilliant. Just after another Western marsh Harrier, Christian told everyone to stop. As we did, he pointed to a flock of 11 Little Egrets. They might be more elegant than their smaller cattle cousins, but I took little notice, and scanned the rest of the etang for some waterbirds. Vanina then called out Common Kingfisher, and as I looked through her scope, it was gone. We didn't come across this bird for the rest of the whole entire trip, let alone that day. Christian and Vanina told us that just yesterday, much to our disappointment: a sewage pipe had burst, right in the place where the bee-eaters and hoopoes socialise. So we made our way back to the etang's eco – museum, where Christian would give a talk on all the aspects of this wetland. In the middle of his tour of the museum, I looked round, just

to see if there was anything avian about. Indeed there was, and the moment I caught sight of three Audouin's Gulls, I left the group, trying to get as close as possible for a good image. The photos were not exactly what I had hoped for, but it was a new, and target bird for the holiday, too. Happy enough with my photos, I made my way back to the group. It wasn't long before Vanina came rushing down the stairs to tell us all to come up. Although I had no idea what anyone was saying (Corsicans have a very distinctive accent, as well as language), I looked through Vanina's scope, and there, perched on a wooden post, tearing on a fish, was an Osprey. Lucky enough, it stayed on the same perch for a good while, giving everyone time to marvel at such a majestic raptor. Although they are seen in Ireland, this was just awe – inspiring: as it was a bird Harry and myself have longed for, for many years. Other birds seen from the great view of the cliff include the same three Audouin's Gulls, three Mediterranean Gulls, and three Black-headed Gulls. After our 'Laridae' watching, I asked Christian if he could identify the juvenile Warbler that was at the beach. He agreed that it *could* be a Spectacled or Subalpine Warbler, though if its not, it could be anything (if anyone could shed any light on this that would be much appreciated). We ended the trip at the car park, where we saw the large flock of Cattle Egrets. Literally as we got out of the car, back in Folelli, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk flushed right past us, then landing in a tree. The next couple of days were as ever, though on one occasion, driving back from the beach, we spotted another European Honey Buzzard flying high over the car. Our next two days would be in the western part of the island, Lumio, a small town neighbouring Calvi, where we would be staying with the O'Connors, whom we had seen during our first week. As usual, the drive up was plentiful with raptors, but as we closed nearer to Lumio, a few Peregrine Falcons were sighted circling over the cliffs. Their house was overlooking Calvi bay, and was high enough in the mountains. Arriving early, a few of us went up to a nearby village. A few of us, of course, did not include me, and as they came back, they described to me what I could only think was a juvenile Bonelli's Eagle. Originally, we had planned a boat trip to Scandola Reserve Naturelle. Its beautiful scenery but, most importantly, the nesting Ospreys, are found here. A couple of calls announced that due to strong winds, the trip was cancelled. I then recommended Foret de Bonifatu, and off we went. So off we went. Even though we saw an Osprey at Biguglia, it would have been nice to come across one at its nest, and chicks, after all, the Osprey at the etang came from Scandola, according to Christian, that was. I chose Foret de Bonifatu for a good, yet simple reason: Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, and Corsican Nuthatch, as well as endemic and/or semi – endemic races, are found here, though most in spring. As I expected, we didn't come across any of the hoped species, but we did pick up Crag Martin: many of them on the cliffs, during our walk. In addition, on our way back, infact, on a wooden post just outside the St. Catherine Airport, was a Corn Bunting. Peregrine Falcon was the only raptor that was seen in large numbers: birds we've never come across in *Costa Verde* (the Green Coast, as it's sometimes known). Our last tick in Lumio was a Eurasian Hobby, as one flew low overhead at the villa. That rapped up our west-side story, and we made our way back to Folelli, though this time we were visiting relatives in Poggio, a village high up in the mountains: no longer than fifteen minutes up from our Folelli. As we made our way into the kitchen, we spotted a birds nest with, as you might have expected, birds. There were four chicks, but no sign of either adult. Finally, a Spotted Flycatcher made its way to the nest, trying to feed all of its young. These were all over the place, particularly the local race, which was nice, as they're not that common on ground level. Other birds in the area included a Common Buzzard in the forest of trees, its white V formation on the breast obviously making this bird another race. Though it was another buzzard that got the better of the Common, as on a short walk, a gang of five European Honey Buzzards circled the air, hawking the ground for any movement. It was most

likely that there were two adults, and three juveniles. It was a great way to end the second week. Etang de Palu awaited us... We planned a trip to this small etang, mainly because we've never actually gone there, and Christian, our guide at Biguglia, said it is known as 'the little sister of Biguglia'. Just ten minutes after we arrived, a huge bird came flying into our direction. Much larger than a heron, the bins revealed this as a Greater Flamingo. It then flew east, as if it was on its way towards Italy. A Common Buzzard was perched in tree, not for long though, as it flew off. Next was a Little Stint, which flew low over the water, and into the shelter on the other side, to be precise, it was under the tree of which the buzzard was just minutes before, followed by three others. Further out, another Western Marsh Harrier flew in towards us, but then landed on a pole, giving good, if distant views. Last in the area was a herd of cows, sharing the same grounds with more Cattle Egrets. We then took a walk through some forests, using them as if they were hides. It was quite disappointing, though, as only Little Grebe, Yellow – legged Gulls, and more Little Egrets – were to be seen. Back at where we started, a man came over to us, saying that at Etang d'Urbino, a bit before Palu, was the first ever breeding Tufted Ducks. These birds were thought to only winter in Corsica, so off we went. We came to Etang d'Urbino last year: a nightmare of a trip. No doubt of it being the islands most poorly accessed wetland: it still offers some great birds. All we saw were European Shags, or Mediterranean Shags, as some birders like to split this species, and the familiar gulls. Unlike other etangs, it has good numbers of European Bee-eaters, which we did come across. We tried accessing the etang from another area, only to bring back the same nightmare as the year before. We called it a day, and headed back to Folelli. Ever since we arrived, at the beach down the road, there has been a flock of nearly two swifts flying over the tennis courts, fields, etc. Though at an evening game of tennis, an Alpine Swift flew right overhead. Not long afterwards did a Pallid Swift fly over. It's most likely that there were more than just one Alpine and Pallid, and not just buckets of Common Swifts. At first, we didn't think that the beach would bring a couple of interesting birds at dusk and dark. As we made our way onto the beach, we were almost immediately in shock: as a European Nightjar flew various bars, tables, then back in the direction of the woods. As we were leaving, which was at about 1/4 to one in the morning, we didn't find the nightjar, but did come across a Eurasian Scops Owl, staring back down at us. We spent our last two nights coming here, our last one giving us up to six birds in total. It was a great way to end a rather surprising trip, not many species seen, but most of them daily.

If anyone would be interested in planning a trip to Corsica, I would more than love to give you some information: sites, birds, subspecies, et al, just email me at [26iona@gmail.com](mailto:26iona@gmail.com).

# Systematic Checklist

The checklist first reads the species name, followed by it's scientific name, whereabouts was it seen, and last, it's race (subspecies). The race written is that of the Corsican, in some cases other Mediterranean, such as European Shag, and not other European races, such as Pied and White Wagtail.

All the names and order of species are taken from Collins Bird Guide (2009).

## Key abbreviations to sites:

D= Daily  
MD= Most days  
EB= Etang de Biguglia  
EP= Etang de Palu  
EU= Etang d'Urbino  
L/C= Lumio/Calvi  
P= Poggio (mountains)  
F= Folelli  
FB= Folelli beach  
C= Cascade

## Further Reading

### **Connaitre les Oiseaux de Corse**

*Jean – Claude Thibault & Denis Clavreul*

### **Birds of Corsica: An Annotated Checklist**

*Jean – Claude Thibault & Gilles Bonacocorsi*

### **Birds of the Mediterranean: A Photographic Guide**

*Paul Sterry*

### **Birds of the Mediterranean and Alps**

*Lars Jonsson*

### **A Birdwatching Guide to France South of the Loire including Corsica**

*Jacqueline Crozier & John Busby*

### **The bird life of Corsica**

*F.C.R Jourdain*

<u>Species</u>	<u>Scientific name</u>	<u>Where</u>	<u>Race/subspecies</u>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	FB	None
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	EP	None
Great – crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	EB	None
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	FB	None
European (Med) Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	EU	<i>desmarestii</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	EB/EP	None
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	EB/EP/EU	None
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	EB/EU/FB	None
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	EP	None
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	EB	None
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	D	None
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	EB/EP	None
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	ET/EP/FB/F	<i>arrigonii</i>
European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	F/C/P	None
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	F	<i>wolterstorffi</i>
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	MS	None
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	D	None
Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	L/C	None
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	L/C	None
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	EB	None
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	EB/EP/EU	None
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	EP	None
Black – headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	EB/EU	None
Slender – billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>	MD	None
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>	EB	None
Yellow – legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	MD	None
Audouin’s Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	EB	None
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i> (domest)	D	None
Common WoodPigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	L/C	None
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	D	None
Eurasian Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>	FB	None
European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>	FB	None
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	D	None
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	FB	None
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	FB	None
European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	EB/ <i>en route</i>	None
Common Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	EB	None
Common Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	MD	None
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	L/C	None
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	D	None
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	L/C	None
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	EB	None
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	MD	None
Unidentified warbler	_____	FB	?
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	EB	None
Cetti’s Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	EB	None
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	D	<i>tyrrhenica</i>
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	FB	None



Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	FB/L/C	<i>corsus</i>
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	FB/EP/L/C	<i>corsicanus</i>
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	L/C	None
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	D	<i>sardonicus</i>
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	D	None
Italian Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus italiae</i>	D	None
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	EU	None
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	MD	<i>tchusii</i>
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	F	None
Serim	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	F	None
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	L/C	None

**Total species seen: 59**

### Reptiles

- Western Whip Snake
- Grass Snake
- Italian Wall Lizard
- Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard
- European Pond Terrapin

### Amphibians

- Corsican Painted Frog
- Tyrrhenian Painted Frog
- Green Toad
- Tyrrhenian Tree Frog
- Italian Pool Frog



**Italian Wall Lizard**



**Italian Pool Frog**

# Photo gallery

## Etang de Biguglia



Lesser Kestrel. HM



Cattle Egret. HM



European Bee-eater. FM



Audouin's Gull. FM



Audouin's Gull. FM



Osprey. FM

## Folelli beach



? Warbler. FM



Italian Sparrow (male). FM



Spotted Flycatcher FM  
(*tyrrhenica*)



Eurasian Jay (*corsicanus*). FM



Italian Sparrow (female). FM

Folelli



Red Kite. FM



Serin. FM



Spotted Flycatcher. FM

Poggio (mountains bordering Folelli)



Common Buzzard (*arrigonii*). FM



Spotted Flycatcher (*tyrrhenica*) parent...and it's chicks.



**Eurasian Scops Owl. FM**