

## Winter Birding in Slovenia

With the prospect of the “hardest winter birding in Europe” – owls, woodpeckers and gamebirds as an honourable challenge, five Norwich birders – Dan Brown (Sunbird), Alex Lees (UEA), Simon Mahood (PIMP) Rob Martin (PUNK) and Rich Moores (RBA) visited the country for four days in December 2004. Despite its considerable birding potential outlined at [http://www.fatbirder.com/links\\_geo/europe/slovenia.html](http://www.fatbirder.com/links_geo/europe/slovenia.html), a search at [www.eurobirding.com](http://www.eurobirding.com) only generates six trip reports, one of which - Mahood (2003) stems from a visit by 2004 team members Brown and Mahood in June 2003. Four days did little to do the country and its avifauna justice and we were unsurprised to miss the likes of Tengmalm's Owl (*Aegolius funereus*) and Rock Partridge (*Alectoris graeca*), but despite the brevity of the mission we were successful in finding some excellent sites and interesting birds detailed below.



Team members being arrested at Lubjuno – try to ensure your hire car is not Croatian when dazzling owls and farmers in the middle of the night.... (Copyright Dan Brown)

### Localities

#### Lake Cerknica

Lake Cerknica is a temporary eutrophic lake situated on the largest karst field in Slovenia, it is usually totally dry in summer and late winter, but encompasses an area of 2600 hectares when full in spring and autumn comprising huge expanses of reed sedge and wet grasslands. It is internationally important for breeding Corncrakes (*Crex crex*) when Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*), Ferruginous Duck (*Aythya nyroca*), Spotted (*Porzana porzana*) and Little Crakes (*P. parva*) and attracts passage Red-footed Falcons (*Falco vespertinus*) and White-winged Black terns (*Chlidonias leucopterus*) but its importance as a winter site is largely unrecognised (Birdlife International 2003, Grimmet & Jones 1989).



Lake Cerknica (Copyright Dan Brown)

### Mount Nanos

An impressive limestone massif dominating the western skyline of the country. The plateau rises dramatically and gives way to extensive grassland with stunted copses as well as an expansive forest stretching off to the north east. The site has no official protection and is obviously a popular hunting spot which makes locating the ultimate prize here - Rock Partridge (*Alectoris graeca*) very difficult. Alpine Accentor (*Prunella collaris*) and Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenyx nivalis*) may occur around the summit in winter whilst in spring and summer the area comes alive with the songs of Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*) and Rock Buntings (*Emberiza cia*).



Mount Nanos (Copyright Dan Brown)

### Ljubno and Sava valley

A beautifully fresh alpine valley this area marks the southern end of the Julian Alps and provides some excellent birding. Although 30km long, almost the entire length may produce species of interest, however several sites deserve slightly more attention. In areas of old growth Pygmy Owls (*Glaucidium passerinum*), White-backed (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) and Three-toed Woodpeckers (*Picoides tridactylus*) may be found. Thicker understory often holds Hazel Grouse (*Bonasa bonasia*) – often an elusive species, however with enough time a likely score. Nutcrackers (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*) and Black Woodpeckers (*Dryocopus martius*) are common; however, the latter becomes noticeably more difficult in winter. On a par with Rock Partridge in terms of difficulty is Tengmalm's Owl (*Aegolius funereus*). The best chance of this species seems to be around Luče and Dobravlje, however it is rare even here.



Sava Valley (Copyright Dan Brown)

### **Kočevje**

Although not protected the area is heavily managed by hunters, primarily due to the income generated from large game hunting including Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*), Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) and deer. This has led to the protection of pristine areas of primeval beech and spruce forest along the ridge top to the west of the town. Here the commonest owl is Ural (*Strix uralensis*), whilst Three-toed Woodpeckers may be found by thorough searching of the dead spruces. White-backed Woodpecker occurs at lower densities but the site still offers probably the best chance of this species.



Kočevje (Copyright Dan Brown)

## Annotated systematic list

### **Hazel Grouse** *Bonasa bonasia*

The distinctive wing-whirs and alarm calls of this species were heard from the hills near Lubjuno, where DB & SM found this species in June 2003 (Mahood 2003).

### **Black-throated Diver** *Gavia arctica*

At least 11 individuals were present on Lake Cerknica, this species winters widely across eutrophic lakes in Central Europe.

### **Great Egret** *Casmerodius albus*

Three birds were present at Lake Cerknica, most probably from Neuseedel in Austria or Balaton in Hungary (Tout 1995).

### **White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla*

One, possibly two adults and an immature were recorded at Lake Cerknica, these birds apparently use the site as a feeding/staging area year-round but do not breed (BirdLife International 2003). Cerknica also appeared to be a suitable site for wintering Spotted Eagles (*Aquila clanga*) but we did not locate any in our short stay.

### **Eurasian Pygmy Owl** *Glaucidium passerinum*

We located at least three calling individuals in the hills above Lubjuno, one of which showed exceptionally well just after dawn.



*Glaucidium passerinum* Copyright Rob Martin

### **Ural Owl** *Strix uralensis*

Slovenia holds an internationally important population of this impressive species. DB & SM previously successfully found this species along the ridge at Kocevje (Mahood 2003) – Urals are known to competitively exclude Tawny Owls (*Strix aluco*) from their preferred pre-montane forest (Vrezec & Tome 2004) and this appeared to be this case at Kocevje. We obtained unsatisfactory views of a furtive day-roosting bird mid slope, but despite much effort no calling individuals were located at night.

### **Grey-headed Woodpecker** *Picus canus*

This species was easily located in floodplain forest at the foot of the slope at Kocevje.





*Picus canus* Copyright Rob Martin

**Middle Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos medius*

A single bird was located in the same area as the above.



*Dendrocopos medius* Copyright Rob Martin

**White-backed Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos leucotos*

What was almost certainly this species was glimpsed at Sava. Small populations of the Balkan race *lilfordi* have been located in virgin forest in central southern Slovenia in recent years and occasional dispersing birds of the nominate subspecies are seen in the north of the country (Tout 1995).

**Three-toed Woodpecker** *Picoides tridactylus*

Perhaps Europe's most sought-after picid, the extensive virgin montane forests play host to a globally significant proportion of the *alpinus* subspecies which is endemic to the mountains of Central, Southern and South-Eastern Europe. Because of its dead wood dependence, Bütler et al (2004) considered this taxon to be effective indicator species for forest sites with a high value

for other specialised species dependent on dead wood, many of which are red list species. We found at least one pair holding winter territory atop the forested ridge above the town of Kocevje.



*Picoides tridactylus* Copyright Rob Martin

**Alpine Accentor** *Prunella collaris*

At least three individuals were located wintering on the slopes at Nanos, favouring the rocky escarpment below the radio mast.

**Great Grey Shrike** *Lanius excubitor*

Two individuals were located on winter territory at Lake Cerknica and a third was seen by the motorway en route to the airport.

**Spotted Nutcracker** *Nucifraga caryocatactes*

We found this species easy to find at both Lubjuno and Sava.



*Nucifraga caryocatactes* Copyright Rob Martin

**Snow Bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis*

A single individual was located feeding on the turf by the radio mast at Nanos, here at the southerly limit of the species wintering grounds.

**References**

BirdLife International 2003 *BirdLife's online World Bird Database: the site for bird conservation*. Version 2.0. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International. Available: <http://www.birdlife.org>

Bütler, P., Angelstam, P., Ekelund, P & Schlaepfer, R. 2004 Dead wood threshold values for the three-toed woodpecker presence in boreal and sub-Alpine forest. *Biological Conservation* 119: 305–318

Grimmett, R.F.A. & T.A. Jones 1989. Important bird areas in Europe. ICBP Technical Publication No. 9, Cambridge.

Mahood, S. 2003 Slovenia, 4th-11th June 2003. Trip report online at:  
<http://www.surfbirds.com/mb/trips/slovenia-0703-v2.html>

Tout, P. 1995. The Birds of the Northern Adriatic Region. online at:  
<http://home.xnet.it/tout/adriati1.htm>

Vrezec, A & Tome, D. 2004. Altitudinal segregation between Ural Owl *Strix uralensis* and Tawny Owl *S. aluco*: evidence for competitive exclusion in raptorial birds. *Bird Study*, Volume 51:264-269.

### Trip List

Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Hazel Grouse	<i>Bonasa bonasia (h)</i>
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Great Egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>
Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>
Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius (h)</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>
Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>

Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Marsh Tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>
Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>
Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>
Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>

Alex Lees & Dan Brown 2005